

Cambodia in Transition: Family, Culture and the New World

Novel: *Made in Cambodia*

Exegesis: **Cambodia in Transition: Family, Culture and the New World**

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Table of Contents

Thesis Abstract	page 5
Part One	
The Novel – <i>Made in Cambodia</i>	6
Prologue.....	7
Part One.....	11
Part Two.....	91
Part Three.....	161
Epilogue.....	224
Part Two	
Exegesis – <i>Cambodia in Transition</i>	234
Terminology.....	235
Historical Overview.....	236
Introduction.....	238
Exegesis Chapter Summaries.....	242
Chapter One:	
Spirits and Ancestors – Society, Religion and Traditional Literature.....	246
Chapter Two:	
Two Cambodias: Symbolic Interaction and Conflict Theory.....	267
Chapter Three:	
Literature and Identity.....	287
Chapter Four:	
The Modern State: Life Under International Capital.....	308
Conclusion.....	330

Appendices

One – Cambodian Population Graph.....	332
Two – Impact of Industrialisation on Urbanisation.....	333
Three – Statistics from Interviews April 2015 and March 2016.....	334
Four – Interview Questions.....	335
Bibliography.....	336

Abstract

In this thesis I examine the current state of relations in Cambodia between individuals, their families and elite forces, and the direction taken by traditional spirit beliefs since the introduction of Western capital and education. I argue that Cambodia has been in the control of elites at least since the days of the Khmer kings from the 7th century, and that the didactic elements of Theravada Buddhist literature have been a critically important controlling factor. In my novel and my exegesis I examine the concept of the ‘ideal woman’ at the centre of the Buddhist social model and discuss the radical changes visited upon young women since the introduction of internationalism. In my exegesis the sociological theories of Max Weber and George Herbert Mead are used to show how Cambodian peasant life has been sustained for centuries by the Symbolic Interaction of individuals with family and Theravada Buddhism; I argue that in the last twenty years there has been a shift towards Marxian Conflict Theory. In my novel the advent of capital and factories has been followed by unionism, which I dramatise through the struggle of industrial garment workers for wage improvements. A related romance between an Australian man and Cambodian woman links the reader to an examination of the modern Cambodian family and the state of traditional spirit beliefs. My exegesis places my novel in the context of modern literature written by outsiders about Cambodia, and my interviews with five Cambodian writers show the confines still placed by Government on writing by Cambodians. I look at the impact of new capital on the lives of young women in the garment factories and examine the various types of relationship between Western men and Cambodian women. Drawing on my own interviews with forty young Cambodians, I argue that the new generation of young people has retained family ties and many traditional beliefs despite new materialism, Western education and often physical separation from their families. Despite outside influence the family remains strong for now and, in my novel at least, Western culture can bend to the Cambodian way.

Part 1

Novel: *Made in Cambodia*

73,000 words

Prologue

The crowd would be bigger this time.

As Malee jumped down from the tuk-tuk she felt the clamour all around her; a noisy dusty sweaty spirit thing that folded her in, that she gave herself into. It would be the biggest push ever. Motorbikes came in from all directions: from the South West road, and along Veng Sreng Boulevard from the city; some walked up in groups of four or five along dusty side roads from their apartment blocks. Open trucks arrived packed with protestors, some with handkerchiefs over their faces against the dust, others wearing a defiant uncovered look, staring into the wind. She saw the iron gates of the industrial park, chained and padlocked this time. The same old woman sat at her tiny rice stand as before, and grinned at Malee through stumps of teeth and nodded as if to say she remembered her, then gestured to her rice and sauces. Malee's sister Reap jumped down behind her, holding the hand of their young cousin Cris, then Ryan.

Police waited in a gang of thirty or forty across the road. There was a black 4WD Number One Police Vehicle, a megaphone speaker fixed to its roof, and next to it a sticky officer in a khaki uniform – hat with red trim and gold braid. Malee saw the swaggering pose and the agitation that hid beneath it. There were no fire trucks or water cannons to be seen anywhere, not this time. Maybe, she hoped, this meant the government had decided to ease off.

The crowd tensed against the factory gates and waited for the first truck to emerge. Last time they had played the role of the striving, vulnerable and human team against the machine-symbol of the multi-national. It had worked. The newspapers played the images on the front page of the Monday paper – a woman's leg crushed under a truck tyre; she would never walk again. Others had been beaten and bloodied by riot police. Public sympathy had swayed in

favour of the garment workers and for the first time ever people spoke about an industrial issue openly in the streets.

For millenia Cambodians had bowed their heads in the face of raw power. But now, a publicity war – it was new territory.

But this time no truck came. The cameras of the nightly news began to strafe the crowd for interest stories; she saw one capture their arrival. Ryan, a Westerner in this crowd, was news value in himself. Then young men with megaphones struck up a chant and for twenty minutes the crowd surged against the gates and back again. Reap and Cris took up the chant and Malee and Ryan held each other close for strength. 'One sixty, one sixty, one sixty' went the song – the number of dollars per month that had been declared the minimum wage to keep a person above the poverty level in Cambodia. The vanguard at the front of the crowd began to shake the wrought iron gates, then someone appeared with bolt cutters and made to attack the chains that kept it all together.

Suddenly the crackle of a megaphone came from the police four wheel drive. The voice of the man with the red and gold police hat was strained, high pitched. Malee struggled to hear what he was saying amidst all the shouting, chanting and stamping of feet, but she could hear the Khmer words 'disperse' and 'consequences'. She could see the row of men in riot helmets holding rifles, behind them a bank of more uniforms and Perspex shields. All the power was against them: the boss was in the factory, the police were in the street and the judges sat in the courts, brimming with disdain for the new ideas – unions, civil rights.

The men with bolt cutters were at work, but the gates held strong. A welding set was produced and the sparks that flew around the gates now excited the crowd further; this was real action. The bodies of the line of police bristled and tensed, their faces impossible to read beneath their riot helmets. There was a yell from the officer in charge and he drew a pistol and fired it once into the air. The single crack of gunfire panicked some protestors who began

surging into those who would stand firm. There was an aimless yelling and shoving that was more the result of the need to do something than knowing what was best to do. An organiser with a megaphone started shouting and the crowd turned to face the police, fists raised; they were galvanised once more. The chanting began again.

Someone threw a rock. It sailed above the man in the red and gold hat and clattered against a riot shield behind him. Then another rock came, then a third. Everyone, it seemed, had collected a stone or two on the way in that morning.

The policeman held his braided hat in front of his face to protect himself, then he stepped back, waving his troopers ahead of him as he did so. The men took three steps forward in a line, raised their weapons and immediately began firing into the crowd. There was a sudden crashing cannonade of noise and the acrid smell of gunsmoke. A young woman fell, blood gushing from her stomach. Others clutched their arms, another caught a bullet in the knee and went awkwardly on to the ground, screaming. A man fell dead – shot in the face. Suddenly all were running, screaming, falling over each other, in the direction of the city, the only escape. Still, the sound of firing continued. Surely, Malee thought, it would be enough for the police that the crowd was running. Her eyes were wide in disbelief as Ryan took her arm. Reap grabbed Cris and together the four of them ran toward the tuk-tuks, the drivers starting up their engines and heading towards the city. Still the bullets came.

As she ran, Malee saw the old woman rice seller, lying on the ground, her mouth wide open, her eyes still. A stray shot had come through the crowd and taken her in the throat. As they neared the tuk-tuks, Malee looked over her shoulder and saw that Reap was dragging something. It was Cris. His legs were trying to move, but there was little power in them. He had caught a bullet in the back as he was running and now he coughed and choked in his struggle. Ryan rushed back to help Reap and the two of them lifted Cris in their arms while

Malee ran ahead to help Chean, the tuk-tuk man, to fend off people desperate to escape in his vehicle.

‘Boss, quick!’ Chean motioned to Ryan.

They bundled Cris into the tuk-tuk and jumped in after him. Chean revved his engine hard and they raced away in the direction of the Russian hospital, hurtling past people who were running, falling by the side of the road in exhaustion, cowering behind trees and buildings.

‘Hold his head,’ Malee said to Ryan, ‘one hand on his face, one here.’ She motioned him to support Cris’s chest. Reap shoved a hand under his chest and together they held him up while Malee tore the back off his shirt and then stripped off a section to staunch the wound. Cris looked up at Ryan for a second. He tried to speak, then fainted.

The noise of bullets behind them had stopped. Looking back Malee could see people on the ground, perhaps six or seven of them, motionless. Others were staggering to their feet, then falling, friends and relatives next to them, crying.

She felt for Cris's hand. There was a pulse and the Russian Hospital was near.

Part One

Ryan Davey folded his map of the city to back-pocket size, then ducked through the seething mess of merging tuk-tuks and motorbikes to the corner opposite. This traffic, it was all so ... close, almost a personal thing; you could reach out and touch it. You could smell the petrol and the sweat at the arms of shirts. On this corner some boys sat lounging on their motorbikes. One straightened on his arrival, 'Sir, motorbike? Where are you going?'

'Sorry,' he motioned to the building opposite, his destination.

'Ohhhh,' said the boy, smiling, 'is ok. I take you there. One dollar.' It was his first taste of Khmer irony.

Ryan looked up at the building – three storeys of blue glass and white plastic; new, ten years old at the most, a purpose-built English language school that put the ragged shops and cafes and the sleazy bars around it in the shade. A symbol of the new Cambodia, shaped up from the rubble.

A chubby security man in blue uniform grinned shyly and half-saluted as glass doors rolled open and Ryan stepped through to a waiting area that was spacious and plain – tiled floor and picture windows; cool and empty save a girl in big round black-framed glasses who sat behind a long counter. When he stated his business she said 'Oh', with surprise, and went on in good English, 'You have an appointment with Mr Dith?'

She glanced toward five plastic chairs that were braced into the wall near the main door; he was fifteen minutes early. He sat his document folder on his knees and closed his jet-lagged eyes to listen to the honking, revving traffic of the perplexing city outside. Soon a rumbling came on the stairs and a stampede of feet and suddenly there were young people finished Saturday morning classes – laughing, joshing, giggling, everyone headed for the rolling doors – all of them somewhere in that group that could have been aged anywhere

between sixteen and twenty-eight. At the tail end of the migration a ginger-haired bloke stopped at the door and looked Ryan over for a second. Then he pointed an index finger and said a cheery 'Hey', before disappearing into the mad street.

The silence resumed and he idly thought of conversation openers that could engage the girl on the desk, all too predictable to go with. Another class thundered down the stairs, even more lively than the previous. Faces smiled at him, not because he was anything in particular, he thought, but just because he was.

'All finished for the week?' he said, about the students.

'Many of them go to their jobs now.' The girl on the desk was deeply earnest, but finished with a questioning smile.

Oh, he thought, of course.

After five minutes she sent him up to the third floor. From the panoramic window outside the lift he could see down into the street. The crush of students had already dispersed a hundred different ways, but the merging of motorbikes and tuk-tuks and pedestrians was the same. He closed his tired eyes for a moment and thought of the girls in the foyer a few minutes before. Their legs had all been modestly covered with pants or knee-length skirts, even their sleeves were mostly rolled down.

He thought of Amanda at his gate. He counted backwards in his head. Was it only ... eight days? Little more than a week, anyway. He'd heard the whine the gate-hinge had made that morning. He'd screwed his head around from his book to look up the front path, as he did in the rare event of a visitor. Amanda there – blonde bob, cream suit, tanned legs and gym-three-times-a-week calf muscles that yelled out 'look at these'. She'd turned on her court shoe heels and looked up towards his door – breasts in her tight, white blouse like clenched fists.

Mr Dith was waiting.

Ryan shook his head as if to turn the memory out, but it came straight back.

‘Dermott and I are getting married,’ was what she had said, as she drained the last of her glass of water. She had refused coffee, and tea – she wasn’t staying that long.

Dermott, his brother.

‘Why didn’t you just send me a text,’ he’d said, with a studied nonchalance. Of course, whatever she did was quite immaterial to him.

‘I wouldn’t *do* that,’ she’d said. ‘So impersonal,’ as if the fact that she had delivered tidings in this personal way should count as a victory in itself.

‘Got an Open Inspection in the neighbourhood?’ he’d countered. ‘Not like you to drive all the way down here, just for me.’ He drove a small knife between a couple of ribs.

She drew breath for a moment. ‘There is a lease inspection, a quarterly.’ At least she was honest about it, he thought. That was one thing about Amanda. She might have changed sides in the war of life, but at least she didn’t pretend that she hadn’t – not to him, anyway.

‘Some poor bastard of a tenant to torture, eh.’ He felt he had the right to twist his little knife until he got a response.

‘Is that all you can talk about?’ Her voice rose to the bait. ‘Tenants, Opens? I’ve come here to tell you something important about ... about us, and all you can do is ... is ... I don’t know, cavil.’

And then she’d cried. Right there in his living room, surrounded by his novels and books of poetry and all the other symbols of what she’d decided was his failure. He stared at his morning toast crumbs and half-drunk cup of coffee, which had already begun to evaporate, its surface congealing into a milky film.

She cried and told him that she still felt for him; there had always been that connection. Life wasn’t as simple and clean as he thought. Dermott would look after her. She wasn’t an

animal, so why did he keep treating her like she was? ‘It’s not about fucking!’ she’d finished, self-consciously it seemed.

And abruptly she had left – handbag over one arm and tissue at her nose. It had been a Thursday so, nine days ago. He walked out to the gate after she’d left and looked up and down, half expecting that she would have stopped the car down the street to think, to reconsider everything. Perhaps she would be walking back up the street to him.

On-the-edge Amanda: his first and only love, who had moved from Arts, to Law, had taken to drink and judges’ sons for a year, and had never finished anything. Amanda, who, at the age of twenty-seven, had then drifted into business – Real Estate.

Cavil, he thought. How would she ever get on in Real Estate with a vocabulary like that? They will look sideways at her and wonder.

And he’d spent the weekend wondering what it all meant, this visit. He left his phone turned on, and in his shirt pocket, but there was no call from her. Then on the Monday he received a card in the post. It had been addressed in her handwriting – so neat and small that it looked studied, like everything she did. But he felt something like tension rise in his throat as he walked the card inside. He stopped inside the door and looked at it for a moment. This might be so important that it could not be just opened like a gas bill. He boiled some water and made a cup of tea, then sat down in his comfortable reading chair and opened the envelope.

It was a wedding invitation.

Without a thought he crunched it up in his hand and with a frustrated ‘Aaaaggh’ he made to throw it at the wall. Then on second thoughts he opened the crumpled card and flattened it out and checked the detail. There was the address of the same Anglican Church that he and his brother had been christened in. It would be the full catastrophe: the bride would be in

white, same colour as the horses and the carriage. Dermott would wear a top hat – a short one, nothing too pretentious.

He looked down into the Phnom Penh street again: the same honking and constant negotiation of position – no traffic lights, no road markings, no rules.

Figures were indistinct from that far up but he could make out two Western types, tourists – on the same spot he had been no more than twelve minutes before. He thought that, in a strange way, a great deal had happened in those twelve minutes. The tourists were hesitating at the edge of the street. Go on, plunge in, he thought. The boy on the corner raised his hand to the couple from the seat of his motorbike. ‘Sir, I can help you. Where are you going?’

Ryan could hear the words in his head, and he smiled. I am actually here, he thought, and he could barely believe it.

The door to Mr Dith’s office was half open and it moved beneath his knock.

‘Ah, Mr Davey, welcome to Cambodia.’ Dith rose from his chair to greet him. ‘We are very pleased to have you here in our fine school.’ He grinned and nodded, dipping his shoulders in a half-bow of welcome.

‘Well, I am very happy to be here.’ In his airplane-tired state Ryan did his best to match Mr Dith’s welcome and held his hand out. Dith was no stranger to the Western greeting; his shake was firm and quick.

‘Please,’ he motioned to a couple of chairs, white plastic body frames and tubular steel legs. They brought back memories of the Ikea store and the broad Australian suburb. Mr Dith sank into a large swivelling imitation-leather chair with arms, the kind of executive chair some people use to play body language games with – to turn away to the window, to lean back in. But while Mr Dith wore his chair with comfortable pride, he did not use it to assert any of that desultory air of authority, no game of power. Rather, he quickly sat forward,

picked up a pen and tapped it on the desk twice as if to call a meeting to order. He was somewhere above fifty years old, hair receding to the point where he could almost be called bald, cheerful but watchful face – wary.

‘How are you feeling after your long plane journey, Mr Davey?’ He pronounced the name with a long soft aaahhh. Ryan learnt later there was a Khmer girl’s name, Davy, said that way, and that he would forever be referred to in that tone. He liked it.

‘Well, it always takes a couple of days to recover,’ he admitted.

A big window showed the tenement across the street; an old woman was moving slowly about in an apartment – above that a huge sky with streaks of cloud.

‘I am pleased you could come and see me today. We all work in the morning on Saturdays and it is of course the last working day before you begin on Monday,’ said Mr Dith, with an uncertain smile. There was little Ryan could reply to that so he made the most acquiescent face he could manage.

‘We have Phnom Penh’s finest English language school here, Mr Davey. And we make what you call a ‘tight ship,’ yes?’

The metaphor seemed to please Mr Dith, so Ryan smiled appreciatively. He knew the school was one of the best three, probably running third in that group.

‘I can’t wait to get started.’ The remark seemed to please Mr Dith and he got into his speech straight away.

‘You must wear a long-sleeved white shirt each day with a dark-coloured tie.’

Mr Dith had already listed the dress requirements in his email, so Ryan had gone fossicking at the local Op Shops and picked up three white shirts.

‘Long dark pants, please. Black or charcoal are preferred. Oh, I am forgetting. You may roll your sleeves up to the top of the forearm.’

He hadn’t heard of that relaxation of the code.

‘Very generous,’ he murmured. If Mr Dith understood the mild sarcasm he gave no indication of it; but looking at him now Ryan could see that this was in no way a dull man. Sure, he was repeating his routine checklist now, but that was not all there was to him. A glance at Dith’s eyes showed that. And anyway, why would he not lay down the rules; he’d hired a teacher sight-unseen and this was his only shot at him.

‘We have to attract people to our school from the best families in Phnom Penh.’

Around the corner one hundred metres up Street 114 was another school. He’d seen parents in 4WD vehicles picking up children that morning, all dressed up in uniforms: close fitting beige waist jackets and white shirts for the boys, matching dresses over white shirts again for the girls. They went to school every day trussed up as if for some nine year old’s birthday party, in beige and white – preoccupied fathers, mothers who do lunch – Prime Minister Hun Sen’s elite. Ryan had seen no Mercedes vehicles with tinted windows outside this school when he’d walked up that morning.

‘Do you take primary school kids?’

Mr Dith looked blankly back at him.

‘Young ones, ten year olds.’

‘Oh no. Most of our students are young adults, making their way in the working world. English is very important for them to get ahead. Many wish to enter university, or to work with tourists.’

‘I see,’ he said. He had already seen the keen young kids in the foyer, sticking their heads up to get a part of whatever was left in the new Cambodia after the elites had licked off the cream.

‘Many of our students are young women. In fact, seventy per cent,’ Dith said with some rising note in his voice, as if he still couldn’t quite believe that women were taking whatever chance they could, while their brothers were stuck to their motorbikes on street corners.

‘Our students want value from every lesson. What you teach them they will try on their customers in cafes, or at the university – some have office jobs. It is very important.’

Ryan was impressed by the urgency of Mr Dith’s delivery. This was turning into a top order opening pep talk.

‘I am looking forward to the opportunity to help them,’ he replied.

Mr Dith eased his elbows off the desk, and when he sat back in the light, lines of care became visible in his face. Running any business in Hun Sen’s Cambodia would be perilous: corruption was rife; he had read in the *Post* that even teachers took extra money from their students in some places. The owners of the school could be quite close to real power. It occurred to him that anyone of Mr Dith’s age must have been a Khmer Rouge survivor. Even the tuk-tuk driver who had brought him from the airport the day before must have lived in the time of Pol Pot – the reign of terror. Everyone of that age must have been a survivor.

Or a perpetrator.

Mr Dith motioned to the corner of his desk closest to Ryan, to a large white folder, three centimetres thick with quarto-sized paper. Tabs in primary colours indicated chapters.

‘This is the text book for your advanced class. They are a very good class. I have marked the place for you to begin.’ Ryan noticed that Dith used ‘is’ and ‘are’ in every sentence – the first person he had encountered in Cambodia who did so. His English was good. ‘Other teacher was up to here,’ he pointed out the place. Ryan hadn’t thought until that moment that he was taking over from someone, another person. He looked at the imprint page; the book was from the United States, for teaching English as a Second Language. It looked like his first lesson would be about the U.S. economy.

‘Your other teacher had to leave?’ he said, making conversation.

‘We have many teachers here. All very good English. But it is good for our school to have native speakers. Very good, but expensive. You are paid a little more than Cambodian

teachers.’ He nodded twice in his enthusiasm, but Ryan noticed that he hadn’t answered the question. Then Dith lowered his voice and cast his eyes down as if to announce the arrival of a difficult subject. ‘But you must be teacher, always a teacher only.’

He didn’t get it for a moment. Mr Dith hesitated, showing his preference to not speak directly about any matter, wishing rather to inflect and infer and that such subtleties would be understood that way, as they would by people of his culture; and that the response to his oblique words would be returned to him in similar subtleties of nods and inclines of head and that all would be understood. But no such affirmation did he receive, just open-mouthed wonder from the man sitting opposite him. Mr Dith’s smile crinkled in embarrassment over this last important thing he had to say.

‘Always teacher. Never boyfriend.’

Mr Dith pressed the two open palms of his hands together and raised them in an apologetic way to the level of his nose in the Cambodian sompreas expression.

‘Of course,’ Ryan said. ‘Of course. Never boyfriend.’

He had imagined the Phnom Penh riverside area differently – the ‘quay’. It was the Sisowath Quay after all, and that word conjured all the romantic imagery of the neutered pomp of the kings of the colonial era. He’d imagined boats chugging in and out – puffs of black smoke trailing behind like something out of Joseph Conrad, cargo stacked on piers, nets of fish winched up, spilling from wicker baskets on to rustic wooden jetty planks.

But instead of that there was a busy modern street with one side of the road packed with cafes and shops, bars and travel agents – footpaths jammed up with menu boards and spruikers, racks of polo shirts clogging the footways. Still, this was one of those cities where quaint and rural touches remained: one coffin maker still sandwiched between bars and hotels, from the days when the Phnom Penh quay was like a village high street; an old

Peugeot tray truck came by with hay stacked high above the driver's cabin, and on top of that a boy, propped up on one elbow – consciously nonchalant. A hay truck in the main street of the capital; he liked it.

On the river side of the street there was a wide paved area that caught every degree of the hazy heat and radiated it back at you; here and there sorrowful little trees made twisted fingers of shade. Then there was a low concrete wall and the Tonle Sap. The river was down now at the end of the dry season and the concrete supports of the quay stood out like the ribs of a starving man, leading down to a scurf of mud and debris at water's edge. Away to the north a sight-seeing cruise boat chugged in and out from a dock every now and then, and six hundred metres or so to the south, past the Imperial Palace, was the murky confluence with the Mekong.

It was said that when the real rains came and the rivers flowed like they meant it, the waters of the Mekong shouldered into the smaller river with such force that they pushed the Tonle Sap all the way back to Kampong Thom two hundred kilometres up the stream. The river then flowed backwards.

Looking down into its sturdy progress now, he could not believe it. He walked along the strip towards the confluence as far as the Foreign Correspondents' Club, then down a side street where there was an English language bookshop, its shop space just wide enough to fit shelves on each wall with two long ones back to back in the middle. Soon a girl glided out and placed the palms of her hands together, then lifted them in front of her face. It felt natural to return the gesture and when he did she smiled shyly and bowed her head. She was a slim and tall picture of elegance; a small bare-footed child looked around from behind her close fitting neck-to-floor dress. After a few minutes he found himself buying a pirated copy of Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, with photocopied pages bound together into what

was a reasonable facsimile of the original cover. All that to make three dollars – without considering paper and copying.

He'd heard of pirated CDs and illegal downloads, but photocopied books? In an economy like this every single dollar was to strive for.

He tried to speak to the girl as he paid, but she was embarrassed and shook her head as she said, 'No, sorry,' then made the sompreas again after she had given him his change. The girl who ran the English language bookshop must have been the only shopkeeper in Phnom Penh who spoke no English.

He had the number of a family friend – Colin, a university pal of his father's who'd never quite lost touch. He pulled out his phone and looked at the name on the contact list. It was Saturday afternoon, an auspicious time to visit. But not now; he wasn't ready for an Aussie.

He pressed on up the river towards the confluence, up to the Chaktomuk Theatre, surrounded with big trees and all closed up. It was quiet here. The intensity of the city slipped away and he was suddenly alone. Across the Tonle Sap, on the peninsula that is the final point of its separation from the Mekong, there was a brand new luxury tourist and high-roller hotel that stared out over the waters as if it was the proprietor of the river itself – big money and big-noting. There, suddenly before him, was Amanda at his gate again; he was too slow to stop her running out – tissue at her face. What if he had held her arm at his front door, given her an option that breathed and loved? Amanda and Dermott together – the luxury hotel. They would love it there.

Or would she? Some days she was the conscious and pre-meditated lady, on others she would shoot baskets with the boys and you would have to watch her elbows or end up bloody-nosed. There was no knowing.

He turned and hurried away.

Back in the middle of town, life burst around him again. In places there was new building work, and scores of shirtless lads in thongs toted barrows of cement and erected bizarre bamboo scaffolding on which they worked, five storeys up, still in thongs, no safety net. He had read about bamboo scaffolding used at the buildings of Angkor; this was the same, and the fatality rate was probably a match as well.

The footpaths were too packed with life to walk on. A couple of mechanics had wheeled out motorbikes and squatted, one with a screw driver dismantling a carburetor. Some of the boys hung about, smoking, slapping down cards – grease up to the middle joint of their fingers. Motorbike parts lay around like spent shrapnel.

At the next shop-front two women sat next to a plastic stand – grilled bits of scrawny chicken and fatty pork on sale. Beside them a clothes rack: four shirts, five pairs of undies, two bras and a range of children's things. He stepped to look closer, but then he could see that this stuff was the women's own morning's washing out to dry, right there in the street. The women laughed in a cackling, crone-like way when they saw his realisation, and meant no offence.

Wedged up by them was a man asleep in his cyclo. Then another man squatted over wrought iron gates which were planked across the way, sparking at them with a welder. Beside him sat plastic bags of waste from bars and restaurants, coconut husks and banana peel fermenting in the tropical heat. An old woman who must have been seventy squatted by a pile of hessian sacks full of charcoaled branches, chopped into one foot lengths, waiting for the cafes to pick them up for the evening grill. Among the smell of rotting vegetables and charcoal fires and petrol fumes, came the dank and fetid smell of sewage. A saffron covered monk hurried by him, briefcase in hand – business awaited him somewhere.

The irresistible, clamourous rabble of Cambodian life had kept him wired for two hours since the chat with Mr Dith. But now he could feel he was tiring with every minute that his

senses were stretched in this extraordinary place. He decided to turn back towards the Kandal market and then up the quay to his room at the Indochine. But still, motorbikes made a slalom pathway around him, tuk-tuk drivers hailed him. A man marched past him with a basket of bananas on his head. A foot-powered cyclo glided through, one stick-thin loin-clothed gent trotting between its sticks. A boy of around ten pushed a wooden cart piled so high with spinach leaves that he had to peer around his cargo as he went, one side then the other. A chicken crossed the road pursued by an even smaller boy. A motorbike ducked around him, a lad steering with his left hand, text messaging with his right, glancing up and grinning.

Then from the crowd a hand stuck out, grabbing him by the arm. Sudden. He gasped with the shock of it – he had been in the middle of it, but until that moment viewing it all as if in a dream. He cried out loud, ‘Ugghh.’

‘Hey, you ok?’ said the owner of the arm. He looked up to a freckled face and brownish blonde hair. It could have been the head of a surfer. But he didn’t know any surfers, and this face was familiar.

‘I saw you earlier on today,’ said the head. Ryan gazed back uncomprehending. Today? What had he been doing today? He woke up in the hotel, had eggs in the café downstairs, went to see Mr Dith, walked along the quay.

‘At the school,’ the blonde head went on.

‘At the school?’

‘Yeah, buddy. You were waiting downstairs, in the lobby. You’re the new guy.’

‘Jesus. You were there.’ Now he remembered, the guy who came down the stairs with his class, pointed at him and said ‘Hey’.

‘I’m there, six days a week. Well, five and half. And don’t call me Jesus, the name is Tom.’

‘I’ll call you Jesus if I want,’ he said.

‘Huh!’ Tom crunched a snort and threw his head back. ‘You’re an Aussie,’ he said.

Ryan had to admit that it was true. ‘Awesome,’ Tom said, though ‘ossom’ was the way it came out.

‘You can find your way through all this ruck?’ said Ryan.

‘Aw, it’s easy. You’ll have your sea-legs in a couple of days.’

‘Young bloke back there was steering through this and sending a text with the other hand.’

‘Ah, you’re not one of the guys if you can’t do that.’

‘I guess so,’ said Ryan uncertainly. ‘Been here long?’

‘Two years, mate. From Minnesota. I came to Cambodia for three reasons: it was warm, it was cheap and someone said it was interesting.’

‘And you stayed two years.’

‘So far,’ Tom said, looking around him at the street, the people, all of life’s pageant tottering along on a shifting canvas. ‘It’s kind of like that.’

Ryan stumbled over his own reasons for coming, left out all the important bits and said that someone had told him it was interesting here too.

‘Yup, interesting is the word – literal and Chinese senses in abundance. We need to go out sometime. I’ll show you what I mean.’

‘Can’t miss.’

‘You sure you’re ok?’ Tom said before he left.

‘I’m fine. My hotel’s just up the street. A nice cheap one.’

‘Can’t miss.’ Tom repeated Ryan’s phrase and pointed his finger at him for emphasis, as he had back at the school.

He had made a contact, two if you counted Mr Dith, then three if you counted Colin. He told himself to stop thinking so much, to stop looking so hard. It was only when you gave up hunting for something that you would find it.

That's what he told himself.

He slogged through his first day with the elementary classes. There were hours of repetition as eager newcomers tried to grasp the impossible sentence structure of English and its flowing pronunciation all at once. The business of learning was serious and taxing.

'You seen Dith yet?' said Tom at the end of the day.

'Saw him a couple of times coming down the corridor.'

Dith had gone past with a folder under his arm all business-like, ears tweaking.

'If he hasn't sat in on a class yet, he must be busy.'

'He sits in on classes?'

'At first, yeah. That's the procedure. Then there's reports and feedback surveys. But you're a mid-term start-up – weird.' Tom wagged a finger to show that protocol was everything here.

Ryan just held his hands out as if to say, what happened?

'Dith did two or three classes himself last week; we all did a couple.' He sat forward on his metal lunch-room chair. 'The last guy left in a hurry. Your email came through the day the fan and the excrement went boogaloo.'

'I took the hint there may have been some "inappropriate relationship" involved. You know, I hate that term. It could mean anything from shagging to holding hands.'

'Yeeaaaah,' Tom drawled, 'something at the real business end of that scale, you'd have to say. But he was just basically slack about everything. You're already a grade up from that. Si, claro.'

Even though Tom was from the freezing north of the USA he liked to use the Spanish expressions, as if he was some Tex-Mex wrangler dude. He'd visited the Southwest once,

Arizona. He stayed a while and worked in a gas station, talked to all the characters. Told himself he'd never go back to the lakes and the twin towns – moved on to Asia.

‘What happened to the girl?’

‘She stayed. They pay Dith; Dith pays you.’ He pointed his finger at Ryan once again for emphasis. ‘Money doesn’t talk around here, it swears.’

‘I see.’

‘Mind you, gorgeous chick.’ Tom spoke with the air of someone who would know, or at least someone who would notice. For the moment Ryan asked no more questions.

The second morning, Tuesday, was the advanced class, the one he had been looking forward to. The kids would have been up before seven for the early class at eight. Many would race away after the lesson to universities and technical colleges for eight hours of study before work in the evening, the boys buzzing tourists around on motorbikes, the girls putting plates on tables.

There was a little phalanx of five or six girls at the front, jeans with white shirts or coloured tees, delicate faces, some with a blush of makeup and with little caps sitting by them on the desk. Then the boys, the entertainers in the middle of the class and the slower ones at the back, following the lesson from whatever the better ones said.

‘Ok, turn your books to Chapter 5, page 3.’ A rustling of paper followed as they found their places – they could all get the numbers and were keen to show it.

‘This next section is about the economy of the United States.’

‘Yes, teacher,’ many of them remarked in their eagerness.

‘Are any of you doing Economics in university?’

They looked up at him in surprise. They weren’t used to a lot of conversation with their teacher that went away from the book.

Three or four hands rose sheepishly.

‘Have you learnt anything about the economy of the United States ... or of Cambodia?’

Two of the boys whispered to each other in Khmer for a few moments and then were joined by a girl who sat behind them and seemed to admonish them mildly. It was she who spoke.

‘Economics is mainly figures and stas...statis-tics,’ she said. Then, concentrating very hard she said again, ‘Statistics. That is a difficult one to pronounce.’ The girl coloured slightly and smiled a sweet shy smile. She had spoken the best student English he’d heard in Cambodia, rivalling Mr Dith.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’ll bet it is. And what is your name.’

‘I am Malee,’ she said, colouring more deeply.

The girl next to her raised her hand and Ryan nodded to her. ‘Malee is the best student in class. Always.’ A number of students around her, both boys and girls, nodded and murmured approbation. Malee bowed her head modestly.

‘Very good,’ he said. Ryan was happiest when formality was broken down, but he could see by the way they looked at each other that this was not the usual style. He glanced at Malee again as he began to read from the book. She was small and neat, her hair was tied back in a ponytail that revealed delicate ears and neck. Her features were smart and sharp, beautiful in a book-wormish way.

‘The United States is the world’s largest single national economy,’ he read. ‘It was worth 18.8 trillion dollars in 2015. Does anyone know what a trillion is?’

The class was silent, twenty-two faces looking back at him.

‘A trillion is one thousand billion.’

‘Billion?’ said one of the economics boys.

‘A billion is a thousand million.’

The eyes of the class bored into the pages of their books. He didn't want to confuse them more so he stuck to the script for most of the lesson as they trudged through all the positive news of the American economy. With five minutes to go he'd had enough and he was curious about what they knew.

'All right then. Can somebody tell me about Cambodia's national economy?' Suddenly eyes lit up; this was something about their own country. 'What industries are important here?'

A boy named Thuon raised his hand.

'Yes, Thuon, what do you think?'

'I think ... is very difficult to become rich economy like Japan or United States.'

Two girls sat at the front, Sophy and Chi. They had spent the lesson alternately looking at their books and making eyes at him with open-mouthed expressions. Sophy spoke up now.

'In Cambodia people work very small wage. In Western place everything ok.'

Suddenly everyone in the class was giving him some advice on the Cambodian economy, everyone except Malee. He held his hands up for quiet and the class quickly toned down.

'Malee, do you have anything to add?'

Everyone looked to Malee and she hesitated, gathering her thoughts, still looking down at her desk. Where all the others had been blurting, she had been thinking.

'I think in Cambodia people work for very little money.' Heads nodded around her. 'I think everything owned by very few people. *Is* owned,' she corrected herself. 'Everything *is* owned.'

'One per cent of the people own all wealth,' said one of the economics boys, Tang. He spoke as a smart guy who was showing off a fact he had learnt in his university class. 'Factory own by Korean and Taiwan.'

There had been a trace of emotion in Malee's voice when she spoke. He was interested and couldn't help digging a little.

'Do you know people who work in the factories?' he said, looking at Malee, holding one hand up to silence Tang and the other boys.

'Yes,' Malee said, looking up for the first time, 'my sister works in a factory.' Her chin stuck out slightly as she spoke. 'She makes garments, she sews up shirts. They pay her eighty-five dollars every month and if she works overtime half a day she makes five dollars more. From her money she helps pay for me to come here learn English.'

It was not said with animation, or anger; but within the shell of her matter of fact tone there was hidden a pearly note of defiance. She had said more than she needed to; and four sentences with only one mistake.

'Garment making is the most important industry in Cambodia – more than 600,000 workers.' Malee lowered her head as if to say that her statement was concluded. In this context, within this classroom, it was quite a speech.

He remembered seeing something on TV the night before – unhappy workers. Was there a strike threatening? In this country? After only a few days in Cambodia he could see that this was not a place that would be friendly to striking workers. When the elite rolled their huge imported 4WD vehicles through the crowded streets – tinted windows, bullet proof glass – people looked over their shoulders, moved aside. Worried looks crept over their faces. He remembered the parents he had seen outside the rival school, dropping their liveried children from huge Mercedes vehicles.

'Does anyone else have family in the garment industry?'

Two of the boys raised a finger, as if embarrassed, and the girl who sat next to Malee put her hand up as far as her shoulder. The rest of the class was silent, their pursed lips and downward glances disassociating them from any stain of garment worker family.

At that moment a bell rang to announce the end of the class. He could not pretend to be unhappy about taking a break. The mood changed instantly and they all began to pack their bags.

‘Thank you, teacher.’ Many of them cried happily. ‘Goodbye, teacher.’ Every one of them gave him farewell. He got the feeling he had been a hit.

When most of them had gone there was just Sophy and Chi left and Malee, who was methodically and thoughtfully packing her bag. Sophy smiled and said thank you again for the lesson. They finally made for the door and Malee was just behind them. He wondered whether Malee would stay to say something to him, but she slipped through the door behind Sophy with her head down.

Then suddenly the room was empty. He straightened some chairs. His first lesson with the top class had been interesting – tiring, hard. He tried to remember details from the TV news about the industrial trouble brewing. The place had suddenly become more real to him; it was closer and that felt good.

As he stepped out into the corridor he saw the figure of Mr Dith, sitting on the bench outside the room, his back rigid and his hands out on his knees – an almost military pose for a man to be waiting in.

As Ryan stepped out Dith rose and turned towards him, his face serious. He brought his hands together in front of his nose and tapped his fingers as if to summon his thoughts.

‘You are a good teacher,’ he said. ‘I was listening for ten minutes. I apologise that I was not able to sit in with your entire class. Students like you very much – it is easy to tell.’ He took a deep breath, as if about to make a pronouncement. ‘But, I think you must follow the book. Very few students from the garment worker background come to this school. Malee is an exception. She is assisted by UNICEF and her sister works very hard to help her. Many

students in this school come from a ... higher background. In future I think you must follow the book.'

'Yes, Mr Dith,' Ryan said. 'I think you might be right. In future I will stick to the book.'

Mr Dith bowed seriously to him and without another word he walked away in the direction of his office, deep in thought.

Ryan made it back to the Hotel Indochine.

'Hello, boss. You want go somewhere?'

It was the tuk-tuk man who had brought him in from the airport, taken up residence outside the Indochine now. Ryan guessed it must have been as good a place as any to work from.

'Not now, mate – too tired.'

'No worry, tomorrow good. We go Mt Oudon tomorrow – thirty dollar, cheap.' The man chuckled with the preposterous nature of his own proposition. Sure, he could take Ryan to Mt Oudon if he wanted to go, but it was big long shot.

'Nah, no go Mt Oudon tomorrow.' Ryan smiled too, a tired smile.

'Killing Field, very nice.'

'Not for now.' He had to put his tourist pleasures on hold for a while.

'Ok, boss.'

He got a beer from the fridge in the little lobby and a sleepy-eyed boy stirred from his nap, slid his key across the bar and placed a stroke next to the word 'Beer' on Ryan's tab. The passageway outside Ryan's room gave out onto a couple of metres of balcony that looked over the river. He sat on a plastic stool for a minute and watched the water roll by towards the Mekong. The beer was cold.

The man had brought him in from the airport. When they stopped by his tuk-tuk in the carpark Ryan had looked up to his first Asian sky. It had been low and intense, dark and sulky – as if it had been contemplating rain but just couldn't collect the energy.

He had said something to the tuk-tuk man about the sky.

The man had looked at the sky.

The man looked at Ryan, then looked at the sky again.

'You know, boss,' the tuk-tuk man had said. 'People ask me about hotel, Angkor Wat, garment worker strike. No-one ask me about sky before.'

All the way into town the tuk-tuk driver asked Ryan questions as he dodged traffic: where you from? – Australia, very good country; this your first time Phnom Penh? – tomorrow you go torture prison, I take?

Ryan had resisted most of his offers of transport solutions, but since that day the man had taken up his spot outside the Indochine and greeted him every morning, often with a comment on the nature of the sky that day. Ryan could almost count the tuk-tuk man as another person that he knew in Phnom Penh. But now that he went back over their first conversation again, the man had mentioned a garment worker strike.

The garment thing is big, Ryan thought, as he eased himself into his beer.

'So, is he handsome?'

Malee often came home thoughtful and remote, and Reap could tell when something interesting had happened, but this time she'd walked around like a tortoise with its head pulled even further into its shell than usual. So there had been questions and the digging eventually revealed an astonishing answer: the source of her perplexity was a man.

The last time Malee had come home so pensive it had been the connection in political philosophy of Mao's Cultural Revolution to the Khmer Rouge ideology; she'd no idea the

influence of China had been so strong. The time before that it was the functions of the liver that still played on her mind when she'd come in from medical school, and while Reap found this interesting for a couple of minutes it wasn't what excited her. In her mind the functions of the body were just there and there was nothing you could do about them, a bit like the Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot.

But husbands were a different matter.

'Handsome? Hmmm ...fairly, I suppose.' Malee saw the world as shades of grey and would give every subject credit for complexity, which she would sometimes try to communicate in detail to her older Sister Number Two. But Reap was black and white about things, and whatever patience she had was reserved for the ten hours every day that she plied her sewing machine at the Amalgamated Apparel factory.

'There is no such thing as 'fairly'. There is only good and bad so I think that must make him good.' Reap was strong on this point and as she looked through narrowed eyes at her little sister she saw a faint blush around the ears.

'Aha!' she said. 'I saw that. So, he *is* handsome. And rich.'

Catching the subject of this conversation, Reap's workmate Sophea jumped off her bunk in the bedroom she and Reap shared, and trotted into the living room.

'Did you say rich?' said Sophea.

'He is a teacher so he can't be that rich,' said Malee, not wanting to leave awkward reality completely out of the discussion.

'Your teacher?'

'He's new. He took over from the one who had to leave.' They had heard about the one who had to leave. A girl had had an affair with a teacher – it was compellingly shocking. It was also a precedent.

‘You better catch him soon before some other girl,’ Reap pointed her finger for emphasis. There were a few boys working in the garment factory but there were no husbands there, certainly no rich ones. In any case, Reap and Sophea were destined to return to the village in three years’ time and marry boys their fathers thought were suitable and whom they liked enough: five years in the garment factory, then babies.

But Malee was the exception from their whole village because her life was not so planned. Out of the first five children in the family who had made their way into the world so far, she was the clever one. Their Pa had almost burst with pride that she was helped by UNICEF and had come to Phnom Penh to become a doctor. His face in the village was high, but it meant he could not fulfil his role of finding a boy for her; when her study finished Malee might work in a hospital anywhere. She would never return to the village to live.

‘He might have a barang girlfriend,’ Sophea suggested. They waited for Malee’s insight on this question.

Malee looked at her sideways and pursed her lips. ‘I don’t think so,’ was her judgement, her first concession to the scheme that the new teacher might, after all, be a prospect.

‘What makes you think?’

‘Things he said today,’ Malee replied mysteriously. ‘And, he’s only been here a week.’

‘Ah, he’s new!’ the other girls exhaled in unison.

‘Is he nice?’ Sophea asked.

‘I was wondering when one of you would get around to asking that – handsome, rich, then nice, in that order of importance.’

‘Well?’ They were impatient.

‘Yes. He is nice. He is gentle ... and funny.’

Reap and Sophea popped their eyes at each other in exaggerated amazement. ‘Grab him!’ cried Reap, whimsically shaking her head from side to side. Their hands grabbed at Malee’s

knees as if to demonstrate how tight she should hold on. They shook her comically from side to side as if to push some sense into her. When this vaudeville routine and the giggling subsided, Sophea had to dry her eyes, then showed she possessed a more sceptical and serious mind.

‘They all seem nice, then they go away. Do you remember Chanti from our village? She fell in love with the French guy from the NGO. After three months she talked to him about babies and the next day he disappeared. One last ficky, then he’s gone.’

‘Her red-check krama was stiff from tears.’ Reap remembered it well; she had never seen another person so disconsolate.

‘No-one from the village will marry her now. She’s stuck with Phnom Penh guys.’

They were all silent for a moment, thinking of Chanti and the grim lottery which would befall her with the men of the city, and which could happen to them too if they made such an inauspicious gamble.

‘But for us, every week, life is just the same as the one before,’ said Sophea, propping her head on her hand in a melancholy way. ‘Two years we work in the factory and Malee studies all the time until eleven o’clock at night. At least Chanti had three months of fun.’

‘But now she has a broken heart and her ancestors will be ashamed of her too.’

‘She will have to light some special incense at Pchum Benh to restore their hearts.’

‘We have to speak softly, and be patient; it is the only way. Chanti was so forward. She was the one who asked that French guy out, when he came into *Chez Jules*.’

‘Yes, it was too easy for him,’ said Malee, nodding to herself and narrowing her eyes. ‘But I am lucky. At least I like to study. Sometimes I think I won’t like it when I have to stop.’

The other two nodded, in awe of Malee’s driven nature and her study habits.

‘And,’ she went on, ‘I think that speaking softly will suit me ...’ and they waited for Malee to finish, ‘in all things.’ It was another one of Malee’s mysterious statements, but somehow

the other two understood her this time – that it was something to do with the new teacher. ‘Turn the cooker on; it’s time to cut some vegetables.’

Reap lit a match at the portable single gas burner that was their only cooker, and Malee and Sophea cut the radish and carrots that would go into their noodle soup. Every night was boiled noodle, and whatever vegetable was cheap at the market.

‘One day Malee will be a doctor and we will be proud,’ said Reap, giving up on the marriageable barang for a moment. She knew not to wish too hard for anything.

‘One day,’ said Malee.

‘But now we grind. And this week there is another demonstration.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Malee, looking up again, ‘the demonstration.’ She looked back down at the radish in her delicate fingers. ‘We can’t forget the demonstration’.

While Ryan might have come to Cambodia to be away from his family, there was at least one person he could never ignore.

He called his sister Janey, his big sister in between him and his brother Dermott. His sister Janey who tied his shoes for him when he was little, who packed him peanut butter, redcurrant jelly and salami sandwiches for his school lunches because that was the way he liked them.

He looked at his phone. It meant retreating in a way. He had come all this distance and now he had to think about the Sydney problem again. He looked up the elaborate prefix for international dialing then tapped it all in with Janey’s number, took a deep breath and punched the green button.

‘I’m supposed to be going without you? To this wedding horror? Where are you? What’s happened to you?’

That was how she answered the phone. Ryan had left her a message saying he wouldn't be going to the wedding – that's all he'd said.

'Hi, Janey.'

'Hello. This means I've got just three months to exhume some date and drag him along for company, me an old maid thirty-six years of age. If they last that long, that pair. She's not with foetus, is she?' Janey was always conflating ideas into a bunch of sentences, leaving you to pick which one you wanted to follow, or both – whichever. This conversational mode was confusing to new players, but had advantages for experienced hands.

'You should find someone else, Janey. Someone permanent. You don't think they'll make it?'

'You are telling me, and you not over this Amanda. Fifty/fifty I'd say.'

'No chance pregnant. It's only been six months for me to get over her, you've had eleven years – more.'

Janey had fallen in love with a Jewish boy in her first year at uni, in the dramatic society. He was quirky and funny. They shared interests and they got on.

The boy's parents were polite and accepting but, well, a little distant. They didn't think Janey would last but that only drove her on. She upgraded from science to medicine to impress them, and maybe to stretch herself too. She got through ok and ended up in one of those practices where there are six or eight doctors and you never know who you are going to see unless you book two weeks ahead. 'Too bad if you come down with diarrhoea,' was what she said, shrugging her shoulders.

But her success in medicine was not enough for the Adlemans. When three, four, five years passed and she didn't go away, the parents became more and more distant. And then he dumped her.

She was a shiksa.

‘I haven’t found the right one yet,’ she said.

‘You’re not even going out with anyone.’

‘The only men I meet are doctors.’

‘So ...’

‘All married with Range Rovers.’

‘Any with wives?’

‘They’re the only ones who are interested. And don’t even mention internet dating.’

‘You could try going into low pubs by yourself on a Friday night. You know, short skirt, a little make-up.’

‘At least you haven’t lost your sense of humour.’ Then she had a thought. ‘Hey, this was meant to be about you, anyway. What in hell have you been up to these five days since you disappeared on me?’

He still hadn’t told her why he wouldn’t be attending ‘this wedding horror.’

‘Oh, yes, that little matter.’

‘That one.’

‘Um. Let’s see. Yes, the wedding. I’m not going.’

‘You emailed as much. Your phone has been silent for days.’

‘I won’t even be there.’

He heard silence on the end of the phone, then a sigh – all constructed for effect. In the early stages of her brief but notable varsity dramatic career, Janey had been noted for her natural comic timing.

‘You said ‘there’, Ryan, not ‘here’. Is that correct?’

‘Um, yeah.’

‘Um, yeah ...’ she mimicked. Then her voice came over all cheerful, as if nothing untoward was occurring at all. ‘Oh, ok. And just, by the way, just asking but, just where

might you happen to be at the moment? If I might enquire, not wanting to be too pushy or nuthin’.’

‘Um, let me see now. Just looking down into the street,’ and he actually did look down into the street, ‘I can see a guy pulling a little rickshaw type thing only they call them cyclos here and there are millions of motorbikes and lots of people in the street who mostly look sort of South East Asianny so I reckon ... the place I am in at the moment is probably ... ah, Cambodia.’

The silence at the other end of the phone this time was more profound.

‘Jesus H Magillicuddy. You’re serious, aren’t you.’

‘I’ll be teaching English.’

He could sense her nodding with pursed lips, catching up with the news.

‘A very fine thing to do. Do you have any idea how much they pay teachers up there?’

‘Enough to live on.’

‘Enough for a Cambodian to live on, if he’s corrupt.’

‘Or she.’

‘Pardon me. Women can be corrupt too. Very good. Now, what can I do to dissuade you?’

‘I started three days ago.’

He knew that Janey was the last person in the world who would have him walk away from an agreement. He remembered how when he was a teenager he had arranged to make a date with a girl and then had second thoughts. Janey held him by the shoulders and looked into his eyes. ‘You said you’d do it so you’d better go through with it. Think of that poor girl,’ she’d said, and the date worked out ok after all.

She had been the moral imperative in his life; she chose to see even casual verbal agreements as binding, like a sacred oath or written contract.

‘Can I come and visit you?’ It was sudden, unexpected.

‘Serious?’ At the best he had hoped for acceptance. ‘You want to come?’

‘Of course I want to come!’

Ryan could not speak for a moment. Janey had supported him in the past, and especially about this relationship between Amanda and Dermott, but this was a shock.

‘I ... Well, yes. Janey, I didn’t think this was your ...’

‘Not my what?’

‘... not your kind of place. Look, yes. Yes, please. When I am well settled.’

‘Well settled could take a lifetime up there.’

‘So it could,’ he said. ‘A lifetime is what it could be.’

‘Oh, my God,’ he heard from the other end of the line.

That night he was still thinking about his morning lesson. The laptop was sitting on the bed. He flipped up the lid and knelt in front of it without bothering to set up on the tiny table that was there. He typed in ‘Cambodia garment workers’. A list of newspaper articles came up; a glance to the bottom of the screen showed there were more than ten pages of them. *The Phnom Penh Post*, *The Cambodia Daily*, socialist weeklies from all over the world, even the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Melbourne Age* were in on the act. Suddenly it all looked like big news.

Some of the entries were news reports of strikes and demonstrations stretching back a year and a half. Some of them were investigative pieces revealing the living conditions of the workers. The demonstrations had been tense stand-offs between the workers and police to show dissatisfaction at the employers’ failure to respond to demands. Workers in the garment industry were receiving around \$80-85 per month, the poverty line was \$160. One article quoted a representative from the Federation of Friendship Unions who feared the situation could descend into violence. A court injunction had ordered strikers back to work.

One piece showed girls sleeping four to a room in a block of flats. There were pictures of them crouching on the floor, washing dishes in a plastic baby's tub; they had to cart the dirty water down three flights to toss it in a drain; they went the same way for a toilet. Most of the workers were girls who had come in to Phnom Penh from the country and from their \$80 per month they sent money home to parents in the provinces. He guessed from what he had heard that even \$10 per month would make a big difference to people out there, but it left the girls in the city on subsistence diets, in a weakened state. One story focused on mass faintings – girls passing out at their sewing machines in hot and ill-ventilated factories. There was a procedure called coining, where girls would be rubbed hard with coins to restore circulation and revive them. He shook his head, and wondered what Janey would think of that.

The articles revealed sympathy among the educated class who wrote in the newspapers. But it seemed tentative support, as if testing the resolve of the government: editors and journalists had been bashed in years gone by, one had been shot dead in the street with his twenty-one-year-old son. But Prime Minister Hun Sen could not go so far down that road now; it could tempt international disapproval and threaten the flow of foreign aid to his country. On the other hand he had to keep wages down and the flow of capital coming in. Foreign aid and multi-national investment worked against each other's interests to a large extent, but Hun Sen needed both. It was the kind of balancing act that he loved to play, and he knew better than anyone how far he could go at any one time.

Ryan's eyes stopped on a figure. A story from the *Post* said there were 650,000 people in the garment industry. Another story said 700,000 but another would only say over half a million. They were incredible numbers. He remembered the one boy who said, 'garment Cambodia biggest industry'. He was not smiling when he spoke the words.

He piled up his two polyester pillows and laid back on the bed. Was this the first time he had felt he was doing something important? Ever? The feeling that people were relying on

him to do his job properly filled him with a sudden belonging. The kids in his class; they actually needed him. And Malee, the scholarship girl. He wanted to find out more about what was in her mind; her sister was a garment worker.

He drank a cold beer, looking at the wall in front of him. He checked his emails from home with reports of concerts and piss-ups, of who had fallen down the stairs at the Rose Bay Hotel and chundered off the side of a harbor cruise boat.

Thank god I am not there, he thought, for the first time. Somehow that meant that at last he could call up Colin. It would have been all too easy to have appeared as a callow and diffident lad before this formidable ex-patriate, but now he had done something for himself; he had learnt things. He now felt a little less like Alice in the Wonderland of mystery and danger.

Or so he told himself.

Ryan was prepared to concede that he knew less about life now than he had when he was a know-it-all twenty-two year old, which was about the last time he had seen Colin. In that time, even though Colin was a friend of his father's (a fact which counted against him), and a user of traditional Aussie sayings (which deepened the negative reckoning), even then Ryan could see that Colin had something: a kind of third eye that saw through what was being said around him, and a native wisdom that kept you honest.

'Where've ya bin? I heard you'd done a runner up here.' Colin answered the phone in his office.

'Took a few days to settle in.'

The address was past the Royal Palace on Sothearos Boulevard, on the way to the National Assembly. Leafy streets – nice. Life in a well-established NGO couldn't be all bad. Ryan

rang with a hundred metres to go and Colin came through the rolling glass doors of the modern building as he approached.

‘Mate,’ he stuck out a hand and gave Ryan’s a good grip. The pleasure in his face was so urgent that it was almost needy. Ryan wondered for a second about the life of the long term ex-pat. Colin might be a king in this world, but what about life away from the office? Who did he turn to when the sun went down?

Colin first hit town to help out in the United Nations-run election in 1993. To say he had come for six months and stayed for twenty years would be not quite literally true. But he had found some excuse to return, the way people do when there was something about Cambodia that had ground into their souls and wouldn’t go away. For Colin it had been schools. UNICEF had wanted someone who knew how to set up schools and Colin had just split up with the wife. He had met Hun Sen along the way. Ryan asked him about that when they settled down with Angkor Lagers cold from the bar fridge.

‘The glass eye is good,’ Colin observed. Hun Sen’s eye had been taken out by shrapnel when fighting for the Khmer Rouge, before his defection to Vietnam. There’s nothing like hearing your name is on an elimination list to get you running across the border. ‘You met any glass eyes yet?’

Ryan confessed that he hadn’t.

‘You will in this country – nearly as many glass eyes going around as blown off legs.’ Colin’s humour was black. ‘They’re good these days.’

Colin’s NGO was still something to do with schools. That’s where Hun Sen came in. Every second school in Cambodia was named after him; they made for good photo shoots and TV programs, so they had to get a new one going every now and then. In comes Colin.

The window looked over trees – twilight, an open park, lights winking through shimmering branches like outback stars through shifting clouds. From that high up the

impression could settle gently upon you that life was good. He was unsure whether he should be feeling privileged or whether he was just doing a duty by visiting a family friend. He decided to feel privileged for a moment.

‘By the way I heard what happened.’ For someone who only visited Australia once every three years or so, Colin was up on the family gossip. ‘What the fuck is your old man doing allowing that shit? Jesus.’

Ryan shrugged his shoulders and tried to seem unconcerned, too cool to be back there in all that stuff.

‘Dermott is gearing up to be family king,’ he said. ‘Now he’s got his queen; she was a kind of take-over target. That’s probably how he thinks of it.’

‘And you’ve run away.’ Colin was a tester. He liked to hit you with one so frank and confronting that you weren’t expecting it, just to see what you would do.

‘There’s only so much confetti you can brush out of your suit pants.’

Colin took a huge swig from his beer and leaned back in his chair – narrowed eyes regarding Ryan.

‘Good answer,’ he said. ‘But it looks to me like you got a bit stuck in your fly.’ Ryan stared back at him and made a face, so Colin went on. ‘Weddings,’ he shrugged, ‘fucking hell. Seen a Cambo wedding, yet?’

Ryan shook his head.

‘All pink and yellow - hysterical. Big ceremony walking in a circle around the couple, brings good luck. Divorced people on the outside – bad karma. And noise! Loudest musical racket you ever heard, and I saw ACDC at the Sydney Concert Hall in 1987.’

‘I get your point.’

‘You know your dad and I used to hang around in the same bunch at uni in the seventies. He keeps in touch.’

‘Great networker. Always at the parties. Made him sick in the end.’

‘In business pissing on can be an occupational hazard.’

‘Maybe you should have brought him up here in ‘93.’ Ryan was thinking how that would have solved everyone’s problems.

‘We could have used him; he *gets things done*.’

Colin was tough enough to make sure Ryan had to hear something good about his dad.

‘Sounds like it was a wild time had by all, from what I’ve heard, and read.’

‘93? UN people were running around with allowances of a hundred and sixty bucks a day. In this place! In fairness it should be said that some of them kept a low profile and wired the money home. But some of them ...’

‘Gomorraah!’

‘Didn’t know you were Irish.’

‘That’s begorraah.’

‘You knew that one! You’re either smart or just knowledgeable.’

Ryan shrugged. It was from a gag, an old one, one of the old man’s. Something about Sodom and Begorraah. He couldn’t remember the joke set-up but he would never forget the punch-line.

Colin sniffed and almost chuckled but didn’t allow himself quite that much.

‘At that time a bottle of whisky and ficky would leave you enough change out of ten bucks for brekky the next morning and a hair of the dog thrown in. You could play up like the Rolling Stones on tour and still send money home to the missus.’ He shook his head at his memories. ‘Yanks, Dutch, Eye-ties, Bulgarians – the fucken lot.’

‘You send some home to the missus?’

‘You bet. All of it. I was married then and I wanted it to stay that way.’ Colin looked at Ryan quizzically, as if challenging him to contradict. ‘With the view of hindsight I may have

done some things differently. But experience is something you get just after you really needed it. Isn't that what the man said?'

Colin's marriage had ended back then – old news. But there had been another since and that had gone in the same direction. So what now? Colin had given no hint of his situation, so Ryan had to guess that he was alone.

'We ought to take you out one night – have a look at the town.'

'Sure. I know a bloke might be in it with us.' He could take Tom along as a buffer.

'We'll go to the Heart of Darkness.'

'Jesus. I won't disappear up the Mekong will I? Like Colonel Kurtz?'

'In the totally bullshit film version. No. Not while I'm there to save you.'

Tom had told him about the Heart of Darkness bar: head crunching music system and bargirls with insect persistence. Suddenly a veil of dread was dragged over his head.

'Cheers, old man,' said Colin, chuckling to himself, still assessing the young man sitting opposite him.

'Yeah, cheers,' Ryan replied, crossing his legs and trying to look natural.

We are all acting, fitting in. The central question had plagued him since he was sixteen years old: is there a real us? You may need to go away to another environment and participate in conscious acts of change before you realize that the self you have been so proud of has been wrapped around a core created by anyone but yourself. Even the rebellious lads he had grown up with had templates: Kerouac, Che, Kurt – all icons, poster boys, not hard acts to follow. Sure, you have *chosen* them, but it is still culture.

When you have a new experience, how much of the old should you keep and how much of it should you discard? When you learn and change, how much of the past do you take with

you? Amanda had made a choice. She thought she wanted the kind of success that came quickly; she had jumped.

In Phnom Penh he was beginning to know where to go. The city was simple with its colonial grid style and streets with numbers instead of names. But there was more than that. Feeling comfortable walking through traffic took a few days. On the big boulevards the trick was to choose a quiet spot in the traffic, step out steadily, don't flinch from your course and let them go around you. It takes confidence, but after a couple of days there came a feeling of belonging to a huge team – Cambodians getting through their daily business, and you with them.

During his week of walking the city he found just three sets of traffic lights. Boys on motorbikes slowed down at red lights and looked sheepishly left and right, then charged through if there was a gap and no policeman to be seen. He liked the freedom – people making their own decisions over whether it was right to cross the road. No cops, no lights, no insurance – watch your step. It was a different world. He looked up at buildings, maybe four or five dilapidated storeys high - washing pegged out on strings across alleyways, emaciated figures sitting at windows, waiting for shirts to dry. Who looked after these people when things went wrong, when they got old? He guessed it always came back to the family.

He started going to the markets and dawdling through the fresh food sections. There were types of spinach that he'd not seen before. And the meat! Chunks of flesh of varied hues sat out under awnings, attended by women sitting up on the trestles with fans, swishing away the flies, their unshod and dusty feet sticking out between cuts of beef and pork, saying, 'You like?' as he passed. Chickens were crushed up alive in cages, or trussed together by the feet in bunches of ten and twelve, clucking softly. Strange spikey fruits like yellow sputniks and long thin purple and cream streaked eggplants; he began to see them in curries that he could

make. And mushrooms – where did they get their mushrooms from in this climate? If only he had a kitchen.

Mr Dith had told him he knew of an apartment he could rent, only a mile from the school, a good position. He thought about it.

By this time he and Tom would have lunch each day at school, often a bowl of noodles from a hawker's stand that had a wooden trestle and some plastic chairs next to its miniature mobile kitchen. It was a bit like a hot dog stand only about one third of the size – barely wide enough to fit the wok and a single burner. The proprietor was a Chinese man named Chin and he was pleased to have customers who could afford \$1.50 for lunch any time they wanted.

'No way,' said Tom. 'You don't want that guy looking over your shoulder every day, and that's what will happen if you rent a flat off his old war buddy. He's doing enough looking over your shoulder now.'

'War buddy?'

'Khmer Rouge.'

'Khmer Rouge?' he said, startled. 'Do you think? I haven't met one before.'

'Hah!' Tom said, his hands up in mock-shock. 'Compadre, you've met dozens of them.'

Tom motioned around as if to say, they are everywhere.

'I guess so,' Ryan said. 'There was no real purge was there, after the Vietnamese took over.'

'Even Hun Sen was ex-KR if you go back far enough. And he's the man. Bunch of them held out in the jungle and kind of defected and dribbled back over time. After five years of civil war, three or four years of KR, then ten years of the Viets, everyone was fed up.'

Ryan had talked to one of the boys in his class about the times of trouble and what his parents felt. 'As long as killing stop, no worry,' was how the situation had been described. He mentioned that to Tom.

‘Exactly. They’re everywhere, mate.’ He loved to call Ryan mate. It made him sound like a true blue Aussie, or so he thought. ‘Go out in the villages and there are people living together – next door neighbours. The KR neighbour may have bashed the non-KR neighbour’s uncle over the head with a shovel in Pol Pot time and kicked him into a ditch, but they have to get on with it. It’s fantastic. There must be a lot beneath the surface,’ he said to finish, showing that even he didn’t know everything about it. ‘We should go to a village some time.’

‘I’d love to.’

‘You wanna? Serious?’

‘I haven’t been out of Phnom Penh yet.’

‘You haven’t even been to the suburbs, mate. I know some people; I’ll make some calls.’

Ryan looked at Tom now, shovelling noodles into himself with balsa wood chopsticks. He wondered just who his friends might be out in the villages. Could it be dangerous?

‘Who do you know?’ Ryan asked, as innocent as he could manage.

‘Just some kids who come in to the city sometimes that I’ve known for a year or so. They’re good.’

Tom looked left and right then picked up his plate and tipped the last of the juice onto his tongue.

‘Damn, it’s good here. But it’s not getting you an apartment is it. Away from Mr Dith,’ he stressed.

‘And his war buddy. You really think he’s KR?’

‘I dunno. He’s always very careful. You know, the way people are when they have a secret. I worked with a guy once in the States. Just in an office kind of thing. He was the most normal guy. In fact he was so normal he was almost overdoing the normal, chipper act – ‘How you doin’ guys, what’s goin’ down?’ That sort of thing. All the fucken time; like you

couldn't have a talk without this barrage of phoney convo ploys. I left that place but someone told me a couple of years later that he'd been outed as a smack addict. Sad, but it fell into place. He was always covering up his secret – trying too hard. Dith's not like that, but there is something going on in his head that he's not telling about. You know what I mean?'

He did.

In the end the apartment hiring was simple. There were adverts in the *Phnom Penh Post* for apartments and he rang a couple of the numbers while Tom was there. To take this step was a challenge over which he had been faltering, but with Tom there sitting sleek and satisfied after his bowl of noodles and with all the confidence that Ryan didn't have, he began to gain courage. And he kept thinking of those eggplants, the spinach, the chunks of beef – the flies he could be rescuing them from. It was a duty.

He met the owner, Mr Thiounn, at his grocery shop downstairs from the apartment. He was about sixty years old and wore round horn-rimmed glasses that accentuated his puffy face. In the last couple of weeks Ryan had read a lot about the Khmer Rouge years. Mr Thiounn made him think of the Chinese mercantile class who had fled in rightful fear of their lives. Some came back when the Vietnamese finally left in '89.

Around the back a locked gate led into a metre-wide walkway and a flight of stairs where a little landing looked over a fence of sticks and the back of the block of flats that fronted the next street. Then there was the shady yard of a small wat. He could see saffron covered figures, some just lads, moving about in the dappled light beneath the trees. Were they playing a controlled and laggard game of football?

Mr Thiounn directed his gaze back down the stairs.

'That gate must be locked, all times.' He wagged a finger. 'Security.'

Mr Thiounn keyed open the door to the apartment and they walked directly into a kitchen with a stove and two electric burners – of course, no gas. The gas under the woks in the market all came from bottles. Still, he could stir-fry from electric plates. There was a narrow passageway with a bedroom on the right, a nice little lounge and then a balcony, the door to which, Mr Thiounn recommended, without explanation, should also remain locked.

One month in advance, no questions asked. Electricity? ‘Leave to me,’ said Mr Thiounn.

‘You pay one month advance each month, we have no problem. You want bring girl, no problem. You want girl? Ask me, I get, no problem.’

And that was it. Girl at extra cost – no problem. Thiounn might be a little bit twisted, but no more than average; so Ryan forked over the cash for month number one, without girl. He went down the stairs and into the street, jingling the keys in his pocket. Back at the *Indochine* the tuk-tuk man who had brought him from the airport was waiting. He still greeted Ryan every time he came in or out, proposing a different inexpensive transport-rich recreation every time.

‘Where are you going, sir? I take you, cheap-cheap.’

Ryan would shake his head because he liked to walk everywhere.

‘I take you Tuol Sleng torture prison.’ Ryan shook his head every morning. ‘Killing Fieeeeeld, very ni-ice,’ the man trilled and grinned, with humour that managed to see how black it was and yet to remain essentially innocent at the same time.

Somehow Ryan admired the man and envied his stoicism. Finally he had a job for him.

‘Will you be here tomorrow at two o’clock?’

‘Yes, boss,’ he answered immediately.

‘Good. I need you to take me to Street 228.’

‘No problem. I be here. I wait,’ he said and smiled happily.

Waiting, Ryan thought, as he mounted the stairs, is what they spend nearly their whole lives doing. Upstairs he walked past his room door to the narrow hotel balcony and looked down into the street. The tuk-tuk man was there, sitting in his tuk-tuk, watching the crowd.

The man's eyes caught a passer-by. 'Sir?' he smiled and raised one hand in salute. For a moment his face turned away and his gaze drifted to the river, to the grey brown water inching along to the confluence; his eyes seemed troubled for a moment. What memory had returned to him, survivor of the Pol Pot time that he, like Dith, must also have been? What social world had this man had to wrap himself around in order to survive? Ryan thought he briefly saw the tragedy in the man's eyes, as if a veil had been lifted for dusting.

'Tuk-tuk, sir?' The man's moment of abstraction broken, the veil was quickly replaced. He raised a hand, picking out a face in the crowd. He smiled once more, at nothing, at faces passing, resuming his vigil, nodding and grinning into the clamour of the Sisowath Quay.

'Ok, if you remember we came as far as Chapter Six and page two.' Many of the books were already open to the right page in anticipation.

'Now, the conversation we are going to read concerns Sarah who is talking to her friend Todd.' On the page next to the conversation was a cartoon drawing of Sarah standing outside an American school building; she was posting letters and talking to her male friend. Her dark bouffant hair was swept back behind her head and cascaded down to finish in a point in front of her shoulders. Her neat jacket was striped purple and green and her shoes and tight skirt matched in. Her face was filled with exasperation. Todd was casual, with his hands in his pockets, chestnut hair in an outrageous Fonzie quiff.

'Notice in the first line she says she is going to school now and having trouble 'making ends meet.' Does anyone know what that means?'

Concerned looks came back across the room. Some looked harder and harder at the page as if the answer would spring out were their eyes to bore into it.

‘It’s a tricky one, isn’t it.’ He was going to explain when Thuon put his hand up.

‘Is impossible, teacher. When two ends go different way they cannot meet unless they go all way around the world. Then meet.’ The tension of the problem had been broken and the class shared laughter. They knew it was not the right answer but it was an answer, and any answer was a good answer.

‘This is an expression, which is not completely literal. Do you remember when we talked about what literal meant. Do you remember that?’

Three or four nodded slowly while the other fifteen or so remained wooden. Chi’s face brightened.

‘Teacher, this is when thing is only true.’

‘Yeeess, Chi, very close.’

‘This when is only way.’

‘When it can be taken no other way.’

‘Yes, yes.’ All agreed now; they were no strangers to metaphorical speech.

‘When there is no other meaning or interpretation, a thing is then literally true – true to the word. Here, when she is talking about her ends, she means that one end is her expenses, and the other end is her income.’

‘Oohhhhh,’ the class began to nod together and chant as one, their voices collectively rising in the middle of this extended exclamation and lowering at its end. Every fibre in his being wanted to talk about Mr Micawber and his own desperate trouble balancing incomings and outgoings, but any attempt to account for the intricacies of the characters of Charles Dickens would be certain to create many more difficulties than benefits, so he decided to

leave Sarah's ends to meet of their own accord. He moved on to the most important part of the lesson.

'Now we see that Sarah has two children and has returned to school to get the education she missed out on earlier.'

In the front row of desks Sophy and Chi brightened up and now took even greater interest in the story before them.

'Oh, is like us,' Sophy said.

'Yes, American girl like us,' Chi replied.

They were nineteen and twenty years old and both had children of their own.

'The girl Sarah is having difficulty because she has to pay so much money for child minding that she can't afford to give up full-time work to go to school.'

'Oooooohh,' the class registered its unified interest once more and they looked down at their books again to find an answer for Sarah.

Sophy had it straight away, 'But, teacher, is easy. Just give children to auntie, she will mind.'

'Yes, give to grandfather,' said Chi.

'Yes,' said Thuon, 'grandmother can mind baby and grandfather will play with older one. Is easy.' And the class erupted with good-natured advice for poor Sarah who, though American and rich, must not know much if she could not see her way out of this problem.

Malee now raised her hand.

'Yes, Malee. Can you explain Sarah's problem?'

The class quietened quickly to listen to Malee.

'I think life in America is different. Many people have no family. It is a sad thing.' Malee showed that she had read something of weight, or seen a documentary on one of the better TV channels, and that she had thought about it.

The class remained quiet as they listened.

‘Can you add anything more, Malee?’

‘Life is hard in Cambodia, but I think life is hard in different places, even though people are more rich than here.’ Malee had concentrated hard on a complex sentence that made an advanced point. She looked up and her eyes met Ryan’s for a second, then she lowered them modestly. He saw a reddening behind her small neat ears. But the way she looked at him was as if she had seen something within him that he didn’t know he was showing, but which she understood completely. He faltered in concentration for a second, then recovered.

‘Yes, class, as Malee says, it is different in America, and in Australia too.’ They were listening closely now to hear how it would be different in the West. He looked at the clock on the back wall of the classroom. It was five to nine so he thought he might as well talk through.

‘In America it might well be that auntie is working and can’t mind the children. It might be that grandfather is also working.’

‘Oh no, grandfather no work.’ The very thought was extraordinary.

‘Yes, grandfather may well work full time right through to the age of sixty-five.’

Sections of the class erupted in laughter at the thought of grandfather going to work at the age of sixty-five. Malee smiled at the hilarity around her and could not suppress a giggle.

‘Or even seventy.’ The howls of mirth increased. ‘Either that or they may live very far away. Perhaps even in another city.’

‘But then other auntie or big sister.’

He struggled now to explain the way life was in the West. He stuttered in front of his class and was embarrassed. His own life had been full of baby sitters as his mother accompanied his father to endless business functions and parties. Eventually Janey had been old enough to be the responsible one on Saturday nights at home, and Thursdays too and Tuesdays; any

night the Chamber of Commerce or the Rotary had a 'do' or any business partner or associate chose to blow a bit of the entertainment expense budget. He fought with an inexplicable sense of honour to justify his culture, as if to fail to defend the West was to admit a fault in himself. What had happened to families? The class was silent now. How much of the old culture was he bringing with him, how much was he leaving behind? How should he express all these things, in a simple sentence?

'Well, you see ... People, well, people just ... go their own way a lot more. People do things by themselves.' Without looking he could feel the eyes of Malee on him; he was giving something of himself away, without wanting to.

In the front row Sophy spoke. 'Where husband?'

'Well, she may not know where the husband is.' The attention in the room somehow became a saddened silence. 'In America, and in Australia too, a lot of marriages break up. People decide they don't like their husband or wife and they decide to go with someone else and that particular someone else may not like the idea of having someone else's kids around all the time and, and, so people like Sarah have to pay someone to look after children.'

'Happen here sometime,' said Sophy.

'Yes, sometime, I mean, sometimes.' He was beginning to speak like his students.

It was almost nine o'clock now and some of them were closing their books already.

'Ok then, pack up for your next class. I'll see you all next Tuesday.'

It had been awkward to have to justify the world he had left, and to go back there in front of these people. He remembered the words of Mr Dith: stick to the book.

Sophy and Chi again were the last to leave, beside Malee, who packed her bag carefully and methodically as ever.

‘You have no wife?’ said Sophy, and Chi smacked her arm as if to say that is too far, too cheeky. Then they both giggled and flashed their eyes so he was able to go along with that and the moment passed. When they got to the door Sophy turned again.

‘You should come to karaoke bar next Saturday night, teacher. We good dancers.’ They giggled and bumped their bags into each other to cover the embarrassment they felt at being so forward.

‘I don’t dance very well, girls. I’m sure you would be too good for me.’ They left and Malee was following behind. He had to say something to stop her – any connection with dancing would do, no matter how remote.

‘Khmer dancing is wonderful.’

It worked. She stopped at the door and turned, an expression of surprise and recognition mixed together. ‘I am going to the classical dancing this week.’ He blurted it out; it was the bravest thing he had ever done. ‘At the Sovannah Phum.’

She looked at him openly for the first time, across three metres of schoolroom.

‘Yes, very good,’ she nodded quickly twice. ‘Khmer dancing has a place in Phnom Penh once more. It is wonderful.’ She smiled, and her cheeks dimpled as she did.

Under the Khmer Rouge all dancers and musicians had been executed. A handful had survived by hiding their identities and working in the fields; others got away in time to Thailand or the United States or Australia. Some of these had returned and were now training young performers to keep the ancient arts alive. They needed an audience.

‘Yes, I will go and ...’ Ryan faltered as he hovered on the edge of asking her outright to go with him. But it was such a bridge to cross and he could not. Malee seemed so pure, and he so broken, ‘and ...well, support them and ... enjoy the performance. I hope.’

He had become inarticulate. He thought of some film Amanda had made him watch, Hugh Grant making an art form out of stammering indecision.

Malee did not say a word in reply, but pressed her palms together in *sompreas* and raised them high to her forehead in respect. Her small feet trod silently on the linoleum, and she was gone.

He went out into the passageway to watch her down as far as the stairwell. He could hear Sophy and Chi, their laughing voices ringing off the metal banisters down a flight or two. The compact figure of Malee stepped neatly behind them, head down.

She was swallowed by the stairwell without looking back.

That afternoon the tuk-tuk man was there in the street, alert and waiting.

‘Sir,’ he cried, ‘I am ready to take you,’ then sprang forward to take Ryan’s luggage.

Ryan said the address.

‘Street 228 ...’ The tuk-tuk man scratched his head. Ryan produced a map and pointed.

‘Ah,’ said the man unconvincingly, staring at the aggregation of lines and words on the paper, turning the page in his hands. ‘This street, it is not a hotel we are going to.’

‘No, this is a flat that I have rented.’

‘An apartment, sir!’ His face brightened and he turned around in his seat as he gunned the motor. ‘Very good, very good. You stay long time!’ He nodded in affirmation once or twice.

‘You work Phnom Penh now? You NGO? Teacher?’

‘Yes,’ Ryan said, for the first time feeling proud to be saying it. ‘Yes, I’m a teacher.’

‘Very good. Very good.’ He turned again and their eyes met and they laughed with each other.

A few blocks away from downtown the traffic thinned and leafy trees competed with the massed power lines for command of the street. He began to wonder if he could manage a motorbike in this traffic. The only time his spirit had ever merged with a two-wheel vehicle was in the Greek Islands – the Cyclades. The island of Naxos was larger than most. He had

hired a couple of mopeds with Amanda and they tore off into the hinterland. It was easy, the roads were empty, the skies were blue – there were no helmets, few rules.

Freedom. They went across the hills and found a sleepy taverna on the other side of the island, ate some grilled meat and a mound of spinach and drank a bottle of beer, a large one each, then spent the hot afternoon riding back the long way around, by the seaside road.

There had been good times. But when you were away together it was easy. The pursuit of common goals was not so difficult when you were pursuing new experience every day. Riding a motorbike in a Greek idyll compared to surviving these hard streets was like putting a honeymoon next to the dangerous grind of a life together. It becomes like running a business – it takes work.

Ryan and the tuk-tuk man pulled up outside the apartment. On the corner just a few shops up near Monivong there was another tuk-tuk and its driver hanging there and another two blokes sitting on motorbikes smoking under a tree. Next to them a third motorbike stood empty.

‘I help you,’ said the tuk-tuk man, nodding up the back stairs.

‘No, thanks, no room for two of us on that staircase anyway.’ Ryan paid the two dollars they’d agreed, then stuffed a few notes of riel in on top as a tip.

‘Thank you, sir. Can I take you somewhere now, sir?’

‘No, I think I’ll be right for a while now.’

‘Maybe later,’ he said enthusiastically. ‘I wait here.’ He nodded up to the corner where the others sat.

‘No, I won’t need anyone for the rest of the day.’

‘Ok, is ok.’ And as Ryan lifted his bag and took his first few steps up the back way he heard the man rev his machine just enough to join the little group at the end of the street.

‘His problem,’ Ryan thought, as he turned the key on his new home, but still he felt the beginning of a nagging responsibility for the lonely tuk-tuk man.

He separated T-shirts and socks into the sparse little wooden drawers of the trousseau. There was a mirror there and he avoided looking at himself. For a year he had not looked at any part of his face, except his hair when he was combing or brushing after the morning shower. He was just not someone he wanted to look at.

He found a piece of dowelling about two feet long and then some string in the drawer second down from the knives and forks. He was not so far from the Central Market now and he went up there and bought a piece of material he had seen – royal blue with a motif of caparisoned elephants marching along with their handlers and with ancient Khmer dignitaries in the riding baskets on top. He fitted the material to the dowelling and strung it up to the only picture hook there was in the lounge. The place was now his.

The next big moment was the connection of wifi in the apartment. At the hotel the service had phased in and out of his life on its own terms. His response to that had been to make himself feel above it. He did not need email – all that needless contact, endless Facebook and Twittering.

He plugged the laptop in the lounge, by the window. He could see the iron balustrade of his balcony, branches of a tree, power lines – through all that the outline of another small apartment block across the street, towels laid out in the sun to dry. His doctor had said to keep his laptop away from the bed. He needed clarity to sleep. He had been waking in the night for months. In the beginning he had been on Temazepam, supplied by his GP.

‘Be careful,’ said the doc. ‘They are addictive. That’s why they’re on prescription. I’m giving you one script, to get you through this little period.’

‘I understand, mate,’ he’d said. ‘People top themselves on this stuff.’

‘That too.’

Now he would sometimes wake at five a.m. Too late to be taking something to go back to sleep, too early to be healthy. He had Panadeine, with the maximum codeine hit. That was all. He didn’t even use it every night. Only six tablets left.

He hooked up the laptop and the system came on crystal clear and straight away. Among his thirteen emails one stood out. His sister.

Hi Bubbalinks

How are things settling in up there? Permanently settled yet? I hope Mr Dith is doing the right thing seeing what a valuable asset he has on his hands.

From me I say, Come back I need someone to talk to. Apart from you I only have Jill, Cookie, Estelle, Helen and Bridget. What good are they, I ask you. Oh, and Tim the gay guy you met at little Joey Liebowitz’s barmitzvah. He still asks after you. Now all I can do is shrug my shoulders – He never writes, is all I can offer.

Write.

OK, the real and pressing need for this message is that father is ill. I am the messenger. Please don’t shoot me. The whole prostate thing is looking curly. So curly that I think it has circled all the way back to where it was last year. And that is ‘Terminal’. How long? Maybe six months tops in my GP view, although the specialists of course will not say.

OK, I know this is not as strong a reason for you to come back as is my need for company, but heck, you could alleviate my need to hear from you by writing or even, dare I say, calling!! You could even, gulp, let me have your new number. Would that be too much?

I miss being able to piss in your ear when I need to.

Your loving sister,

Me

Jesus, what an email. How did her patients put up with her? Easy. They liked her because she cared. They loved her because she cared. She often ran overtime but her schedule was always full.

Firstly, there was no little Joey Liebowitz's barmitzvah. It was a joke inspired by the endless round of family events when she was with Joel. From there on any tragically tedious event became attributed to the mythical Joey Liebowitz and his coming of age; it helped to deal with ignoble reality.

Secondly, she referred to their father's health in an oblique and jocose manner – but it was hurting her. She would be visiting and supporting him with every sinew she had. Mother would be doing her duty. Dermott and Amanda she did not mention. And Ryan? He was not blamed for leaving, not by Janey anyway.

Bubbalinks was the name she gave him when he was a little boy; to be used from his adolescence forward only in times of peril. For it to be used at the top of her first message to him in Cambodia, it was a signal of distress.

He wrote back and gave her all his news: he told her about Tom; that they thought Mr Dith was ex-Khmer Rouge. He had taken some time to face up to Colin, but had touched base now. All of this news would be faithfully passed on, he had no doubt. He wished Joey Liebowitz well and hoped his career in computers was coming on; he sent his love to Tim.

He laid back in bed and closed his eyes. She had not said a word about Amanda and Dermott. She was protecting him from the fallout of his disappearance. He had been in Cambodia three weeks now, just long enough to have made his point. He could decide not to

stay and teach at all, but to go on a tour for a couple more weeks and then to head back. He could fly out tomorrow and what could Dith do?

But now he had his apartment. He lay back on his bed and closed his eyes. Images from home came back – Amanda and Dermott, Janey. But he was here, with Tom and Colin, even Mr Dith somehow meant something.

Malee.

He decided to go straight to the market and buy some rice and eggplants and spices – maybe a cut of that beef. He was going to dine at home tonight.

He felt that he couldn't really say he had been there until it rained. For three and a half weeks each morning he had pushed aside the curtains, inspecting the sky. Wispy cirrus drew away to the north and moved little, threatened nothing.

But that morning the air felt different. He had never been in a tropical downpour or known the romance of standing in the warm rain, soaking without cold. He noticed a build of tension or relief or excitement in all faces at school as black clouds gathered. At four o'clock it came, at the end of school; a pit-pit-pit on the roof, like dry rice grains popping in a hot skillet, then faster and faster until the sounds came together and formed into a roar. He could hear the girls outside in the street screaming for fear or joy, for the crazy simulation of both together, and he went to the window to watch them cling to each other under plastic ponchos, making clunking pantomime runs across the street. The deep gutters were full almost at once; it was a world of grey cloud and deep rain and people bent, stumbling, running, splashing bikes through lakes.

The rain pounded the startled city for an hour and a half. Even though the roads were uniformly mounded in the middle for drainage, still there was no dry place to walk. To cross the street his shoes and socks were soaked and his pants were soaked half way up the shin.

All week it continued, off and on. The day would begin with dull high cloud and sunny bursts, then in the afternoon the black clouds came together and the wind blew up in spasmodic gusts. The signs were not hard to read: tuk-tuk men hurried to tie plastic covers on their vehicles; the café people brought their chairs inside; people ran for home before the gathering storm. Then an hour or maybe two of thundering rain and it was over.

And the rivers rose. The rains had begun in the mountains the week before and the swollen Mekong had already hit Phnom Penh and shoved itself into its confluence with the Tonle Sap. As soon as the school closed up on Saturday afternoon he walked over to see the sight. He followed some tree branch debris and it went with him at walking pace all the way up the quay away from the Mekong; the Tonle Sap River was in retreat. He stopped for a moment to watch the branch of crooked twigs and leaves flow upstream and against the common run of nature. The grey skies stretched all around opaque and low, and the sun glowed dull and flat somewhere up there behind.

The moment he paused to look a woman approached him and began to talk, asking where he was from. Her skin was dark and sweaty and she wore no shoes; the soles of her feet were cracked and dust and dirt were ground in so deep it seemed no simple bath or wash could ever erase the stain. Her blue dress had been slept in – perhaps on the quay itself. In half a minute he broke away from her insistent questions and she did not follow him, but turned back to two young girls who were sitting on rugs, playing at cards. He looked back. The woman may not have slept on the riverside at all; she could have brought her girls, her neighbour's girls, her sister's, to the river to pass the time. This could be their playground. Or was there more? Had she wanted him?

Rivers flow backwards. There was something biblical about it. More than that, there was something arcane that ran through the whole Khmer world that he did not understand yet. The Tonle would now carry its waters hundreds of kilometres to the lake and drop fertile mud

that would act like fertiliser when the dry season came and the rivers and lakes went back to their most of the year shape; it was the same elemental force that had born the Egyptian civilisation five thousand or more years before. For all its conflicting forces the river proceeded with a vaguely harried dignity; its disquiet ran beneath the surface.

He walked back to his apartment. All the way he thought of Malee. It was Saturday and the night of the classical dancing had finally come around. He wanted to see the dancing but it was a long way away and it felt like it had been a long week. Still, it could bring him closer to Malee. At least he would be able to say that he had been there; he could engage her in conversation on the topic and that could lead somewhere. The same tuk-tuk man was waiting on the corner with his group of mates, so he spoke to them about the dance performance that night.

‘Tonight I go to Street 484. Do you know it?’

The three of them bent their heads in discussion that went on for a full half a minute. ‘Is far,’ and he pointed vaguely down towards the South West of the city.

‘Yes, is far. How much? You take me there tonight? Seven o’clock.’

‘Oh, I think,’ he said, rubbing his chin, ‘bring you back ten dollar. Yes, I be here.’

The guide book said it was the Classical Dance Association of Cambodia. He had glimpsed it before: girls with their fingers stretched, torturously deliberate portraits of mythical stories, outfitted in silver and gold and jewels, elaborate headwear, perfect balance: Apsara dancing.

Later that night they pulled out into Monivong and headed south. It was a broad avenue with three lanes in each direction; Saturday night and there was excitement in the air – people going places. Lads in bunches, girls three on a motorbike, giggling over ice creams as they sped along, waving at the barang in the tuk-tuk.

A night time office block facade was punctuated by windows lit up here and there – it seemed to him like a blaze of starlight, the Milky Way anchored for him on the east side of Monivong. Surely it could not be cleaners working Saturday night? Above him trees as high as the second level of the buildings were strung with electric lights. And past these trees, that looked like someone had plugged them into a socket and had blown their hair, they drove along at a smooth easy rate that was itself a novelty. The arm wrestle of the city grid was behind.

They swung right at a big roundabout then turned left again and entered another part of the city. Darker – narrow streets were lit by single bulbs every hundred yards or so; the tuk-tuk man slowed to look at street signs etched onto corner stones that were so rounded by weather that they could have been from the middle ages. Street 420 – nowhere near it. They drove gingerly up to the corner and turned right and right again – Street 422. Then left and left again – Street 424.

He checked his phone – 7.21, nine minutes to show time.

He motioned back to the long street they had turned off; they must go further up there to find 484 – surely that was it. But the tuk-tuk man was alone in his thoughts and seemed not to see or hear. Up and down they went again and made it as far as 428. The driver was hesitant and uncertain now.

‘Go down the other street,’ Ryan shouted and signaled his arm meaning the cross street that would go past all these side streets. His man began to look desperate now. He was lost.

There were little shops at corner places – old fashioned corner stores. They passed a small group of girls standing outside, some squatting on low plastic stools. But this was not a social gathering; these girls spoke little or nothing and sat as if waiting, smoking nervously – down here on Saturday night.

And a little epiphany struck, a light and gentle awakening that had descended on him from the expectant, lazy attitudes of the girls: the man might think I am here for sex. He sat back in his seat to think, not caring about lateness now. The tuk-tuk man seemed to care for him, to see something in him. Since Ryan's first hour in Cambodia the man had been close to him, almost as if he was giving care or protection. Yet there was a distance. If he was looking for a brothel surely it would not matter much which place he went into, so why bother to find Street 484?

'Street 484,' he said firmly.

'Yes, I find.' He looked worried now.

'It's the place ...' and Ryan waved him over to the side of the road to talk. 'It's the place where they do dancing.' The man looked back blankly. Ryan held out his hands in mimic of apsara dancing moves and made his eyes go in the bewitching style of the classical dancer. 'Dancing?' He did not seem to know the word.

'Yes, dancing,' and Ryan moved his shoulders and arms in a lingering rhythm for the man, hands still out with fingers stretched engagingly.

Slowly, so slowly, a look of recognition came over the face of the tuk-tuk man. His mouth and eyes came open in the appearance almost of awe.

'Sovannah Poom,' he cried. 'Sovannah Poom!'

'Yes, yes,' Ryan nodded furiously, a sudden jolt of hope bringing him to life. It was the Sovannah Phum Classical Dance Association of Cambodia. Ryan had never guessed that the man would know it by its name. He had under-estimated him.

'So sorry. Sovannah Poom,' the man said again and gunned his machine to vibrant life, executed an abrupt U-turn; the tires squealed as they bit into the dusty rubble and potholes of the dim suburban street, then raced away. The girls at the corner shop turned their heads to look.

Now they hit a more generously lighted street. He looked at his phone – 7.29. At least they were going to get there now, he thought – late perhaps, but it would happen, and there would be no more apsara miming.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ the tuk-tuk man turned around and hit his head quite hard with his open right hand to indicate how stupid he thought he was. ‘So sorry,’ he looked at his own watch and sped his machine ever onward.

Malee and Reap waited at the door of the Sovannah Phum Classical Dance Association.

Malee turned around to check on Sophea in another little group of girls from their village in Kampong Thom: two cousins and three others who were friends of theirs or friends of friends from the village, and an older woman from the factory who was their supervisor.

That was the way it worked when you came to Phnom Penh. The network of village girls who had preceded you would get you a test for a job at their factory, would pay the bribe that got you in, would feed you while you waited a month for a position to begin. Without them you would be dead, or on the bus back home and losing face for your family.

When they had done their four or five years in the factory – the air stifling like a mask, the work mindless with repetition – they would return to the village, most of them, as virgin brides. It would be disgrace to become enamoured of the modern ways and the make-up and gold jewellery, to be walking out with boys after dark, to keep money for yourself. To fit in as a modern person in the city, and to remain a dutiful daughter who upheld the moral certainty of the village; it was a balancing act they performed each day.

It was 7.30 and all the girls wanted to go to their seats, but they waited for Malee. There were no secrets in a group like this and everyone knew there was a rich barang who was interested in her. He had said he was coming to the dancing tonight, but some of the girls were sceptical. Married barang couples sometimes came to the dancing, or genteel girls in

pairs or small groups, but not a man, not alone. The band was in place by the side of the stage and they could hear a crash of cymbals and a whirl of oboe-like horn music as the musicians warmed up for their performance. The cousin of one of the girls was dancing tonight and they had special seats beside the band.

‘We have to go now,’ said Malee, softly to her sister.

‘I want to see him,’ said Reap, jumping up and down on the spot. She was the same height as Malee but stockier, she seemed built closer to the ground and she had an intelligence that was feisty, where Malee’s was thoughtful, contemplative. ‘He is handsome and rich; he will be my sister’s husband.’

The disappointment was in Malee’s eyes too as she took hold of her sister’s arm. ‘Come on,’ she said. Reap was hard to move when she had her mind set on something, but tonight she was outnumbered seven to one.

‘Huh,’ Reap’s eyes flashed in anger. ‘They are all the same. They say they’re good, but then they do something else. He is a no-good husband for us.’

Indeed, Malee had wondered, could he really be what he seemed to be? She smiled at her sister and smoothed her hair. Reap smiled back at the touch of her sister’s consoling hand; it was almost as if she was the sister waiting for the man and not Malee. ‘Come on sister. We have to see Sonith. He will be a great dancer.’

Arm in arm the two girls made their way to their seats. As they let the canvas flap of the performing structure fall behind them Reap took one last glance back at the empty forecourt and Malee watched her sister look, and felt inside her that it was hopeless.

They turned off the main drive and into another small street, but this time the tuk-tuk man knew exactly where he was going. There, all at once, was an old house that sat among

sheltering trees, a wonder among the blocks of flats. They turned through an open gate into a brightly-lit courtyard where they came to an abrupt halt.

‘Sovannah Poom,’ the tuk-tuk man said, turning in his seat. ‘So sorry.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about. You’ve done brilliantly.’

The man’s face was filled with joy. ‘I wait,’ he said. ‘I wait.’

There was a card table with a couple of kids still selling tickets. On one side of the courtyard a door opened into a lit room that looked like a little gift shop. Opposite that was a low barn-like structure that was enclosed by dark curtains that billowed out like sails and around which you could see the backs of the heads of the people inside. He could hear a man talking into a microphone, probably introducing the show.

In the dim light inside he could see that half the audience of about twenty-five people were Western. Young couples in their twenties or thirties and a couple of girls who could be Northern European. A Khmer father was there with his four-year-old daughter and a young mother with a little girl too.

There was a group of young women in a corner. They sat next to a band of Khmer musicians nested beside the stage: a clarinet type of instrument that would not have been out of place charming snakes from baskets in a market in Bombay; also a xylophone of wooden bells hit with drumsticks; and two drummers, one seated at a nearly full circle of gongs and another with two large drums beaten with the hands – plus the host with a microphone who was just taking his seat.

He found a place on the hard bench seat and there came on to the stage, not poised and elegant apsaras, but a bouncing troupe of young men. He had quickly glanced at the paper program handed to him and it had said something about the Reamker which, he could see now, was a Khmer version of the Ramanaya. Tonight it was the Ponhakay Story.

The five boys on stage seemed all under twenty-five. The older man with the microphone, the master of ceremonies, watched from the side as if he was the holder of the deed and title to the whole business; a little smile played on his lips. He must be one of those who got away – a dancer or singer from the old days who'd run away before the Pol Pot time. Or he had hidden his identity, his smooth dancer's hands, and made out to be a working man.

Unlikely. This was one who got away – one who had returned. There was something serene about his attentive smile. He had not the cloud that lived on the countenance of so many men who had survived the horror, or who had been conscripted in its perpetration, and had buried the memories inside them. Memories that would explode back into the human system when a car back-fired in the street, when unexploded ordinance was detonated in a field nearby, when the most careful system of defence was pierced by a word, or a picture, or a name. This musician was a free man.

Four of the boys left the stage and the principal dancer did a solo piece. He was impressive. Stripped to the waist, his sinewy musculature strained as he leapt and writhed. Then, suddenly, cries were heard from outside and the audience turned as one to watch as eerie face shadows were played from outside the pavilion onto the long silk sheet which was the back 'wall' of the theatre. Outside, the other four dancers were now holding torch lights behind flat puppet frames held up on a pair of wand-like sticks. The shapes danced around and fought each other and there was a great deal of hallooing to accentuate the mystical conflict. Then the shapes were brought through the silk into the theatre in procession and the four boys jumped up on stage with the light now thrown on another silken sheet up there.

The band on the side of the stage raised the level to a crescendo and the elder with the microphone had begun warbling, crying out the story. The clarinet wailed over the top of it all and the xylophone of wooden bells crashed to the thump of drums as the host wailed on

and on. Suddenly, all vanished from the stage and the crashing of the band was no more, the audience frozen in rigid attention – the stage was bare.

After a pause of no more than ten seconds the dancers came bounding out again, scratching and tumbling as the army of monkeys which is conscripted by the hero Prince Preah Ream who is searching for his abducted wife. Their monkey routine was good; it was time for some comic relief. The stage was cleared again and one dancer stood poised behind the silk screen with arms outstretched while the light played on him from behind so he appeared as just a shadow. He waved his arms for a moment, then another set of arms appeared from his side, then another and another. Clearly there was a row of dancers back there not visible to the audience until their arms rolled out, but the trick was made to portray one of the many-limbed Hindu deities. The effect was magnetising. The performance had ended.

When the clapping was over, Ryan turned to see the tuk-tuk man standing at the side. They had let him in to watch the second half. He also had a ten-dollar round trip fare to collect. He was very happy.

But Ryan could see that he was pleased by more than just a fare and a show. A new layer of respect had been born, not sprung from wealth or social position, but from something deeper and more real; when the tuk-tuk man realised they were not making for a girl bar in the suburbs, but for Sovannah Phum.

‘You saw the show,’ Ryan said. ‘I am glad.’ The man nodded many times in pleasure, but he was already turning for the door. ‘OK, let’s go,’ Ryan said.

It was then that he saw her, from the corner of his eye, and he stopped on the spot, without knowing he had done so, while his man walked on a couple of metres before him. She had left the little group of women who were in the corner next to the band. She was standing a couple of metres away, facing him.

It was Malee. She pressed her hands together and bowed her head so slightly.

‘You are here,’ he said, then thought, how foolish, for she was obviously there.

‘Yes,’ she said, and seemed to be fighting between embarrassment and a desire to speak. ‘I ... came. My cousin,’ she waved back at the stage and the musicians, ‘he is a dancer.’

‘Oh, how marvellous,’ Ryan said, not able to conceive, in that moment, of anything that could possibly be more wonderful.

‘Yes,’ she agreed, and pressed her palms together once more. ‘I thought you were not coming.’

She has been looking out for me, he thought, and was thrilled.

‘Oh, yes, we had trouble finding the place.’ He motioned to his tuk-tuk man who grinned and nodded furiously in acquiescence.

‘Yes, it is far from city.’

‘Indeed. All my fault really. I knew the name of the place and only gave him the street number and ...’

‘Oh,’ she smiled. ‘I see. The street numbers are confusing in this part of town.’ She nodded sympathetically to the tuk-tuk man.

They had spoken; it was enough for them both. She had seen that he was really there – had truly spent his Saturday night at the classical dancing. For him, it was a step, and any footfall in the direction of Malee was an advancement that he simply had to take; he had lost his power of choice.

The tuk-tuk man was waiting.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’ll see you next week.’

And she was gone and then he was outside. He wanted to stay for a minute to savour the moment, but the drizzle had begun again and the tuk-tuk man had already tied the plastic

covering around his vehicle and started up the motor. They were soon headed towards the Foreign Correspondents Club.

Had she really come to see her cousin? Or for him? Whichever way it was, he felt a glow of possibility settle over him.

They drew up at the FCC and he handed over the ten dollars. The tuk-tuk man was still happy.

‘Do you have a name?’ Ryan asked. ‘I mean, that I can call you.’

‘I am Chean.’ The man nodded and grinned in appreciation.

‘Thank you, Chean.’

And as he hopped on his driver’s seat to take off, Chean turned one last time.

‘Soon,’ he said, in his singsong voice, and paused a moment as he gunned the motor, ‘you will have a girl freeennnnn.’

Chean chuckled happily. He pulled some blue plastic over his head and was lost in the quayside traffic.

The night came when Colin and Tom were to take Ryan out to the Heart of Darkness bar, a semi-legendary place in the Phnom Penh fabric, famous for many things in the old days including gun battles between the hot-headed sons of elite families; throw in crooks and drugs and the picture is complete. But what he wasn’t used to was the ‘bar girls’.

He had always found it difficult, even a little unfair, that men, or boys for that matter, had to be the ones who did the asking out, who crossed the dance floor, so to speak - took all the emotional risk of embarrassment. It had even been known that girls would flirt to encourage this risky offer-making on the part of males, only to then turn it down, as publically as possible! Asking a girl out could be a perilous business.

But in Cambodia the rules were all different. Nice girls, like Malee, should properly be approached through a third person known to the family, with an offer of marriage. Heaven help any man who offered and then reneged: the least punishment would be to return as a cockroach in the next life, but other more immediate repudiations of a miscreant suitor could be in the playbook of an aggrieved family. But since the time of Westerners and dollar bills in Phnom Penh, bar-girls had become like the water in the tap or the air in the sky. They were simply there, and their idea of relationship could take many forms.

Ryan, Tom and Colin had had enough to drink over dinner to get the three of them just humming. Colin led off to the Heart of Darkness and Tom pretended that all he knew about the place had been gained from hearsay – reports from a third person. Colin and Ryan threw each other a look and a raised eyebrow.

As they approached the place a boy in a black jacket reached across and the big copper doors opened before them. Noise – Phil Spector’s Wall of Sound had nothing on Korean pop music.

Inside there were hot red lights, suspended from the ceiling, that glowed over tables but barely illuminated, like hellfire suspended in Chinese lanterns. Lasers stabbed through the darkness around the tables, strobing blue and white flashes on the handful of dancers. The music switched to a disco beat throbbing through – *You’re Just Too Good To Be True*; not the Chris Montez version but a disco group with around three girl singers – a seventies treatment of a Western sixties song, probably recorded in Asia somewhere in the nineties.

‘Hello, handsome man,’ straightaway there was a girl by Ryan’s side. She wore hotpants and raised platform sandals of iridescent silver, a tight red T-shirt that nearly matched her lipstick but was more crimson where the lips were caked in deeper fifties film noir red, the sort that stuck to collars.

‘How can you tell I’m handsome, you can’t see the nose in front of your face in here.’

The girl looked blankly at him for a moment, then her face creased up in a grin.

‘Ha ha, you’re funny.’ She slipped her arm inside his.

‘You don’t know the half of it.’

The music throbbed into another number crackling over the same beat: he caught the words ‘Never gonna let you go’ echoing over and over.

‘You come dance me.’

He now saw that there were two more like her, one at each elbow, awaiting the outcome. One wore a pink headband with a little rosette at a jaunty angle on the side – something she might have longed for since her kid sister’s baby photo. She might have been sixteen or twenty seven, hard to tell.

Colin leant forward, ‘You come back later. We have drink now.’

He waved them away, and the girls melted into the shadows.

‘The good thing is that they’re all freelancers in here. If they bother you too much the boss gets pissed off and they kick ’em out.’ They took a place at the bar. Tom was trying to keep track of the conversation, but his eyes were everywhere.

‘Why do they let them in?’

‘You buy them drinks; that’s good for the boss. Other reasons too ...’ and Colin waved his hand again to signal the end of that topic.

‘Are they prostitutes?’

Colin shrugged his shoulders. ‘Depends.’

By the dance floor was a podium about three feet high with the figure of a woman carved in wood; like a Cycladic figure, or a Modigliani – staring, unnerving. A soft light played up from below, accenting its other-worldliness – some jungle spirit up for appeasement.

The music changed from disco beat to something more like the song *Fame (I'm gonna live forever)*, but the words went more like 'Say that you'll love me forever'. It was a rip-off where the melody line must have been just different enough to pass the laws of copyright.

The girls drifted under the arcs of light and began to dance in the most desultory fashion, their arms and legs barely moving. The one who had spoken to him glanced across for just a second; her eyes narrowed and she managed to pout and smile all in one seductive movement of the mouth.

'They can't come here just for drinks.'

'They like you they take you home, or your place, or down the lane. Some of them work ...'

'In the day?'

'Do a shift in a café somewhere, maybe. Then if they pick up twenty bucks from you it's a goldmine. She'll be back in five minutes.'

'Why not just give her five bucks and say keep off – not interested.'

'Ha! If they think you're a soft touch you'll *never* get rid of them. Pay them for nothing and they'll want a lot more of that action. They'd want to marry you then because they know you're not only rich, you're pissweak as well – perfect man!'

Ryan thought of the money he'd put together before going up there – three thousand dollars in the bank. He'd worked reasonably hard to get it, but that would be a lifetime's savings for these girls. What would an amount like that mean to them?

Another girl came up to the bar and brushed her shoulder against his arm. He turned to her and she smiled, 'Hello, handsome man.'

He put his hand up and motioned no; she raised her eyebrows in that 'maybe later' way that they seemed to have, and moved back to her group.

He turned to Tom, 'I know where to come if I'm ever lonely.'

Tom's eyes had been all over the room. 'No shortage of company, muchacho.'

After two beers they got out of there. Ryan soon was sick of shouting; Tom decided to save it for another time; Colin had seen it all before.

The Pattaya Bar on the next corner was like a regular pub by comparison. The 1970s West Coast rock they spun there was backgrounded. There were two pool tables and on one the girls played each other and two girls played with two guys on the other. One of the girls at the first table said a friendly 'Hi' as they walked in and they said 'Hi' back and went to a table and were left alone after a resigned grimace was passed to the other girls, signaling their dud status.

'Don't they ever play Khmer music in these places,' Ryan said.

'Never,' said Colin. 'They think *Hotel California* is hip.'

'But no one listens to this sort of thing anymore. Do they?'

'You don't listen to enough FM radio, man,' said Tom.

'Only in supermarkets.'

'And there you can't help it, right?'

'It fouls up my shopping. How can I choose between smoothy and crunchy with *Crocodile Rock* and *Piano Man* in my ear.'

'You're a hard case, man.'

'And *Back Off Boogaloo* on a good day.'

'I think Ryan needs to relax a bit more,' Colin put in.

'You take me to the Heart of Darkness bar, to relax?'

'All right, dear, it is a touch noisy in there.'

'The girls here leave you alone.'

‘If they think you’re interested it’ll be different. You know, not too many girls, or the lads for that matter, will sit at home twiddling their thumbs in this city. You got to be on the make, all the time. These chicks might only score every two or three nights but it’ll still pull more than a job in that garment industry you’ve been talking about. Eighty-five bucks a month don’t go far if you’ve got the old folks back home to support.’

Ryan tried to imagine eighty-five dollars a month, even here. But there was genuine sympathy in Colin’s voice as he dropped the knowing tough guy approach for a moment. He nudged Ryan gently. ‘Poor bitches are probably saving up for English lessons.’

‘English lessons?’

He checked out the girls more closely.

‘I already checked, mate,’ said Tom, ‘none are in my classes. You should do the same, wherever you go.’

‘Jesus, what if I ran into Sophy or Chi out here.’

‘What about this Malee you keep talking about?’ said Colin.

‘Not in here, no way. Not that kind of girl, Colin.’

‘Oh, I see, she’s the nice one is she – the truly “nice” one.’ He went into the exaggerated tone of the documentary voice-over – ‘The moral certainty of the village untrammelled in the poly-temptational big city.’ He was poking for a reaction.

‘Yeah, she’s smart, is Malee,’ said Tom, picking up on Colin’s line. ‘Nice, truly interesting, but she plays the long game for sure. She’s just smarter than the others – high stakes.’ His voice turned into a rasping whisper as he leaned forward to Ryan’s ear. ‘She wants to take it all.’ Then he laughed and slapped Ryan’s back in a way he could not tell was playful or pitying.

Still, anger rose in Ryan. Why did Malee have to symbolise something to these guys? As if Khmer girls were just for bonking the loose ones and ignoring the nice ones. Malee didn't play games of any kind.

Still, they had him thinking. Malee had come up to him at the Khmer dancing, he hadn't had to do a thing. She knew he was interested. She *knew*. Ryan became annoyed for a moment but he couldn't show up his interest in her to them; that was probably what they were waiting for. Luckily the conversation drifted off into loosely related matters.

'These girls couldn't spell 'long game', ' said Colin, gesturing to the girls at the pool table.

'In which language, Colin?' Ryan wanted to get him back.

'Yeah, good point, buddy,' Tom put in, slapping his own thigh. 'If they have to spell it in English, you have to spell it in Khmer, Colin. Ha, ha, ha.' Tom was pissed by now.

'Ah, ha ha-ha.' They joined together in mocking Colin; Tom motioned for a high-five and Ryan reluctantly complied. Girls at the table turned around and smiled encouragement – the boys were starting to have a good time.

'You fucken pricks,' said Colin. 'All right, my buy.' He signaled for three more. 'The problem with your argument there, though, is that I probably *could* spell it in Khmer.' The other two just looked at each other to acknowledge this.

'What would Dith have to say, if we were reported out in such dens of disease?' Ryan ventured.

'Ah, the enigmatic Dith,' said Tom.

'Aren't they all enigmatic,' Ryan returned, 'according to the stereotype. That's what you guys are into isn't it. Half good, half bad – never saying what they think, all that stuff.'

'They don't have the disadvantage of Christian background. We have to pretend that we're being good all the time, especially when we're not; always giving false reasons for doing shit. Big cultural difference. We're always supposed to be working to raise ourselves in the world.'

They can just say, ‘Eh, Karma, whatever. At least I’m not a fucken cockroach.’ You know what I mean?’

Colin bought into it at last, ‘The Khmer people do keep a lot to themselves. You can never be quite sure, but they do like rules. They want to know where they stand with you.’

‘They want to know where you stand, they just don’t want you to know where they stand,’ Tom put in.

‘Maybe. Who knows? I’ve been wondering about that since 1992.’

‘Like Dith and his questions. You’ve met him.’

‘Years ago,’ Colin admitted.

‘Was he Khmer Rouge?’

Colin was quiet for a moment. As he did from time to time, he simply turned the question around.

‘Would you have been?’

‘What? KR?’ Tom answered. ‘Would we have been Khmer Rouge?’ He turned to Ryan. ‘If you’d been brought up in the jungle with no education, or even if you were in the city looking at Sihanouk and his court lounging around with about a hundred dancers and concubines, going to Paris for holidays every year. If you had the Buddhists telling you that ambition was evil, that any education bar the old folk stories was bad, that you had to love your work in the fields or in the factory. If someone then shoved a gun in your hand and said, “There lad, now you have power. We will change the world – the Chinese are on our side.” Wouldn’t you have been tempted to say, “Fuck it, I’m in.” Huh?’

Ryan had to admit that, yes, he would have been tempted to be in. What red-blooded ox-rider would not? The fact that things had gone terribly wrong – that could not be attributed to the farm boys, the followers. Even a lot of educated people in Phnom Penh welcomed the KR, not guessing what was going to come next. But the idea of Mr Dith, reserved as he was,

taking up a gun at any age, was hard to take to. It was too much of a figment that their boss could once have been Khmer Rouge.

‘Who knows,’ said Colin. ‘You can never tell in this place, and forty years on, people will change. Your Mr Dith could have been a lad’s lad in his day. But whatever you do, don’t ask him. It would be unspeakable rudeness. And your little Malee, don’t ever ask her what she’s after either, because she won’t say.’

They had turned it back on him. Were they teasing, or were they not? Were they as hard to read as they said the Khmer were? He decided that neither of these guys had met a girl like Malee before – she was different.

At the end of their next class Malee packed her bag as carefully as ever and left at the tail end of the crowd.

He had been unable to think of much else but Malee. When he walked in the street the day after the dancing he looked for her face in the crowd. When he wrote an email sometimes his fingers stopped moving and his thoughts trailed away. When he read a book he stared without comprehending, the pages not turning. The prediction of Chean the tuk-tuk man kept singing away in his head. ‘Soon you will have a girl freeennnnn.’

But if there was going to be any contact outside of school he knew it had to be he who made the move. There could be a million nods and winks, but in this one there was no doubt that it had to be the man who took the risk.

After the first class of the week he had complimented the dancing night to her. Malee had smiled happily but the conversation stilled and went in no other direction and she left for her day at university. The next class she had smiled and he had bid her goodbye, but they didn’t talk. After that she smiled goodbye and left with her lips compressed.

Was she showing exasperation? Saturday was his last chance, or the week would be over and the impetus would all be lost.

He wrote a note including his phone number and asking her to lunch on Sunday, at the Blue Pumpkin, a bright and noisy café overlooking the river. He felt so lame with a note, but who knew where Mr Dith might be, around the corner, other teachers coming by. He was breaking the rules. But the note sitting in his pocket somehow gave him strength, as if it meant that the decision to act had been made – it was in writing.

She finished her packing and moved to the door.

‘Malee,’ he blurted her name and then did not know what came next. She stopped, backpack in place, two books under her left arm, and squared up to him as if to say, ‘Ok, out with it’.

‘I ... I,’ he began to hand her the note. She leaned forward and peered at his hand, as if to read from a metre away what was scrawled on the little sheet that was there.

‘I’d like to see you,’ he said. Suddenly it mattered not – Dith or no Dith, walls with or without ears. He handed her the note. He thought now that it would be ok to do it like that because the note had his number and that was required information, wasn’t it? George Clooney could do it that way – talking to a girl then handing a note with his number. Simple.

She read the note. The place was silent except for muffled noises from the stairwell down the hall.

‘Sunday ... I can’t,’ she said in a broken way. ‘I will tell you ...’

Then she broke away, through the door and down to the stairwell. He stood in the corridor. Her legs sprang like coils under the weight of her pack as she broke into a run. He had never seen a Khmer girl run before. It was something they simply didn’t do. She trotted quickly down the stairs and as she made it to the turn, where he could still see her face; she gave him an open, frank, meaningful look.

And then disappeared.

He exhaled heavily and turned to look the other way up the corridor. There was no Dith. The space was empty and quiet. He had an hour off before his next lesson. He packed his bag and locked the door of the room.

When she said ‘I can’t’ he’d felt hope, that she wanted to come with him but could not. When she dashed from the room his heart sank – he had gone too far, too soon; perhaps he had broken whatever spell had been created so far between them. But when she looked up at him so calmly before disappearing he returned to a state of expectation.

And now. Who knew? He had fifty minutes to prepare for his next lesson and a pile of tests to mark, and Malee’s would be certain to be the top one.

He didn’t have to wait long in the end. At the end of lunch time he received a text message from Malee. It was as if she had taken the morning and the lunch time to consider her answer, and then had been decisive.

‘Tomorrow at lunchtime I must go to demonstration with my sister so I cannot come to lunch. I am sorry but another time it will make me very happy. Malee.’

To the demonstration! Of course, there was a wages strike on and there would be a demo on Sunday in support. He turned to his computer and searched ‘Cambodian worker garment demonstration’ and found the details. He was immediately compelled by the idea of the protest – the justice of the cause. It would take place in the industrial sector in the south west of the city at midday. He had never been there. He devoured what information was available on the net and then went to the corner shop to buy *The Phnom Penh Post* and *The Cambodian Daily*.

As he walked his steps quickened with urgency and certainty.

On Sunday Chean was waiting at 11.30 as they had arranged. The day before he had cheerfully accepted the ride, but now he was worried.

‘You go garment place,’ he said. ‘No good, boss. Plenty trouble.’

‘I’m just going to have a look.’

Chean shook his head and gunned up his motor.

‘Ok, boss. You careful.’

Ryan didn’t know what else to say. He knew what he was doing but not exactly why he was doing it. He just had to go, at least be close to the place. He had to see. He had to be able to talk about it with her sometime. He needed to be closer.

‘Could be OK,’ Chean turned around to speak. ‘Could be danger. Big people in Phnom Penh no like garment strike.’

He had already got that impression. TV reports had shown garment workers at previous demonstrations with angry faces, blockades of trucks trying to leave a factory, police in lines with shields – but it had all been stand-off, a placing of stakes in a union bargaining game, no action.

They went south on Monivong as they had on the way to Sovannah Phum. The plane trees and office buildings had lost their happy protectiveness now. No lights winked in the buildings; there were no crowded motorbikes with excited girls – garment workers on parole. There was just the grey regretful Sunday morning and uncertainty in the air.

They took a sudden turn to the right that had him holding on the side struts of the little carriage. The city-scape flattened out to ragged looking shops with just one floor of accommodation above them. Half-fed brown dogs sniffed about, fossicking with the crows for scraps. The street had an unsatisfied and derelict air. In places blocks of flats poked out of the rabble, strings of clothing lining little balconies. Sunday was the day for all practical matters: shopping, washing, visiting – the day for protest too.

This is where Malee and her sister live, he thought: in these blocks of flats, out here surrounded by wasteland being measured up for more factories and more blocks of flats – a short ride to work six days a week and the same ride on the seventh day of protest. That meant thirteen days without end these girls came down this road, to this grim and desolate place. After years it would eat into your soul; and if garment profits stayed high, in ten years this place would be packed with blocks – girls supporting their families. And what would happen to these grey ghosts of places if the industry collapsed and girls returned to their villages?

Large buildings began to appear with eight-foot fences and large gabled gates big enough to accommodate trucks of any dimension, where buses dropped workers every shift. Inside was tarmac that would have been packed with motorbikes during the week, but now they were parched and lonely spaces. In some places a truck was backed up to a loading bay, a fork lift vehicle running up to one of them. There were factories all the way up the street and outside one of them was a large group of people, already focusing their energies inwards to a huge pair of gates. Ryan felt something in the pit of his stomach.

As they approached he guessed five hundred people – quite a crowd. Chanting came to their ears as they approached; there were placards with messages on them. Three girls wearing dust masks carried a sign in Khmer with just one thing understandable in English: \$160 – the amount they were asking for, a doubling of the Government legislated minimum wage. An open-topped truck rolled up with another thirty demonstrators crammed on top; they all jumped out together in a swarm and merged into the crowd. There were two young men with megaphones and as Ryan arrived one began barking instructions. The noise was great and as he stepped away from the tuk-tuk Ryan could tell this was not a five hundred crowd, maybe double that. Some men were there but mostly girls – baseball caps and t-shirts

and jeans with thongs on dusty feet; but some were dressed up, rose pink rouge on their cheeks, lipstick – Sunday best. The air was electric with excitement and possibility.

A woman about sixty years old had set up a rice stand by the side of the road and grinned with yellowed stumps of teeth. She looked vulnerable, with her tiny stall, but then he thought, who would harm an old lady? Not any of these strikers. Another man sold corn and bananas grilled on open charcoal. He looked up in hope as Ryan jumped out.

It was a grimly festive and expectant atmosphere. On the opposite side of the road at least two hundred motorbikes were parked. Under a twenty-foot rubber tree with pink flowers there was already a small gathering of tuk-tuks and their drivers, interested in the outcome, anticipating a return fare. Chean joined them and Ryan began to skirt around the outside of the crowd, looking for a face he might know.

People were still arriving on motorbikes, some crowded with three and four people on board. A tuk-tuk came up packed with seven passengers who all bundled out with the kind of glee that comes from novelty, the kind of apprehension that comes from uncertainty and danger.

It was quiet inside the factory. The crowd stood outside, and waited. The men with megaphones circulated, encouraging the chanting, keeping spirits high. There was a fire engine in the street on the other side of the group of protestors, then a handful of police came out of a side street and formed up in a loose rank, shields held in their left hands, batons in their right. Ryan walked in through the crowd, checking faces. A few people looked at him twice – a Westerner, not a garment worker. They may have thought him a journalist. Some smiled, welcoming him to the cause, as if he could help to give them strength.

He saw her, with a girl who just had to be her sister – neat as Malee, stronger built, but somehow worn as well. And then he lost them, he had seen them for just three seconds. He waded into the crowd to where they had been, but could not find them. He stood on tip toes,

towering now above the rest of the crowd. Then, again, he saw her. This time she was watching him, staring at him – it seemed as if she was the only still person in the whole crowd, a look of wonder on her face. She nudged her sister and then her face broke into a smile and she waved at him as it dawned on her that he had come there for her, for no-one else and for no other thing, but for her.

They pushed through the crowd toward each other. When they met there were no hugs, no episodes of drama. She raised her hands in sompreas and so did her sister; he did the same.

‘This is my sister, Reap.’

‘Hellooo,’ Reap grinned.

‘We must listen for instructions,’ said Malee. They turned their attention to the young man with the megaphone who now spoke – longish hair flopping over his eyes; he wore thongs, a white shirt and blue jeans. He must have been no older than nineteen. After a few words the crowd began to move forward and to press together into a tighter group in front of the iron gates. On the other side of the gates a truck was moving up and then the gates were opened inwards. At this point people could have spilled inside and rampaged through the factory had they wished, but this was not the plan. The crowd tightened and linked arms, presenting itself as a phalanx of solid flesh to the truck. Those at the front abutted the metal grille of the monster. If Malee and Reap had not moved up to talk to Ryan, they would have been down there, facing the machine. The crowd pressed forward against the truck and the truck moved so slowly it was barely perceptible. There was much heaving and shoving and in a full minute the truck had made about a metre’s progress. The face of the driver of the truck showed fear and stress; his duty lay in getting through, but here were a thousand people in his way. The face of the young man with the megaphone was contorted with imprecation to greater effort. Then he too confronted the truck, placing his own body weight in with the rest of the crowd,

shouting into his megaphone all the while. There was a scream, as if a woman had lost her footing and was going under.

Suddenly the driver lost patience and his foot went down on the accelerator and the truck lurched forward just a foot, but that was enough to crunch down eight or so of the girls who were pushing, and the boy with the megaphone too. Those who had fallen were screaming in panic as they scrambled to their feet and pushed back into the turbulent crowd behind them. One voice rang out over the rest, a yell of pain as well as of anguish. Had the truck run over her foot or leg? There was a hubbub of shouting and real anger now. A hundred protestors screamed at the driver and megaphones were adding to the confusion of noise; the smell of sweat and fear was in the air. The driver stopped his truck and put his head out the window and shouted back, his face anxious. He was just another worker after all, caught on the opposite side in somebody else's war. Guards from the factory now joined in the shouting and began pushing the crowd back with batons held in both hands, swinging at heads.

The situation was a war of clubs and fists and scratching and pushing when the game changed in an instant. From the side that the fire truck had been standing, there came a cannonade of water so fierce that it was knocking people down, right off their feet. Strafing from left to right and back again, it mowed down people who tried to rise and were hit down hard again. The three of them were wetted through by the spray off other bodies, then Reap was smacked down by the full force of the cannonade. Malee and Ryan pulled her up and they all held to each other for support. A sharp crack of sound snapped over and over again. Police were firing above the crowd.

'Jesus, bullets. Come on,' he cried out to them and grabbed their hands.

All around people were panicking and running, picking themselves up, falling down again, slipping over. The three of them ran for it, back towards the clump of trees where the tuk-tuks had been. They were in the clear, away from others, doing better than average. Ahead of them

the drivers were revving up their engines and turning around for the road. Was Chean there; was he gone? Ryan saw a bright red tuk-tuk U-turning in the street, pausing, waiting.

‘Chean!’

‘Boss, jump in. Come quick.’

They all leapt into the tuk-tuk and were away. Malee and Reap looked at each other and then at Ryan in amazement.

‘You have a driver!’

Chean turned around, ‘Hellooo, I am Chean,’ he said, and turned back to the road.

‘How did you get here?’ Ryan asked them.

‘We came on Reap’s motorbike.’

‘Oh, hell,’ he said.

‘We can come back later,’ said Malee.

As they revved away into the regular Sunday street Malee’s right hand held her sister’s hand tight, and her left hand held on to two fingers of Ryan’s hand, tight.

Part Two

‘Home, boss,’ said Chean, as they watched Reap and Malee run into their block of flats.

‘Garment people bad thing sure, but is trouble for you.’ Ryan watched them push through glass doors then disappear. ‘Rubber bullet,’ Chean went on, shaking his head. ‘Next time real.’

Next time? He felt as if he had just survived a once in a lifetime experience. ‘Rubber bullets – Jesus. How do you know they were rubber?’

‘Sound different to real one.’

Now Ryan shook his head. What doesn’t this guy know about? As if reading his mind Chean turned and shouted back at him

‘I was a soldier.’

‘You were?’

‘After Pol Pot run away to the jungle. I fight him there, with the Vietnam army – six years.’

Ryan wanted to ask him more about the Khmer Rouge days, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. For a start he was still dripping from his assault by a water cannon, and he had just held hands with a girl who was his student, and whose sister who worked fifty-six hours a week for eighty-five dollars American per month. That was enough complication for him at one time.

He looked up at the pale-grey concrete Soviet-style apartment block, and at the block next to it and the one next to that. Was life better for Reap now than it might have been before the Khmer Rouge? Leaving the family and village behind ... for this?

Chean revved up the engine and took off abruptly. He drove hard for the first kilometre, as if some bad spirit had crept out of the apartment block and taken possession of him, and only the piercing over-burdened whine of the tuk-tuk's little motor could drive it away.

When he got home Ryan walked from his apartment to the quay and back again three times to settle himself, but he was still feeling wired. He rang Malee – no answer. The television news showed protest images of angry faces and megaphones, but the rifles and water cannons had been excluded. He took some codeine and in his fitful sleep he dreamt of holding Malee's hand: her fingers lying in his palm were delicate, so much more tiny and fragile than even her real ones. Reap was there, and Chean, but they were remote, outposts in the purview of Ryan and Malee. Some other person he could not see took Malee's hand and was shaping as if to snap a finger off. The finger was crooked at him in a beckoning way, but all it did was remind him of the delicate handle of a porcelain teacup. And then he started up in bed awake, and could think of nothing but Malee.

The Pchum Ben holiday of the ancestors began on Wednesday. Everyone who was in Phnom Penh from the countryside went home on their motorbikes or clung to whatever overloaded vehicle they could grab; the city would empty. He only had two days to talk to her, one if they were leaving on Tuesday to escape the crowded roads.

In the morning he sent a text message: I must see you at the Blue Pumpkin at 4.30. Ok? He waited and waited through an endless minute before the reply came in: Ok.

He picked up the electric kettle to test the water level then tipped the switch to get his day going. The little orange light on the top always pleased him – flick, and there it was, one tiny control thing that never failed him.

Then he noticed a sheet of A5 paper that had been poked under his door, neatly folded over once. He picked it up, and read:

Mr Davey, You must come and see me first thing.

7.30 in my office. Mr Dith

Good god. Dith.

Ryan looked closer at the clock than he had bothered before: 6.50. He had time for a cup and a couple of biscuits.

He stopped and talked to Mr Thiounn about security. Someone had come through the locked gate all the way to his apartment – this was a serious matter.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Mr Thiounn, grinning. ‘I put note.’

‘You?’

‘Yes,’ he confirmed, bowing and smiling.

‘But how did Mr Dith ...?’ But he gave up trying to understand. Somehow, somewhere, there must be a connection between Thiounn and Dith. Or perhaps when he told Mr Thiounn where he worked, he had contacted Dith, hoping to establish some sort of patron relationship? He could only guess, but he knew that if he asked he would only get a reply that was as obscure as the Delphic Oracle or couched in terms of a haiku. Or more likely, quite simply: ‘Mr Dith very good man.’ Make of that what you will.

All the way there he thought about his last twenty-four hours: Chean, Malee and Reap, the demonstration, Dith – the note, Mr Thiounn. His life had sped up so suddenly. He began to look for meaning and to hunt for associations between all these factors and people. But with a Dith meeting forced upon him, the only connection he could solder together in his head right now concerned Malee and Dith.

Malee was his student and Dith was his boss: ‘Teacher only, never boyfriend.’

The door to Mr Dith's office was ajar, as it had been on his first morning. This time his boss smiled through thin lips.

'Ah, Mr Davey, good morning. Good to see you. I like to catch up to you after two weeks or so to see how things are.'

'Ah, very nice.' Ryan glanced up at the clock to emphasise the fact that it was close to lesson time, without risking an impoliteness by saying as much.

'That's ok,' said Mr Dith, noting every non-verbal move of his young teacher. 'Just want to say, you are a good teacher. Students are very happy with what you are teaching them. We hope you are happy here.'

'Oh, yes, certainly.' Ryan was still wary. 'I can't complain.'

'The test results from your first fortnight are very good, I think.' He had the tests in front of him, in the middle of his desk.

'I'm so glad you are happy. I have had Tom here to help me out and get me settled. His advice has been very useful.'

'Ah, yes,' said Dith gratefully, as if the mention of Tom had opened a side-door to the message that was seeded within this conversation. 'Mr Andersen is a good, experienced teacher now. With us for more than a year.'

'Nearly two he says.'

'He has talked to you about the way ...' and here Dith's eyebrows came together in a frown, 'the appropriate way to be, with the students.'

Danger.

'Is not good to be so close. I mean, in this job I hear many things. Sometimes true, sometimes not true.' Dith stopped and looked at Ryan, almost in an appeal for help.

'In this country, Mr Davey, it is very different. I mean, the way people behave may be different to Australia.'

‘I’ve noticed one or two things.’

‘Yes. The people with the power work in a different way.’ He placed his hands together in front of his mouth, not in a sompreas, but tapping the ends of his fingers together, meditating his next words. In Cambodia direct speech is seen as intimidating and a way should be found so that no-one loses face. Dith was looking for a way to imply to Ryan what should have been understood without the need for words. But now Ryan changed the subject away from the nudging and prodding.

‘Mr Dith, do you think the garment workers should do what they have to do, live the way they have to live, for eighty five dollars a month?’

Dith’s head and shoulders straightened like a sentry on duty when the captain walks past. He seemed to hold his breath for a moment. Through his first couple of weeks at the school Ryan had listened in to the obscure circuitry of Khmer communication. But this was confronting directness, and it changed the question between them from one of what was allowable or appropriate, to the more complex and demanding issue of what was proper and moral.

Ryan knew that Mr Dith’s private views counted for nothing against the responsibilities he had to the owners of the school. His position may have seemed powerful from inside the school, but to those outside who had the money, he was just an employee. Ryan knew that, but he wanted to find out how Dith really felt.

Dith sat back and rocked in his chair, fingers still pressed together. It would be a rudeness to make no answer at all.

‘In this country many people work for very low pay,’ Dith said. ‘Even teachers receive low pay. It is not good. In some schools teachers resort to corrupt ways.’ He was struggling now. He dipped his head in respectful acknowledgement that Ryan was doing a very good job for very little money.

‘Even in this school some teachers sell to students books that they have been issued free by the government.’ Mr Dith bowed his head in sorrow, as if this was simply the way of things. He looked up again in confusion: Why must you take sides, his face seemed to say, you crusaders? Western ideas: human rights, unions, NGOs – they all were blunt instruments against the old ways of his country, where people knew where they stood in a system of patronage, and where power was not questioned like this. The question put to him was one of morality and rights, almost hypothetical, but Dith seemed compelled to go on. There was something in him which connected with the garment question.

‘There are many things we cannot control – many things that could be better in this country. Some students have siblings in the garment industry. I think things are very bad,’ he nodded again in acknowledgement. His own view had been glimpsed; he seemed to waver on the edge of a rare personal disclosure.

Dith looked distantly into the air above Ryan’s head for a moment, as if choosing his next words carefully. ‘I too have a relative, a worker in the garment industry. I try to help her, but there are many in my family.’

So, Dith was working into his old age to support family members. But there was something else Ryan just had to know, and he shrugged off his usual diffidence to ask.

‘Mr Dith,’ Ryan leant forward in his chair, closer to Dith, ‘do you have a wife?’

Dith stiffened. Ryan thought he was about to call an end to the interview; for a second Ryan thought, I’ve gone too far.

‘No, Mr Davey,’ Mr Dith finally responded. ‘My wife died. I understand that it is very difficult to live without a wife.’

He was struggling with his memories, or with what he had to say about them. But again he turned to what his profession and his position required. ‘But you should not have a close friendship with a student.’

These words were forced from him as if squeezed from a towel that had already been wrung dry by stronger hands, such an effort did it seem to be. Mr Dith looked up to Ryan's face for half a second and then dropped his gaze and half closed his eyes. Though this had begun as a discipline meeting, it seemed there was now a small bond between the two of them – one of loneliness that was shared but rarely spoken of, and of family absent, for widely differing reasons perhaps, but absent nonetheless.

'I think is time for lesson now.' Mr Dith again raised his hands in sompreas, as high as his nose this time.

As he walked away Ryan locked in his mind that Dith had said that he should not have a relationship. Not 'must not' but 'should not'.

Reap pulled up another piece of material to her sewing machine and folded a hem for stitching. It was the last day before the Pchum Ben holiday, when even the garment factories would be closed. For three days they would light incense sticks in temples, bring food to monks in the wat and offer gifts to their dead grandparents and uncles and aunties. Special appeasement went to all those spirits who had died violent or unexpected deaths. Nearly forty years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, there was a great number of those.

Malee and Reap would go, with Sophea wedged between them, on Reap's motorbike, all the way one hundred and seventy kilometres to Kampong Thom.

In her factory Reap sat working – turning the hem under, pinning it, feeding the material through the machine. Her back was bent, watching the bobbing needle closely so the shirt went through perfectly every time. Her head and neck were fixed like that for five hours from the seven am start until lunch time when she would sit on the tiled kitchen floor and eat from bowls of rice and spinach, and then on through the long hot afternoon.

It was thirty-five degrees inside the factory and humid. The walls were like high fences of iron and above them were opaque windows that never opened and through which could be seen the dimmest outline of cloud and sky. Two girls had fainted as that morning ground on towards lunch time. But Reap would not faint. She had never fainted. She was strong and steady; she had one of the best completion rates in the factory. She had that to be proud of, that and her clever sister and the money they sent home. Reap had become the solid rock of the family, but some days the rock felt weary. She anticipated Pchum Ben as a blessed and even euphoric time to be with her family; and three days without a sewing machine.

At lunch time she was able to check her phone and there was a message through from Malee.

‘He called me. He wants to meet today.’

As she read the message Reap’s heart lifted for a moment in hope. From her pay she could manage English lessons for Malee and help out Ma and Pa. But what of her, Reap? If she wanted to leave this place, to pay for English lessons for herself and to try for a job in an office, the only way was to have a rich barang in the family. Then he could help Malee and Pa and then perhaps, for once, she could help herself. She closed her eyes and allowed herself the only three seconds of the day that she imagined herself to be anything other than a garment worker. She saw herself smiling at her well-groomed colleagues as she tucked a folder under her arm and pressed the button on the lift – all the way to her office on the fifteenth floor.

But it was not her place to dwell on such selfish thoughts. She turned the phone off and put it in her bag where it belonged, along with her comb and smog mask, and the baseball cap that would keep the hair out of her eyes on the motorbike. It was news she had been waiting for, but she could hardly dare to dream.

The Blue Pumpkin was modern and plastic, upstairs looking over the Sisowath Quay, the street and the river. Downstairs there was a bakery bursting with French pastries, breads of sourdough and walnut, and little sausages in flaky wrappings. Upstairs it was blue and white and noisy with clanky tables and chairs; on one side there was a vast open lounge like an endless futon that ran along one side with giant pillows for hipster travellers to prop themselves with their laptops. It was a place that young Khmer people could go and snack among NGO-class Europeans and ex-patriate Australians. To be taken there by a respectable Westerner was special.

‘I didn’t have time to change,’ said Malee, looking around at the other girls there.

‘You look wonderful,’ said Ryan. Malee relaxed a little as she saw the other girls were wearing nothing that special.

They ordered tea and fish amok, light creamy curry built around turmeric. The moment they ordered food she seemed to relax.

‘My father was a fisherman,’ Malee began. It was time for life stories. ‘On the river.’

‘Was that the Mekong?’

‘No, another river. Smaller one. Goes into the Tonle Sap – other side of the mountains from the Mekong.’

‘I am going up the Mekong to Kratie for Pchum Ben, with Tom.’

‘Tom?’ she wore a puzzled look.

‘Mr Andersen.’

‘Oh, him.’ She didn’t get that carried away by Tom. ‘Anyway, I have a brother Number One, then sister Number Two, Reap, then me Number Three.’

‘You’re the baby of the family!’

‘Oh no,’ she laughed, almost screamed. She was a different girl here, away from the school – talking about her family; anxiety had seeped out of her. ‘Then there is Number Four and Five and Six all the way to Number Ten.’

He put down his fork.

‘Ten of you! I don’t believe it.’

‘Here, I’ll show you.’

She pulled a wallet from her bag and out flopped a concertina of photos, about twelve of them. ‘Here is the little one,’ she said proudly over a photo of a boy about ten years old, grinning up at the camera over what looked like an iPad.

‘My God.’

‘He is going to be a lawyer one day. He has already decided. My brother Number One, he works for Samsung in Phnom Penh. He brings home his iPad sometimes and Number Ten just plays games all weekend.’

‘Number One works here?’ said Ryan looking out to the Boulevard as if he could come past any minute. The idea of a brother had never occurred to him and somehow made things awkward.

‘He don’t like the city so much. He works for the big company run by foreigners. I think he had a fight with someone and he isn’t getting any more promotions. He keeps his life a big secret these days.’

‘Can’t he go back, to the homeland?’

‘Aaaahhh, when he was thirteen he was going to be fisherman, like Pa, only he was always making jokes, always fooling around. One day he fell off the water buffalo and broke his arm.’

‘Water buffalo.’

‘Yeah, sometimes those guys are crazy. Arm was broken in two places and it took many hours to get him to a doctor, so then he can’t pull in the net with the fish and he stayed at school, so then my sister and I became fishermen.’

‘You?’

‘Yeeaaahh ...’ she said, drawing it out as if to say why not. ‘We get up at four in the morning to go to the river with my father. Then we come home and have a wash from the bucket and get on bikes and ride to school seven kilometres to be there at eight o’clock. Then we ride home at lunch and back again seven kilometres for afternoon classes.’

He remembered her legs that had sprung like coils as she ran to the stairway. Her arms, at that moment lifting only a tea cup, held a wiry elegant strength.

‘That’s twenty eight kilometres each day,’ he said. And that’s without the fishing, he thought.

‘My father was brought up in Phnom Penh and he was going to school in 1975.’

‘Khmer Rouge.’

‘The Pol Pot time. They took him to Kampong Thom.’

‘And he’s still there?’

‘Uh huh. We will be going home tomorrow,’ she smiled, captivated with the prospect, it seemed, thinking nothing of the inconvenience of the three-hour trip on the back of a motorbike on muddy, pot-holed roads.

‘Your father didn’t come back to Phnom Penh?’

‘Oh, yes. He came back to look for his family. He went to his old apartment where they used to live, but there was someone else there. Another family living there. He went everywhere to find them but they were nowhere. His father was a teacher.’

‘Oh no.’

‘Yeah, so he was probably killed by Pol Pot.’ She said the words dispassionately, as if it had never occurred to her that sympathy could be attached to such a thing.

‘When they were taken away my father had to rough his hands to make it look like he was a worker, so they wouldn’t kill him too. My father smart; he is always thinking. So when he came to Phnom Penh he can’t find his family and he is homesick for Kampong Thom. He was in love, with my mother.’ She covered her face with her hands and giggled at the thought of her parents as young lovers.

‘Before he left he went to the message wall and told them where he was going, but we never heard from anyone.’

‘Message wall?’

‘Was a big, big wall,’ she swivelled in her chair and pointed over her left shoulder, ‘about one kilometre away. Everyone left messages for their family in case they turned up alive. One woman saw his message and came to tell him that his sister died in childbirth. They forced her to marry Khmer Rouge man and when she gives the baby they put hot coals under her bed to make her blood work better.’

‘What? The Khmer Rouge did that?’

‘Uh huh,’ she shrugged, as if to say, who else.

‘They make her drink rice wine too. Lots of it. That is the old custom. She died an agony death, baby too. That baby my cousin from a Khmer Rouge man.’ Her eyes went still, seemingly focused on a distant point somewhere past Ryan’s left elbow. ‘That is why I become a doctor. No more of that.’ She looked up at him for a second and returned to her fish amok.

Ryan was overcome by the speed with which these revelations had been delivered. And the look she had given him was unfathomable; it had lasted one second and had been full of

knowledge, pity, suffering, purpose, strength. He could not reply to it except to return to the story of her father.

‘And your Pa became a fisherman.’

‘And he farmed rice sometimes. My father was brought up in the city and he knew about education. So he made us go to school. Then UNESCO sponsor me.’

It was the first time he had heard of the United Nations doing something good.

‘Did they pay you money?’

‘No, no,’ she shook her head, ‘they gave me a new bike to ride to school. It was much quicker,’ she said, with real excitement in her voice. Ryan wondered for a second what the old one must have been like. ‘And pencils, and books of paper to write in.’

‘Paper?’

‘Yeah, you know, writing down what the teacher says is very important.’ She looked at him with quiet mockery and raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes, yes, all right. But didn’t you have paper before.’

‘Hmm ... not much. We wrote over old things all the time. We wrote in between the lines of old books.’

For a moment he couldn’t speak. The image came into his mind of young kids writing in the spaces between lines – perhaps first ruling through what had been there before. ‘Good grief,’ he said.

‘When my sister Number Two came to Phnom Penh she brought me here to go to school. My other sister, Number Four, she married and has a chicken farm in Kendal. She sends money home too.’

‘How many sisters do you have?’

‘Seven.’

‘What?’ he squawked like a cockatoo. ‘Seven sisters!’

She laughed until she almost doubled up. ‘My parents wanted another boy after Number One and so they kept trying but no good – eight girls in a row.’ She tucked her thumbs behind her palms and held up all the other fingers to give a graphic illustration of the number one family joke.

‘The little guy in the photo? That’s him?’

‘That’s him.’

‘He thinks he’s the king of the family?’

‘He *is* the king of the family.’

‘Eight sisters doting on you.’ Ryan thought of his own family and the positioning for power, his brother taking up with Amanda – win/lose techniques that could never happen here.

Malee looked at him with a questioning little frown. He realised his face must have turned serious and he wondered what Malee might have seen there.

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘I just realised I haven’t called my sister.’ He tapped on the table with his fingers. ‘I’ll do it as soon as I get home.’

He had changed the subject. Cambodia had been brutalised, but the family, at least, still clung together.

‘I will see all my sisters, except for Number Four,’ she said, tapping the table a couple of times herself. ‘She will stay with her chickens. Reap will place incense at the temple to say hello to our grandfather.’

‘Your grandfather is still alive?’ He could hardly believe it.

‘No,’ she laughed again. ‘He died long time. That’s why we go to the pagoda. But I am lucky, this year my uncle and auntie that I have never seen are coming from France, and my cousin Cris.’

A bowl of fish came, swimming in a yellow sauce, with a side dish of tomato and cucumber chopped in lettuce and a drizzle of Kampot pepper dressing.

‘Yes, I am lucky,’ she repeated. ‘But in two weeks’ time there is another demonstration. I must go.’ There was no falter in her voice, but her tone suggested that the demonstration was a duty, not a pleasure.

Another demonstration, he thought. If she must go, I must go.

The road to Kampong Thom sat on an enormous dyke that ran through flat rice fields that in this September flood time were submerged in coffee-coloured river water for hundreds of metres on either side. Even Malee and Reap, who had grown up within the annual downpour cycle, were wide-eyed at the magnitude of this year’s floods. With one hand clasped on either side of the motorbike seat Malee stared out over the swollen river that was now a lake. She rested her head on the shoulder of Sophea in front of her and Sophea laughed but Malee did not hear her. She was wondering about the strange barang and his quiet smile, and his silences; and when he spoke, the things he said made her laugh or made her wonder. Up front Reap watched the road closely for vehicles coming at them on the wrong side. But for Malee the ride was a rare time when she could daydream and drift.

They turned away from the river and up along the secondary road to Kampong Thom City and slowed through the traffic there, then pressed onward. On the outskirts of the village someone shouted hello and they waved, then they fell to wondering what the river that came up to their own house would be like.

In the village ducks quacked past and the girls cried out greetings to them; a buffalo was guided across the main street by a small boy. Every person knew them and many stopped to greet them and to exchange small gossip, so their progress was slow up to the branch road that took them away to their house. The two sisters were respected in the village because

Reap was sending money to her family, and Malee would one day be a nurse, perhaps even a doctor. They were both bringing excellent face to their Ma and Pa.

Away from the village street, the road was firm in parts but there were holes that the sisters had to skirt around, so their progress was even slower than it had been on the highway. Out here flooded reaches lapped up to the side of the road. Boys jumped from the back of their homes into five feet of water in places that would be firm ground ten months of the year. Girls splashed about in the shallows and some paddled little canoes, whether running errands or for recreation it was hard to tell, as it was made into a game either way.

Chickens scooted away in groups of five and six as the motorbike came by and on the side of the road some families had set up temporary sties for their pigs, the flooded river having taken their usual homes under the stilt houses. One brooding sow was lying in the mud and was nuzzled by six or seven little piglets. At a corner shop some boys played pool and drank cokes. A man bent over some ageing farm implement and made sparks with a welder; he stood to watch the approach of the bike and waved as the girls went by. It was quiet season for the farms and everyone was catching up on odd jobs and taking their ease.

The last section of the road was long and straight and Malee felt her life blood flooding into her as they drove. She had gone to the city to study and to be a success, but here she did not have to think in English, she did not have to walk the hard streets of Phnom Penh or breathe the petrol fumes that swamped her in that place. Here the whole world knew her and she knew them.

Their house was a wooden one on stilts and there was a steep gangplank of a ladder to walk up. For twenty years it had been a struggle for Pa and Ma to feed their enormous family. There had been little else to do, after the Pol Pot time, but to go back home and make children who would one day be your only security. Now four of the children were out in the world and they were holding their own, but Pa was worn out from work.

As they rode into the small yard at the front of the house, their Pa came outside and stood to watch them. He was dressed in culottes and sandals and wore a singlet. He grinned and nodded amiably, as if the sight of his girls had assured him once again that his life's work was safe and sound.

But as they stepped up the gangplank to the house the girls could both see that their father's joy was not complete. He was showing them at once that he was so happy to see them but also that something had happened, and when he placed his arms around their shoulders – one arm around each girl with his face in between – he hung on to them too long and squeezed them tighter than his modesty normally allowed.

'Pa, what is it?' Reap was the first to speak. 'Is Cris here?' She wanted to see her cousin.

'Cris is here.'

'And uncle Meach and auntie Kim?'

He looked at the ground and his face turned sorrowful. 'Ma will tell you.'

'What's happened?' cried Reap. Malee gasped a little and held her hand to her mouth as she could tell that some disaster had struck. Ma came running out at the sound of voices. She had put on weight, at last, thought Malee. She grasped at her two oldest girls. 'Thank the Buddha, you are safe.'

'Ma, what *is* it?'

'Meach and Kim. They went onto the river this morning.'

'Oh my god,' Reap gasped, 'the river is huge.'

'And fast,' Malee put in.

'They have not been here since Pol Pot time. They took the canoe this morning before any of us awake. Last night they were talking about the old days, about going out on the river and pulling in the fish. They were talking as if the river is like heaven or a beautiful after life. But

it is not like that everywhere. It is dangerous. And yesterday an hour after they came to the house the ravens came.'

'Aaaaahh no!' Reap gasped.

'Oh my god,' thought Malee, and looked at the ground. The belief was that if the raven came and sat on your house and made its cawing sound, then someone would die within three days. Malee was trained in science. She had completed a three month placement in a hospital in Phnom Penh and she knew the reasons that people died. But still, still she felt herself shiver at the story of the raven; they were messengers from the other world.

'Two raven came to the house and sat on top and make their noise.' Malee had never heard Ma speak so much. 'I went out to throw stones but when I did the ravens only flew up and then sat back on the house. All day they keep coming back. I tell Meach and Kim don't go out on the river, but as soon as it was light they went out. You know where the water goes around in circles, can take you in.'

'We should have gone with them,' said Pa.

'But when we got up they were already gone. We waited for an hour for them to come back. Then we went to borrow the neighbour's canoe and Pa and Number One brother went out to look for them.'

At that time of year the river rushed with whirlpools and eddies from sudden mountain rains.

Reap for once was struck dumb, with fear. Malee could not believe it. 'The ravens come, and they are dead.' she said, almost to herself. She shivered a second time and held her hands to her chest, as if to warm the heart that beat within. 'The ravens,' she repeated, in a whisper, to herself.

'Pa found them. Kim was stuck in tree branches from a little island and Meach was floating in the shallows. The achar is coming.'

‘They hadn’t tried to swim in forty years,’ Pa said sadly, ‘since before Pol Pot.’

Suddenly a wailing began from Reap that started low and threatened to burst from her but was contained by her as she fought to keep her anger inside. It was not fit to wail at fate, at kama. It was something that had happened to her uncle and her auntie in another life that was brought to bear on this day; they all knew that. But still, there was crazy rage in Reap. Malee felt it too, but kept it boiling inside. At least Meach and Kim had returned to their homeland and would be cremated there.

‘What about Cris?’ said Malee.

‘Cris is here,’ her mother replied, and she stood back and there indeed was a childlike boy, looking much younger than his fifteen years, with deep dark eyes and protruding ears, standing shyly in the doorway. His Adam’s apple showed up and down as he gulped nervously. Behind him was Number Ten brother holding an iPad and looking up at his French cousin. Ma held her arm out to Cris and he came forward to join the little group. He saw the faces that were by turns sorrowful, pitiful and filled with tears. He looked around them and in his moment of grief and alienation he spoke in the language with which he was most familiar.

‘Bonjour,’ he said quietly.

Malee stood with her Pa and looked over the two bodies laid on biers at the back of the house, and listened to the lapping of the waters of the river that had taken them. Two monks in saffron robes shook incense burners and mumbled prayers to frighten away the evil spirits and to keep the souls of the dead couple pure until the day of cremation when their remains would be stored in the village stupa. A handful of older men and women from the village had come to remember Meach and Kim and to keep their merit building right up to cremation day. They stood well back away from the monks and clasped their hands in front of them. These people had known Meach and Kim in the Lon Nol days, before the Khmer Rouge.

Some had been children together and had only the day before relived their past adventures on the river in a joyful reunion.

Perhaps, it was thought, the joy of the day before was too much for the returned couple and they had been unable to stop themselves from pushing out in the canoe the next morning. Maybe there had been more to it, said some. Perhaps they had come home to die; they were at journey's end and the river had simply been there to receive them. They knew the risks; they had not forgotten everything. It was meant to be. There would be much speculation in the village and yes, said some, they had come home to die – for that reason and for that reason alone.

Malee could see that, even with a tragedy in the family, Pa was still thinking, all the time. He had no choice but to think. There would be three days until the cremation; Pchum Ben would start tomorrow. Surely this would be the best possible time to dispel bad spirits. The temple would be full of monks and offerings, of incense: the presence of family and villagers would help as well.

But there was still the problem of Cris.

Pa turned away from the monks and motioned to Malee. They went outside to the gangplank and sat down. Pa took a rolled up cigarette that he had stuck behind his ear and flamed up a disposable lighter.

‘Cris, he is a Frenchman.’

Malee cocked her head in an ironic way that said ‘He is?’

‘He looks like us but he is a Frenchman,’ and Pa pointed to his head as if to say, in here. ‘I can keep him in the village with us, but he will be unhappy. Your Ma and I are very worried about him; we don’t know what to do.’

The first time Malee caught sight of Cris, emerging from behind the skirts of Ma, she knew what she had to do. But she did not want to say it to Pa; the idea would have to come from him.

‘Does he have people in France?’ she said.

‘He has nobody. Meach and Kim had him very late in life. He has no brothers or sisters. There may be Khmer people in his city ...’ and he shrugged his shoulders as if to say, but what will they do, what guarantee do we have?

‘Poor Cris.’

Pa held the cigarette carefully between his thumb and forefingers, took a drag and then spat out a speck of tobacco. There was a pause as they looked across the road, past the neighbour’s house and through the tree-tops to the river beyond. Malee waited to hear whatever was on Pa’s mind, as the ideal Khmer girl should.

‘Your sister Number Two. She told me that you have a friend.’

‘What did she tell you?!’ Malee’s voice rose higher than any ideal girl’s should, then she checked herself. She was suddenly frightened or even a little angered because under normal circumstances it was not permissible for her to have a boyfriend. A girl should wait until her father found a boy. In three years in the city Malee had been a good girl, like the others from the village that she knew. She had never had a boyfriend. But while most of them would return after five years or so to marry and have families in the village, Malee’s future was uncertain.

‘Reap tells me you are a good girl,’ said Pa, holding up his hands to silence her. ‘But there is a man who likes you. Your teacher.’

‘We have had lunch together. That is all, Pa.’ Malee felt her voice rising again and she had to sit with her head held back to stop a tear running from her eye.

‘That is good. Is very good.’

Malee looked up in surprise. ‘That is good?’

‘Teacher is good. Very good. He is Australian, yes? This is a very good country.’ Then Pa’s eyes narrowed and he rasped out the question that was on his mind.

‘Does he speak French?’

‘French? Pa, I don’t know that. I don’t think so. He speaks English. He teaches English.’

‘Might speak French too?’ Pa’s eyes narrowed again.

‘Pa, I really don’t know. I really *don’t* know. Would you like to ask him?’ said Malee, with as much sarcasm as she would ever muster on her own father.

‘Yes,’ said Pa, ‘you ask him if he speaks French.’ He spat out another speck of tobacco. ‘*You* ask him.’

The bus pulled up outside the Heng Heng Hotel in Kratie and Tom and Ryan jumped out to stretch their legs; the three days of holiday were before them. The Mekong had been in flood but the waters had eased back now and people were cleaning up and beginning to get on with business, the last night before Pchum Ben. The river had come over its banks a week before and rushed through the town, sinking shops and cafes three feet deep in the brown river and whatever it brought with it. Ryan could not imagine the level of chaos that a flood would bring.

Decayed French colonial buildings surrounded the covered central market. A handful of cafes led up to the foreshore where a string of hotels lined the river – no doubt stylish places in the 1960s. A man trotted over from the hotel to collect their bags and in five minutes they were checked in.

Tom had said they would meet up with his friends and they turned out to be two girls, one each. His girl was beautiful, sexy, and nice enough. She wore make-up and that surprised him

in the provinces, where the vanity of adornment seemed so incongruous with the struggle and poverty they had witnessed from the bus window all the way up from the city.

Tom didn't seem to care whether his girl was made-up or not and after a couple of beers at the hotel lounge the two of them disappeared with a wink and a grin. Ryan was left alone with his girl and suddenly it was not so easy to go along with other people's plans.

He had to decide. His instinct was to defer, so he complained of being tired from the trip and said he wanted to pack it in early. His girl pursed her lips and frowned and then seemed to become upset, on the edge of tears. He said something about tomorrow but then stammered on about going to see the dolphins, the Irrawaddy freshwater dolphins that inhabit the Mekong River downstream from Kratie. They were the town's number one attraction, still hanging on, a couple of hundred of them, in a bend on the river twelve or so kilometres out of town.

He thought the dolphin idea would turn the girl off, but on the contrary, she was excited by it. She began jumping up and down on the spot and clapping her hands; she would settle for no action tonight if they could go to the dolphins tomorrow. The guy who had commandeered their bags came over to claim the fare the moment he overheard the conversation; his tuk-tuk was waiting outside. Everything was arranged in one minute and Ryan could hardly say no – ten o'clock tomorrow.

The road out to the dolphins that next morning was long and straight, under a canopy of jungle trees that held hands above them. A soft breeze whispered at the leaves and the tunnel of foliage induced them not only to the dolphins but to a new phase of possibilities. Around them brown water licked at the stilts of houses and all along the way villagers went slowly about their business.

So the scene was beautiful and his girl was happy. She had greeted him that morning with such a squeeze that her feet left the ground for a second or two, as if the cement that would bring them together that day had already begun to set.

To say she relished the sights on the road away from the town would not be strong enough. She yelled out and pointed to the pigs and chickens; she *called* to them. A rooster cocked its eye and followed her with it. She watched closely the corner shops and their little groups of idlers. Women in pyjama suits of melodramatic pink and green and yellow gossiped and watched over children running around naked – the girl waved to all of them.

He wondered about her.

‘Do you live in Kratie all the time?’

‘Oh no, Phnom Penh some time, Kratie some time.’

He remembered: Tom had said that if she liked someone, she might come to the city to be with him. She could be in Phnom Penh next week if he wanted. He felt her lean into him as she spoke.

‘Did you ever go to work in the city?’

‘I work the garment some time,’ she smiled, ‘but too slow.’

‘Do you mean you were not fast enough on the machines?’

She smiled and nodded. He thought of Reap, who seemed almost superhuman: to work in that factory and to sew the same hem of the same shirt ten hours each day for a year, or two years, or five. He could not see this girl toiling ten hours, not for a single day.

‘Do you come out here to see the dolphins very often?’

‘Huh?’

‘You see dolphin some time?’ He motioned ahead of them, up the track.

She shook her head; her eyes went wide for emphasis.

‘Never?’ He could not believe that. Never?

She answered very deliberately, 'Not one time,' and smiled again.

He sat back for a moment. The tuk-tuk fare was eight dollars, a day and a half's pay in a garment factory, and for a girl who could not keep a job, unreachable.

'You like to see the animals?' He motioned at the pigs and chickens they were passing.

'Uh, huh,' she nodded. Her grin came back, unpleasant thoughts forgotten.

They bought two tickets at a little sentry box and walked on planks placed across a boggy open space that led to the trees by the river where there waited an old dark-skinned boatman with crooked teeth, wearing culottes and a singlet that was frayed from years of wear. His face lit up at the sight of them and he motioned them into a solid wooden boat with a little canopy for the sun, then cranked a big old motor to life and pushed her out with a pole. They putted along about thirty metres out from the bank.

The girl pressed her shoulder gently into him and closed her eyes for a moment all dreamy and appreciative about being taken out on the river. She had taken off the make-up and left just a little pink around the eyes. She had guessed that he did not like it and today she was more natural and relaxed; she had read him. Her lips were thin and perfectly shaped. There was a puff of breeze and her hair flapped in her face and when he reached over to brush it away for her he could not stop himself from touching her cheek. She smiled, her eyes still closed, and buried her head further into his shoulder, both arms around his arm now.

When they swung out into the river there were whirlpools and snags everywhere, chunks of debris swirling and circling, but the boatman steered easily around them. Little sandbars and banks appeared; tree foliage poked out above the flood-level waters as if they were the emaciated hands of unappeased Pchum Benh spirits, wandering Pol Pot victims with no family left to remember them.

But, crossing to the other side, there was so much space that the river seemed half a kilometre wide and there descended upon them the kind of elusive peace that you don't find anywhere on land. It washed over him in the half a minute it took to get right away from the bank - the water lapping against the prow, the low chug chug of a big old outboard. He closed his eyes for a moment and then he felt the girl's hand close over his. He was now inside the dreamy peace of the river, as if he was living within the instinct of the girl. Was this where he could find his place? If he truly wanted exit from all that brittle selfishness of Western life, this could surely be the end of the journey. He looked at her again; her eyes were closed, she laced her fingers inside his.

He turned around to see if the boatman was noticing, but the man's whole face was lifted in pleasure at the river, as if it mattered not that he had made hundreds of trips before, for each one was extraordinary. The romantic vignette before him had barely flickered in his consciousness. He acknowledged Ryan with a couple of nods and he said, 'Aha, aha.'

Then the boatman flicked a switch and the outboard chugged and coughed a couple of times and was silent. They drifted in to a scrap of tree that was reaching up from a submerged sandbank. The boatman tied up on a long rope and the feeling was of drifting weightlessness. In this elbow of its course, the river had no need to show its strength; it presented as a kind of elemental and eternal lake from which, as in some creation myth, he could be made again.

They waited for six or seven minutes, eyes wide open now, but there was no dolphin. The boatman showed no concern. The girl sat on the edge of her seat, intent and mesmerised by all that surrounded her, watching and waiting.

Then there was a ripple on the surface sixty or eighty metres away. A short dorsal fin and a grey snub-nosed shape, a soft snort and an atomised puff of Mekong water and it was gone. The girl grinned and petted his hand again.

Then three broke the surface together, a mother and her pups, on the other side of the boat this time. All the while the boatman watched and every now and then he raised his arm and made a soft low noise to show the motion in the water and the lazy grey bodies breaking the surface. The dolphins returned to their rhythm of life, languidly appearing and then returning to the deep. Ryan tried to take a picture but he kept taking snaps of water where they had been a second before, of ripples on a surface.

After half an hour a long low wooden boat appeared, crossing the river, its piercing modern outboard whining away as its master held on to an iron upright and steered with his foot while he smoked and talked to his mate. They made rapid progress in their trip from one bank to the other and were soon gone. But the dolphins had disappeared. Ryan fought hard to resist rising annoyance. These people in their boats have business to do, but why obtrude the dolphins' home, this placid bend of the river? After five minutes the boatman's arm shot out again - the first sighting after the boat's intrusion - then another and another. They stayed like that for twenty minutes more, the three of them out on the mighty river. Silently watching.

The girl held Ryan's hand all the while.

'Back now,' said the boatman, the only words of English he seemed to know. Their hour was up. He cranked up the outboard again and the dolphins disappeared once more, to their homes in the deep, to the distant shore, away from all of them.

When they got back to Kratie, Ryan had asked the driver if they could go visit a village the next day. The man scratched his head. 'Is no good. Road is mud.'

'Why you want go village? Stay here town with me,' the girl smiled and pouted in one movement.

Ryan again was forced to consider the expectations that went with a trip to a bar with the girl, the implications of sex; he was innocent of the way to progress these matters. What kind

of commitment was expected? Any? And where was Tom? For a moment he envied Tom his simple approach: come up to Kratie for the weekend, have some fun, go back to work.

She was nice, lovely. He could imagine the next hour easily enough. It would be certain to be wonderful. But what of the hour after that, and the next, and the next day or week after that. Malee was in another province only a hundred kilometres away, across the mountains, with her family.

‘Look, I’m tired,’ he said. ‘I didn’t sleep so well last night. I’m going to have to go and rest up for a while. Perhaps I will see you later on, with Tom and your friend.’ The words came out of him haltingly. He could see the tears in her eyes.

He was what she had wanted.

‘Ok, I go,’ she said, and turned and walked away towards the market, where the cafes were. He watched her walk to the corner. Her golden legs were perfectly shaped. She turned and showed him one last look of hurt and pleading.

And then she was gone.

This year Pchum Benh was different as everyone dressed in white to remember Meach and Kim. Older ones sat on cushions in the front, with small children curled in their laps. All of Malee’s sisters were there, except Number Four who had talked to all of the family on the phone the night before. She had chickens to feed and her own baby to support as well as Ma and Pa.

People from the village had sent bunches of white flowers, and those who could attend had pressed little clumps of riel and some American dollars into Pa’s hand, for they all knew that it was Pa who must now take responsibility for the orphaned Cris.

The bodies had been set out in open coffins for viewing, in order that the mourners would be reminded of the impermanence of life; and as they moved away they bowed their heads

humbly in affirmation of the lesson learnt. Cris stood by the side of Pa and received the consoling attentions of these strangers. He lived now in a strange land, full of people who looked like him, but whose culture, especially here in the province, was mostly aberrant to his own.

When all were settled the achar stepped forward and intoned a chant in Khmer. For twenty minutes the mysteries were repeated and in time the thirty or so who had come to show their respect began to file away.

Malee took Cris by the hand and led him out of the temple. They sat in a little grove that was by a small stream that attributed to the river.

‘We will be all right here for a while, Cris.’ Malee spoke the simplest Khmer expressions she knew and in the few words of English that she thought Cris might know. In this way they edged forward, she watching closely for his nods of understanding. ‘They will take your Mum and Dad away to be burnt now.’

‘The bodies,’ said Cris, in what English he could. ‘Their spirit gone, into the river.’

‘The achar and the monks were asking them to come back home, into the house, to live here forever.’

Cris nodded his understanding of this aspect of the Khmer ways. His parents had told him about spirits living on after death, but he had not seen a Khmer funeral before – and now, his own mother and father. ‘I’ve watch them for three days. No want to see more.’

His eyebrows were knitted in a frown. Malee too was challenged by what had happened. She had brought a science book with her, but into that space of her mind had come the ravens and spirits of Pchum Benh to fill her world with the old ways; she felt herself slipping back. She held Cris’s hand and he let her do it.

‘Cris, in France do people think they will return in another life?’ It was a question that Reap would never have thought to ask.

‘Some of them do. Some Khmer people do.’

‘Do you believe what they believe?’

‘I don’t know. I went to a school was Catholic. They say if you are good you go heaven, but boys at school don’t believe. Maman and Papa, they try to be church, but people don’t want them. Better be nothing.’

‘School. Of course, you must go to school.’

‘I don’t want school.’

‘If you don’t go to school, Pa will kill me.’

Cris looked up at Malee. ‘I don’t want that to happen,’ he said, deadpan.

Malee laughed and Cris smiled. He hadn’t lost his sense of humour. Somewhere sometime soon, they would have to find a school for him.

‘Cris, do you like Reap?’

‘Yes,’ he turned to her, his face brightening. ‘And you. You are my cousins.’ He crinkled a smile. ‘I never had cousins before. This is cool bit.’

‘Cris, when the ceremonies are all over and Pchum Ben is finished, I will have to go back to Phnom Penh.’

‘Yes, I know. But I want you to stay,’ said Cris, for no-one had ever said anything except that, with his parents gone, his fate was to remain there, in the village, to go to school with the villagers, to eat Khmer country food, to become a Cambodian peasant and to work in the fields. They would never send him back to France alone. He had no return ticket. The savings of his Maman and Papa seemed to have been enough to get them to Kampong Thom, and that was all. There was no more money.

‘Cris, when Reap and I go back to Phnom Penh, would you like to come with us?’ The words were out, before she knew it. She could do nothing else.

‘To Phnom Penh!’ He had spent a night there in a hotel and had walked along Sisowath Quay and looked at the dark river and felt the frantic movement of the city all around him. He had been excited by it. ‘With you and Reap!’

‘Yes, with me and Reap.’ Malee’s eyes began to grow moist at the sight of the hope that had sprung in those of her little cousin.

‘Can we go on your motorbike?’

‘Yes, yes, my friend who came with us will go back on the bus, so there will be a seat for you.’

Cris’s hands grasped his knees, tight. His eyes widened and then moistened, then he blinked three times and held his tears in. And Malee knew that it was right. Some things were impossible perhaps, but they could be done.

Pchum Ben was over and it was the morning for all to return to the city. The family was gathered to discuss the problem of Cris.

‘How are we going to feed him?’ said Reap. ‘What will he do in the day when I am at work and you are at university ... in our little place.’ Reap and Sophea shared a room and Malee slept in a little broom closet that she also used as a study. The other girls all went to bed early to get up at six o’clock for the factory while she slept sometimes as late as seven thirty after studying late.

‘He can sleep on the couch,’ Malee said hopefully.

‘He will not sleep on a couch,’ said Number One brother. ‘What kind of place will he think Cambodia is? He has come from the West and you want him to live on a couch when he is used to his own bed and his own room. He must come with me. He stays at my place. I have room.’

‘But, Number One brother, you have friends come to visit you on motorbikes and stay up late at night,’ said Reap. Since moving away Number One had lost face in the eyes of the village. He had not been successful and was not seen as a proper successor to Pa. Now that Cris was an issue it was a chance for Number One to regain his place by providing for him. If the girls got Cris, Number One lost face again.

Malee spoke with her eyes respectfully cast down and with words that she had weighed. ‘We respect you as Number One older brother, but still it is not the best place for a boy to be living with grown men, even for a little while. You and your friends do things we are not allowed to do, things that would not good for a boy. Because he is a boy and we are girls the place for Cris will be with us at first.’

She looked at Cris and he nodded his head minutely forward in assent. But even the most minute of nods said to Number One that he was not gaining the respect that was his due.

‘I will look after the boy.’ His voice rose. ‘He wants to be in the city and he will be with me.’

Pa had been silent through this exchange. He had wanted time to think about it and to talk to Malee more about her friend in the city, the teacher. But in a wood and bamboo house where twelve people were sleeping there were few opportunities to talk. Pchum Ben was over. Everyone must return to Phnom Penh and a decision was needed. He knew it was his time to speak.

‘Number One son,’ he said, and bowed in his direction, ‘we respect your help to Cris. Your house is a very good place.’ He raised his hands in sompreas. ‘Reap and Malee’s house is also good. Malee is a student and she speaks very good English.’

‘But the boy speaks French, Pa. There is a difference.’

Pa bowed his head in response to the urgent and disrespectful tone of Number One. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but the boy speaks some English that he learnt in school. And,’ ...here he faltered

and his eyes were cast down, ‘sister Number Three may have a friend who speaks English and some French as well ...’

‘You talk about the teacher friend ... the barang! What is she, a prostitute? You let her go with the foreigner? You let our relative be taken care of by a stranger?’

‘He will be with two cousins all the time.’

‘You come and visit us all the time, Number One,’ said Malee.

‘Yes, we want you. Cris want you too,’ said Reap. Cris nodded enthusiastically.

‘We don’t need barang in this house.’ Number One picked up his helmet with a swipe and walked out of the room – he knew his cause was lost. Around the room all heads remained bowed in silence. Malee’s hands covered her eyes and she sobbed; her brother had called her a prostitute.

Since he had gone to the city to live, Number One’s temper had become short. In a few moments they all heard the whine of his motorbike engine at high speed come from the side of the house and out into the road, there was a panicked cluck of chickens scattering, and the motorbike roared away down the dirt road to Kampong Thom City.

Pa remained focused on the floor in front of him. Cris was silent, waiting for whatever happened next. Ma was praying silently. Number Ten sat next to Cris, hoping this meant that he could visit Phnom Penh now. Reap stood and went over to Cris.

‘Come, cousin,’ she said, holding out her hand. ‘We must pack and go. Number One Brother will be fine in a day or two, you wait and see.’

Cris rose and went with Reap to pack his things. As they left, Pa allowed his gaze to lift to Malee, who had remained sitting opposite him.

‘I’m not so sure, Pa. You know what he’s like.’ Number One Brother would take defeat very badly.

‘Give him time,’ said Pa hopefully, knowing within himself that time, sitting on a question unresolved, might only make things worse where Number One was concerned.

Tom and Ryan took the mini-bus back from Kratie - fourteen people crammed into the ten seats and a cage of a dozen chickens shoved in with some baggage behind the driver. Not many Westerners went for the crumple and compress of the troop carrier and they were honoured with two seats saved for them at the back – not a single person sitting on their laps.

The twisting river disappeared from view as the road made a straight run to the south through rice fields with water buffalos, damp stacks of hay on higher ground, tarpaulins slung across them, stilt houses lining the road. It was the first time Tom and Ryan had been able to talk about Kratie and the new type of relationship that had been dangled before Ryan there – the sort that some people came to Asia to find. But they were both silent.

After half an hour the driver slapped a video into the slot and a show flickered to life on a small TV. There was a comedy pair in a live stage show, a husband and wife team with a five-piece Khmer band behind them and a lively audience loving what they did. The wife was berating the husband with a wagging finger and he was giving back as good as he got in an exasperated, hands-on-hips, I-simply-don’t-believe-this fashion. From time to time he appealed to the audience while his wife’s back was turned, with a gesture or a raised eyebrow. They must have all been on his wavelength because they laughed uproariously. The comic timing was good; they were a great team. Even without knowing the language it worked – a husband and wife situation where the arguing and complaining is squeezed out of a bedrock of affection and respect.

The bus loved it. The boy next to Ryan was totally tuned in. Old men were comically associating with the beleaguered husband; they slapped their knees. A mother and her child

were both giggling, the four-year-old girl holding her hands over her mouth and looking up at her mum to share the joke.

There was a close-up of the woman on the comedy team. Beneath her arched eyebrows and huge O of a mock-shocked mouth she was caked in make-up to look younger than she really was – this team must have been going for years, decades, so there was a purpose for the cosmetics. But it made him think again of the girl Tom had set him up with, and it must have made the same connection for Tom.

‘You are one weird man, man,’ said Tom. ‘That was one gorgeous honey of a girl back there.’

There was a long silence as Tom looked out his window at the rice fields, more hay stacks, the occasional phlegmatic water buffalo, houses lining the road. ‘But ... but,’ Tom raised a finger for emphasis, then pointed it at Ryan, ‘sometimes I wish I could be more like you.’

He went back into a bundle of himself, folded his arms over his chest and made out to be dozing. He had the look of a man whose short holiday had not been that satisfying either.

Tom opened one eye and came back with a question. ‘You got another fish to fry?’

Ryan said nothing for a while. Then, in a spasm, ‘I dunno. Maybe.’

Tom sat up with more interest now. ‘Malee?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Oh, Jesus,’ Tom groaned.

He shook his head and would say no more. The skies were dark, the fields passed by and the rain came again. The bus tore into the weather without flinching. Another small bus coming the opposite way came straight at them in the rain, then ducked in front of a tractor, missing them by half a metre.

‘I had a wife once.’

Tom spoke, both eyes half open now, peering through the rain. It was Ryan's turn to sit up straight.

'You're kidding me.'

'In St Paul, Minnesota. We were good together, for a year. So good that we got married. Just seemed like the right thing to do at the time – to make the big statement and all. But it ended up being more than a symbol. Everything changed straightaway, overnight. It all became so serious. My life was planned out for twenty years ahead, more.' Ryan simply nodded with interest. 'I became a civil servant. Motor vehicles, Registration.' He looked over at Ryan and then said very seriously, with even narrower eyes, 'I could have been a team leader.'

'Jesus, you gave up that chance.'

'I had the right stuff.'

'Married, government job. Kids?' Ryan joked idly.

'Yeah. One.' Suddenly Tom's fingers went into action, as if some decision had been made. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and snapped out a picture of a blonde girl, about four years old, with a cute smile and a gap between her two front teeth. He held it up for about ten seconds and then flipped it away back in his pocket.

'Daddy's girl. There, now you know.'

Ryan was shocked but somehow not surprised. He was shocked because he had spent so much time on himself that he hadn't thought that deeply about Tom. He had accepted as much of Tom's story as had been implied by Tom and that was all.

'Be careful, man, is what I want to say. Since then I haven't even been able to think of settling with anyone. They say you are more secure in a relationship. I say you're not. I say you're only secure if you have three relationships. Then,' and he turned to look at Ryan and held up a finger for emphasis once more, 'if you lose one you've still got two left.'

‘And you can look for another one to top up to three again.’

‘Exactly.’ Then, peering ironically, ‘I don’t know why they say you’re so dumb.’

‘Those girls?’ Ryan tossed his head back in the direction of Kratie.

‘Or someone like them. Each of those girls will have three or four on their own team. Your girl has one guy comes from Sweden every year for three weeks, just to smoke weed and fuck the ass off her. Next to him you were looking real good.’

‘But she still would have kept him?’

‘Sure, until you ask her to marry you. Then he gets the flick pronto. But are you going to do that?’

Ryan shrugged as if to say, well, not right now.

‘That girl of yours probably has three different Sim cards in her purse. You know, a little juggling ... She’ll be in Phnom Penh in two weeks. You wanna see her?’

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. He felt a new empathy for the girl back there. She wasn’t getting what she wanted but she was surviving, trying to improve her lot the only way she could.

At ten o’clock the night of the dolphin trip there had been a foot upon the stair, soft and purposeful – hers no doubt. Then a knock on his door. She had stood there, three metres from where he laid. He could hear her exhaling breath from the exertion of the stairs, or was it from exasperation? She knocked a second time, as if the first could not be heard in such a little room, or as if she would rouse him from a dead sleep. He waited in the darkness until he heard her slippered shuffle fade down the stairway.

He had judged her against Western standards that were, what? ... prudish, wowser – hypocritical maybe. She had liked him, and he had money: he satisfied all the criteria. He could still have her.

‘What are *you* going to do?’ he said to Tom.

‘Don’t know. Stay here until the end of the year.’

‘Dith wants you.’

‘He does? You been talkin’, you two?’

‘Hah,’ thought Ryan. How could he explain? He hadn’t told Tom he’d been in the demonstration and had had rubber bullets whizzing around his ears. ‘We had a chat.’

At that moment Ryan’s phone buzzed and there was a message, from Malee.

Hi. How was Kratie?

He wrote back: *Fine. How was Kampong Thom?*

Too much to tell. Q: do you speak French?

French? He’d done five years of it in school and could still use quite a bit.

I can get by Ok in French. Why?

Talk later. On back of motorbike now. See ya.

Ryan switched off his phone and shook his head, wondering about the mad place he was living in.

Do I speak French?

Back in class Ryan saw Malee but he had to watch her go out with the rest of them and down the stair without a nod or a glance. On Friday they went to the Blue Pumpkin and before Malee went home to study she told him about her boy cousin and about his parents who had died in the floods.

After two weeks Ryan asked her if she really had to study on Friday nights. She told him that every day she spent as a student was another day that Reap had to work in the garment factory. If she did an extra unit every semester she could finish her Science and Medicine course in the middle of next year instead of waiting until the end.

‘How much do you get for working in the café?’

‘Seventeen dollars per month.’

‘Seventeen ... but that’s just four bucks twenty-five a shift: a five-hour shift.’

‘Uh huh. Reap gets eighty-five dollars a month and we send twenty to Ma and Pa.’ He did the arithmetic: eighty two dollars a month between the two of them, before paying the rent.

‘Nurses in a hospital are paid much better, like, five times more. Then I will be able to help Pa and Ma and the kids.’ He couldn’t argue with that.

He could see her handling more responsibility even than a nurse. In his mind there was a stethoscope around her neck; she was listening, making decisions, speaking quietly but with authority – weary but satisfied at the end of her day, coming home to ... to what? To an empty apartment in Battambang or some other provincial town big enough to boast a hospital; perhaps she would be there in the capital.

‘They say that sometimes it is important to have a little time away from study,’ he said, ‘so that you go back to it with a clearer head.’ She looked at him quizzically. ‘You know, get away from it all – go to a movie, something like that.’

‘Yeaah’ she smiled. ‘Got it. You like Hong Kong film or India film?’

‘Both.’

‘No you don’t.’ She kicked at him under the table.

‘I do now.’

She picked up a spoonful of food and looked down at it, and a smile spread across her face.

‘Maybe you could come and meet Cris one day. We could go for a film then or kick a football with him.’

‘Sure, love to. He sounds like he could do with a big brother.’

‘He likes Hong Kong films,’ she stretched her hands out in front of her face and did a couple of karate chops, ‘er ... just like you do.’

The day after Ryan put the idea of the movie to Malee he received a text from her.

Pa is coming to town to go shopping. He wants to go to lunch. See you at the Pizza Company at 2pm

It turned out Pa had been watching TV the night before and had seen the ads for the pizza franchise; he wanted to try the barang food and he put two and two together. As Malee said, Pa was always thinking.

Ryan arrived ten minutes early but they were already waiting for him, crammed into an American diner-style booth for six people. They hadn't ordered anything; they knew nothing of the menu and in any case they were afraid that if they ordered they would have to pay up front and they were waiting for him to do all that. Pa grinned broadly. His teeth were nicotine-stained but that fact seemed to bother him little. His hair was a thick shock of black, flecked with grey and his face was rounder than Malee's, more like Reap's; Ryan decided there and then that Malee must follow the Ma that this man fell in love with. Pa grinned broadly on Ryan's appearance and kept ducking his head in acknowledgement, but he didn't get out of his seat or sompreas or make to shake hands.

As well as Pa there was the boy, Cris, who seemed to be anticipating Ryan's arrival quite intensely. He addressed him in French, '*Bonjour*' and thrust out his hand to shake.

'Bonjour, monsieur,' Ryan replied, *'ça va?'*

Pa's face lit up in pure delight.

'Aha, aha, aha'! Pa repeated and looked around at them all; there was vindication of his judgement that Ryan and Cris were a made pair. There was a sister there as well, must be Number Five Ryan thought, and also another man who had come from Kampong Thom to go 'shopping' too – a semi-retired mate of Pa's whose name sounded something like Tommy.

He was tiny, as if he had been stunted of growth in childhood years; his face was lit up with excitement on being introduced. It seemed that meeting the barang was quite an occasion.

When pleasantries and introductions were completed a plastic menu was pushed in front of Ryan. The list was nearly as confusing for him as it would have been for them – what to order for people he didn't know, who had never been in a pizza place before.

The whole table was looking at him with cheerful, expectant faces, wanting to see how it was done. Malee seemed unpractised in the art of hosting a social occasion; there was watchful silence all round as he looked over the extensive menu.

‘Reap could not come today?’ he asked.

Malee said something in Khmer to her Pa and then she replied, ‘No Reap has to work until six o'clock.’

‘Ah, of course.’

He turned the menu over and there was more on the back. It appeared they did toasted sandwich things that were slid into an oven with cheese sprinkled on top, and macaroni cheese bake and fries as well. He thought about the idea of pizza and fries on the side. Pa looked like he would devour pizza, fries, the plastic menu - anything. He grinned avidly at Ryan, waiting for the moment of ordering. This was getting difficult.

‘What about Samsung brother?’

Again Malee said some words to Pa and he shook his head decidedly and said some words that were like ‘Nah, nah, nah.’

‘Number One working too. Number Five has the day from school to come to the city for the first time,’ and Number Five grinned and looked down modestly as she realised she was being referred to.

He could feel that the conversation had been changed quite deliberately away from the subject of Number One, the Samsung brother who had had trouble with barangs. A girl

appeared wearing a white plastic apron with green and red vertical stripes and a little paper hat with the words 'Pizza Company' written across it. With her Khmer looks and American outfit the girl embodied a bizarre, incongruous cuteness and, as she held her order pad at chest height and pertly poised her pen ready to take the order, she seemed to know it.

The pressure was on. Pa was watching the way he handled the situation. He went against the macaroni bake and straight for middle road tradition with one Sicilian pizza and one ham and cheese, all to share. Green tea was on the list but he decided on soft drinks all round. When he completed the ordering everyone leant back with pleased looks on their faces. It was as if he had made a great success; he half expected a slap on the back, such was the impression he had made, such was the goodwill at the table.

They talked about this and that. Ryan referred to things that Malee had told him about Pa's life, avoiding the Khmer Rouge years out of delicacy. Malee asked Pa questions in Khmer and he replied, looking at Ryan all the while, and Malee replied to him in English. Meanwhile Cris listened intently, as did Number Five, but did not speak. Tommy continued to respond ecstatically to every utterance, without making one himself.

They loved their pizza. Pa went back to the ham and cheese time and again and they all laughed when he bit in hard then pulled back greedily and the cheese fell on his chin and he needed to stuff it in with his fingers. It was the most hilarious thing. Pa took it in good spirit. They all laughed together without hesitation or mitigation; the family was as one, and Tommy was treated as a member of this gang.

Conversation slowed to a walk and Ryan began to worry what would happen when the eating was done. But after about an hour it was all over quite suddenly. There was a glance at watches and nodding to each other: they had seen what they wanted to see. Ryan caught the eye of the waitress and he paid the bill in cash. Pa's eyes widened and he nodded happily at the wad of notes and keenly watched the money change hands.

Then they were out in the street and Pa and Tommy and Number Five all piled into a tuk-tuk, which had arrived by arrangement, and with a quick chorus of waves they went back to the bus station – a four-hour bus trip in the morning, then a pizza, then a four-hour bus trip back, then Number Six would probably pick them up at Kampong Thom City and drive them to the village, all four of them on one bike.

Ryan was left on the kerb with Malee and Cris.

‘I guess that’s it,’ said Ryan.

‘That’s them all right. Pa says you should take me shopping now.’

‘Shopping?’

‘To buy me something nice. But it doesn’t matter.’

‘*Je voudrais un téléphone portable,*’ said Cris. Then he looked up and saw the look on Ryan’s face, ‘One day – *ça ne fait rien.*’

‘Ok,’ said Ryan hesitantly. He thought he understood, but there was unease stirring in him. Colin and Tom had said that he would be expected to take his Khmer girl shopping, and how that would be only the start. They had said it was best to be clear what the boundaries were. The problem was, he had no idea what the boundaries should be.

Cris went to the nearest public school. As Malee took him in for his first day he eyed the hungry lean dogs in the street; they nosed around in piles of rubbish and competed with ravens for stray scraps. He was introduced to the class as the new boy and took his seat in silence as all faces stared, even the teacher’s. The story had already got around that he was from France, that he spoke French and didn’t know a word of Khmer (which wasn’t true), and that people in France were lucky because there were lots of frogs and snails to eat there.

At morning break-time he filed out into the corridor with everyone else and wondered what would happen next. Would he sit by himself while the other boys played with their

friends? The girls melted away and the boys gathered around him, looking, staring at him; Cris was their property, at least at first.

Then the first question was blurted out, 'Do you really speak French? My grandpa speaks French.' 'Where is France, is it close to Israel?' 'What colour are the frogs there, are they green or brown?' 'Did your parents really die in the flood?' 'Have you seen Ronaldo play?'

At lunch time a football was produced and he was first picked. Everyone wanted him on their team. He said he normally played in defence but they put him in attack anyway. They fed him the ball, until he scuffed a shot at goal and they decided that he knew his own game best after all and he was eased back behind the midfield and did a fair enough job for his side, just booting the ball artlessly up-field when it came near him.

Before class went back in he told them about his two cousins who were so cool and how one was going to be a doctor; about how he slept on the couch in their little lounge room and no-one told him what to do; but most of all he told them about his friend Ryan who took them to the Pizza Company and was like his big brother and who came to visit all the time and who he spoke French and English with.

Most of what Cris said was true; only a little was exaggerated.

They did go shopping.

Malee possessed only four shirts: two white and two pale blue. She matched these up with one knee-length skirt that she wore to school and university, and one pair of trousers that she wore to work. She washed every third night and hung the shirts on a line from the window, except in the wet season when they rolled the shirts up in a dry towel to extract as much moisture as possible and dried them inside, or gave a hundred riel to Mrs Leang on the ground floor who had a washing machine with a drier.

Ryan had never bought clothes for a girl before and it felt strange, it felt ... serious. He had been brought up in a place where women had their own money from the time they were seven years old – some before that. Or at least had parents who would materialise every item on their child's birthday or Christmas list as a biannual right of passage. Buying clothes for Malee seemed so old fashioned, so pre-feminist, that a part of him rebelled. On the other hand it would bring them closer. And it had nothing to do with Pa. Malee was so unjustly poor; but even in Australia there were people who were unjustly poor. And what had he ever done for them?

Such thoughts were travelling around in his head. But events were overtaking him; they were almost at the Sorya Mall already.

They entered and strolled past the glitter of jewels in a sea of display cabinets – the first thing you see as you enter. Malee did not even glance at those; it would be immodest of her to even think of appearing in jewellery. If she wore such things only in the city, the news would be heard in the village before the sun went down.

They rode the escalator to the higher levels and rummaged through the clothing stores; it was an experience for both of them. They found a shirt and a pair of pants of a silky lavender colour; when set against her jet black hair and her glistening light brown skin the suit was beautiful for its simplicity. He waited while she ducked behind a screen. She was just a metre or so away, changing clothes. He listened to the old white shirt rustle from her shoulders and drop to the floor, the new one slipping over her and then silence as she looked at herself. He felt awkward, but excited. When Malee emerged, she seemed even tinier than she had been before. She stroked the smooth and flawless fabric; it would be reserved for the very best occasions.

‘Can I really have it?’

He saw how she tried to restrain her joy.

‘Yes, of course you can have it. If it’s the right thing to do.’

Malee briefly pressed her palms together in *sompreas*, and raised them to the level one does for a respected friend or equal. He stretched his hand out to her, and stroked her hair just once.

The suit of clothes had cost him just fifteen dollars.

By the time they emerged from the Sorya Mall darkness was closing in and he hailed a *tuk-tuk* to take her home. In her street the concrete apartment blocks were ghostly grey against the evening sky. Stray pips of light escaped from their towering walls like half-closed eyes in a giant disfigured face.

When they arrived at her building he paid the man and told him not to wait. He would walk her in and say goodnight properly, whatever the cost. At the glass door that led inside he stepped close to her and stroked her hair again. She did not stop him. He drew her to him and he kissed her lightly on the forehead. She leant in to him. The light was dim beneath the shelter over the doors, and no-one was coming in or out just now. He held her in his arms for a minute and they stayed there without speaking. He would not try to go too far too soon, though every sinew in his being wanted to place his hands under her shirt and touch her, to go down the back of her pants and caress her buttocks.

He could have stayed like that forever, but it was time to go and so they released their embrace and he bent to kiss her goodnight. She responded to him with her mouth closed, but with her lips pushed out searching for him as if enquiring after something but not knowing where to find it. It was a beautiful small kiss, but peculiar. It occurred to him that she had never kissed a man before.

He laughed, or rather smiled and chuckled together at his epiphany about this girl. She heard him and recoiled.

‘What’s wrong,’ she said, in horror that she had made some irreversible mistake.

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ he replied. ‘It was just the most beautiful kiss I have ever had.’

She relaxed again and exhaled a sigh of relief.

‘Me too. I must go.’

And she went, as abruptly as Pa had left that afternoon, scampering up the stairs. There was just the faint odour of her sweat on his face, and as he stepped out into the night he still felt her hair on his fingers and he remembered the feeling of the silky shirt against her taut shoulders as he held her.

He was in a strange place. He should have got the tuk-tuk man to wait for him; that’s what they preferred to do anyway, but he just hadn’t wanted anyone around when he was saying goodnight.

There was a pole with a light up on the next corner, and others at intervals that diminished into the distance. They were like candlelight spots in a harbour that showed the direction for a ship to take, but shed no light on what laid below; walking between them could be awkward, even dangerous. In the other direction it was five hundred metres or more to the main road. There would never be a tuk-tuk along here; no-one down here could afford one except him. He would have to walk up to the main road and flag someone down. And then he remembered – Chean! He had Chean’s number in his phone but had never had to use it.

‘Yes, boss,’ Chean answered brightly. Ryan told him he was at Malee’s flats.

‘Oooooohhh,’ said Chean, ‘danger place. I come for you. Ten minutes. No worry.’

Ryan stepped into the empty street. There was a convenience store a little way up the road but it was quiet now. It was eight o’clock at night and this was not what anyone would think of as a party part of town – most of them in the block would be lights out early for a six o’clock start for the factories.

There were some low bushes behind him next to a broken paling fence that had strips falling off it, some were lying face down by the bushes. Then he froze as he heard a rustling around the branches. Could it be rats? He hated rats. Then there were the quick steps of humans. He froze for a second as a shudder of fright went through him, then he turned around to face whatever was coming and walked straight into a blow on his forehead from a solid stick of wood, and then another and another. There were two men, it seemed, piling into him. He slumped away and down from the blows and as he did he grabbed the arm of one of the assailants and tried to pull him down. His other arm grabbed the man's shirt and he tried to push him into the path of the other one to make him stumble. But the man evaded his grasp and, off balance as he was, he swung another blow at Ryan that missed and while he was open Ryan went in with a punch that connected him on the lip or nose. The man reeled back for a second then righted himself and came back harder. Then he felt another crack on the back of the head from the other one behind him and Ryan instinctively flung his elbow back to go for that one's nose as well, but his arm was grabbed and pinned and then a kick came, aimed at his genitals but scuffing only his thigh as he turned to protect himself. Then they pushed him down and smacked him time after time with the flat side of their paling cudgels, then they threw the posts away and both of them kicked him three or four times in his ribs and on his arse.

And then they ran. When they had taken a few steps one of them stopped and said in a darkly sibilant, raspy way, as if he was trying to disguise his voice.

'Keep away, barang.'

And then running, running, until the steps disappeared and a street away there was the sound of a motorbike revving harshly and whining away into the night.

He had been hit many times, but not hard. They had been using palings of wood, but nothing like a baseball or cricket bat. One of the kicks had connected hard around his

perineum and he could feel it as he rolled up onto all fours. He felt his mouth. There was a split in his lower lip. He was not ready to stand for a little while so he stayed there on all fours, spitting blood out of his mouth, trying to remember whether he knew the number of Malee's apartment.

And then there was the whine of another motorbike motor and the tinkle of a caravan behind it. The tuk-tuk stopped and then he heard a couple of scuffling steps.

'Boss?' Then some more steps and again, 'Boss, boss.'

Chean was feeling his arms and legs for breaks and then his head and lastly he touched his mouth and felt the split.

'You ok, boss. Nothing broken. You come with me.'

Chean helped him gently into the tuk-tuk and laid him down on his side. And as they drove away Ryan began to wonder why Number One Brother had not come along to lunch that day when the rest of the family had taken such trouble to make it all the way from Kampong Thom to the city.

In the several minutes between waking and opening his eyes, the scenes of the night before were played out over and again in his mind.

The fight, if you could call it that. But no, you couldn't. He had been surprised, advantaged, beaten; he was paling-smacked. He was no fighter, but he surmised that the others were not really such practised exponents either.

If they were criminals they would have taken something from him. He had fifty dollars in his pocket – half a month's wages for a garment worker, about a week's worth for someone in an office. And the weapons, they were just sticks of wood picked up off the ground, no planning.

He had light bruises all over his arms and around his buttocks. There was a small split on one corner of his mouth. The blows had seemed to be aimed at humiliation, not physical hurt – a pressure valve of steam going off in someone’s head.

When he turned over he felt his arse; that was where it hurt the most, the final kick.

Chean had brought him up the stairs the night before, had laid him out and taken his shoes off, then fed him four Codalgen with a glass of water – that’s a hundred and twenty mgs of codeine along with masses of paracetamol. As they came in to the flat together Chean had looked around the place in awe of the bountiful space it afforded just one man. Ryan thought now that the look Chean had given him had said: ‘She will want this.’ He didn’t whistle softly like some people might, but Ryan now swore to himself that Chean had pursed his lips to do so, but had then thought better of it.

He sat up in bed, his eyes still shut against the light he could feel blasting through his window. Jesus – no! He would not go to work. What did it matter if he did or he didn’t? What did anything matter now? No-one had ever hit him before. Not like that. And he had never hit anyone before – ever; but when he’d had a chance he had socked one of those blokes a good one. He was a bit proud of that. Hey, I’m a fighter, he said to himself. He felt his right hand. It was ok, just a bruise on the middle knuckle.

Of all the things he remembered from that whole day there were two that came to him now: the look on the face of Pa as he counted off the bills to pay the Pizza Company girl, and what Malee had said: ‘Pa said you should take me shopping, but it doesn’t matter.’

As if it didn’t matter. He could see now how much it mattered to one of them. He could see that there was conflict in the family, over him. He felt now that Pa had sprung a honey trap around him. They said that once you had been sucked in to the family all the way, the demands for money became greater and greater until you were paying for the wedding ceremony of sister number six and held responsible for the successful marriages of all the rest

of them: pink and yellow bunting, roast chicken feasts, deafening Korean pop music, the monk and the civil celebrant.

Suddenly Ryan felt like such a tourist, and with that thought there returned to him a memory. At the end of the Pizza Company experience, in the street when they were seeing Pa and the rest of them into their tuk-tuk, a man had ridden past on a pushbike: a kind of goon, a Westerner, with an open-mouthed staring expression on his face. Ryan had thought of the look on Coleridge's ancient mariner. He had taken particular notice of Ryan, it seemed, with Malee's family and, as the tuk-tuk carrying them took off, the man did a U-turn in the street and rode past on the other side, all the while his pop-eyed, leering face focused on Ryan. And then, again, he turned to come back up on their side of the road and as he passed once more he caught Ryan's attention with a twitch of his head and he cried out loud in a sing-song trill, 'You'll never be one of them!'

And then the man had given a quick high laugh and pedaled hard on his bike and he was away, happy, merry almost, at the delivery of his telling line.

Ryan had thrust that memory away then, but now it was harder; he had bruises all over his body and the memory of this prescient idiot-savant stuck fast in his head. He forced himself up and braced himself for the light. He peeped one eye open at the clock: five past seven. He had to send some texts. It was Friday so at least he would only have one day to be covered at the school before the weekend. He sent the same text to Dith and Tom, a simple message saying he was sick and suggesting that Tom fill in for him on Saturday. Then he turned the phone off.

He went to bed again and dozed and dreamed and imagined things. Even Reap now seemed sly. And then he saw her in his mind, sitting in the garment factory, sewing up sleeves, pushing the fabric under the needle; over and again she pushed a T-shirt through the machine and then she began to laugh maniacally. He looked down and there was his face

printed on the T-shirt and Reap was pushing it under the needle and there were stitches all over his face, like some Frankenstein's monster that had been in a knife fight: 'You'll never be one of them' the face croaked at him in a voice that was not his own. He sat up in bed. He was hot; he was awake.

'Jesus fuck' he said out loud.

He did not know what to think. He went to the fridge and took a cold drink of water. He poured some on his cupped hand and washed it over his face. He thought of Janey – he still had not called her. How many days had it been? Perhaps that was the one constructive thing he could do with his day.

He turned his phone on again. It was ten o'clock. There was a message for him from Malee: *They said you are not at school today. What's the matter?!*

He thought for a minute and went through a series of wordings for his answer. He wanted to suggest that he was being taken for a ride by her and the family, but he didn't want to say it outright. He spent five minutes composing a message that said he would call off their friendship, and then he deleted it. It was a delicate thing and he could not decide, but he had to do something. After three or four versions and twenty minutes he wrote: *I got beaten up last night. Welcome to the family.*

It was simple. It hinted at bitterness, but not blame. It suggested her fault as a member of a family, but not as a person. Some girls would drop a man for a text like that; perhaps he was tempting the issue of fate, Malee to end it for him. For a moment he thought of the girl from Kratie, her look of hurt as she walked away, her knock on his hotel room door. He could be with her next week.

He turned the phone off and dozed for a while. He decided to make a Skype call to Janey at three o'clock; by then it would be half past five in Australia and her patients would have

left and she would be at her office writing up her day, finding things to do to stop her going home.

By two o'clock he was ready to do something and he made himself a coffee and checked his phone. In the first minute of lunchtime the answer had come through: *Beaten up!! What!! Aaaaagggghhhh!! What do you mean??* And then five minutes later: *What do you mean??!! Help, tell me!??*

He rang back. She would be back in class at the university by then and he left a message: 'Uh, yeah, when I left your place last night I was beaten up in the street by two guys armed with sticks of fencing wood. They kicked me too ah and one of them told me to stay away from you. I guess that means someone in your family is telling me that should be the end of our relationship. Perhaps I should count myself lucky there weren't any nails in the fence palings because I might not have an eye now, er, or a brain I suppose. Um, I guess that's all I need to say. Bye.'

As he pulled the phone away from his ear and paused his finger over the red button he thought his message was good on the factual side but needed something editorial to round it out. 'Um,' he said, 'I thought we might have had something. Bye.'

It was meant to hurt. It was meant to say, 'We could have been good but for your stupid brother. And sister. And father. And the whole rotten family thing.' For the first time ever he thought that he should have stayed in Australia and accepted his own fate; should have stayed and gone to that wedding, to be with his sister Janey if nothing else, to be best man at his brother's wedding if need be. In mythology, wasn't it always those who tried to defy the oracle who met the most grisly ends? These Cambodians would *never* have left home – anything for the family, don't rock the boat.

He sat down hard in his TV chair and his arse hurt sharply from the kick he had received. He winced and rolled over onto one cheek.

‘Fuck,’ he said out loud and in exasperation. And then, after thinking about his situation with a cool head for a minute more, he repeated the only word that summed his situation perfectly.

‘Fuck!’

‘What on earth?’

‘What do you mean “on earth”?’

‘What happened to you? Tell me now.’ His sister Janey was using her sharp voice, the one that was meant to show him that this was a situation that entailed the suspension of the standing orders that governed their relationship in all but exceptional times.

Ryan squirmed in his seat but his arse hurt again and he screwed his face up into a wince. Janey’s face leaned forward for a closer look and her eyes were narrowed, a sure sign that no amount of banter would deter her from the answer to her question.

‘I fell down the stairs, out the back here.’

‘Oh Jesus, pull the other one. Stairs don’t hit you on both sides of the head. I’m a doctor for cryin’ out. Do you forget this fact?’

He made a mock-thoughtful face, ‘Oh yeah!’ he said, as if a lightbulb had just been snapped on. ‘So you are.’

‘Bring your face up to the screen.’

‘Oh, come on ...’

‘Bring it up to the screen!’

This was the woman who had been his mother as well as his sister on all those lonely Saturday nights when their parents were out schmoozing money – the only person in the world he would take this from.

He leaned close to the screen.

‘Jesus, your eyes are like a cross-section of the red cabbage I cut open last week.’

‘You been making sauerkraut again? You know, the one you do with the ...’

‘Don’t change the subject! Have you been to see a doctor?’

He shrugged his shoulders. Really, what was a doctor going to do?

‘What happened?’ Short, blunt, demanding.

‘I got beat up.’

‘By whom?’

‘It was dark. I don’t know.’

‘You know. I can tell that you know.’

He asked himself why he had called Janey, when she was always going to see through him. But he knew on another level that he was calling her *because* she would see through him and would then force him to confess. We play these games with ourselves, he knew. And by the time all that had happened he would have shared it with the only person he *could* share it with.

‘It might have been Malee’s brother.’

There was a silence of some seconds and then. ‘Oh – my – god.’

Silence. They looked at each other. He was waiting for her to speak, to decide.

‘If you have a cucumber take two slices and put them over your eyes. I will be there in two days.’

‘What! You can’t ...’

‘I can.’

‘But your patients ...’

‘Are like your classes. Someone else can do them. Do you know, I haven’t been away from this place in three years.’

‘I thought you loved it.’

‘I do but, Jesus, there’s a limit. The reason I haven’t been away is because I haven’t had anything to do with myself. Normally I find holidays stressful because there’s nothing to do; now they are all making life stressful here by telling me every five minutes I should have a holiday! Nowhere to go except to join some tour group full of old people, god love them, and go to Ephesus or the Pyramids or, or ...’

‘Stonehenge?’

‘Or some fine place like that, but to do it in such style and in such company that I feel like my life is over some thirty years too soon. And now my baby brother has conveniently gone to the tropics and got himself into bother and he needs his sister. There is a flight goes every night to Singapore. Then I get whatever connection there is to Phnom Penh. I will be there the day after tomorrow. I might be a fucking wreck by the time, but I will be there.’

And Janey began fossicking in her bag right there and then.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I need my Qantas card. I’ll score handsome frequent flyer points for this. Now get off my screen, I want to book a ticket.’

‘Ok. Bye-bye, sis.’

She reached forward and the screen popped to grey. Ryan sat back in his chair and wondered. Whatever had happened or was going to happen, Ryan’s day had just swivelled on an axis. Some of his energy had returned, and whatever had happened to him mattered a little less.

Before Chean brought him home, Ryan hadn’t had many visitors in his three weeks in the apartment. Tom had come over the day he rented it and pursed his lips and nodded his approval. ‘Bene hacienda, muchacho,’ he’d said, murdering, Ryan thought, his Spanish and Italian together. Still, it sounded good.

Colin bought two cold beers from Mr Thiounn and came up saying they'd better drink them before they warmed up, even though Ryan had a fridge already. They'd cracked them open and clinked tins and Colin had told Ryan he was proud of him – something Ryan had taken a day or two to think about. He was still not certain what would make Colin proud.

Apart from these intrusions and his Skype sessions with Janey, the apartment had become a citadel of solitude for him and just now he was glad of it. He decided to let things go and not think again. He could let Janey do all that for him when she arrived. There was a sudden release from decision and worry. He went down to the Kandal market and bought some eggplants and mushrooms. He already had some chicken from the Sorya supermarket and he cooked them together in a wok with some pad thai sauce; he boiled noodles and tossed them in some spinach at the last minute. He sat in front of the television and avoided the BBC and the Asian English language news channel and the Australian and American ones too. They were starting to seem foreign to him and his remote control dwelled on the local section of the channel numbers instead.

There was a game show with a yellow backdrop and all the wide-eyed contestants were wearing pink make-up and flapping their hands up and down in excitement. Then a news channel and for a while he tried to work out the Khmer words that were being spoken. After a few minutes his head began to hurt from the effort and he switched again. On the next channel was Hun Sen - giving a speech! He was famous for his long rambling speeches that attacked his political foes and made claims about them that were outrageous, but which would sink into the minds of whoever watched.

Hun Sen was sitting at a long desk in an auditorium full of people, and alongside him on either side of the desk were generals in their full regalia topped with khaki hats with red bands. Hun Sen spoke very seriously for a minute – there was something terrifyingly magnetic about this man with so much power, the survivor who became a dominator. Then

his face lightened into a smile and he uttered what must have been the joke conclusion to some long story. Along the line of generals and colonels everyone broke out on cue into grins and nods. But their grins were squeezed out of their faces like lemon juice from a mangle. Hun Sen went back to his speech and in a minute he broke into a smile and began nodding at his own joke again and the grins and nods were squished up again from the cavalcade of generals. On and on the speech went, each malicious joke eliciting a more pained and forced response from the brass up there, each joke perhaps presaging the political or earthly demise of the person who was the object of its intention.

After ten minutes Ryan almost felt sorry for the elite up there on that stage behind their leader, their boss. It became embarrassing to watch. It was all about money and power; it was a bullying game in which no-one had any rights – none. The followers, even the powerful ones, had to abase themselves to stay in the gang of thugs. What a place, he thought, and decided he had seen enough of it.

At that moment there came a knock on his door. It was a soft knock but a sound that carried and which demanded an answer, almost proprietorial. He started at the sound. Hun Sen continued leering on screen, but the spell of his Machiavellian and demoniac presence was broken. Ryan went to the door.

Malee was there. Her eyes were pleading and angry.

‘Where have you been?’ she said, then started. ‘Oh my god.’

What would he say? Could he say what he thought, or just relay the facts, that he had been beaten up.

‘I was beaten up by a couple of guys. They had sticks.’

‘Aggh. Sticks! But ...’ she immediately began to examine him with her nurse’s hands.

‘There isn’t any cut. They were fence palings, from outside your place.’

‘My place?’ she gasped. ‘It was there?’ Her eyes widened as she considered the possibilities.

‘Anyway, er, why don’t you come in.’

She was distracted, thoughts racing as they sat.

‘Who was it? Did you know?’

‘Hard to tell in the dark, but I don’t think I’d ever seen them before.’

Malee was silent and thoughtful as she sat.

‘Ah, one of them told me to keep away and called me barang. It seemed he was saying to keep away from you.’

They sat like that for a few seconds and then Malee’s head nodded in recognition. ‘Ah, I see,’ she said. ‘Number One Brother. I should have thought of that straight away.’ And she relaxed her shoulders and sat back in her seat as if this meant the problem was resolved.

‘What do you mean, Ah, I see? He’s just assaulted me. Isn’t that against the law here?’

‘The law? Oh, yes, the law,’ she nodded as if to say, good point. ‘Number One is angry about many things, not just you. But you take the blame. Number One wants to take Cris away from me, and you especially. Cris can’t wait to see you again; you are his hero. Number One has lost face.’

Ryan thought for a moment about how he could achieve a pedestal position with a boy, so quickly, without any intention of doing so. And Number One ...

‘But Number One is even now,’ Malee finished.

‘What do you mean ‘even’?’

‘He has his face back.’

‘You mean he lost face, so he gets a mate and waits for me in the dark and hits me with fence palings, so everyone respects him again?’

‘He had to do something and that was about all he could do.’

‘You mean, you’re just going to leave it at that?’

‘It’s in the family, so it’s over. If it had been someone else – different story. You still have power, with us.’

Ryan flopped back on the sofa, his mouth gaping. The whole thing had been dismissed, just like that! He had expected a little more attention. He *had* been beaten up after all.

But somehow, for the first time, he could feel the power of her desire for him. The clash with Number One had brought him more deeply into the family and if he was so important to someone else’s face that meant he had more importance than he had figured before. Such was the power of the person of Malee that when she had said it was ok, that somehow that made it ok. Ten minutes before he had been drawn into the leering power of Hun Sen and had thought about leaving Cambodia. But now ...?

She put her hands to his head, gently feeling the wounds again. ‘I want to do something for you.’

‘But there’s nothing really to do, is there. Just wait until it heals.’

She felt his mouth. ‘I will bring some cream.’ She came close to him, as if to examine him very closely; she was in his arms. Her cheek touched his cheek and her mouth moved to his and they were kissing. She was tender, with loving small kisses, her mouth more open this time, sexual.

He lent forward and laid her on his couch and knelt on the floor in front of her and stroked her hair and kissed her right there, kneeling in front of her, bending. Then his hand was underneath her shirt and she shivered and her whole body twisted as he stroked her stomach. Her skin was smooth to touch. His hand came around her back and unhitched her little white bra. Her breasts were so small that, but for the sake of modesty, such a bra would have served no practical purpose. He stroked her nipples and then lifted her shirt and applied his mouth to them, first one then the other, kissing and licking, back and forth until she began to moan not

low but a high gasping open-mouthed pant, as if in complete surprise at the sensation she was experiencing. He felt at the soft fur between her legs and felt the wetness there. Her arms were around his head and her legs twisted together as he kissed her and she writhed three or four times. Then when he kissed her on the lips and their tongues came together her body gave a little shake and her eyes were wide open for a moment staring as if the answers to life were written there on his plain white ceiling; her moan became lower and as her twisting subsided, her eyes were closed again and she collapsed her weight languidly into the sofa and, whatever it was, it was over.

They lay there for some time, his head on her shoulder, her eyes closed, her face expressionless but for a tinge of wonder.

‘My God,’ he said.

‘Phew,’ she said in reply.

Ryan called Chean and they all went together to take Malee to her apartment. He felt Malee’s hand over his all the way this time, in the dark. He felt her fingers lace into his and he remembered the girl in Kratie. She had done the same thing out on the water, on the day of the dolphins. She had placed her hand over his, then after a minute had laced her fingers like this. He wondered what had happened to her, that girl.

When they arrived at her block Malee jumped out and thought for a second, then spoke as if she had just had a thought.

‘Come up,’ she said to Ryan. ‘Say hi to Cris.’

Chean turned the engine off and said, ‘I wait.’

‘No, you come too, Chean,’ she said. ‘You’re part of the family as well now.’

Ryan looked up at that ‘part of the family’ thing, then he and Chean exchanged glances.

‘I’ve seen your apartment, now you can see mine,’ she said. ‘You know, when I was a child, sometimes I took the family cow away for grass by the river; it was my job once a week for a year. I would take a book to read and study, but sometimes I just sit under a tree and let my thoughts drift away for, like, a whole hour. I think it was the only time in my life ever I was alone. Even riding my bike to school there was usually three of us. Now there are three of us here too.’

Malee led them up three flights of stairs and along to the end door in a row of eight. She walked confidently, happy to show how at ease she was in this derelict environment, then she looked around and grimaced before turning the key and pushing through. The two girls inside stopped what they were doing and looked up, their eyes wide at the sight of the two men. Then Cris was there too, jumping up from his couch. The girls were working: Reap was washing clothes in a baby’s bath, squeezing a shirt dry of suds before plunging it into a plastic bucket of clearer water. The other girl chopped vegetables next to a saucepan of water that was coming to the boil on a single-jet portable gas cooker; a carrot had been done and the other looked like a turnip or radish.

‘Hey,’ said Cris, and he ran over from the couch to slap Ryan a high-five that Ryan turned into a soul brother hand clasp, just for fun. The kid got the irony in the turnaround and giggled and turned and said something to the girls that must have been, Look who’s here. The girls smiled through their embarrassment at being caught out with their washing and their meagre dinner. The room was the size of a small bedroom, but was the living room for four of them, and was now Cris’s bedroom too.

‘I’ll show you around,’ said Malee. ‘Shouldn’t take long.’ She went through to the bedroom and pushed open the door. There was a double bunk bed that looked like a child’s size, and a foam mattress on the floor with a pillow and scrunched-up sheet that had been laid

out square but in which you could still see the creases from the shape of its nocturnal occupant. There was about a metre of space between the beds.

‘The girl from the top bunk went back to the village,’ she said, seeing him look at the empty space and the neatly made bed. ‘But not the right place for Cris.’

‘A cat?’ he suggested.

She tilted her head thoughtfully, ‘Nah, no space for a cat.’

She stepped out of that room and opened the next door and switched on a light.

‘Here is my place,’ she emphasised the last word, to show that you could hardly call it a room.

It was an odd little crevice, next to the bedroom, about six feet long and three feet wide. There were medical books ranged up along the end wall, and a single foam mattress had been forced in there. Forced because it was too wide to fit in naturally and was riding up one of the walls.

‘We would cut the foam down to fit but, who knows, we might move to a bigger place sometime.’ She raised her eyebrows to accentuate the irony.

‘Cosy spot,’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ she countered. ‘Good security. A robber couldn’t even fit in here.’

‘He’d have to have an interest in medicine.’

‘Hmmm, some intern down on his luck. It could happen.’

He nodded in agreement with that; it was unlikely, but possible.

Back in the living room dried noodles had been thrown into the pot of water, with a little fresh spinach and bamboo shoots from a tin. They were looking forward to this as a feast.

‘Is good,’ said Reap in English. ‘Some night only have noodle.’ And she pointed to a cellophane packet in the corner with about a dozen individual serves of noodles, each with its flavour sachet - preservative high, nutrition low. ‘We must get strong for demonstration.’

‘Of course. Sunday.’

‘I’m going too,’ said Cris happily.

‘We don’t know that,’ said Reap. ‘You still too young.’

‘I’m fifteen, nearly. In France you can join the army at fifteen.’

‘No you can’t,’ said Malee, wagging her finger at him.

‘In the days of the Foreign Legion you could. So why not now?’

‘This is serious, Cris,’ said Reap, switching to Khmer. ‘At the last demonstration the police shot bullets. It was not funny.’

‘Only rubber ones and only into the air.’

‘And you heard what Ma said on the phone today. That raven came back this morning and sat on the house until she threw a stone at it.’

‘The raven?’ said Malee, all the paradox and mockery leaving her face. ‘The raven is back?’ She returned to English so Ryan would understand.

‘But you don’t believe that, and neither do I, huh!’ said Cris, putting his arm around Malee’s shoulder.

‘No, no. Of course not,’ said Malee.

‘And neither does Ryan,’ said the little Frenchman, in English.

‘Time to go, boss,’ said Chean.

Malee went with them to the door and half closed it behind her. Chean went ahead to the stairs. She looked Ryan in the eyes; he kissed her on the cheek, then quickly on the lips.

‘Tonight at your place,’ she said. ‘It was ... I never felt like that before.’

She took a deep breath and exhaled. Had something changed in her? It seemed to Ryan that she acted with conviction now, as if she was driving forward with a different strength. As if by assured action and by this alone the world would come to her, not her to it. In this single moment Ryan felt that power, and was at once drawn to it, but was also fearful of it.

‘I will see you Sunday,’ was her final declaration to him. ‘Reap won’t be able to stop Cris from coming. We can’t leave him here on his own while we all go.’

‘One in, all in,’ he said.

‘Leave them to their meal,’ said Chean sorrowfully when they were on the stairs. ‘We stay they ask us to share. No good.’ His sad look said, They need everything they have.

They walked over to the tuk-tuk and Chean looked back at the building.

‘They all live like this,’ he said, and he motioned his hand over the block that sat before them, those beyond, and to the whole world of the garment workers that was this quarter of the city.

‘Me lucky, have tuk-tuk.’

For his part Ryan could not speak. He was sunk in himself, but not with thoughts of the certainties that seemed to have come over Malee. His introspection was something dark and full of doubt, as dank and claustrophobic as Malee’s closet bedroom, as murky as the muddy waters of the river that lapped around the stilts of Pa’s house in the province of Kampong Thom.

It turned out Janey wasn’t able to get away from Sydney with the dramatic flourish she’d hoped for. There were certain clients who had told her so much of their life stories that they were on a hand-holding basis (which she knew she shouldn’t do but she did because it felt right). Anyway, no other doctor wanted to see this bunch of loonies, and the patients would see no-one else either, so the mad enthusiasm of the moment had to be tempered by her jamming all of this crowd into the last three days of the week. Janey was leaving on Saturday night and arriving on Sunday a few hours after the demonstration

Even though the idea of his sister being there had given Ryan strength, the delay in her arrival gave him time to breathe. Things had changed quickly after he'd seen her on Skype; what he'd been feeling then had not been the same after Malee's visit to his apartment. What he'd thought when he was riding home with Chean after visiting the garment workers' building was another thing again. Did Malee want him for himself? She had compelled him to see the way she lived. For what purpose? Why had she made such a point of taking them in? Was it tactical, for sympathy alone? To show what he should be taking her away from?

But with Malee it couldn't ever be that simple. There was some steel rod of irony that ran through her. It was as if she had an understanding of the world that said, 'Yep, this is the lowest of the low, all right. I don't deserve it but who deserves anything when there is no such thing as justice.' She 'got' more of the world than any other person he had known. Malee could make acid jokes about her poverty, in a foreign language, and stay a step ahead of a native speaker. But she would never accept her low position. She could sleep on two inches of foam and then get up at seven for school, university and a job waiting tables. She would drive right through the Buddhist acceptance of fate and emerge on the other side. It was the same for the garment workers; unions were unheard of in Cambodia, even five years before – unthinkable. Paradigms were shifting and powerful people were trying to stop it happening.

If he didn't go to the demonstration then his positioning within this world became phoney. Even his act of loving Malee became predatory; he would not be showing commitment to the family. He would become base – physical, not spiritual. The Kratie girl would be so much simpler, but that was not where he could go.

The demonstration was called for the same place at the same time: midday on Sunday – the only day off for garment workers. This time they all drove together in Chean's tuk-tuk –

Malee and Reap on one side, he was opposite them with Cris who, as Malee predicted, had refused to be left behind.

‘You go to stay with Number One today,’ Reap had said, but Cris had said that if they tried to drive off he would grab on to the back of the tuk-tuk and be dragged along in the dirt. And if they hit his fingers to shake him off he would run behind and embarrass them. He had seen demonstrations on TV in France, orderly groups of university types in city streets bearing placards for climate change action or occupying city squares to support some computer hacker guru. That was what he knew of demonstrations and he wanted to see one for himself. Anyway, he was a member of the family now: he just had to go. If Number One would not come that was his problem and fault.

The logic had been difficult to deny. Sure, the last time there had been trouble – rubber bullets. But that was as far as the Government would take it.

‘It won’t be like that again. We will be ok,’ said Reap, her resolute chin stuck out. ‘I know it.’

‘This time the newspapers are supporting us,’ said Malee, as if she was trying to talk herself into believing that it could help.

‘The Opposition Leader has taken up the cause,’ said Ryan, not sure whether this was good or bad either. One thing clear was that the stakes were raised this time; but still no-one dared mention the prospect of achieving the raise in pay. It was almost as if this was a game played without hope of actual victory, that to speak out and survive would be enough.

‘You be careful, boss,’ said Chean as they got out, his face worried, then he withdrew to the shade tree and the other tuk-tuk drivers.

There was a huge crowd – many hundreds, maybe a thousand. As they jumped out an old woman at her little food stand grinned and gestured to her rice and her sauces, but he had no stomach for food. He was nervous. Police waited in a gang of about thirty blocking the other

end of the street. There was a black 4WD vehicle with a megaphone speaker fixed to its roof; a guy with an important hat paced up and down in front of it. No fire trucks, no water cannon. Motorbikes and trucks were still arriving from all directions – chaos looming. He could see that it was not just garment workers now. A few unemployed graduates from the universities had joined them. Maybe this was developing into a broader community protest against the Government, against Hun Sen.

Again the crowd massed against the gabled gates and waited for the first truck to emerge, but nothing came. There was a change of tactics. For twenty minutes the crowd surged against the gates and back again. The only thing he understood from the chanting was: one sixty, one sixty, one sixty – the poverty line dollar number that was the target. Then the vanguard at the front began to shake the gates and someone from the crowd appeared with bolt cutters and made to attack the chains that kept it all together.

Suddenly there was another sound above the already incredible din: the police megaphone on top of the huge 4WD number one police vehicle. There was an agitated man in khaki uniform and police hat with red trim and gold braid in it, shouting into a microphone – Ryan thought of the generals on the stage when Hun Sen was making his speech. He could almost be one of them. His voice was strained, high pitched. Beside him was a row of men in riot helmets holding rifles, behind them a bank of uniforms and Perspex shields.

The man yelled into his megaphone and the crowd shouted back. The sun was above and the heat was rising. The attention of the crowd was now turned away from the gates and onto the police. At the gates a welding set was produced and sparks began to fly. The man with the megaphone now began to scream at the crowd to disperse; the lines of police bristled. Then he drew a pistol from his pocket and fired it into the air. The crack of gunfire panicked some people in the crowd and they began surging into each other, but a young union guy with a megaphone started shouting and the crowd turned to the police and arms were pointed at

them and the chanting began again. Then he wasn't sure what happened. Did someone throw a rock? He knew by instinct that was going too far and a shiver of fear went through him. More rocks came. People scabbled among debris at the side of the road and everything that could be removed and thrown was heaved in the direction of the police.

And then it happened. The policeman in the braided hat stepped back, waving his troopers forward as he did so. The men took three steps forward in a line, raised their weapons and immediately began firing into the crowd. It was so sudden that people were in shock for a few seconds. Then people began falling, blood spurted from a woman's stomach. All around him people began screaming and running. He felt the slipstream of a bullet as it made a sound like *whing* as it passed his face. Next to him someone caught a bullet in the knee and went over on to the ground. Malee's eyes were wide in disbelief; Ryan grabbed her and started running. Reap screamed and grabbed for Cris. Ryan lifted his eyes and could see the tuk-tuk drivers starting up their engines and turning towards the city. Would Chean wait for them?

As he ran Ryan saw the old woman rice-seller, lying on the ground, her mouth wide open, her eyes still. A stray shot had come through the crowd and taken her in the throat.

Then as they neared the tuk-tuks Reap and Cris suddenly disappeared from their side. He turned and there was Reap dragging Cris. His legs were moving, trying to run, but not gripping the road. Ryan went back to help and Malee too. Cris had caught a bullet in the back as he was running and now he coughed and choked in his struggle. The three of them carried him somehow to the tuk-tuks and there was Chean, fighting off a couple of people who would board his vehicle.

'Boss, quick.'

They bundled Cris into the tuk-tuk and jumped in after him. Then Chean said to the two strangers, 'Now you come,' and they jumped in too. Chean revved his engine hard and they

drove away in the direction of the Russian hospital, hurtling past people running, falling by the side of the road in exhaustion, cowering behind trees and buildings.

‘Hold his head,’ Malee said to Ryan, ‘one hand on his face, one here.’ She motioned him to support Cris’s chest. Reap shoved a hand under his chest and together they supported him while Malee tore the back off his shirt and then stripped off a section to staunch the wound. Cris looked up at Ryan for a second and cracked a half a smile then fainted. The couple they had picked up held themselves together and watched Malee in a kind of awe.

The noise of bullets behind them had stopped. The soldiers had achieved their purpose; the demonstration was dispersed. Looking back Ryan could see people on the ground, perhaps six or seven of them, motionless. Others were staggering to their feet, then falling, friends and relatives next to them, crying. He turned his face in the direction of the hospital. They passed more people, still running, some crying as they went. Then they were in the clear, ahead of the pack.

He thought of Janey, coming that night. He watched Malee, not calm, but functioning, giving instructions. Again he noticed the couple admire her; they whispered to each other. He admired her too but somehow, in that moment, he did not know her. In the shock he felt, he wondered just how he had got to where he was that day. He saw Malee feel for Cris’s pulse and collapse in a great sigh of relief. Then she did something he never ever thought he would see.

She burst into tears.

Part Three

He was in a state of shock.

He had read about a demonstration by the opposition in 1997, when pairs of guys on motorbikes had ridden past and lobbed grenades into the crowd - twenty people killed. The bikes had then driven straight into a hundred-strong rank of Hun Sen's own praetorian guard, which had mysteriously turned up to watch this opposition demo and had then parted to let the bikes through in much the same way as the Red Sea had opened up for Moses. Since then newspaper proprietors had been shot dead in the street, sure. But he'd always thought of that as the old days, ten years back at least.

The scene was different now: no longer the battle for political supremacy between factions, this was about profits and kickbacks for an established elite. But as much as profit, he could see that it was about social order. It was unthinkable, even ten years before, for a thousand Cambodians to parade themselves in the street in disobedience of their superiors: social, economic, political – call them any kind you liked and they were it. The Prime Minister was probably genuinely shocked. Sure, everyone adjusted their position in life according to what their Kama allowed – he had certainly done so. But in Hun Sen's eyes this would have been a disgraceful, unseemly display, and one that threatened Cambodia's forward economic march.

Ryan's mouth was arid and his forehead ached. Cris had seemed some kind of glue that brought him, Ryan, deeper into the family.

'Jesus,' he said to himself and wiped sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. He went to the bar fridge in his apartment and took a bottle of water and drank a mouthful. He'd not had a drink for five hours. He had been prickled in the hospital; when the doctor emerged

to talk about Cris, the women had taken over and he had been waved away. Malee had almost forgotten he was there. She turned around to him at the last moment.

‘Oh,’ she’d said distractedly. ‘I’ll see you later.’ And then she’d turned away with Reap and the woman in the white coat and stethoscope – as if he had been family when Cris was there, but now he was no longer useful. He and Chean had no course to take but to walk away into the car park. Chean started up his engine and said seriously, ‘Home boss.’

He sat and stared at the blank dark TV screen.

He remembered Malee’s text: *Do you speak French?*

He heard a motorbike engine and the tuk-tuk tires swinging around in the street and he stood to look out the window. Chean was completing a U-turn outside and drew his vehicle up as if for an appointment. It took a moment for the message to knock on Ryan’s head.

‘Janey. Oh Jesus.’ He said his sister’s favourite exclamation out loud. Janey was due at the airport in thirty minutes. He rushed around the apartment thinking panicked thoughts.

Just at the moment that he was patting his pockets to check that all was in place, his phone rang. He thought, could it be her already? Was the plane early, or had he and Chean got the time wrong? He looked at the phone. It was Mr Dith – the kind of phone call that he should have just let go by. But he had a broad streak of duty and responsibility in him – curiosity too.

‘Hullo.’

‘Mr Davey. It is Mr Dith speaking.’

‘Yes. Yes. I know. I mean, I saw.’

‘Mr Davey, have you seen the television news this evening?’

‘No, no. What? The news?’

‘Yes, the news. There was a lengthy item about the demonstration today.’

‘There was? Oh, but of course, there would be.’ Ryan still couldn’t see the point of the call.

‘Mr Davey, there was much visual coverage. You were there. There was a film of you arriving with the student Malee of whom we have spoken previously. As a Westerner you are a curiosity and would be a source of interest to news cameramen.’

‘Ah, I see. Yes, I did notice that I was being noticed.’ He began to see it now.

‘You were not to come closer to this student. And I have already received two phone calls from people who have recognised you. The story will spread very quickly and the owners of the college are certain to find out about this. When I hear from them I will be able to announce to them that I have already terminated your services. I will go to your desk tomorrow morning and remove your personal items and place them in my office. I will make an arrangement with you to collect them from me at a later date.’

‘You’re giving me the sack.’

‘I am terminating your services immediately. I am very sorry. Goodbye, Mr Davey.’ And the phone went dead without another word.

‘Jesus, you look like what the cat dragged in but decided was too unwholesome to chew on.’

‘Ta.’

The look on his face didn’t go away so she slung her carry-on bag down and looked at him closely, ‘My God, I think I’m glad I’m here.’

‘I think I agree with you.’ They gave each other a little squeeze and shoulder pat.

‘It occurred to me that whatever was the matter might have blown over by now and I would be hanging around getting in the way.’

‘Hmmm, I’d always be able to find a problem for you to solve, if I thought about it.’

Then words came tumbling out of his mouth as if he had to tell the stories all at once. What Janey heard was that Malee was a big mistake, that they were only after him for his money and that Pa was some malevolent eminence grise of the family who manipulated them all for his own benefit. That Reap was working like something out of Dickens, that Malee was the great hope and that he was a part of Pa's plan to advance the family. He even made it sound like they had forced him to get attached to the boy Cris and then they'd shot him just to make life awkward.

Janey felt for his pulse and told him to shut up and he did. She looked into his eyes and felt his forehead.

'Just checking for shock but I think you'll live. Did they look at you in the hospital?'

'They don't do things like that here. Everyone's in shock in this place, every day of their lives.'

'I'll wait to be my own judge of that.'

They walked out past the alleyway of phone and merchandise stalls and through the waiting crowd and into the carpark. Ryan was wheeling Janey's bag and she had her arm in his and it wasn't clear who was guiding whom. Chean straightened up as soon as he saw them coming.

'You ok, boss?' he said to Ryan, then, 'I take, I take,' and grabbed the big bag and swung it up into the seat behind the driver.

'What is this, you have your own driver?'

Chean turned to Janey and placed his hands together in sompreas and raised them as high as his forehead.

'Chean is my friend. And we drive around together too.'

‘I met Mr Ryan on this spot – on this very place. Two month ago. He told me that the sky was very low that day. No-one ever talk to me about the sky before. Hotels, Angkor Wat, garment strike, yes – never sky.’

‘Oh, I see. I am very pleased to meet you, Chean.’ And she made a sompreas too, as the moment seemed to require.

‘You never sompreased me that high, Chean,’ said Ryan.

‘I see straight away, your sister great lady.’

‘This is the most charming man,’ said Janey, as she took her seat and Chean gunned the motor. ‘Why aren’t you more like that?’

‘The insights into your character that Chean expressed are so obvious to me that they barely merit the expenditure of breath,’ said Ryan as they pulled out into the highway.

‘Hmmm,’ said Janey, ‘you’re more like yourself every minute.’

Immediately they were in the shoving jostling traffic – petrol fumes, honking horns, proprietorial 4WDs speeding by, scattering before them the rattling clapped-out motorbike engines that were the true pulse of Phnom Penh, moving across each other at speed, blaring, warning, all with an incomprehensible sense of purpose that was so urgent it seemed more like an abiding role-play than something that could ever be real. Janey gripped the side rail of the tuk-tuk hard with one hand, held Ryan’s arm with the other, and jammed both feet up against her luggage to steady herself.

‘Jesus, I can see why everyone is in a permanent state of shock here.’

Ryan almost felt for his own pulse then to see if he was running fast, and at that moment it occurred to him that he needed to get away from the city; that, in wanting to become close to this place, he had come too close too quickly and it was time for distance. Janey’s visit was not quite that of a guiding angel, but something he could use to steer himself in another direction. He realised in a switched-on second that he had always needed someone else to

help him make his moves. Tom took him to Kratie and the river girl. And Cambodia itself? It was Amanda; it was all about Amanda and Dermot. But whether he was using Janey, or just making a decision for himself, he needed some space to think in.

‘Tomorrow we’re going to Kep,’ he said. ‘To the beach. The French built summer houses there.’

‘I don’t blame them,’ she said, fanning herself. ‘I place myself in your capable hands.’

‘Capable?’ he thought. He could hardly be certain of that.

The next morning Ryan woke drowsy from the temazepam Janey gave him that she had brought for sleeping on the plane.

They had gone to his apartment and Chean helped them with Janey’s bags and made the sompreas once more and left. They talked. The apartment was better than Janey had expected. She complained about Ryan sleeping on the couch while she got the only bed. He said he’d washed the sheets specially and if she didn’t use them what was the point of all his good work, so they put her things in the bedroom.

Janey couldn’t slow herself down so they walked to the Quay and absorbed the buzz of the night time city. She bought a trinket from small girls peddling wristbands and a photocopied guide book from a dwarf in a wheelchair.

‘Now this is what I call a souvenir. They really photocopy these things?’

‘Cost you five dollars, but they still make a profit out of that.’

Tourists of all ages and stations jostled along the narrow footpath, felt their way over loose bricks, dodged around racks of sport shirts and every now and then a trio of scampering urchins swarmed past. There were travel agents, massage parlours, cafes and bars with tables and chairs obtruding passers-by; it was like some snakes and ladders game – paradise to pitfall in any second.

They chose a place and ordered beef lok lak. While they waited Janey could not keep her eyes from the street and its constant teeming parade.

‘Is all of it so ... charmingly chaotic?’

‘Pretty much.’ Cambodia and chaos: sure, but the craziness was like a clown’s suit on a wise old man; there was a less apparent order beneath – everyone hustling but still knowing their place, their limits in kama. ‘We’ll have time for the FCC after.’

‘FCC? Sounds like a blood disorder.’

‘It will be if you keep drinking like you are. It’s the Foreign Correspondents’ Club.’

Janey raised her eyebrows. ‘Sounds important.’

‘The journos moved on a couple of decades ago, but it’s a big spot for ex-pats and tourists – a view of the river, the confluence of the Tonle Sap and the Mekong.’

‘We’re going.’

‘You ever get lost in Phnom Penh, just wave down a tuk-tuk and all you have to say is ‘FCC’ and you’ll be safe. Every single driver will know it.’

‘I get the impression safe is a commodity worth having here.’

‘The place looks frayed, but it’s really rare that a tourist gets bopped without doing something to deserve it.’

‘Nice to know. But how safe are you, little brother? In here.’ And she pointed at her chest to where a heart would be.

‘Oh, that.’

‘Yes, oh that. The most important thing there is in the world. That.’

‘Emotional safety, it doesn’t exist, you know that.’ He leaned forward in his seat, ‘You know, the first day I met this Pa guy he told her to get me to take her shopping. And I did it! You know, up goes the curtain, out comes the actor, reads from the script!’

‘But Ryan, as I see it, you will never be the proverbial penny in the slot machine. Isn’t that why you clashed with Amanda? Maybe there was a part of you that actually wanted to take her shopping. Huh?’

‘She did look pretty nice.’

‘Ok, so tell me something that’s more important than that. Anyway, how much did you spend on her?’

‘Twenty bucks. I know that doesn’t sound like much but it is over here. And it’s the principle.’ Janey gave him a raised-eyebrow look. ‘Then the same night her brother comes at me with a mate and a couple of fence palings. Jesus.’

‘Your sudden and unexpected appearance may have provoked some family disagreement. What is this Pa fellow like?’

‘Not that unexpected is my guess. You should have seen the look on his face when I pulled out a wad of bills at the Pizza Company – Christmas, New Year and Happy Birthday all at once. People that know this place say that once you start with the money train you never stop and it just gets bigger and bigger until you are paying for fancy weddings for all of them and a Land Rover for Pa.’

‘All right, all right, I get the picture. Just how many siblings does this girl have?’

‘Nine.’

‘Fucking hell!’ To say that Janey took a long tug on her South African sauvignon blanc would be correct, except it was also true that she had done little but that since she sat down. She signalled for another.

‘Three of them are pretty much settled, so that leaves only six to go. Seven counting her.’

After dinner they walked out into the street. They stopped outside a travel place, still selling bus tickets at eleven o’clock.

‘Well, let’s get this ticket to Kep. I want to see these French villas. But I want to see this girl of yours too. I want to see her with my own eyes. Only then will I know. For God’s sake, I can’t trust every word of what you’re saying tonight. Tomorrow she may seem a different prospect completely.’

He looked at her queerly. ‘I don’t know,’ he mumbled.

‘Exactly. Now where is this Foreign Correspondents’ Club? I’ve only had three drinks and I have a terrible feeling that that will not prove to be enough to get me off to sleep after this exciting day.’

‘There,’ he said, pointing up to a first floor balcony, where contented florid faces chatted and drank, gazing through stately arches over the river view.

‘Jesus,’ she said, ‘this city is full of surprises.’

‘You don’t know the half of it,’ he said, and led the way upstairs.

On the bus they saw a Korean action movie, with two super-hero girls fighting giant spiders and anacondas, escaping falling nets, rushing down waterfalls on perilous rubber rafts and occasionally slicing through a dozen or so soldiers in samurai sword fights. Then, if that wasn’t comic relief enough, on came the perpetually warring couple he had seen on the Kratie bus. Their comedy routine was like an old friend and he cheered, then eased happily back in his seat. Some Khmers turned around and smiled, pleased as they were with his familiarity and appreciation of their culture.

‘Check these guys. They’re good,’ he said to his sister, all wise and knowing, pressing his insider credentials.

‘How much do they remind you of Mum and Dad in the old days,’ Janey said after a minute, ‘before she gave up?’

‘A bit,’ he said. ‘But with these guys you know no harm is going to come to anyone.’

‘Do you think he harmed her?’

‘He ran her life. She was an ornament. On display.’ He looked at her. ‘She gave up acting to be the wife of the President of the local Rotary and the Anglican Layman of the Year.’

‘You don’t think we were part of it.’

‘Oh yeah, the whole baby thing.’ He kept forgetting that you had the power to change someone’s life like that, without even being born. The thought of babies suddenly was oddly redeeming; it suggested an application to duty and a freedom from choice. It associated in his mind with the perverse freedom of arranged marriages. It was also the kind of liberation from the burdens of individualism that the Khmer family had – no need to decide what to do with your pay packet each week.

The bus dropped them in a little town square at the foot of a hill which was the backbone of the little peninsula that Kep yawned around. A row of cafes and hotels stretched around the open space and Janey was already making eyes at the dress shops with their goods spilling out on hangers. To see the sea and sand from the bus, after months in Phnom Penh, was so alien that he could not take his eyes from it, like returning to childhood and simplicity. Rich magenta bougainvillea leant out of large cement planters. The human machine ran at one quarter the pace of Phnom Penh.

He had made an error with the booking. Instead of two single rooms he had somehow made it one twin room.

‘Lucky it wasn’t a double is all I can say,’ said Janey.

‘We can change to separate rooms, no problem,’ said the man at the desk.

‘Nah,’ she said, looking at Ryan, ‘It’ll be like old times.’ She leaned forward in a whisper to the man, ‘He’s my baby brother,’ and the man grinned broadly and made the sompreas to them.

They went away with their parents from time to time when they were children, to resorts on the northern coast of New South Wales. They had liked to have twin rooms. They could listen to the sea outside their windows, moaning and restless. It was like no other sound. They lived close to the ocean and could go to the beach daily if they wanted and crash right into the waves, but this was different. At night and with you tucked up in bed the sea became something mysterious and endless. On their holidays they would talk and compete to see who could stay awake the longest. Janey usually won, partly because she was older, but also because she was highly strung, could never settle. Ryan was the one who allowed himself to be swallowed in the quiet tidal roar.

‘I give you key to room opposite as well,’ said the man on the desk, delighted. ‘If too much like old time you can change and pay me in the morning.’ They all laughed at his little joke and the man was pleased. They were all pleased.

They dropped their bags and decided to stretch out for a walk on the beach before it rained. Clouds were beginning to build; it was four o’clock in the afternoon.

‘One never knows what people really want,’ said Janey. ‘What does Chean want? It might serve you well to stop and ask yourself that for a minute. What does he really want beside the obvious entity of the next fare?’

‘Chean has a wife and two little kids – girls. He works so they can go to school and don’t have to sell bracelets in the street. He is fifty-three years old and his kids are twelve and ten. He was thirteen in the Pol Pot time.’

‘That’s what they call it?’

‘Sometimes they just say ‘in the Pol Pot’. It’s become like some abstract idea now. Pol Pot is a person but also a thing. Most people talk about those times in a matter of fact way like it’s something that just happened to everyone, but Chean never says a word. I think school

stopped for him at age twelve. Now he's a tuk-tuk driver and he can't read a map and has trouble with street signs. But he knows about guns, broken bones, how to dress a wound, how to fix a motor bike engine, even a bit about being a farmer – how to plant rice anyway, about the seasons, the rains, markets for different produce. He can tell you the best way to wring a chicken's neck.'

'Great.'

'He was in the army after the Vietnamese came, fighting the Khmer Rouge until he was thirty. He must have been good at it, because all he will say is that they wouldn't let him leave. So, now he probably just wants to get home safe and see his girls and put some food on the table. In the West he'd probably be borrowing money to get a second and third tuk-tuk and building up a fleet. Here he considers himself lucky to be putting along on one.'

'He has an extra space for you, in his heart.'

Ryan thought for a few seconds before he answered. 'I guess I'm about the age a son of his would be if he'd had one at the regular time of life a man might have a son here.'

'Connections,' Janey said wistfully. 'The family we wished we had.' Perhaps she was thinking about Joel and the family of her own that she didn't have. 'Which brings me in a roundabout way to another important matter. The coming wedding that was the closest thing to incest without being that ...'

Ryan was silent, so Janey went on.

'It's all off.'

'Off! You mean she saw through him? At last? Or did she catch him? Catch him at it?'

'As her attraction began to wane, she also caught him, what you would say red-handed.'

'Ha ha ha,' Ryan made a parody of knee-slapping hilarity.

'Almost literally red-handed.'

‘My God, that conjures images. But, Janey, she’s known him for seven years. What possessed her, in the first place ...?’

She looked at him sideways. ‘What possessed her? Probably you, in the first place.’ He was silent again, so she went on. ‘You don’t think you could ever be a little, um, what shall we say, frustrating for a girl? Disappearing into a bean bag with books of poetry for days on end!’

‘You mean I should be the hundred pounds of clay, to be moulded into shape by a woman with sound social ideas.’

‘More like two hundred. I mean because you are always thinking like that. Amanda is not a bad girl. Yes, there may be some small cultural differences between the two of you, but she would find excuses to visit you, wouldn’t she ...’

‘Yep, like coming to tell me she was going to marry my brother ...’

‘Yes, you see, like that. She could have sent you a text ...’

‘That’s what I asked for ...’

‘Oh, Jeeesus.’ Janey pretended a scream to show her frustration. ‘Remember that the girl has a soft spot for you, at least. Did you ever consider that the marriage thing with Dermott may have been an attempt to attract your attention?’

‘It worked on that level.’

‘She may have been consciously telling herself that Dermott was better for her, but adding up sums and coming up with a relationship doesn’t work for most people. Some yes, her no. She’s not practical at heart; she loves you, which is the living proof of that fact.’

They went back up to the Hotel de la Plage. He had a large beer and as she was on holiday she had a little red margarita, and then another.

‘Lastly, I must tell you that your father has been on the verge of plunging over the cliff for three weeks. You picked an interesting time to make your exit.’

‘Have you come to bring me back?’

‘I came to get away, just like I said. Ma said, Go. If he dies, he dies. I think she is also praying that it will be soon.’

‘Ma said that?’

‘Your departure has had a greater impact than you might think. It never occurred to anyone that they could actually do what they want in life. Or say what they really think. You may have promoted that ‘life’s too short to...’ mentality. You know what I mean?’

‘Yeah, but ...’ How could he explain it? The Western idea that life is too short to not engage all your wants and fantasies just had no currency in this country. He thought of Cris slumped in his arms in the tuk-tuk, Malee taking his pulse, looking up every five seconds, willing the Russian Hospital to appear; all that family had their obligations, but he could go anywhere he wanted. If he stayed would he be just a provider, or a real part of it? Cris was in the hospital and Malee was with him. He felt a surge of anger, and of foolishness. To bring his sister to Kep was a fine thing, but there was a sudden emptiness that he was not sharing it with Malee.

‘But there’s more to it than that,’ he said at last.

‘Indeed, baby brother. Just when do you jump off the cliff? When do you take the wheel and when do you sit in the passenger’s seat?’

‘If you jump in the hot seat too often you’re going to get burnt.’

‘Then again, a hot seat may be better than a fucking cold one.’

They raised glasses and drank to that, then signalled for two more.

They drank some more and ate fish amok. The rain came in a sharp burst, then the clouds lifted away; late sunrays dwindled and at last the sea grew dark. Ryan was glad the day was

done and he saw the tired look in his sister too. They planned a trip to the pepper farms the next day to give their trip to Kep some shape and reason.

Ryan laid down on his bed and listened to the sound of the sea that was maybe a hundred metres away, but whose arriving waves were so insistent that they could have been breaking against the wall beneath his window. It was ten o'clock. Boys kicking bags of sand to each other in the square had gone home and the place was quietening. A group of diners shuffled softly in the street, returning early to their hotel places – occasionally a voice; the idea of a late night bar was a distant and disturbing thing, and the tight black outfits of Phnom Penh bargirls like a nightmare down here.

Ryan heard the street die, listened to his sister brushing her teeth in the bathroom. It was the sound of childhood and he brought the blanket up under his chin as he had on cold nights when he was a boy. Then he closed his eyes and turned to the wall while Janey settled herself down. He wondered what Malee was doing now. Was she with Cris, as he recovered in the hospital? Ryan had told himself he should be with his sister, but if that was true and his loyalties really lay with his family, why had he come to Cambodia in the first place?

But Janey *was* his family. She was all he had; and Colin, if you counted reprobates who cared. And why would he not count anyone who cared?

He felt a swift downward spiral of loneliness. He turned over in bed and tried to settle facing the other way. In a minute he turned back to the wall. He listened to the waves but they did not take him away with them now. It was not northern New South Wales and he was no longer a child.

Then from somewhere came a distant whining sound that at first he thought was a mosquito in the room, until he placed it outside the hotel, in the distance, on the street – a sound that grew and heightened in pitch as it came closer. It was a small motorbike, of the kind that Reap rode to the garment factory every morning. The sound spluttered and then

abruptly stopped as the bike pulled up outside the hotel. A rush of thoughts and feelings about Malee came over him: Khmer girls on motorbikes, fragility and toughness juxtaposed. It couldn't really be. Then there was silence for what seemed a long time – too long to be anything. He sat up in bed, ears straining for sound. Was it a conversation in the lobby downstairs? Were there voices raised? A disagreement? Pleading?

Then, distinctly, there was a foot on the stair: a quiet foot, so light as to be barely audible, taking steps one at a time, but at a pace – running almost. His mind returned to Kratie, another time he had heard a girl's foot upon the stair from his hotel room; then it had filled him with sorrow and fear. But now ... He swung out of bed and pulled his trousers on. He heard Janey sit up. Then there was a knock on a door. It was not their door, but very nearby. He quietly turned the handle of his own room-door and stepped half out into the passageway. As he did a girl looked up from outside the next room. She was knocking on it. It was dimly lit but there was no doubt.

'Malee,' said Ryan.

'Och!' she cried out, and he rushed up to her.

'I couldn't see the numbers. They are so small and it is so dark. The man didn't want to let me up, but I made him.' He held her in his arms. He felt her shoulder blades through the thin wet shirt. She was trembling. She crushed her head into his chest and squeezed her eyes shut.

'Here,' said Ryan, and dried some tears from her face with the bottom of his T-shirt.

'I only ever cried once before,' she said, in amazement at herself, 'and that was yesterday. It seems like two weeks ago. I had to come. I couldn't stop ...'

The door of their room was swung open again. Janey emerged. 'Oh, my dear,' she said softly. 'Let me look at you.'

Janey advanced down the passageway, shown the way by the spectral light from her phone.

‘My God,’ she said, when she had come close enough. ‘You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.’ Looking at the helmet in her hand, ‘You came all this way on your motorbike?’

‘Uh huh,’ Malee managed, wiping her nose on her shirt.

‘In the rain? With all those trucks and buses?’

‘You just have to make sure you miss them.’

‘Now that is what you would certainly call logical. I am taking the key to the other room,’ she said to Ryan, and went inside, returning in less than twenty seconds with her bag and toiletries.

As she crossed the corridor and tried the key and opened up, the last words she had to say were, ‘Push the beds together.’

When they were alone Ryan said to Malee, ‘How did you find us?’

She raised her eyebrows, ‘You said Kep Beach and there are only five hotels along this part; this one in the middle range.’ There was a small shrug of the shoulders that said, Simple really.

He stood back to look at her. Not five feet tall, maybe forty five kilos, maybe not.

‘If you hadn’t found us what would you have done?’

‘Probably sleep on the beach.’ Why hadn’t he thought of that? ‘I brought some plastic for shelter just in case.’

‘You don’t have any money?’

She pulled out some notes and made a show of counting them, ‘After petrol, two thousand five hundred riel.’ About sixty five cents.

‘Enough to rent a nice pile of sand for the night.’ They fell into nervous banter, standing there in the corridor, on the edge of something else as they were, both too edgy to pass through the door of the hotel room to everything that lay beyond.

‘Couple of geckos for company.’

‘You have to watch those geckos; they’ll mop up the last of your beer if you turn your back.’

‘Yeah,’ she said, ‘I knew a couple of those girls pretty well once upon a time.’

‘You the party animal.’

She leant in to him, whispering, ‘I’m not sure what that is, but let’s not worry about it now.’

‘Time to go inside?’

‘You could help me get out of these wet things.’

They closed the door behind them and she put her arms around his waist and they held each other for a minute. He kissed her but it was a long way to bend down there so he picked her up and held her in his arms. She was light to hold and she clung to him close, her knees clapped around his waist. They kissed for five minutes: mouth, cheeks, ears, neck and then mouths again.

She spoke first. ‘You will have to let me down sometime or else hold me up all night.’

He laid her on the single bed he had left seven minutes before as a lonely vexed and worried single man. He drew the sheet across them as he got in. He had no shoes and she had slipped her thongs off as soon as he picked her up. They held each other close.

‘You had your phone off, naughty boy.’

‘I ... I was trying to work out what I really felt.’

‘I missed you. I love you, I think. But isn’t love supposed to be like in Korean pop songs? Where they stand beside a waterfall and they are dressed in pink and yellow silk and look into each other’s eyes and sing.’

He knew she didn’t think that. ‘I won’t sing for you,’ he said.

‘Why don’t you just do what you did before?’

She did not need to explain what she meant by ‘before’. It had been on his mind for a week. He opened her shirt and his lips went over her breasts. The world was silent except for the waves that rolled beneath the window; perhaps they were the waterfall backdrop of this Korean pop song. She closed her eyes and began to moan softly. He ran his warm hands along her back as he licked and kissed her. Her eyes were closed but when he kissed her mouth again he could see small tears in the corner of them. He unbuckled the top button of her jeans and she helped him slide them off. He ran his hand across her buttocks and then between her legs. She gasped high and quick.

‘Malee, darling.’ He kissed her again. ‘You are a virgin?’

‘Yes,’ she gasped then, after a little gulp. ‘Now!’

‘What about babies?’ He was gasping for breath himself.

‘I don’t care about anything.’

And at that moment he too cared about nothing in the world except her and him and being together; not one thought for anything else or for any other person. She held him in her little fingers and guided him to her and he entered her and broke her. He stroked her soft and slow. Her mouth was open and her moaning rose in pitch until it became quite breathless and she gave a little scream that was suppressed and she bit her own hand to hold down the noise and tears came from her eyes. He could hold himself no longer and with two hard strokes he came with her, and within one minute of beginning they had both finished. They laid each in the other’s arms for some time, not sleeping, dreaming their thoughts, not different but together.

Malee and Reap had been in with the doctor a long time.

‘They have to save this boy, don’t they,’ said Colin, shaking his head. ‘This will be cataclysmic news in the village – a boy shot in a garment worker demo. Out there they won’t know what a strike is.’ He turned to Ryan. ‘A lot of people in the city don’t.’

When Colin had sent Ryan a message to see what he was up to and Ryan had replied that he was in the Russian Hospital, Colin had gone straight down there. ‘I want to meet this girl of yours too,’ he had finished. At least he’s honest about it, thought Ryan. Colin sent him a text each week, asking if he was ok, but he had not seen him since the Heart of Darkness night.

‘With Meach and Kim gone, everyone was jostling to be the ones that brought him up.’ Ryan had one leg in the family, but only one. He spoke of them with the kind of critical eye that can be born from mystery; he still didn’t quite get them.

‘There’s merit to be earned there, as long as you don’t want it too much. Let’s have a look at you.’ Colin examined his head for bruises. ‘You’re a quick healer.’

‘You heard about that.’

‘I have sources.’ Tom, thought Ryan. But Colin went on.

‘Big brother probably didn’t really want to bring the boy up, but he wanted it to look like he did. Now that he’s had a piece of you, he doesn’t have to worry. He’s evened up the score and he can let the girls have the kid, no probs. He’s shown that he cared.’

‘By beating me up.’

‘Yep.’

‘His face is good now.’

‘Yep. Good as yours, ie a bit battered but not that ugly.’

‘Jesus.’ The idea of the family now seemed to him like a claw around the throat – just for a moment. But then his own brother had done nothing but trip him up as long as he’d been alive. ‘But a family is just an idea; you *can* be free of it,’ he said, looking down at the worn-out linoleum tiles.

‘It’s more than an idea around here. Your family *is* your safety. No social security safety net around this place. No family ...’ Colin seemed a little exasperated, ‘they don’t even have a word in the language for being alone. Even if your family are all dead you end up in someone’s family.’ Ryan thought of Tommy, at the Pizza Company lunch. He seemed not to have all his wits, but now he thought he got it. Pa was taking care of him. Tommy had been adopted and everyone just accepted that.

‘They’ve been in there a long time,’ said Colin.

‘Something’s up,’ said Ryan.

‘Or down.’

That morning in Kep they had filled Malee’s petrol tank and she zoomed away like a girl who had made a right decision and had grown during the night. She had never acted so impulsively before and now she had slept with a man for the first time in her life. It had worked out, or so it seemed. He offered her more money and she refused.

‘I’ll make it there,’ she said. ‘If there’s a problem I’ll call.’

He watched her ride along the seafront road, in the direction of Kep City, out to the dangerous highway. To Ryan it was as if the most vulnerable part of him had gone out there, a girl on a bike against trucks and speeding buses, creeping hay-carts, other motorbikes and cars buzzing between it all. He wanted to keep her in Kep, but he could not: she had missed her first ever lecture and to stay would mean doing the same again in the afternoon.

He and Janey had walked around the town and decided they'd seen it all. 'Besides that girl of yours is the most interesting thing I've seen in Cambodia so far.' They went straight in to a bus ticket shop.

He stared at the rubbery plastic tiles of the hospital waiting room floor. They must have been laid in the early sixties, during a brief boom period: pop music, night clubs, Modernist architecture, and the latest thing in rubber tiles. It had been a time when the innocence of the people was wrapped around inevitable official corruption, which had grown and festered into Lon Nol and then the savage reaction of Pol Pot.

Innocence. It remained there still in many places. Malee had given him her virginity. In this country, with a girl of Malee's type, it was the gift of a life: I have decided - it is you. To abscond from that would be reprehensible; yet it would be so easy to walk away.

He could be on a plane tomorrow, to any part of the world – this afternoon, really.

Half of him wished that she was pregnant; that would mean the time for decision was past and he would go with her. If she was not, he could decide to spend his life in Cambodia or in East Sydney, or somewhere else. Or he could marry her and take her with him.

There had been a night of love, but that had happened before and the feelings had dissolved into a residue of sadness and delusion. And what had it really meant for her, for Malee? How natural was a family anyway? Before the role of seed in reproduction was known, children were raised by the village and named after the earth mothers who bore them.

But before he could gather his thoughts any further, there was a shuffling of feet on the corridor tiles and Malee and Reap were there, with the doctor. They were solemn.

The doctor held her hand out to Janey in a Western shake. 'We did everything we could. Any hospital in the world ...'

'He is not with us,' said Malee, with a lift at the end of her line that had a question in it.

Colin withdrew from the group and sat down on the hard plastic seats. ‘Shit,’ Ryan heard him say softly, to himself. No-one cried. Reap sniffed. They had all know how strong the chance was that Cris would leave to join the spirit world.

‘The government,’ Malee’s eyes were narrowed and the words were steely. In Cambodia the custom was to channel grief into ritual – chanting and incense, monks and achars. The expression of anger was allowed only to the wealthy. If you were poor, anger had to remain bottled and capped, and it stayed that way until it sometimes exploded.

The doctor raised her hands in respectful sompreas to the group. She nodded to each of them, then turned and returned to her endless work, her sandals flapping softly away.

The next day there didn’t seem much left for him to do but to walk over to the school to collect his things from Mr Dith. Chean was due in ten minutes to take Janey to the Wat Phnom, so she could sit in the shady glade on the hill for a while. She might do lunch in the French colonial elegance of Van’s and from there she would be the lady of leisure at last and walk back through the Riverside area, as far as she felt, and see the city on her own.

They were putting the finishing touches to their packing for the day when they heard steps on the outside stair – slow and deliberate. They both listened.

‘That’s not Chean,’ said Janey.

‘Mr Thiounn wouldn’t let him up without a fight anyway.’

A quiet knock came at the door, so Ryan passed a look to his sister and went through the kitchen and opened up.

‘Mr Dith!’ he said.

‘Mr Davey. Good morning,’ said Dith, bowing slightly, pressing his hands together and raising them to his face. ‘I am sorry to disturb you. If this is an inconvenient time I can return later, but there is one thing I wanted to say to you, which I found I had to say in person.’

‘Of course, Mr Dith. Please come in. My sister and I were going out in a few minutes so you have caught us at a good moment.’

‘Your sister,’ said Mr Dith, stopping for a moment and turning to Ryan, as if he was afraid that his visit could be construed as an intrusive or impolite act.

‘My sister I’m sure is very happy to meet you.’

‘Very well, Mr Davey,’ said Dith with some hesitation. ‘We shall proceed.’

They entered the living room and Janey rose to greet them, making an impeccable sompreas to Mr Dith, who smiled and bowed his head in appreciation at her politeness and returned the gesture.

‘Good morning, Miss Davey. I am very pleased to meet you.’

‘You wouldn’t believe how pleased I am to meet you, Mr Dith. Ryan has said so many things about you I have been dying to meet you in person.’ The polite exaggeration hit its mark.

‘Oh, oh, is that so ...’ Mr Dith seemed struck by Janey’s comments and he bowed once again. He looked at her once more and blinked slowly as he nodded almost imperceptibly in a way that Ryan had never seen him do before. He motioned to Mr Dith and they arranged themselves around the coffee table.

‘Mr Davey. It is clear that I was intending to speak to you in private.’ Dith’s grounding in protocol made him broach the matter so he could get at least an implied permission to speak in front of the unexpected visitor.

‘Mr Dith, whatever you want to say to me can be said in front of my sister.’

‘That is excellent, Mr Davey. I wanted to say to you that my understanding of your situation has changed since I last spoke to you. It came to my attention last night that you have suffered a great loss.’

‘Ah ... yes?’

‘I was deeply, how shall I say ... shaken by the news of the shootings at the demonstration last Sunday. The television news coverage which I saw did not include any mention that there had been killings, or shootings of any kind. There was much footage of demonstrators with angry faces, shouting, pushing at the factory gate.’

‘I suppose there would be.’

‘The television completely omitted mention of the level of violence used by the authorities in response to that situation. But on Monday morning the newspaper ran the story. Seven people killed, dozens wounded. People were being treated while they were waiting on the hard floors in the corridors of the Russian Hospital. It was very distressing. One of the dead was an old woman selling rice – an innocent bystander.’

‘I saw her.’

‘You saw her?’ Dith asked. Ryan nodded.

‘You never told me this,’ said Janey.

‘I thought it was, I don’t know, that it would frighten you unnecessarily.’

‘I think you were right about that.’

They paused then, and looked to Mr Dith to continue.

‘I was very moved by these things, Mr Davey.’ And Dith nodded towards Janey as well, as if to include her in this form of address. ‘We have not had violence in this city for many years, and never anything of this nature. The nature of this government response has changed my view of the incident. And now, yesterday, I hear that the cousin of your friend, our own student Malee, has been lost also. This now affects all of our community at the school. Mr Davey, I understand that you were with the boy, Cris, when he died.’

Dith was silent for a moment. His hands were together, in front of his mouth, fingertips touching the end of his nose. He was tapping his fingers together, as if he had made a

decision which was a watershed moment for him, and that this was the moment to take the leap.

‘On Monday I placed your personal things in a packet which I have kept in my office, as I told you I would on Sunday evening. But I would rather that you do not take them away. I would like you to keep them there and then return them to your desk. I would like you to remain with the school. With your permission I will report to the senior management that I have re-employed you.’

‘Mr Dith I ...’ He was going to say that he had not really been with Cris when he died and that the rumours had exaggerated his role. But he hesitated a second and Mr Dith went on.

‘This is not only because I want to re-employ you for my own reasons, but because the students want you too.’ And at this Dith, for the first time that morning, smiled. He had crossed some Rubicon; he had said something important that he had been working up to and his face was relieved. It may have been the first time ever that Mr Dith had taken a chance.

‘Mr Dith, I am honoured by your offer. I must say, honoured. I ... I have much to think about at this time. There will be a funeral.’

‘Of course. I will wait for one week for you to return to Phnom Penh. I will take some of your classes; Mr Andersen will also help.’

At this moment there was the rumble of tuk-tuk wheels in the street outside and two sharp toots of the motorbike horn. Chean had arrived, one minute ahead of time as always.

Mr Dith rose, his speech over.

‘Phew,’ said Ryan, exhaling audibly. Having Mr Dith in his house had been a difficult and unexpected experience for him.

‘It has been a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Davey.’

‘It has been an extreme pleasure to meet you too, Mr Dith. I hope I have the pleasure of speaking to you again while I am in Cambodia.’ Indeed, she seemed to have been quite

charmed by this polite and self-effacing gentleman. At this, Mr Dith stopped in the middle of the room for a moment, as if flustered. He felt in his pockets and after a few moments he produced a simple white business card, which he then placed, without ascribing any specific purpose to this act, on the coffee table, facing Janey.

‘Ninety dollar offer,’ said Reap. ‘Ninety dollars!’

The Government had offered to increase the minimum wage by five dollars a month. The girl from the apartment next door had come in to tell them the news she had heard on the radio. Reap and Malee did not know how to feel. The fact there had been an offer at all was overwhelming to them. Up until now the girls had felt they were invisible and that the action they took in the streets was just an outlet for their frustration – not real but a psycho-drama they played out for their own benefit.

But now there was an offer. An unseemly low offer perhaps, but it was evidence that they had been noticed, talked about in high places and even taken seriously. The delirious joy of recognition was tempered by the amount offered: five dollars per month increase from eighty five to ninety. The unions had asked for the poverty line: one hundred and sixty.

The four girls put in twenty cents each and the girl from next door went down to the convenience store for the *Phnom Penh Post*. To read the newspaper was an unusual event and they crowded around the little coffee table in Reap and Malee’s flat. It was Sunday and the girls were not working, except Malee who had studied steadily through the morning. There was a preview of the demonstration the next week and speculation whether the offer would change anything. There were pictures of the last demonstration, and a statement from a representative of a British department store that sold the clothes they made. He said his store deplored the violence used to disperse the garment worker strikes last month. An American

jeans manufacturer said the same thing; the paper said there were a number of comments supporting the garment workers from companies around the world.

‘We are winning,’ said the girl from next door. She wiped her eyes.

‘If they like us so much,’ said Reap, ‘why not give us more. Five dollars is nothing.’

They looked at Malee for answers to the difficult questions, but she took a moment to decide what to tell them.

‘I think it’s because the ones who sell the clothes are not the ones who pay us to make them.’ The other girls were silent a moment. ‘You say that sometimes Korean people come to look at the factory.’

They all nodded. They had heard the strange voices and seen East Asian men in Western suits and ties. No-one had ever told any of them who owned the factory; this was their only clue.

‘Then it is Koreans who own the factory. They sell the shirts to American companies to put in their stores. In other places it is Taiwanese or Chinese people owning. So the people who sell the clothes don’t really have anything to do with the factory.’

‘So they can say nice things,’ Reap got the point at once, ‘and no-one cares.’ They saw that the store owners in the West could say bad things about the Koreans or Chinese who own the factory, but that didn’t stop them going on and buying the jeans and shirts. Only the Government could raise the minimum wage.

‘But I think it does mean something,’ Malee went on. ‘They never said anything like this before. Last time Hun Sen went too far and everybody knows it. We will all go to the demonstration next week.’

Yes, yes, they all nodded. They could feel a lift in their spirits - articles in the newspaper, an offer, even of only five dollars; this was new ground.

‘Poor Cris,’ said Reap.

‘Poor Cris,’ they all agreed. ‘We must march for Cris too.’

Ryan walked down the stairs with Mr Dith and Janey after their meeting in his apartment.

Chean was waiting in the street to take Janey away to Wat Phnom.

Ryan kissed his sister on the cheek and shook Mr Dith’s extended hand.

‘Mr Dith,’ said Janey, ‘how did you get out here?’

‘I took a tuk-tuk also.’

‘Perhaps I can drop you near your school. I think it is not far out of the way.’

‘Why I ...’ To accept a lift from a Khmer woman would have been a difficult thing. From a Western woman was different. ‘Perhaps if you drop me on Norodom Boulevard I will walk the next block. That will be easy.’

Sensing a change in instructions Chean jumped down from the driver’s seat and walked the three or four steps over to their group. Then a very peculiar thing happened indeed. The eyes of Chean and Mr Dith met for a moment; their looks were locked for perhaps only three seconds, but it was long enough for each of them to drop his guard and for both to assess and confirm the identity of the other. Mr Dith stiffened and drew himself up to his full height. By contrast, Chean’s head dropped a fraction and he drew within himself.

‘Mr Ung,’ said Dith, using the formal title, perhaps the only one he had ever known. There was silence of a few seconds.

‘Well, let’s get goin’ then,’ said Janey with a forced brightness, trying to cover over whatever it was that existed between the two men. ‘We will drop Mr Dith off on Norodom Boulevard, Chean.’

‘Yes, miss,’ said Chean, jumping on his motorbike, keen to go.

During the five-minute trip to Norodom, Mr Dith was quiet. When Chean stopped the tuk-tuk he climbed out and thanked Miss Davey and bid her good morning. Chean pulled the tuk-tuk into the traffic and headed north to the Wat Phnom, without looking around.

‘How ya bin? I seem to have lost my drinking partner just about permanent.’ It was Colin on the phone. ‘I hear you’ve struck a snag or two.’

‘Is there anything you don’t hear?’

‘I ran into Tom.’

‘Ok. Don’t tell me where. I don’t want to know.’

‘Look, I rang him up and we went out for a drink. I have to know how things *really* are with you and at least he’ll tell me. Good lad – got his own problems though.’

‘I know.’

‘You got sacked.’

‘Yes, well done. You found out.’

‘It’s your altruistic streak fucking up your life again. Those bloody demos.’ It seemed Colin had to show off his tough side when discussions like this came up.

‘I guess that’s it.’

‘But listen, I must say that since I’ve been in this country I have not heard another thing that equals all this in shitness – and in this place that’s a big statement. Young kids, and that old woman rice-seller with a bullet through her neck.’ Colin went quiet for a moment; Ryan could feel him shaking his head at the other end of the phone.

‘We have to march again next week.’

‘Fucking hell, so you *are* going? I have to admit that half the reason for calling you is to find out whether you were going or not. Now I can worry about you. Still, the same thing can’t happen again I wouldn’t think ...’ Colin stopped in his sentence for a minute – unusual

for him. ‘I have to tell you that I kind of love you for it. You’re weird but, you know ... respect.’

Ryan’s shoulders relaxed a little at his words, as if some mystical masseur had eased a weight from them. Colin had stepped across a communication line that had separated them before. They had talked about personal things, but there was a place where familiarity stopped and intimacy began and Colin didn’t cross that line; Ryan had never heard him use the word love before, ever – not for anyone.

‘What was the other half a reason?’

‘You need a job; I’ve got one for you.’

‘One thing your gossip circle didn’t do for you. I got my own job back.’ Another silence: he had said ‘my own’ and taken ownership of the school, his job, Dith – everything.

‘You’re right. That’s one thing I did not know, but if you asked me tomorrow I probably would have. But I’m a bit surprised. The blokes who run those schools are seriously Big End.’

‘He came here.’

‘To your flat?’

‘I was amazed. Shocked. There is still a heap of stuff I don’t get about Dith. He surprises me all the time.’

‘That’s probably normal for this place. Not still worried if he was Khmer Rouge?’

‘I stopped trying to guess. But then, today, when he was leaving, we bumped into Clean downstairs. Dith knew his surname.’

‘Only his surname. That’s interesting.’ Ryan could hear Colin thinking on the other end of the line. ‘Anyway, Dith deserves to be honoured for reinstating you. He’d be acting contrary to the expectations of his superiors; they are conservative and powerful. But when you’re thinking about this don’t forget that my job pays five times the amount.’

He could live on the teacher's pay if he was very frugal and he was moved by Mr Dith's visit, but in this country NGO pay was wealth. He had another ethical decision to make.

The waiter at *Le Tour Eiffel* came to the table and Janey watched Mr Dith bow and nod at the Khmer girl as she stacked plates and skilfully cradled them up her arm. They had been through the opening small talk and politeness and then the subject of the city of Phnom Penh, then Angkor Wat and a little on medieval Khmer kings. It was all new to Janey and she listened avidly. Mr Dith was a charming and knowledgeable man, amiable dinner company, but his points of expertise were just little keys to unlocking the man that she wanted to know about.

'It was very good of you to call me, Miss Davey,' said Mr Dith. 'When you asked me to choose a place to come, I could not think of any other place but Chez Gaston. The atmosphere here is so,' here he paused to gather his thoughts, '... just as I imagine a Paris bistro to be.'

Janey had to admit that it was a pretty decent facsimile.

'You've never been to France?'

'No, no.' Dith shook his head sadly and Janey suddenly felt such a fool to imagine that Mr Dith could ever fly off on a trip to Paris when he had family to look after.

'I'm sorry, of course ...'

'It was always my wife's dream to come to a French restaurant.' Mr Dith had interrupted her, if only to save her the embarrassment of explaining her faux pas, which he perfectly understood. 'And mine also. I think that, at my time of life, I have done enough that I can now begin to allow myself an occasional small luxury.' And looking around him at the restaurant, he added, 'It would be very nice to come here, say, once a month ...'

Janey wondered at the reason Mr Dith would have for taking this direction in the conversation, but after this suggestion of a personal message he returned to the factual.

‘In the 1960s French dining was very fashionable, but my wife and I were poor students. We could not afford to come to a place like this, and there were enough of them in Phnom Penh in 1969. The king was a great lover of French things. He owned Peugeot cars, he made movies in the French style.’

‘Movies?’

‘Yes, he made films and was the star actor also, and then he set up awards nights and he won for best director and so on. He was, in his own eyes, the father of his people and we were all his children. He even sent students from mandarin families to Paris to study, thinking that they would come to love French things as he did. He anticipated that they would return and support his programs even more strongly.’

‘It didn’t work is my guess?’ Janey knew that Mr Dith was talking about Prince Sihanouk and that his reign had ended decades before. She was murky on details but she knew something about him hanging on powerless and bitter.

‘For some of the students, yes it did. But at that time Maoism was very popular among French students and so some of our ex-patriates returned as Communists ...’ Dith smiled ironically and held his hands together in sompreas, as if to honour the best intentions of his former monarch. ‘It seemed that some of the children were of a mind to repudiate their father and his claims to genius.’

‘I think I get it. Some of these students became quite well known?’

‘Yes. Saloth Sar was among those students of this kind.’

‘That one is vaguely familiar.’

‘Yes, he came to be known by the name of Pol Pot.’

‘Oh my god.’ Janey didn’t know what to say. She remembered that Ryan and Tom had been talking about Mr Dith as if he had been a member of the Khmer Rouge. Could he really have brought her out to this French restaurant to lionise the man who created the killing fields? She had been to the monument there only the day before and stared at the hundred-foot glass tower containing hundreds of skulls that had been dug from the fields surrounding. Looking at Dith now she could not believe it. But then, what does life do to us, she thought, but make us into things and then un-make us again. What were most of the Khmer Rouge cadres but country lads, changed by six months of indoctrination from obedient rural Buddhists into violent revolutionaries? Who are we really? What chance had made her a doctor? She’d made a random decision to join the dramatic club at university, then fell in love with Joel and felt the disdain of his parents that she would never be anything but a school teacher. That was enough to make her grind through years of medicine, to prove them wrong, but which only steered her more damagingly to the rejection which was all she had ultimately achieved from them. And now here she was, sitting in Phnom Penh listening to a middle-aged Cambodian man who was as great a mystery as anything she had known, even in all the years she had spent talking to her patients with all their maladies real and imagined, their anxieties and secrets.

‘Did you have ... much contact with the Khmer Rouge?’ She had meant to pursue the subject as diplomatically as she could, but she knew that as soon as she had spoken that she had again said something stupid. How could anyone avoid contact with the totalitarian Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, without leaving the country?

‘Miss Davey, my wife and I had a little boy in the Pol Pot time. We were taken from the city to a labour camp near Battambang. My boy died of starvation after two years and my wife died of dysentery six months later. I had to bury them both. I wanted to put my wife in

the same place as the boy, but when we went out to the jungle it was all overgrown with saplings and vines and we could not find it.'

At that moment the girl brought their desserts: camembert au lait cru for her and mousse au chocolat for him.

'Merci, demoiselle,' said Dith.

'Cheers,' said Janey.

'Ah,' said Mr Dith, his face brightening. 'This is the part I have been looking forward to most of all.' Then, after a momentary pause that would have done credit to the timing of a professional actor, he whispered to Janey with half a wink, 'I have a sweet tooth.'

The weather was hot and it was past mid-afternoon so Ryan went to the fridge for a beer. As he sat down with it the phone rang once more. It was Malee. They talked for a moment about Janey, and he told her how she had walked all over the town and that Chean had finally had his wish to take someone to the Killing Fields. Then he told her that Dith had offered his job back. For some reason he didn't tell her about Colin. He felt that the teaching offer was something she should know about, but the job with Colin would make him almost too grand, too juicy as wedding material. He would bide his time with that.

'That is so good,' said Malee. 'But not this week, right? You come with me to the homeland tomorrow? I want Janey to come too. She will be an honoured guest.'

'Janey will come.'

'We will have to get a car. That will cost money.' He could feel it coming. 'Pa is paying for the achar and everything else in Kampong Thom, but we need the coffin here and to pay for the driver. We have to put him next to his mom and pop in the stupa when he is burnt.'

'Of course, it couldn't be any other way.'

He allowed a silence to develop between them, as if to emphasise what had to come next.

‘How is your cookie jar with spare cash looking?’

‘Not too good after my trip to Kep,’ she laughed, reminding him of the risk and sacrifice she had made to reach him.

‘I’ll pay for the coffin and the driver then.’

‘Would you?’

‘I would. Will a hundred dollars cover it?’

‘With some left over for the party. I’ll ring the coffin man now to say go ahead. See ya.’

What they would have done for a coffin and a driver without him, he decided not to ask.

He went out to the back door and looked across into the grounds of the wat that fronted the next street. A group of novices were just heading inside the pagoda. An adult monk closed the door after them. Dust settled in the compound they had left and all was quiet under the two huge banyan trees.

He kept thinking of the look that had passed between Chean and Dith. It was a surprise to him that they would know each other. Mr Dith was educated and steeped in the etiquette of a man of position; Chean was rough and knockabout, but keen to please and to be accepted. Their social positions would seem to provide very little opportunity for them to meet. And the use of title, ‘Mr Ung.’

It was time for him to go to the market and buy some things for the evening meal. For once he hoped that Chean was working and not waiting at the corner. He wanted to walk and to be alone for a while. He recapped his beer and picked up his back pack for shopping. But when he locked the ground floor gate and turned into the street Chean was not just waiting at the corner, but was parked at the entrance to the lane, waiting for him.

‘Boss,’ he said, straightening up.

‘Chean, not in your usual spot.’

‘Boss, I have to tell you. You talk to me about your Mr Dith, but I never think anything because there many Dith in Phnom Penh.’

Here he stopped, as if that was enough to imply that he knew Mr Dith, almost as if it should somehow imply the rest of his story, which Ryan should guess or understand by osmosis.

‘Yes, he knew your name.’ Ryan didn’t point out that he had called him Mr and used his family name, a title of respect which contained within it the faintest shadow of irony, the most that Dith would ever allow himself.

‘Boss,’ again Chean stalled in his attempt to speak. ‘Boss, I told you I was in Pol Pot labour camp.’

‘You did.’

Here Chean hesitated for several seconds, as if collecting in his mind exactly what he was going to say.

‘I *was* in the camp. But before that I come into the city. I walk down that street.’ Chean pointed up to where cars and motorbikes streamed past, about a hundred metres away.

‘Monivong?’

‘Yes. I wear the black clothes and have the rifle. You see pictures of Khmer Rouge boys walking into Phnom Penh, April seventeen?’

He had.

‘We look very mean. But I tell you now, we just very hungry. Three weeks in the jungle, no food. We scared. I scared. We have to go through the apartment blocks and tell people to move. I think they going to kill me. But they move. They do what we say. Me and my family very poor. My father have very little rice field. Now these people, rich people, they do what I say. I tell people to go with me and my friends. We go West, to Battambang. Walk all the way.’

Chean's speech was five times longer than anything he had ever said before. Telling his story, in a foreign language, had caused him extreme effort, and pain.

'That's where you knew Mr Dith.'

'Yes, I know Mr Dith. His family dead.' Chean said this as if it was the end of the story, the last thing he would say on the matter. Whatever he had done in Battambang and whatever Dith knew him for need not be spoken of. It was as if he had said, Think the worst and you've got it.

The two men sat in silence. It was Ryan who spoke.

'I talked to Tom once, about this.'

Chean looked up with surprise, as if someone had jabbed him in the side.

'We talked about what we might have done if we had been in a position like yours. We thought we probably would have joined up too. We would have turned red for sure.'

Chean immediately understood the meaning of these words: he was not being judged.

'One thing. You told me you fought *against* Pol Pot.'

'That true too.' Chean jumped at this. 'When Vietnam come they many guns. They kill us. We run into jungle, crazy crazy. I run away from the Pol Pot people. Vietnam people find me. I say I talk to villager for them, fight for them. I stay six year – pay good.'

'You defected.' Ryan shook his head in wonder. 'Good move. If you'd stayed you might be dead.'

'Fifty fifty – maybe I hide in jungle with Pol Pot for ten years.'

'Phew.' Ryan exhaled, considering this possible fate, then put his hand on the shoulder of his friend. 'Look, Chean, I'm going down to the market. I'm going to walk. I need a bit of time to myself. But if you happen to be on the corner at seven o'clock, Malee and I will go to the Riverside I think.'

'Yes, boss.'

Ryan walked away in the direction of Kandal market. He had been surprised by Chean's story, but not for long. At the corner of Monivong he waited for the traffic. For a moment he tried to imagine the thirteen-year-old Chean, marching in single file with twenty other youths, a mean look hiding his fear, and a rifle around his neck.

'This is the third day after he died so the ceremony must take place today,' Malee said to Ryan. 'If not, tomorrow is ok.' Although she spoke seriously and deliberately and meant every syllable of what she said, there was still a touch of irony in the last three words.

'I see, crystal clear.'

'When I was little, funerals took place seven days after death. I can still remember one.' She looked meaningfully at Ryan. 'Not nice. This is the new way.'

A marquee had been put in place, in front of the house, abutting the road to such a degree that the occasional vehicle that passed had to slow, in respect; motorbike riders brought it down a couple of gears and putted slowly past.

There was white bunting draped around all four sides – simple and elegant. Malee was all in white. Ryan had brought a white shirt from work. No-one had any pants that were big enough for him so he was loaned a white robe that was draped over his shoulder and pinned at his hip to cover part of his camel-coloured jeans, the lightest thing he could find. That showed sufficient respect. Janey had gone to the market in Kampong Thom and was wrapped in white from head to toe.

A monk was busy lighting fistfuls of incense sticks and placing them in holders around the marquee. The smoke and scent collected in the sultry marquee and then drifted out the open sides to announce the service to villagers for two hundred metres in every direction. Under the tarpaulin the effect was balmy and pleasant – dreamy. Not like the choking eye-watering incense swinging of priests he had been brought up with in oppressive closed church spaces.

He remembered Wednesday afternoons and eucharist: tall hats of white and gold, slivers of what they told him was bread.

‘Now I finally get what incense is all about.’ She gave him a questioning look. ‘It’s a bit like curry spices in Southern India.’

She gave him a questioning look.

‘Well, they cover up the ...’ and he sniffed the air.

‘Like that, yeah.’ She gave him another look and shook her head sorrowfully.

The body of Cris had been washed and dressed in Phnom Penh and placed in a coffin there. The achar travelled from the village and supervised the proceedings. He and Reap and Brother Number One had then driven back with the coffin in the car. Three freezer packs had been placed inside the coffin but by the time they got to Kampong Thom they were all warm, said the achar later, and so was Cris.

‘Cris had the back seat all to himself,’ said Malee to him. ‘Reap sat in the front seat between the legs of Number One.’

He had not gone to see them off because of Number One. He didn’t know what to expect. Would the guy still be angry? It was said that Ryan had been with the boy when he died, Number One had not. Number One had also not attended the garment workers demonstration. But today could be a time for him to regain face.

Cris was in his coffin to be viewed. The wooden seal had been removed and revealed a face with a beatific smile, a boy at rest. There was no embalming and although he was pale there was a kind of sheen on his face, which had not lost all of its glorious golden colouring.

The monks had come the night before and recited a sermon over the body, which then lay inside the house. Malee had insisted that Janey come with them to be there for that and they had travelled on the bus together. He and Malee had sat together with Janey behind them, but

there was so much chatter between Malee and Janey that he swapped seats with Janey so he could get some peace on his own.

‘Did you know,’ said Janey when they got off the bus and waited for Malee to arrange a tuk-tuk to take them home, ‘that your girl has never been to Angkor Wat.’

‘Not many of them have.’

‘But it’s only another hundred and fifty kilometres up the track.’

‘Something like that. It costs too much. Just the transport up there and then the fare from Siem Reap to the temples is over the top, without taking account for a hotel and other stuff. The only holidays they get are New Year and Pchum Ben and even then they have to be here, to go to the temple.’

‘But this is their national treasure.’

‘They have seen the pictures; they think that is ok.’

‘But the grandeur of the place is what it’s all about, or so they say. You can’t get that from pictures.’

‘Every one of them wants to go. Believe me. But it’s for the elite, and funnily enough the elite don’t seem to value it so much.’

Later they had slept upstairs, Janey in the women’s quarters and he in the men’s, separated by a screen through which they could share some whispered talk. The matter of the temples had stayed on Janey’s mind through all the services for Cris and the meetings with family and the introductions and bowing and sompreasing.

‘You must take that girl to Angkor Wat. You haven’t even been yourself.’

‘Ok, sis. I’ll do that,’ said Ryan, tired. He wasn’t a very good tourist; he’d go to a place to be with the people, not to see temples, unless they happened to be where he was at the time.

‘Time for some sleep, eh.’

‘How can I sleep in this place; my head is spinning.’

‘Night, sis.’

Ryan was not prepared for the entrance that Pa and Ma made to the marquee. They came down from the steps of the house, Pa first, Ma second, and Number One behind them as a kind of groomsman or assistant. But it was their look that fixed him on the spot.

Pa’s head of thick black hair, which had so impressed him at the Pizza Company, was gone. His head was shaven, and so was Ma’s. Pa was naked to the waist with a white and gold krama tied around his middle, then tucked under him and hitched at the back. Ma wore a kind of sari of white with trimming in gold. On their feet they both wore their everyday sandals. They were both dignified, monk-like, ghostly. Pa was serious, as though he was on the verge of tears; with his mop of hair, it seemed, had gone his vitality. Ma was likewise, although upon her persona the aspect of mourning sat more naturally. Behind them Number One was grave and noble – the dutiful son assisting his parents in their time of travail. His hair had been trimmed very short all over, as if run over by an amateur barber with a number one cutting comb. It suited him; his face was there to be seen, purposefully erect, where before it had been cowed and hidden. He too was bare-chested but wore a light jacket with pockets that were so large they almost seemed to flop open, although Number One never placed his hands in them, but folded his fingers together in front of him.

Throughout the prayers and rituals, the chasing away of bad spirits with incense and monks, Number One stayed close to Pa and Ma. And then, when the achar and the monks had finished their incantations, a strange thing happened: the villagers began to come forward to Ma and Pa in their twos and threes to pay their respects, but not only for that purpose. From each one of these little groups a member pressed a fold of notes of money into the hands of Number One who received them with a respectful nod and then slipped them into the capacious pockets of his funeral jacket. The whole procedure was completed in a respectful

hush, so quiet that the rustling of the notes could be heard, along with the occasional cry from the birds in the trees along the noiseless village road. The procession was immense, with thirty of forty groups of neighbours filing past and bowing, passing over bundles of riel.

Janey made for her purse and began to extract some notes. Malee held out her hand to stop her. 'You don't have to,' Malee said. 'But I'm going to,' Janey replied. She grabbed at Ryan's arm as if to say, you're coming too. It was a moot point whether Ryan should go up with money, for that was a point of respect paid by villagers to their neighbours, not by family. But was he family, yet? The appearance of Westerners at a funeral was probably unprecedented in the village, in the province perhaps.

But up they went. This time Pa showed no outward delight at the money; he bowed respectfully and they passed through to Number One. As they handed over the cash Number One bowed to them and made a sompreas to them both and as he held out his hand he took the money with his left hand, not his right as he had with all the other guests. As he was sliding the money in his pocket with his left hand Number One held out his right to Ryan in the manner of a Western hand shake.

Ryan was shocked for a moment and he froze, but the hand stood out there for that second and it didn't go away. Ryan reached out and took the hand. Number One's deep brown eyes burnt into his.

'Thank you,' Number One said warmly, in English, as he shook. 'Thank you.'

After forty minutes or so a donkey was brought into the marquee and the palanquin upon which the coffin had been laid was then hitched up. The seal was placed on the coffin and a couple of boys jumped up onto the tray to ride with their dead friend who they may have met only two or three times.

The procession was then led away from the house and through the long strung out village to the temple. People stopped along the way to watch them pass through. Boys quit their games of football and cleared the road for them.

‘Number One shook my hand,’ said Ryan to Malee, his mind unable to leave what had happened back at the marquee. ‘He didn’t have to do that, did he?’

‘He didn’t have to do that.’

‘If I had been any other Western guy, would he have shook hands?’

‘I don’t think so. It was because he was with Pa.’

‘You mean Pa made him do it?’

‘Oh, no no. He was with Pa and he was being dutiful Number One. He had his place back; he had his face back. Then he can be a fine person. Then he can be good to you.’

‘So that meant he could be magnanimous.’

‘Hey, that’s a good one – magnanimous,’ she repeated, rolling the word around in her mouth. ‘I never heard that one. Yes. If he saw you at my place, like if you were there as my friend and he was there as my brother, then I don’t know.’

‘We would have been equal and he wouldn’t have been able to be generous.’

‘That’s right. But today he is like the next Pa. He is able to welcome you to family, in front of everyone, and that gives him face. You were there when Cris was shot so you have earned respect. You won face then and he did not. He must respect you. He has to do everything right from now, and I think he will. This is a serious time.’

‘So now,’ said Janey, who had been listening all the while, ‘this could be a turning point for Number One.’

‘I think so, could be,’ said Malee. Janey squeezed Ryan’s arm as if to say, You did good.

At the back of the temple a pit of dried twigs and charcoal had been prepared. The body of Cris was laid in it and the dry wood was lit. Janey and Ryan stopped to stare for a moment, unable to wrench their eyes from this scene.

‘I am a medical person, but I can tell you that is something I have never seen. A body laid out like that for burning.’

‘They don’t hide much, do they,’ said Ryan. ‘In Australia the coffin is rolled off through a curtain and never seen again.’

‘I notice you’ve stopped saying ‘home’.’

‘I guess it’s still home, but not the way it used to be.’

The procession moved away into the temple and they left two monks to watch the fire. It was in the latter phase of this burning procedure, he had heard, that a stricken loved one might retrieve a chunk of charred bone to take home, to show the deceased that they would continue to be loved, or as a kind of talisman, that the spirit of the deceased would protect them in the life remaining on this earth.

Later, when the session inside the temple was complete, when the protection from bad spirits was ensured and all others save Pa and Ma and Number One had dispersed to their homes, the ashes of Cris were collected by the monk and placed in an urn that looked like some Moroccan cooking pot. The monk placed that in a concrete stupa, shaped like a three-metre high bishop’s mitre, next to the urns of his mother and father. No-one collected the charred bones of Cris; there was sorrow, but not ownership. There was collective sadness at the snapping of such a promising life; but there was also a feeling among the villagers of a tragic inevitability surrounding his passing – as if in their sad shaking of heads there was an acknowledgement of the inexorable forces of destiny that had taken him, just weeks after the passing of his re-patriated parents.

The Sunday of the third demonstration came. The three of them, Ryan, Malee and Reap, climbed into Chean's tuk-tuk and made for the industrial zone again.

Janey stayed out of it. Mr Dith would call for her and they would go to a place he knew for a lunch of Khmer food. 'I have my own friends now,' she pretended to admonish them with her hands on her hips. But, seriously, she said it was 'awfully sweet' of him. While they were gone she would also ring their mother in Australia.

Where there had been excitement on previous trips to the demonstration area, there was now silence in the group. It was not just the sobering absence of Cris, everyone arriving at the site had a more businesslike manner about them. The crowd was the biggest ever if anything; the murderous events which had occurred on the previous demonstration had brought even more supporters from the apartment blocks, from their Sunday rest and chores of washing clothes and preparing for the week ahead. And once the action began there was no screeching megaphone, no bolt cutters at the padlocked gates. They were there to occupy the space and to show that they were not going away – no backing down. There was a feeling now that all they had to do was push on, to keep coming back. Everyone knew of the initial offer that had been made, of the comments made by international companies in the press.

Police lined up in the same position as before. There were just as many as there had been but now they wore soft hats: there were no riot shields. An organiser stepped up onto a milk crate and began the chant of 'one sixty, one sixty'.

He was new. He had to be. In the week after the last demonstration Hun Sen's men had picked up fifteen organisers from the unions and placed them in jail. It was his way of saying that if there had been deaths, they were the fault of the mad unions. And now new men, barely twenty years old, were leading the singing. The police stood in a double line with their hands clasped in front of them. After forty minutes of chanting there had been no dispersal charge from the police and someone in the crowd produced confetti from her bag and threw it

joyfully in the air. Others followed her as if by prior arrangement. People's shoulders relaxed and they began to smile; they could see that the police had been told to lay off. Within ten minutes the new organiser spoke to the crowd. A representative from the factory had come down from his office to tell him there would be a negotiation with the factory owners the next morning at nine o'clock. If a satisfactory resolution was not reached they would return in two weeks' time for another demonstration.

When the crowd dispersed they found Chean.

'All good, boss.'

'No problem.'

As the tuk-tuk gained momentum Ryan turned around and watched the crowd wandering away to motorbikes, some on foot to nearby blocks of apartments, in the tired and resigned way they would if they were leaving another day of work, veterans that they were now of civil disobedience.

They dropped Reap at their block and Malee came with them back to Ryan's place. She could not wait to see Janey again and to see how her date with Mr Dith had gone.

'So what did he actually say?' Malee sat on a chair facing Janey on the couch, with Ryan next to her reading the *Phnom Penh Post*. He had not mentioned his talk with Chean. He was still processing it. He wanted to hear what Dith had said.

'With regard to the speculation that he was a member of the Khmer Rouge I can say as a matter of fact that he was not, unless he is the most brilliant actor and liar that I have ever known.'

'That I don't think,' Ryan mumbled.

'Your Mr Dith was married to the love of his life who died of dysentery in the Khmer Rouge years.'

'Ok,' said Ryan, nodding.

‘Ew,’ said Malee. ‘Most people went that way. Four times more died of disease than were killed as enemies of the state.’

‘He told me that he buried his own son at the labour camp they took them all to in Battambang, out in the jungle near a stream. It was the place they buried all the dead ones. There were rows of graves three feet deep. I have read about these things.’

‘You have?’ said Ryan.

‘The library was surprisingly well stocked and you can learn a lot in five days if you have no social life.’

‘That is so good,’ said Malee. ‘You don’t want to come just to see the temples and the torture prison.’

‘We’ll get to the temples in a minute. Anyway, after the Khmer Rouge years he returned to Phnom Penh with the daughter who survived the holocaust.’

‘Daughter?!’ They both exclaimed. ‘No-one knew anything about this.’

‘He has a grandson. He said they keep him alive, and the school. When he got back to Phnom Penh – don’t get me off the track again ...’

‘But we didn’t ...’

‘*When* he got back to Phnom Penh he didn’t know what to do. He was blank, confused – shell-shocked. Do you know he had to rough his hands to make out he was a workman and hide the fact that he had an education. They would have killed him if they knew he spoke English.’

‘Yes, presumed him to be an American spy.’

‘That’s what he said – taken for an agent of the CIA. When the United Nations came everyone wanted to speak English in a hurry and he started teaching, then someone asked him if he wanted to run a school. Now his boss is ex-Khmer Rouge colonel.’

‘I heard that.’

‘No surprise,’ said Malee. ‘Everyone has to live together – *As long as the killing stop*’, she recited a line she’d been brought up with.

‘Yeah. *As long as the killing stop, no worry.*’ Ryan finished off; everyone had to live together no matter what the memories. ‘Did you hold his hand while he poured this out?’

‘As a matter of fact I did, yes.’

‘Whaaat?!’ They were both incredulous. ‘He let you touch him?’

‘I shouldn’t have done it. I wish I hadn’t now. I think I said a couple of stupid things that I should have thought through better and I was over-compensating. It might have been the first time anyone has touched him in thirty years besides his five-year-old grandson who lives out in a province and he sees twice a year.’

Janey stopped for a moment and she rubbed her hands anxiously, as if they were guilty things. Ryan remembered the gesture from his childhood – Janey vexing about something she had done that may not have been right. ‘It’s my fault. I’m too touchy-touchy and I know I shouldn’t do it. I brought my culture with me and it wasn’t right. It was like some lightning rod went through him.’

‘Oh, sis,’ Ryan half sighed and consoled at the one time and made to put his arm around her.

‘We’re nowhere near the end of this, by the way, so un-hug me now.’ She took a deep breath. ‘He asked me to marry him.’

‘Whaaat?!’

‘Not in so many words, but he told me he was lonely and would have to retire before too long and there I was holding his hand. He is such a sweet man.’

‘Did you lead him up the path?’

‘Well, not really. I had to change the subject smartly enough and I told him I was going back to Australia on Wednesday and I wouldn’t be able to see him but maybe once more. He

was very nice about it, but he took his hand away from me.’ Janey took two tissues from her handbag and placed them over her eyes, wiped, then blew into them and held them in her hand. ‘There was a little silence between us after that.’

There was a little silence in the room as well. Ryan broke it.

‘You’re not really going home on Wednesday are you?’

‘Yes, I am. I rang mother. She told me that after his lengthy illness our father has passed away.’ It was said with the kind of even-toned compassion that a medical professional would make such an announcement.

There was another silence in the room. Ryan sank back into the seat as the importance of these words was processed by him and Malee. If Ryan went home for the funeral, would he come back? Instinctively Malee’s grip on Ryan’s hand loosened and she took in a breath to steady herself. It was as if Janey had taken all the fragility of their relationship out of her handbag and put it on the coffee table and said, There, look! The reality of death which, in the case of Cris, had perhaps brought them together, in this case could drive them apart forever. Ryan thought of home, and Amanda, and of a reality that could make his three months in Cambodia seem like a freak, a fluke, a quirk. Would this be something that in ten years’ time he would remember as he shook his head in wonder? Would they talk about his adventure with Malee as Janey might about Mr Dith?

‘There is one thing else I must tell you.’ This was truly Janey’s day.

‘Before I leave this place there is no force on earth which is going to stop me from visiting the temples at Angkor Wat. Also, I must say that I do not intend to go alone.’ She paused a moment and the two of them wondered what she was going to do next. She wouldn’t go with Dith? Surely. ‘And you both are going with me. I bought the bus tickets this afternoon. We leave tomorrow at ten and the next morning, after a restful night in Siem Reap, we will be watching the sun rise over the great temple.’

Again there was a little silence in the room. It was broken by Malee.

‘Ok,’ she said. ‘I’m in.’

An hour later Reap came to take Malee back to their apartment and Janey and Ryan were left alone.

‘He’s dead,’ said Ryan. ‘It felt like a bit of a game, thinking about the possibility of him not being around. And that he wasn’t ever *really* going to pop off at all. Just to think of him lying still is weird – not joking over a beer, or pushing his finger in someone’s face and telling it how he reckons it is, or showing someone what he’s not doing well enough – not even coughing or wheezing. Just still. Have you ever seen him just still?’

‘I don’t think I have. Even at the movies he was animated.’

‘Yeah. Shaking his head, nodding agreement, guffawing.’

‘No-one like him.’

‘Except maybe George W. You know, you’re totally with me or you’re my enemy.’

‘And Dermott was totally with him.’

They had been talking and avoiding the point that was the issue. Janey would be going back on Wednesday to be with her mother in preparation for the funeral. It would be half expected that Ryan would go back too, but only half. It was a long way to go and people would understand, perhaps. But there was Dermott, in place for the family takeover. If Ryan stayed away Dermott would say he was not committed to the family. If he went back Dermott would say he had come for Amanda and was stirring up trouble.

Would he be going for Amanda?

‘It won’t happen until next week,’ said Janey, reading his mind. ‘No-one will make you go.’

‘What about Mum?’

Janey fished in her handbag for a couple of seconds and pulled out her phone. She pressed some buttons and then held it out to him.

‘Find out for yourself.’

He pressed the green button and the phone rang three times and the voice came on.

‘It’s not Janey, is it. I can guess that much. I just spoke to her.’

‘Hi, Mum.’ He drawled it out Maarrm, as he always did, to make her laugh.

‘Baby boy.’

‘That’s me. Hey, I heard your news. Well, our news, everyone’s news.’

‘Yes, everyone’s news but mainly my news. He has been a long time going down. Don’t ever smoke cigarettes is the only thing I will tell you.’

‘I don’t. I won’t.’

‘And another thing I want to tell you ...’

‘Hey, I thought there was only going to be one.’

‘You thought I would stop at one?’

‘No, I didn’t. I never really thought that.’

‘Well you were right.’ There was a moment of silence as she gathered her wits and as Ryan waited respectfully for his homily. ‘I’m going to tell you what I really think. I think you should go and live your life and don’t let anyone stop you. Certainly not me.’

‘Mum I ...’

‘I’m talking, you’re listening. You think you are coming home to be with me? Forget it. I won’t be here. We are going to do this thing next week and then I am going.’ She had emphasised her words, then gathered herself for the next part. ‘As soon as there is a respectable distance of time. To Alaska.’

‘Alaska!’ Ryan could not stop himself interjecting.

‘I always wanted to go. All that ice and snow. So clean and pure.’

‘But Mum it’s as polluted as ...’ But he stopped himself. What place was not polluted? You read stories. Were they all true? There must be incredible places up there. He remembered his mother saying something about Alaska years before, that it was the place she had wanted to go. That was ten years before, more. She still had the dream.

‘Even your father knew it. The day before yesterday he said to me, in the hospice and juiced to the eyeballs on morphine, he patted my hand and he said two things. One, he said, ‘It doesn’t look too good’ – he was right there. Two, he said, ‘Go to Alaska’. And do you know, I hadn’t said a word about that place to him in fifteen years. But he remembered.’ He heard the sound of sniffing on the phone – weeping. He said nothing. He waited. Love was a very peculiar thing that sprung in the most unlikely places and who was he to interrupt his mother’s weeping.

‘He was hard on you, but he thought it was tough love. It was all he knew and it didn’t work out. That’s life sometimes. But do you know one thing? He knew he was out of his depth with you.’

‘He did?’

‘What would he know about poetry? Anyway, don’t let anyone force you to come back for the ceremony. You’ve made a move; it’s up to you.’

‘Okay, Ma,’ he said, his own voice thickening in his throat. ‘Will do.’

‘Be happy, that’s all I ask. Now you should put me back on to Janey.’

He handed the phone over to Janey and went out to the little balcony at the top of the stairs at the back of his block. There was another block across from him. A woman had her washing out on a line that stretched across the alley to the block across from her. Away on the other corner he could see into the wat. There were stucco walls and high trees, a temple. Boys in saffron robes had gathered in the forecourt, maybe the same he had seen a few days before. They dribbled a football around in a desultory manner, as if they were not sure

whether they should be boys or monks, whether they should let themselves go in the delirium of the game or act in the decorous manner expected of a novice. But that was the problem for all of us. How natural can we afford to be? When we make a change are we just switching sets of expectations?

After a couple of minutes a monk appeared at the top of the eight or so steps that led into the temple. He said something quietly and the boys filed inside; he seemed to approve of their restraint. The football bobbed away a few paces and laid still in the shade of a banyan tree. Ryan thought of his sister, bound for home; he thought of Reap and Chean, they had no options beyond continuance and survival. They had duty. Mr Dith – same. But for himself and Malee the options were complex. He had heard it said that when it was time to make important decisions, do nothing for a while. A couple of weeks had passed since Kep. They had not had sex since then, but once was enough and he had had no news from her since then.

He had never thought it possible that he had defeated his father.

It was the last minutes of darkness before dawn. There was a kind of light, as if the first rays had appeared somewhere behind the jungle a hundred miles away and had lightened only the sky above that jungle and had left the rest of the world in darkness. It was no more than a looming sense that there was light, somewhere else, in some other world. For the three of them in practice it was dark, and they felt their way cautiously along the cobbled path. There were a hundred other pilgrims ahead of them and behind, shuffling, some of them with torches, all of them quiet or speaking in low voices.

‘We should have thought of the torch,’ Janey whispered.

‘I think so, yes,’ Malee giggled. ‘But we can kind of see where to go from their light.’

‘At least it won’t get any darker,’ was Ryan’s view.

‘Hmmm, of course.’

‘Yes, I agree.’

There was a stone concourse of two hundred metres that led up to the great temple at Angkor Wat. There was an ancient stone gate that they passed through as the sky began to lighten in the east. On the left of the concourse, before the giant moat, were already gathered fifty or so visitors, a few with cameras on tripods – past them a couple of little shops selling peanuts and other snacks. They stepped down the ancient steps from the concourse into the viewing area as the first distant streaks of pink and yellowed stabbed the sky.

‘Hurry, we’ll miss it,’ said Janey.

Malee giggled. She knew that Janey would exaggerate, but only to introduce excitement and adventure into the morning.

‘We will see everything.’ Malee said in her knowing, even tone, like the straight man in a comic duo.

The moat shone at them. Like an old daguerreotype immersed in photographic liquids, the silhouette of the temple began to appear slowly, slowly. With a shade more clarity each minute the four towers studded the sky, with the great central point rising in between – the greatest building in the world in its time. Ryan and Malee stood holding each other, Janey next to them with a camera. The pink effusion behind the temple turned to orange and then began to recede into yellow and blue. The temple towers were clear now, stark and mysterious in the morning glow.

‘It almost seems too cheesy to take pictures of such an incredible thing,’ said Janey. ‘But...’

‘You’re snapping for the three of us here, sis. Better get to work.’

Janey raised her camera and pressed the button, then again. A hundred people did the same. Janey moved away for a different angle, then took pictures of the people taking pictures, then of the causeway angling up to the temple.

Malee did not move from her place, her arm around Ryan's waist, silently watching the sun come up over the symbol of her nation. The wat was somehow the old way, beyond words. From the age of the Hindu kings, even before the Buddhist conversion, it was so far removed from history and culture that it did not belong to any one era or place. From so far in the past, it had somehow become the national symbol of survival and of newness.

By ten o'clock the sun was burning hot. They had looked over the bas-relief friezes, the battle of Lanka where Rama defeats Ravana, and Vishnu's two hundred servants using the serpent Vasuki to churn the Sea of Milk. They stopped before the carvings of a dozen apsaras – bare breasted dancing nymphs. Malee reached out her hand to the sleek wall carving and glided her fingers past the row of figures; she could not lift her eyes from that perfection. She had never expected to hold her fingers just a centimetre from a thousand-year-old dancing girl.

'This ... is the real one,' she said, her hands flickering before them, her eyes filled with the magic of it. 'This dancing girl – it is like she can do anything. She can live forever.' In her own youth and beauty, and at the beginning of the life that stretched out before her, Malee may have felt for a second that she was like that girl in stone, immutable and indestructible.

'In a way she can. We can get a temple rubbing when we leave. I saw them on the way in. Apsaras in red or blue.'

'Red,' she said, without thinking, then confirmed it, nodding. 'Red.'

Inside the main temple there were rooms, open now to the sky, with deep pools where the king and his concubines had bathed eight hundred years before. The two of them stood silently and imagined the event. Would they have been serious or frolicsome as they took to the waters? Lascivious or demure? He had read an eye-witness account by a Chinese visitor who had suggested they were more frolicsome and lascivious than the other. Even the

peasants in the field were uninhibited. The rural life would have been simple, but attractive. So how had the arc of civilisation brought them to the place they were in now? Reap at that very moment sewing hems in a hot box in Phnom Penh and the wage dispute tottering towards an unsatisfactory conclusion. Were the kings of Angkor kinder to their peasants?

They climbed one of the four towers that surrounded the main citadel. There was a view over the jungle, haze in the distance, in the foreground the moat and lake of Angkor, the squared-off compound and the dead straight wagon road that led the eyes out again through the great gate to the steamy horizon. Malee drank it in, her eyes open wide, as if only in that way could she appreciate it all in the heartbeat of time she had to experience it.

The main tower was before them; the steps were heaven-steep as the access way to the touching point of the Gods should be.

‘Shall we go up?’ Malee eyed the hundred or so steps.

‘Phew,’ was all Janey could say, and wiped a handkerchief over her sweating forehead. ‘I think you have to be under thirty five to even think about it.’

‘Ha,’ Malee laughed. ‘I’ll grab some snaps while you have a rest.’

Janey handed over her camera and Malee moved away to the parapet.

They watched Malee take a shot, then were unable to take their eyes away as she braced herself for a new angle; knee-length shorts they had bought in Siem Reap the night before showed her sinewy calves flexing as she leaned into position. The fisherman, Ryan thought: up at four in the morning helping Pa to pull in nets, picking out the fish, pushing the boat out, rowing, holding her steady in the current.

‘She looks puny with her long pants on.’ It was Janey who broke their silence. ‘But now, Jesus, look at those calves.’

Malee disappeared out of view to the East side of the building.’

‘Are you still having doubts?’ said Janey.

He didn't have to ask what about.

Janey grabbed Ryan's hands and pulled him to her. This might be her last opportunity ever to play big sister.

'This girl is a winner. She has charmed me completely as she will charm many others.'

'She has charmed me completely too. But that's the point, isn't it. Charm.' He took up for a moment the serious clichéd documentary voice. 'What lies behind the Khmer smile?'

'This is no time for that crap. If you don't take her now, someone else will.'

'But where is she going to get a better deal than me?'

'Stop it. She will get offers. If you don't marry her you are insane and I will kill you.'

'You would?'

'I will.'

'Well, that would be the sure way out of my problems.'

But, for once, glibness would not be allowed as the way to slip a net. This was more important than that.

'Just look at me,' she said. He looked at her. 'What I mean is, look at my life. What do I have?'

He didn't dare say that she had a great job that she had worked hard to get, that she had patients who loved her and a family who did too and girlfriends who would do absolutely anything for her. That wasn't the kind of thing she meant.

'Here I am fifteen years after my one life romance and still stuck on a Jewish boy I loved and whose family wouldn't take me. After so many years they wouldn't accept me.' Janey looked upwards at the neat figure of Malee. 'She loves you. I could see that from the first time I saw her in the corridor of that hotel in Kep. She is an extremely practical girl, and that frightens you. But with you around, someone has to be. But you love her too; I could see that first thing too. And her family ...'

‘They want me.’

‘I think they want you for every reason. Not just because you’re Mr Moneybags but because you are one gorgeous hunk of kid. Even Number One can see that now and is probably killing himself for what he did to you. Go back and help to save him. Don’t come back to Australia with me and don’t follow on next week. It’s time to do what’s important, and attendance at this forthcoming ceremony of dispatch is not important.’

Ryan did not answer back. Indeed it was no time to be glib. Malee was approaching from the other side of the tower, shaping to take their photo from a distance. Janey and Ryan posed looking natural and relaxed.

‘She’ll take you places you never dreamed of going,’ Janey whispered to him as Malee lowered the camera and came towards them.

The bus back to Phnom Penh two days later settled into its rhythm. The morning sun came from behind them over a patch of jungle trees that were the backdrop to ripening rice fields. It was November now and the floods had ebbed into their river and the fields were drying out. Water buffaloes and cows stood on firmer ground, chewing hay. People in the bus chatted happily or slumped in their seats, recovering from a night in Pub Street, Siem Reap.

Janey was in front of them, talking to a girl with dark blonde hair who could have been from anywhere: Germany, Sweden, Britain, Canada, even Australia. The girl was talking softly and every now and then Janey’s voice would pipe up *Really, I don’t believe that*, extracting confessions from the girl about her life, loves, her pets and even what they did as a family at Christmas – his guileless chaotic sister. Too much sympathy almost; her questions would lead by instinct in a direction the other person wanted to go, as if by their answers they had found the solution to their own problems.

Malee held his hand and gazed dreamily out the window at the patchwork of fields, the peasant farmers methodically working their way across then back. She would think of herself as spoiled, he knew that – being brought to Angkor Wat. She would need to return to work and study even harder now, to prove to herself that she was not changed by her new fortune, by the great temple, by Ryan, by Janey.

But she was changed. With her fortune there was an edge lost from her irony. Her studies were nearly over and she would be qualified and then there would be more decisions to make. She was the top student in her class and they had all done practical placements in hospitals and job offers would be certain to come. She was nearly there and could almost cry with relief.

‘There is one thing I should tell you,’ she said. ‘Something which concerns you.’ He waited. ‘I can tell you pretty much for certain as of this morning that I am not pregnant.’

‘Oh, I see. That’s good.’

‘What do you mean, that’s good?’ she sat up, not sure whether to be outraged or mock outraged. ‘You don’t want my baby?’

‘Darling, yes, but not now. You have a few things to do first, don’t you?’

‘I made sure anyway.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I gave myself a vinegar douche.’

‘You what?’ He could not believe what he had just heard.

‘I brought some vinegar from home for when we did it at Kep. I may be a scientist but you’re foolish if you ignore the traditional methods. But there is science behind it; even Hippocrates knew the vinegar trick.’

‘But, but ... It was all so spontaneous and loving, and, I don’t know, epoch-making.’

Malee raised an eyebrow. ‘Epoch-making, that’s a good one.’

‘Fucking hell.’ Ryan pulled his hand away and crossed his arms and looked out the window at the Malaysian bulls in the field that passed by the window. Janey had already pointed out that Malee was frighteningly practical.

‘You did the right thing, anyway.’

‘Mmmm ...’ Malee nodded her head in assent. ‘I couldn’t afford to get pregnant for about five different reasons.’

‘It’s right because that now leaves the field open for me to ask you to marry me without it looking like you had the shotgun at my back or any such thing.’

Her magazine was finally still. She stared up at him. ‘You really want to marry me?’

He made to glance around the bus. ‘Well, there’s no-one else around here worth taking.’

She made to slap him playfully, then held on to his arm. In half a minute he prised her from him. Her eyes were dry, but closed in a dreamy meditational way. She opened them and looked at him.

‘About time,’ she said.

Ryan shook his head.

‘You’re a hard case,’ he replied.

‘But you know I have to be.’ And he knew it to be true.

They travelled a couple of kilometres without speaking, their fingers touching and their eyes closed. He had bought the *Phnom Penh Post* at a convenience store next to the bus station and tucked it into his carry-on bag without looking at the front page. After a while he decided to browse through and as he unfolded the paper the words ‘Hundred Dollar’ smacked him in the eye.

He folded out the paper and read the headline ‘PM Hundred Dollar Minimum Wage Offer.’ He straightened up to read the story and Malee stirred as she felt the attention course through him. Hun Sen had raised the offer from ninety dollars; that meant every garment

factory would have to pay it. Ten dollars didn't seem like much at first glance, and it fell a long way short of one hundred and sixty, but with the other five dollars up from eighty five it meant someone could buy vegetables to go with their noodles every night and still send a little more home to parents. The five-dollar offer was nothing; this was something.

Malee opened her eyes.

'What's up?' she said.

He turned the paper to her so she could read the headline and her mouth opened and there was a sharp, surprised intake of breath.

'Oh my god,' she said quickly. She held the paper in her hands to read the first few sentences of the article. 'Oh my god,' she repeated, shaking her head.

'Do you think they'll take it?' he said.

She stared at the back of the headrest in front of her for a few seconds.

'They'll take it,' she said, then looked at him sideways, 'for now. If the others are anything like Reap and her friends they'll take it. Everyone is so tired. That's nearly seventeen per cent on what they are getting now.'

'I hadn't thought of it that way – seventeen per cent. Fifteen dollars seemed so little. That means no more demonstrations.'

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

'Thank *God* for that,' she exhaled. It was the first time she had said a word that diverged from the family line. She had expressed her feelings to him, assured of his confidence, and they were closer because of it.

'Thank God for that,' he repeated. They laughed together in relief.

But as their pleasure and relief subsided and they settled into their seats Malee repeated the same two words in mitigation. 'For now,' she said thoughtfully as she pulled back the curtain and watched the fields go by again. 'Still a long way to go, I think.'

Malee and Ryan held hands again and the bus sped along the road to Phnom Penh.

Epilogue

It was the same marquee that they had hired for Cris's funeral but it was dressed up differently now, more like a tableau from Disney's Fantasyland: the white canvas was draped with festive candy colours, yellow and pink; inside, circular tables were draped with pure white cloths and chairs were wrapped up with pink bows at the back. There was a little hardwood floor for dancing. All this in the main street of Kampong Thom. Pa's face was glowing in the community with the show they were making of this.

Ryan began to count the dollars in his head, then stopped. He was just relieved that in three months there had not been a single request to him for money.

He was impressed.

Where the villagers had been dressed in simple day clothes the last time Ryan was there, today they honoured the occasion in their shiniest and brightest - print dresses of orange with gold or aqua sashes pinned at the hip, men in black slacks with their newest shirts of blue and red. As well as villagers there were people from the town, probably shopkeepers that Pa had dealt with over the years – business associates, men that he still wanted to impress and their wives who would spread the news of the day deeper into the community.

Reap and Sister Number Four were bridesmaids in golden dresses with clip-on fingernails that they displayed like apsara dancers. Their hair had been permed and with Malee in between them they had the aura of Cambodian pop stars of the 1960s – the Khmer Supremes; Diana Ross had nothing on this.

The marquee was closed all but half of one side and the guests crammed there spilled out on to the road in semi-organised chaos. Inside, Ma had set up a little table with a writing pad and a couple of biros, for what reason he had no idea. Tom had come early and was standing with him.

‘So what are you doing this year? Back to school with Dith, or what?’

‘Yeah. That’s a good one. I talked to Marie a couple of times.’

‘So... how’d it go?’

‘Apparently it’s still fucking cold in St Paul.’

‘You’re kidding. No global warming issues up there?’

Tom shrugged his shoulders. ‘Seems not. We’re thinking of moving to Arizona.’

Ryan turned to look at him, closer. ‘Serious?’

‘Phoenix. They got thousands of kids down there need to learn proper English. There’ll be big problems there for sure but, still, it is a job. If the kids want to learn like the school says they do, it won’t be all bad. We, well we talked about stuff. She thinks she might have been a bit kind of bossy. Can you imagine a girl thinking that?’

Ryan shrugged his shoulders as if to say, beats me.

‘She says she thought everything she did was all for us. Like everything she wanted was going to be everything I wanted automatically. She thought if she just ploughed on ahead it would all fall into place. But, you know, we *are* all different.’

‘I guess so,’ said Ryan, looking about him at his Khmer wedding.

‘Relationships are, well, hard work if you really want them to stay around,’ said Tom.

Ryan looked closer at his new relatives now filing into the marquee.

‘I guess so,’ he said. ‘You’ll be with your little girl.’

‘Yeah,’ Tom nodded his head and struggled for words. ‘I didn’t really want to miss that.’

Pa’s hair had grown back about two centimetres, black and strong with just the few white hairs that Ryan had noticed at the Pizza Company on the day they had met – Pa eager to see the new beau, come to the city on an Odyssey and eating the strange new meal, the first time he had ever seen melted cheese. Ryan thought about that day now. Something of the avid expression was back in Pa’s face and eyes. Ma’s hair had grown back too but it was like steel

wool - it frizzed in all directions, was grey and yellowed with age, but somehow looked hip and punk. Ryan bowed and made his sompreas. By their side once again was Number One; he would take the part of Pa today – the giving of the bride.

Guests began moving through steadily now and Ryan got down to making sompreas and beaming. The whole of the village must be empty today, he thought, and half the town as well. Invitations had been handed out with a white envelope attached. Guests stepped through the canvas flap of the atrium and handed their envelopes to Ma who was sitting at the small table; then she began to take the money out of the envelopes and was writing down the names of the people and the amounts they had given.

‘What in heck is she doing?’ said Ryan to Tom.

‘Charge of the ledger.’

‘Isn’t that a bit ...’ He was lost for words.

‘It’s protocol. She’s not checking up on people or anything. But if they make a note now they’ll know how much to give back when they’re invited to these people’s weddings down the line. It’s a delicate situation but this lady looks like she’s right on top of it.’

‘But right here, right now?’

‘Best to get it out of the way. The marquee man is probably hanging around waiting for his money, then there’s the achar, the priests, the flower people, the food ...’

‘Yeah, yeah. I get it.’

Tom glanced across at Ma again.

‘I think your mother in law might be the velvet hammer of the family.’

‘And I’m finding this out now?’ Ryan held his hands out in appeal.

‘You know what they say about mothers and their daughters, muchacho.’

Then there was a discordant Australian voice in the street.

‘Colin is here.’ Something akin to family spirit stirred in Ryan. Colin had known him since he was a baby; he was like an uncle, or something better than that now. Their relationship had come closer in the last three months.

When they returned from Angkor Wat Ryan had gone to see Colin to tell him two things. Firstly, that he was going to be with Malee no matter what effort or difficulty it took and as a consequence he wouldn’t field any more comments from him or Tom about Khmer women.

‘Ok, what’s the second thing?’ Colin had said.

‘You said something about a job. I’ll take it if it’s still going.’

‘Little woman got in your ear then?’

‘I said I wasn’t having any more of that.’

‘Sorry, sweetheart, I was only teasing. It’s about time you and Malee came over to meet Sokha.’

‘Sokha?’

‘My, well ... partner. We’ve been together for fifteen years.’

Ryan thought this through for a second and Colin sat back in his chair and watched him.

‘Fifteen years,’ Ryan said, buying time before he had to say anything else.

‘Married for seven.’

‘You fuckhead.’

‘I had to give you the bad word first, mate. There are pitfalls in this game, plenty of them, as I think you are aware. I didn’t know anything about this girl you were stuck on. Had to paint the worst case scenario. But I did eventually make a few enquiries, as I’m sure her family made about you – as much as they could from the distance that separates them from the city and with the limited resources available to them. But there are always ways. They don’t want their little flower petal crushed any more than I wanted mine.’

‘Thanks, Colin.’

‘But she’s close enough to on the level ...’

‘Close enough?’

‘As you’ll get.’ He leant forward in his seat. ‘Any woman and her family is going to expect you to have your hand in your pocket to a degree. It’s part of the culture, mate.’

‘Yes, Colin.’

‘Right. On the other matter, we have just completed the job interview and you are employed as of this moment. Your first job will be to sit here while I go to Sydney for your Dad’s funeral.’ He fished in a desk drawer and tossed a swipe card and a couple of keys on a plain ring across the table. ‘Here’s my spare set. You answer the phone and sweet talk anyone on the other end of it. I’ll leave some things for you to read and a list of jobs to do. I fly tomorrow afternoon. Anyone wants to have a piece of you for not coming back, I’ll shut them up.’

Ryan lounged back in his seat, jingled the keys on his finger. It was a long way back, and at the end of it Dermott and Amanda – separate now, but they’d both be there. No question.

Ryan placed the keys on the table.

‘I think I’m coming with you.’ Colin stared at him, waiting for something more. ‘Face the music, you know. He *was* my Dad after all. The other two? Well, I’ll talk to them.’

After a few more seconds of silence Colin reached over his desk, picked up the keys and put them back in the drawer. Then he spoke.

‘I’ve got only two words to say to you.’

‘What are they?’

‘Good boy. What sort of pissweak stick of shit would have stayed?’

‘That’s a lot more than two words, Colin.’

And so that night Ryan met Sokha, a jolly Khmer widow about forty years old. While the boys were away, the girls made friends. She loved Malee on sight, probably before that. Now,

three months later Colin and Sokha came into the marquee annex and handed over their envelope.

Mr Dith came, with his sister. They bowed and made sompreas to Pa and Ma and then to Ryan and Tom and Malee and Reap. When Ryan mentioned the wedding to Chean all he said was, 'Mr Dith go; I stay.' In the last two months, Ryan had rung Chean from time to time for a job and he was there on time every time and cheerful, but something had changed between them. Chean never waited on the corner anymore, but went back to a place among the crowds on the Sisowath Quay, where he could be alone with those things that troubled him.

And Janey would not come. She had seen everything she wanted to see and done whatever she had needed to do. Ryan set up his iPad on a table in the main room and Janey and his Mum would watch what they could from the living room of the old family home.

'We have our champagne and our Kleenex. We need no more than this.'

The monk gathered everyone in the main part of the marquee and began with prayers and a short sermon. Then there was laughter during the ritual hair-cutting of the bride and groom. The duty was performed by Sister Number Five and she was nervous and Ma had to help her and everyone smiled and laughed so she was not embarrassed. Number Six came forward with cotton threads which had been soaked in holy water and tied them around the wrists of the couple. Then Ryan placed a scarf around the shoulders of the bride. It was midnight blue and edged with gold and the tradition was that the groom was from afar and had brought the scarf from his homeland as a gift-symbol of marriage into the bride's family. He was certainly from afar, said most people, so the scarf was seen as especially significant.

Then the couple had to be blessed with good luck and fertility, so the married people formed a circle and danced around Ryan and Malee to keep bad spirits away and so happy ones would know to help them. Single people were not allowed and divorced people were bad luck. Colin joined in with his Khmer wife. Some of the group watched and grinned,

waiting for the Westerner to fumble the dance steps. But Colin had done it all before and he put his feet in most of the right places and his dance ended with applause and smiling faces.

Then the sound system got going and deafening Korean pop music began.

‘Hell,’ said Tom, ‘if it was ZZ Top I’d manage.’

‘I’d be happy to kick back with a bit of *Tupelo Honey*,’ said Ryan.

There was a sit-down dinner and lots of drinking. The Khmer people clinked glasses at nearly every sip of beer and toasted ‘Chuol moy’; it seemed that no-one intended to stop for a very long time. They had kept at it right through the main courses and into the bowl of mango with ice cream and chocolate sauce. Then came the sugary dumplings filled with sesame paste that auntie had made.

Ryan was feeling queasy.

But as he looked around the room he could not see one person who had treated him with anything but open-hearted joy. He felt embraced into the family and valued for himself. As far as the ceremony was concerned no-one had asked him for a single cent; he decided to make a point of this to Colin when he next saw him. He had been expecting requests for fifty or a hundred dollars here and there, but there had been nothing. Malee had been almost coy when the question of finances had peeped up; she just twitched her eyebrows and gave a tiny shrug of her shoulders. He had let the issue ride so far, but now he could not resist a bite.

‘It’s a great party,’ he said to Malee.

‘Yes,’ she said, taking hold of his arm, ‘it couldn’t be better.’

‘Must have set Pa back a bit.’

‘Oh,’ Malee hesitated for a moment, surprised. He had caught her, for once, a degree or two off balance. She saw him see her thinking. It seemed best, at that early stage of their marriage, to speak the truth, especially as she could think of nothing else.

‘Not so much a problem,’ she said, cautiously but clearly, as if explaining something to an intelligent child. ‘Janey sent me seven hundred dollars six weeks ago, and I gave it all to Pa.’

Something swayed in Ryan’s stomach. It was not the mango ice cream and sesame paste sitting on creamy fish amok.

Ryan disengaged his arm and sat back in his chair. No wonder Pa was jubilant. He had made great face in the village, and even in the town. It was the best wedding of the year and would be remembered. He would walk around with his head held high for the rest of his life now, and hadn’t had to find a hundred riel. For a moment Ryan wanted to walk across the room to the iPad that was still propped up on a table and punch some buttons and make it spring back to life so he could have a strong word with his sister. It was all very well to hold the hands of your patients while you told them what they wanted to hear, to chatter to people on buses and to extract a life story from Mr Dith. It was all done by being sympathetic. But sometimes things just weren’t your business.

He crossed his arms and retreated into himself. For a moment he watched the flap of the tent flicking up in the late afternoon breeze; it was an object that was, strictly speaking, inanimate, but it was given life by the incessant force of nature gusting it in one direction then the next. He stared at the gaudy hot pink bows that were wrapped around the back of every chair and at the diners and drinkers and their faces flushed in worldly success.

Malee stood up to pay her respects to an auntie who had travelled from Siem Reap for the wedding. There must have been five aunties on the day, each wanting their equal portion of attention. It was his moment to slip out, to leave the wedding feast and feel the freshness of the breeze for a minute.

He stepped into the street, still feeling that something had been taken away from him in the last minute. The town of Kampong Thom was settling from its day, but still there was movement in the street. The last market stalls were packing up, the first lights were flicking

on. Then a man on a motorbike crossed an intersection and tooted his horn at nothing – no car or moto blocked his way - simply to happily announce his presence to the world. He saw Ryan loitering and he slowed and turned around in the street to come up to him.

‘Motorbike, sir? Where are you going?’

‘Going?’ He grimaced at the question – just where was he going?

‘I dunno,’ he said, as much to himself as to the man. ‘I really don’t know.’

The man’s face turned quizzical in acknowledgement of this ambiguity, but the answer was still not a clear negative.

‘You want motorbike?’

‘No, thanks,’ Ryan laughed and held up the palms of his hands to show denial, ‘not this time.’

‘Maybe tomorrow,’ the man grinned in his own kind of irony.

‘Yeah,’ Ryan repeated, ‘maybe tomorrow.’

The motorbike man turned again in the street and went on his way; he nodded and grinned at Ryan as if he understood everything, but surely he did not.

And then Malee was there, by his side. Her hand slipped inside his arm and she leaned her head against his shoulder. They stood like that for a few moments, listening to the dying sounds of the town. Ryan was the first to speak.

‘I ...’ he began, then hesitated, collecting his thoughts.

‘Ssshhh,’ said Malee, and she looked up into his eyes. ‘Darling, everything is going to be all right. It is normal to worry.’ She paused for a moment, thoughtful. ‘For *you* it is normal.’ She tapped him gently on the chest with her finger then stood up on her toes and kissed him on the lips. He took her in his arms and held her for a full minute.

Malee stood back for a moment and looked at him again.

‘This is the happiest day of my life. Now I think we should go inside and talk to my relatives, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, I expect we should. Some of them have come a long way.’

They returned to the banquet arm in arm, to a scattering of applause from some of those inside. Ryan was sure he heard a few of the ladies exhale, ‘Aaaahhhh,’ at the sight of them.

Malee went about her duties, speaking to older ladies, bowing, making sompreas, hugging. But he slumped in his seat, suddenly very tired. He picked up his beer glass and took a long swig. Pa leaned across the table. ‘Chuol moy,’ Pa said enthusiastically, using the only two words of language they understood in common. They clinked glasses and Ryan summoned a smile. Now there, thought Ryan, is one guy who is going to enjoy the rest of his night.

Malee sat down again beside him, looked across at her Pa, and took the arm of her husband.

of

Part 2

Exegesis: *Cambodia in Transition: Family, Culture and the New World*

33,000 words

Terminology

Achar	A type of lay Buddhist official, often a former monk, who specialises in conducting ceremonies
Brahmanism	Same as Hinduism – religion brought by Indian traders in the 2 nd century and syncretised with existing animism
Cambodge	French language name of Cambodia
CNRP	Cambodian National Rescue Party, opposition party founded by Sam Rainsy
CPP	Cambodian People's Party, of Prime Minister Hun Sen
DK	Democratic Kampuchea – government of the Khmer Rouge 1975 to 1979
DRK	Democratic Republic of Kampuchea – Vietnamese government of occupation 1979 to 1989
FUNCINPEC	French language acronym for Royalist Party of Prince Ranariddh, the son of Prince Sihanouk
Indochine	French colonial term which grouped the nations of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos
Khmer	Ethnicity which comprises 85% of Cambodian people
Khmer Rouge	Maoist agrarian communist revolutionary organisation led by 'Pol Pot'
Marxian	Pertaining to the writings of Karl Marx
Marxist	Pertaining to states and ideologies which have sprung from the works of Karl Marx
Pchum Benh	Annual festival in honour of ancestors
Pol Pot time	Colloquial reference to the times of the Khmer Rouge under the leadership of Pol Pot
Sangha	Collective noun for the Buddhist priesthood
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia – 1992-1993, supervised the 1993 elections

Historical Overview

No-one knows exactly how long people have lived in what is now Cambodia, but clay pot remnants have been found from as early as 4,200 BC. Early indigines engaged in animistic forms of worship which eventually became syncretised with Hinduism brought by Indian traders around the 2nd Century. The more advanced Indian culture created structure in Cambodian society and small kingdoms were formed, Sanskrit being spoken at court and Khmer in the villages. Eventually the system evolved into the ascendancy of one great king who ruled at Angkor, with regional princes paying homage. The years 802 A.D. to 1431 A.D. are usually used to define the era of the greatness of the kings of Angkor, whose domain stretched into what is now Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, and whose capital was the most populous city on earth. The great Angkor Wat was the crowning achievement of a series of temples built by the kings, but a period of decline after official conversion to Buddhism saw the borders of the empire eroded by both the Vietnamese and Thais, until the nation of Cambodia was in danger of disappearing. Under the French Protectorate of 1863-1953 the colonial power ensured Cambodia's survival as a nation but deprived it of control over its army and resources. When the much-weakened French relinquished control to King Sihanouk after World War II, a period of growth in education and letters occurred until the late 1960s. The U.S.-supported coup of Lon Nol in 1970 was followed by civil war and the eventual takeover by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in 1975. The subsequent agrarian revolution saw the population of Phnom Penh evacuated to work in the country as farm labourers. Modern infrastructure was destroyed in an attempted return to a medieval agrarian utopia modelled on, but more radical than, Mao's Cultural Revolution in China. A quarter of the population died of either disease, starvation or as 'enemies of the state'. In 1979, an army of Russian-supported Vietnamese invaded, or liberated, Cambodia and set-up a milder socialist form of

government, which lasted ten years. But when Soviet Russia disbanded in 1989 the Vietnamese withdrew, leaving a period of uncertainty which was not totally ameliorated by the elections of 1993, supported by the United Nations. This famous and expensive intervention left Cambodia with a nominal democracy which has opened Cambodia to international capital, but which many see as continuing the corrupt and ruthless practices of previous regimes all the way back to Angkor. Election results are disputed; Prime Minister Hun Sen has control of the army and police. At the time of writing the nation remains in a state of some tension.

Introduction

In my first two visits to Cambodia in 2010 and 2011 I was struck by the incredible rate of change this conservative, hierarchical, traditionally Buddhist society has been experiencing since opening up to international capital and culture in the mid-1990s. I was very interested by the impact of modernisation on families and on Theravada Buddhism, the state's official religion; very much involved with these changes was the abrupt industrialisation of the nation and the diasporic effect this was having on the traditionally location-specific, ancestor-based Cambodian family culture. I also was struck by the level of interaction between Cambodians and Westerners, particularly between Cambodian women and apparently needy Western men, many of whom sought close relationships which might end in marriage. To highlight these themes my novel *Made in Cambodia* blends the romance between an Australian man and Cambodian woman (and her family), with the conflict between powerful elite forces and the newly formed unions seeking wage improvements.

The relationship arc of my novel begins with the Australian, Ryan, who has escaped the self-centred and materialistic elements of his family and comes to Cambodia for a job and perhaps to find a wholeness that he has been missing. In the central Cambodian character, Malee, he finds fascination, potential happiness and a new type of family. Of particular interest in this family are the figures of Pa and Ma, garment worker sister Reap, and also Pa's potential successor, brother Number One. Interaction with the family reveals traditional spiritual beliefs held by the older generation; the beliefs of the younger are tested through a visit by ravens, seen as the harbingers of sickness and death. But in the mundane world, Pa's responsibility is to advance the family fortunes to the extent that his fate will allow, and in his eyes the arrival of Ryan is to be exploited. So Ryan must continually ask himself the question: does Malee really love him or does the family simply want him for his assets? In

the absence of any government social security safety net, the family is still the central unit of Cambodian society and Ryan's commitment to it must be as absolute as is that of Malee and her sister Reap, whose inclusion in the novel opens the door to the discussion of Conflict Theory.

In historical terms, today's Cambodia is a new world. The traditional Buddhist-society hierarchies were torn apart by a series of civil wars and political convulsions from 1970 to 1997. In their place has grown a new elite of crony capitalists within patronage networks extending from the Prime Minister Hun Sen. These hierarchies are as powerful as any in the past, but the world in which they exist is more chaotic, more contestable, and existing in a more global context, with a lower class which is increasingly better educated. Ambition and activism are contrary to traditional Buddhist fatalism, so I see the actions of newly formed unions, in leading people to resistance in the all-important garment industry, as being culturally very significant. Malee must participate in wage justice demonstrations to support her sister and, to be considered a worthy suitor to Malee, Ryan participates also. The loss of a young family member, Cris, to rifle fire in the demonstrations dramatises the lethal events in Phnom Penh in January 2014, when five demonstrators were killed and dozens wounded.

As a practising novelist wanting to write about these themes I formulated the following research questions:

- How has this once isolated, conservative and socially stratified Buddhist nation adapted to abrupt changes after the convulsions of the 1970s, and in the flood of outside education and Western materialism since opening up in the late 1990s?
- How has the rate of change of the last fifteen years affected power relationships within families and in society?

- How has the emerging generation, particularly the young women of both educated and garment worker classes, adapted to new pressures and unexpected freedoms?
- How has traditional literature contributed to the society up to 1975, and how have modern writers responded to the conditions of the new Cambodia?
- How can the theories of Symbolic Interaction explain traditional society and what insights can the use of Conflict Theory give us to explain the changes in the lives of ordinary Cambodians in the last fifteen years?

My project required highly credible social realism and a closely related theoretical framework; as a consequence my methodological approach to these questions involved a broad suite of historical, cultural and sociological research methods. I consulted formal histories written by both academics and journalists, as well as ethnographic work and a range of peer-reviewed articles by academics. I also studied traditional literature to assess its role in the construction of culture. Statistics from UNESCO regarding population and education, both before and after the Khmer Rouge, have shown the extent or lack of recovery from the experiences of the 1970s. I read eye-witness accounts by travellers for cultural detail and also consulted contemporary news media to examine garment worker disputes. My theoretical framework involved studying the ideas of Max Weber and George Herbert Mead and applying them to the analysis of traditional Cambodian society. The works of Karl Marx, and modern commentators on Marxism, were consulted to explain the challenges which have been occurring in Cambodia now and in the last fifteen years. Further, I have tested the development of social trends among an educated group of Cambodians by conducting empirical research: personal interviews with forty Cambodians between the age of eighteen and twenty nine years. The situation in Cambodia today was further illuminated by

examining modern literature by Cambodians and non-Cambodians, and by conducting my own field interviews with five prominent Cambodian writers.

Exegesis Chapters

1. Spirits and Ancestors – Society, Religion and Traditional Literature

In this chapter I show that the hierarchical social order seen in Cambodia today was established with the introduction of Brahmanism (or Hinduism) from around the 2nd Century and I establish that the apotheosis of the system was in the rule of the Angkor kings. I indicate that the system has been reinforced by traditional Hindu/Buddhist literature, which in turn supports the patronage relationships which remain such an important part of Cambodian culture today (Chandler, 2008, pp. 27-34, pp. 106-112). Society was strictly stratified at birth as were positions within families (Tully, 2005, pp. 23-38). I also look at the deep relationship Cambodian people have with spirit beings, importantly including ancestor spirits, and investigate the idea of ravens as bringers of misfortune. In *Made in Cambodia* I examine the approach of the Khmer Rouge survivor generation and of their children to these matters. The passive and deferential Cambodian national character was conditioned by the literature of Buddhism and continues to be so. Consequently, I examine the Reamker epic story, verse novels, *chhbap* codes of conduct and traditional Buddhist monk tales to see how low aspiration and an acceptance of fate was encouraged (Chigas 2005; Brinkley, 2011). The paradigm of the ideal woman and mother is at the centre of this system (Leakthina, 2006, Chs 9 and 13). I believe that to fully appreciate the vital importance of the conflicts I examine in my novel, it is necessary to understand the depth of tradition which is now being challenged.

2. Two Cambodias – Symbolic Interaction and Conflict Theory

The traditional hierarchical systems which I establish in Chapter One are made meaningful at the peasant or lower class level by the rich interactions individuals sustained with family, village and religion. This system of interactions can be explained to some extent by the

Symbolic Interactionism sociology of Max Weber and George Herbert Mead, whose theories show that learning from the behaviour of key others is important in human groups (Meltzer, 1975, pp. 27-42) and I argue that this is particularly true within a strong, traditional Asian family structure. In *Made in Cambodia* the introduction of the Australian character Ryan into the Cambodian family is interpreted in different ways by various family members. I look at Weber's rubrics of social behavior to explain how some members respond to Ryan rationally and in self-interest, and some irrationally and emotionally (Campbell, 1981, pp.169-185). I argue that the symbols of interaction are richly visible in the rituals of Buddhism and in the stereotypes of traditional Cambodian literature, as introduced in Chapter One. I contend that the recent introduction of international capital has been the first significant obtrusion to the system of village and family and has created factories and the first Cambodian proletariat, also involving a population drift to cities. These changes have led to conflict and I use Marxian sources to explain these major social and economic transformations (Ryazanoff, pp. 25-67). In *Made in Cambodia* the garment worker disputes are the exemplar of these processes, and in this and in other parts of the exegesis I try to show how unionised conflict is in contradiction with fatalistic Buddhist tenets. This shift from Interaction to Conflict epitomises the new capitalist, industrial society which has begun to emerge in Cambodia since the mid-1990s. There are counterpointed paradigms of city and country, conflict and interaction, which run through my novel.

3. Modern Literature and Identity

Education and literature are powerful commodities. In this chapter I show that this lesson has been learnt by various repressive Cambodian governments, and I argue that literature critical of government figures, as is seen in *Made in Cambodia*, may only be written by outsiders. The beginnings of secular, Western-style literature in Cambodia were set around 1930 when

French colonial powers judged that a spirit of nationalism would enhance their rule by encouraging a sense of pride and purpose in the people, and also offsetting conflict between provinces. Concurrent with the promotion of Angkor Wat as the symbol of nation, the sons of elite Khmer families were educated in French culture; this directly gave rise to the novelists in the 1930s and 40s, whose work now forms the canon of Cambodian literature. These literary efforts eventually led not only to nationalism, but to a drive for independence which culminated in the overthrow of the same colonialists who educated them. This example of the power of literature was not lost on Prince Sihanouk, who began to actively suppress opposition, including writers, from the early 1960s (Tully, 2005, pp. 137-143). Writers, literature and literacy were decimated from 1970 to 1989 through the Lon Nol dictatorship, the Khmer Rouge years and the Vietnamese occupation (Chandler, 2008, pp. 249-285). Even now under the Hun Sen government writers may not speak openly; I refer to my own interviews with five Cambodian writers to confirm this. Most new literature about Cambodia by outsiders has been in the crime and thriller genres, by writers attracted to the nation's new image of darkness and crime; still, I argue that novels of serious social or political critique must be written by outsiders. I discuss the trickle of non-Cambodian writers beginning to confront real issues in the modern Cambodia. My own novel not only discusses a range of social themes, but also shows government oppression of garment industry demonstrators. I argue that no Cambodian could have safely written about this theme.

4. The Modern State: Cambodian Traditions in the New World

In 1993 general elections in Cambodia were sponsored and managed by the United Nations and soon after that foreign capital and aid money began to pour into the country, altering the economic, political and social world. On the departure of UN officials there was an almost immediate return to the corruption of the past. Hun Sen emerged in 1997 as the strongman

Prime Minister of Cambodia, having allowed large numbers of Khmer Rouge defectors back with impunity, to influential positions in the army, in Government and in his personal bodyguard. In this environment, survivors were forced to live side by side with former Khmer Rouge cadres, a situation which I examine closely in my novel through the characters of Dith and Chean. In the environment of international capital and foreigner involvement, young women are presented with new options in life: two situations which I examine in my novel are those of professional girlfriends and of factory workers in the garment industry. In this process of re-establishment for young women, which often involves re-location from family and distance from the 'ideal woman' role of the past, some aspects of culture are retained, some changed forever. Forty interviews I conducted with young people in 2015 and 2016 contributed directly to the character portraits of Malee and Reap; they show strong, but not universal, retention of traditional spirit beliefs by young people, and even stronger connection with family, often despite displacement for work and study. In the absence of any government safety net in Cambodia, the family remains one's survival.

Conclusion

My research has found that the Cambodian families are retaining connections, despite physical separations and new cultural influences. Some roles and interactions are bending to accommodate changing economic models and educational opportunities. Indeed, the street conflict of striking garment workers occurs largely because of the need of these workers to support their rural families; here there is a melding of the traditional social mode and the new economic condition. This conflict is leading to a shift in the power balance in society or, at least, there is increasing unease over the retention of traditional lethal power by the elite. Modern Cambodian literature begins tentatively to reflect this hostility. My novel *Made in Cambodia* brings the tension into the foreground.

Chapter One

Spirits and Ancestors – Society, Religion and Traditional Literature

My intention in this chapter is to establish the ideas of hierarchy, family and spirit beliefs upon which Cambodian society is based, and which are central to an understanding of my novel *Made in Cambodia*, then to show how these ideas have been maintained for more than a thousand years through traditional Buddhist literature. The historically hierarchical nature of Cambodian society was entrenched in the time of the Hindu kings of Angkor from the Seventh Century and maintained after the conversion to Buddhism around 1200 A.D., through to the present day. I trace the long held beliefs in spirit beings and set the scene for a discussion of my research into their importance in the modern world, which, along with my analysis of new forms of labour and physical mobility in society today, appears in Chapter Four. In the second part of this chapter I show how the social code and spirit beliefs were enshrined in verbal and written form in the stories of Buddhist monks, the *chhbap* codes of conduct, the *jatakas* or birth stories of the Buddha, *Tum Teav* romance and in the epic of the kings *The Reamker* (Chandler, 2008, p. 106-112). I will show how these literate expressions of the religion have had a strong influence over the Cambodian people and are still very important in the modern world of my novel; in particular I emphasise the way traditional beliefs conflict the position of young women today, again pointing ahead to discussion in later chapters.

Society and Religion

The cultural roots of Cambodian society are traced historically to the first centuries of the Christian era, when Indian traders, having established links with the Roman Empire, ‘sought new merchandise to tempt the luxury loving Romans’ (Wiltshire, 2003, p. 22). Indian traders generally stayed in Cambodia for six months and a string of Indianised states emerged all the

way from Burma to Java, and by the time of Angkor, ‘Hindu gods had been so thoroughly assimilated that few could recall their distant origins’ (Wiltshire, 2003, p. 23). Importantly, the cult of the God-king (*devaraja*) was firmly established. Charles F. W. Higham quotes historian A. Foucher saying that early Indian immigrants had encountered ‘savage populations of naked men’, and doyen Angkorean scholar George Coedès wrote in 1968 that the indigenous peoples at the time of Indian contact were ‘still in the midst of late Neolithic civilization’ (Higham, 2013, p.3). The Indian culture which took over was ordered and hierarchical; it is important to note that the creation myth of Khmer civilisation involves the marriage between an Indian prince and the naga king’s daughter, the metaphorical wedding of culture and nature, Indian and Khmer. A line of kings descended from this union and, ‘order was established with its attendant hierarchy and rankings’ (Zucker, in Kent, 2008, p. 202). It is clear that, ‘both within the royal centres and deep in the rural hinterlands, a social system acknowledging hereditary rank had developed by the early seventh century’ (Higham, 2001, p. 44).

Historian John Tully makes the point that at least by the time of Angkor¹ the kings were absolute rulers in every sense of the term. As *devarajas* ‘their power surpassed even that of the European monarchs who claimed to rule by divine right’ (Tully, 2005, p. 34). Towers in Angkor were covered with gold. Anyone wishing to make a representation at the king’s daily audiences had to abase themselves, crawling towards the monarch with their head almost touching the floor. From the first-hand account of Chinese visitor Zhou Daguan in 1297, whenever the king left the palace it would be in a magnificent procession of elephants, chariots and palanquins bearing hundreds of wives and concubines under gold filigree parasols, with the king himself, ‘erect on an elephant and holding in his hand the sacred sword’ (Zhou, 2007, p. 83). Liberty was an alien condition beyond the social imagination and

¹ The kingdom of Angkor is generally agreed to have flourished from the 9th to the 15th century.

words to express it did not exist in the language; the doctrine of reincarnation held out the promise of a better future life, if one had been honest, obedient and virtuous in this (Tully, 2005, p. 36). In seven hundred or more years little changed in Cambodia, at least up to the time of Prince Sihanouk, whose hold over the peasantry was still paramount in the 1970s.

Brinkley emphasises the importance of the system of preferment relationships and explains further:

The king sold government positions to his mandarins. Once ensconced, these aides would be awarded the right to collect rice from the farmers who lived in their respective territories and keep part of it – generally one tenth of the crop. Over time, this model naturally evolved into full-throated corruption (Brinkley, 2012, p. 23).

Even today members of Cambodian society have their position in a hierarchy established at birth and are aware of patrons immediately above them in the system, through the bureaucracy down to the village and the lowest debt-slave.² ‘If a person’s place was relatively secure, people in weaker positions sought him out and offered homage in exchange for protection’ (Chandler, 2008, p. 126). In my novel the character Mr Thiounn seeks out Mr Dith to offer information in exchange for possible future assistance. Zucker shows us that with a new regime in the 1980s the old structure of patronage remained (Zucker, in Kent, 2008, pp. 195-197) and as early as 1994 Hun Sen presided over ‘a vast unbroken patronage network for the Cambodian People’s Party’ (Brinkley, 2012, p. 87). In my novel, the mandarin and royalty class from Angkorean times are represented in the modern scenario by the Prime Minister with his ‘crony capitalists’ and high officials; the peasants are represented

² The Khmer language has no simple word for ‘you’, rather people always identify themselves in terms of their status relative to the person being addressed.

by Malee's family and the garment workers, who toil six days a week for the contemporary equivalent of a medieval subsistence. Concepts like human rights and democracy are modern imports which sit uneasily on traditional Cambodian society. Hierarchy and 'face' within the system remain highly important, and are seen in the character Pa who, even in late middle-age, is highly conscious of his standing and who sees the marriage of Malee to a Westerner as a huge increase to his 'face'.

The power of these social systems continued through a period of almost 1,400 years and the common people, the *knum*, were strictly stratified at birth. At the bottom were hereditary slaves. Some were known by titles such as *ku*, or 'born for loving', meaning they were specially bred for work as prostitutes, prices for whom were recorded in monastic records. The most numerous class were the peasants whose position remains essentially the same today as in 800 A.D. (Tully, 2005, p. 37). Another rung up from this labourer class were the soldier-builder-farmer peasants who were often in small business. Interestingly, Zhou Daguan records that, in the time of Angkor, members of this class were able to own their own slaves, most keeping at least one (Zhou, 2007, p. 59). The women of this class were prized by Chinese merchants as wives, because of their business acumen. This ability of peasant class women becomes a hallmark of the *srey kroup leakkh*, the ideal virtuous wife, which I discuss in the section on *chhbap* codes of conduct below; this concept still has a huge influence on society and literature today, and is seen in my character Malee who must remain virtuous within the era of extreme change in modern Cambodia. Through all levels of traditional society social mobility was possible, but unlikely, and while the elite had Sanskrit epithets, indicating their connection to the ancient and superior Indian culture, the commoners were identified by their Khmer names (Higham, 2001, p.44).

Systems of social hierarchy exist within the family structure as well, with rank and 'face' accorded on the basis of sex and birth order, and to emerge into society as an

autonomous person one must come from a family. The family group ‘defines and delimits the boundaries of the social world, the land in which one may safely travel, the people one may trust and upon whom one may rely’ (Davis, in Kent, 2008, p. 133). The Khmer family can be extended to include uncles, aunts, first cousins, nephews and nieces and even fictive sibling relationships similar to the ‘blood-brother’ idea (Swann, 2009, p. 38). Often extra-familial relations are expressed in familial terms as a mark of respect; for instance a much older man could be addressed as ‘grandfather’, a woman a generation older would be ‘auntie’. This training readies members for incorporation into social categories outside the family, which will all rank prestige in terms of gender, age and wealth (Davis, in Kent, 2008, p. 134), further attuning them to relationships of patronage and preference.

Thus in my novel, the oldest son, always called Number One, struggles with the renegotiation of his position in family and society after breaking his arm in a fall from a water buffalo in his early teen years. He can no longer take over the family’s fishing tradition; he must move to the city and the ‘face’ symbols with which he interacts are radically altered. Malee’s sister Reap, Number Two, has also had to transplant herself from country to city. As a garment worker she helps to support the family, maintains her position and enhances the ‘face’ of Pa within the village (Derks, in Leakthina, 2006, pp. 194-195). The friend of Pa’s who comes to Phnom Penh with him, and the friend of Malee and Reap who shares their apartment, are close to being fictive family members. This kind of de facto adoption will contribute to family strength, but also occurs on compassionate grounds regarding individuals whose own families have been depleted. But as Chandler put it, ‘Despite the apparent informality of these arrangements, there was considerable structural consistency in each Cambodian village and family’ (Chandler, 2008, p. 26). Everyone must be in a family.

Even though the social and family structure may have persisted through from Hindu to Buddhist times, the tone of life did change after the full conversion to Buddhism. Some commentators are of the view that the decline of the great Khmer empire came from the time of the first Buddhist king during the 12th century and that religious change brought a lethargy, ‘which has become habitual, and which inhibits, these eight centuries later – at least among the generality of village people – any genuine commitment to economic and social progress’ (Williams, 1969, p. 50). While this judgement is unprovable, it may well be that the passivity of Buddhism overlaid some of the creativity that had been stimulated by the extravagant Hindu gods, and became the national characteristic. This is the famous Khmer indolence which moved scholar David Chandler to refer to Cambodia in the 1960s as, ‘a drowsy, peculiar place’ (Hansen, 2008, p. 23). But this passivity was cultural, not congenital; it was conditioned by Buddhism and its literature, which I discuss below in this chapter. Speaking of the pre-Buddhist Angkor Wat, Tully makes the important point that, ‘In contradiction to the modern European stereotype of Cambodia as ‘the gentle land’, the Angkor bas-reliefs depict a warlike society. Men march in formation, armed with a variety of weapons including swords, lances, bows and arrows and clubs (Tully, 2005, p. 29). The empire of the Angkor kings had been maintained by force of arms against powerful opponents like the Chams and the Thais. So, clearly, we are not talking about ethnic timidity among the Khmer people. The change in the culture was Buddhism; the social conditions depicted in my novel – cultural materialism, factories, unions and conflict for wage justice – are radical and recent innovations as the society moves away from its religion-inspired lethargy.

As another commentator put it, ‘Khmer culture, steeped in Buddhist fatalism, was inherently passive and deferential’ (Strangio, 2014, p. 111). In the *Gatiloke*, or Way of Life monk’s tales, peasant acceptance of fate is rewarded by favourable karma and by an improvement in fortunes in lives thereafter. The desire for wealth, however, is portrayed as

wicked, as is ambition of any sort (Carrison, 1987, p. 15). Devotion to family, and acceptance of social position, is at the centre of very many tales. And in an essentially medieval society where the only police force was the soldiery of the king, the family unit was paramount for survival. The importance of family is little changed today. Memoirs of survival in the Khmer Rouge era are filled with desperate attempts by separated families to find each other after the fall of the regime. In Loung Ung's classic *First They Killed My Father*, the narrator and her family are half Chinese, and her father had worked for the previous regime. Her maternal uncle pleads with the local Khmer Rouge chief for them to remain in his village, even though the discovery of their secrets would endanger his own life (Ung, 2000, p. 39). Survival stories are full of examples of individuals risking their lives to bring precious scraps of food to their families. In Phnom Penh in 1979 there developed message walls, as described by Malee in my novel, where people returning from dismantled Khmer Rouge labour camps would write news of their whereabouts for other returning family members to find (Edwards, in Leakthina, 2006, p.30).

In a family everything is shared. Once a new member enters a family, they too are subject to this sharing (Koch, 1998, p. 376). Maslyn Williams observed that in Khmer society the preference is for relationships that are clearly defined. 'The definition of a situation and the permissible range of behavior within that situation must be mutually understood' (Williams, 1969, p. 100). In other words, Cambodians accept that when someone joins a family, that person is accepted entirely and is helped without question, but is also expected to pool and share his own assets. In my novel Ryan, who is attracted to the strength of the Cambodian family, must also come to terms with the idea that his own significant resources may now be part of a collective pool. He is challenged by some of the cultural norms attached to courtship. When he first meets Pa it is suggested that to press his suit further he must take Malee shopping. The idea of gift-giving in courtship is steeped in Khmer culture (Swann,

2009, p. 43).³ But Ryan, coming from a wealthy society where even young girls have their own money, sees this as tantamount to a purchase of Malee. Cambodia is still a very poor country where family is the sole unit of survival and Ryan is slow to adapt to this non-Western social imperative.

This duty to family does not stop at death. I have mentioned that Cambodian Theravada Buddhism is a syncretism of early Indian Buddhism and pre-existing ancient animism, with Hindu aspects. This world is full of spirits; some are the spirits of a natural phenomenon such as a forest or a river, but many are those of ancestors. While many of these ancestor spirits are benign and helpful many, especially those of people who have died an untimely or violent death, are not (North, 2008, p. 57). These wandering, unhappy spirits need to be encouraged to return to the shrines which can be seen in homes and shops everywhere in Cambodia to this day⁴. Mementoes and food offerings are laid out, special funeral ceremonies are conducted and, importantly, gifts and prayers are offered at the annual *Pchum Benh* ancestor festival. All those murdered by the Khmer Rouge become bad spirits, as do those who die in accidents, and women who die in childbirth (Swann, 2009, p. 42). This connection to the spirits of ancestors, as well as those of the land and forest, keeps the Khmer people famously connected to their village and region, traditionally unwilling to move for career or business (Work, in Brickell, 2016, p. 395).

In my novel the *Pchum Benh* is scrupulously observed. The family and the village are fortunate to have Khmer Rouge survivors such as Pa, who remember the traditional ways and can show leadership in the restoration of culture. Some villages do not. Eve Monique Zucker has conducted her own ethnographic research in villages which have lost their population of elders in the Khmer Rouge time and have struggled to retain their customs and ceremonies. In

³ In the famous love tragedy *Tum Teav*, discussed in detail below, even the governor of the province, his son having selected the beautiful Teav as his future wife, must send excellent foodstuffs to her mother to establish his suit (Chigas, 2006, p. 72-75).

⁴ These are usually referred to in Cambodia as 'spirit house' and their importance will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

some places these symbols of interaction have been lost for all time (Zucker, in Kent, 2006, pp. 195-212). In my novel I have chosen to present the village as sufficient in elders, monks and achars⁵; as such the proper ceremonies can be shown. My own field research⁶ reflects that educated young people of the current generation of 18-29 year olds have retained a significant level of belief in these traditional spirit beings. The importance of characters like Pa in Cambodian society cannot be underestimated and the revival of *Pchum Benh* is central to spirit belief as well as providing an important platform for the reunion of families dispersed by the new capitalism and its city-based factory work.

There are innumerable references to spirits in the literary works of the Cambodians, both traditional and modern. In the classical romantic poem *Tum Teav*, mentioned above, the young monk Tum boasts that villagers, ‘Depend on my magic chants and knowledge of/ Ghosts, village spirits and sorcerers’ (Chigas, 2005, p. 62). This quote also reveals the syncretism of state Buddhism with the animism of the peasant people. A little earlier in the poem, when Tum departs from his mother she says to him, ‘Another thing you can do concerns the ancestor’s spirits / They usually take care of us in every way / Therefore, help me to placate them’ (Chigas, 2005, p. 57). Spirits are ubiquitous. In the rebound to Buddhism in the 1990s there was a renewed emphasis on the *Pchum Ben*, as so many people felt the guilt of having survived the Pol Pot time and a consequent need to honour those who had perished (Harris, in Sothirak, 2012, p. 321). The fear of bad spirits existed on both sides of the civil conflict. In the novel *Highways to a War* the protagonists stop at night to watch soundless green arcs of tracer rounds across the river; it is the Khmer Rouge, scaring off ghosts from their camps (Koch, 1998, p. 246). For all their Maoist political indoctrination, Khmer Rouge cadres were almost universally country lads of little education other than the Buddhist stories, still frightened of ghosts and bad spirits.

⁵ Achars are lay people specialising in ceremonies – often former monks.

⁶ I discuss my field research more fully in Chapter Four.

Under the Khmer Rouge a return to traditional practices of the Cambodian peasantry was sponsored, in medicine as well as in religion. Trained doctors and nurses were killed and superstitions in medical treatment were revived. One such practice involved the placement of a coal fire under the beds of pregnant women during childbirth; it was thought that the heat from the fire would strengthen the hearts of the mothers and stop the bleeding (Best, 2005, p. 117). Women were also made to consume large amounts of alcohol during the birthing procedure. My central female character, Malee, has been inspired to study modern nursing techniques by the death of an aunt under these circumstances. This is the experience that has turned her away from superstition. To this day magical powers are attributed to senior members of the *sangha*, such as the Venerable Om Lim Heng who has extended the traditional practice of sprinkling water on lay followers to ‘the use of a power hose to lustrate the luxury automobiles of his supporters’ (Harris, in Sothirak, 2012, p. 328). His religio-magical entrepreneurialism has seen him rise to be the quasi-official chaplain of the Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has made at least one donation to Om’s wat of \$110,000 (ibid). The magical traditions are alive and well in modern Cambodia.

According to tradition, spirits can take the physical form of birds and can intervene in human life. Penny Edwards observes that, ‘The Khmer word *sat* denotes either an animal or a bird. The compound *sat lok* refers to sentient beings, while birds who enter a house are still referred to as *sat daun ta*, ancestral-birds, or birds carrying messages from ancestors’ (Edwards, in Hansen and Ledgerwood, 2008, p. 143). My field interviews with young Cambodians reveal there is still a significant, widely held belief that large black birds⁷ are the harbingers of bad luck, and that if they alight on a house, sickness and death will follow if they are not immediately frightened away by throwing stones or making loud noises. These special beliefs in birds are examined in my novel, where the dramatic appearance of a pair of

⁷ Essentially crows, generally called ravens by Cambodians with English language skills.

ravens leads directly to the deaths of two characters. Many members of the older generation believe completely in the power of these birds, and even the university-trained medical student Malee, who considers herself a scientist, cannot stop herself from relapsing into shivers when hearing the story of their visit. This aspect of Malee's character portrait is supported by my interviews with educated young Cambodians. About 40 per cent of my participants believed in the power of these birds⁸ while another 20 per cent were unsure, awaiting the appearance of evidence. I maintain that the appearance of ravens as seen in *Made in Cambodia* is the kind of proof that would convince many.

In my novel it is clear that the funeral is the place where transition to the spirit world occurs. As mentioned earlier, Buddhism in Cambodia sits comfortably enough with more ancient animistic beliefs. 'A belief still prevails in Cambodia that the spirits of ancestors remain in their familiar earthly surroundings while in some transitory mode to the next life' (North, 2008, p. 57). The connection to ancestors and the spirit houses provided for them to live in has made Cambodian people notoriously bound to their villages and hometowns, reluctant to move for the sake of commercial opportunities or career. Harris notes the psychological burden which developed in Cambodian people, knowing that their relatives had not been properly cremated in the Pol Pot time, and this led to a renewed emphasis on the *Pchum Benh* (Harris, in Sothirak, 2012, p. 321). Accumulation of merit for the next life may depend on such attention to ancestors. Furthermore, the deceased does not stop accumulating merit at death. 'Buddhism allows the transfer of additional merit from loved ones to the deceased during the period between the moment of death and the moment of cremation. This belief provides additional purpose to the Cambodian funeral' (North, 2008, p.90). The traditional funeral celebrations in many places have been scaled back in length and detail,

⁸ They also believed strongly that Buddhist monks can fight the birds through prayer and chanting, as they can fight other negative spirits.

generally from seven days to three, but the procedures are still elaborate, as is shown in my novel with the ceremony for Meach and Kim, and another for Cris⁹.

So we can see that beliefs in spirits have been deeply grained into Cambodian society for a very long time and have only been seriously challenged in the last two decades. To understand how these beliefs were sustained over more than a thousand years it is important to look at the way the Buddhist classical literature of Cambodia anchored them deep in the culture and made them a daily instruction; while doing so the literature also entrenched paradigms of class and gender identity for Cambodian people over many centuries.

Traditional Literature

The classical literature of Cambodia was inspired by Indian literature and ‘was linked to two institutions: the palaces of princes and mandarins, and the Buddhist monasteries’ (Nepote, 1981, p. 56). The purpose of these literary texts was firstly to show the social hierarchy as existing for good reason, and then to discourage ambition among the lower classes; the result is epic poetry, verse novels, code of conduct guides called *chhbap*, and the tales of monks, sometimes called the *Gatiloke* or Way of Life. As Chigas put it, ‘The monarchy supported the religious institutions, which in turn served to affirm the monarch’s status as god-king ... the religious, historical and literary functions of writing were interrelated and interdependent’ (Chigas, in Smyth, 2000, p. 135). Brinkley puts it in the most practical way by quoting historian David Ayres’ study of 20th-century education in Cambodia: ‘Students were equipped to become citizens in a system in which they were taught to refer to themselves as slaves and to willingly accept the necessity of their subservience to individuals of higher social status’ (Brinkley, 2012, p. 211). This impact on the Khmer consciousness remains powerful today.

⁹ A follow-up event is generally held one hundred days after the main ceremony.

Because early Khmer writing in book form was composed on palm leaves which had been blackened and scratched with a stylus, virtually everything written before the 18th Century has been destroyed by humidity and insects (Edwards, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 32). However, the early Khmers did leave around 1200 stone inscriptions in the Angkor region, composed in either Sanskrit, Khmer, or from the 13th century in Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism. According to historian Tully they show that the elites of Angkor were highly literate and that, ‘those who wrote the inscriptions had a lively sense of style, with a love of puns and figures of speech and an appreciation of tragedy and comedy’ (Tully, 2005, p. 19). But the literature with direct influence on the common people began to be composed in the 15th and 16th centuries. There are two main types I will discuss: first, the more formal epic poems and verse novels, which demonstrate the rightness of the social order; and then the *chhbap*, or codes of conduct, which, with the *Gatiloke* or Way of Life stories, provide life exemplars aimed directly at the huge peasant class. They ‘simply took children from the rice fields and gave them back to the rice fields’ (Brinkley, 2012, p. 211). All these forms of communication have an influence on the social conditions I examine in my novel, especially regarding the struggle of younger female characters with traditional gendered characteristics within an environment of extreme change, and in the adherence of the characters of Pa and Ma to spirit beliefs.

The epic poem of central importance is the *Reamker* (Honour of Rama), the Cambodian version of the Indian *Ramayana*. Texts of the *Reamker* date from the 17th century, but bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat indicate that the story had been known for centuries before that. Khmer people would have known the *Reamker* through the performances of professional travelling storytellers and dancers (Nepote, 1981, p. 263)¹⁰. Many commentators have pointed to the didactic elements in the written and dramatic performances of this work

¹⁰ The text was, in fact, simplified from the Indian original to accommodate live performance.

(Chandler 2008, Schiefflin 1979); ‘they link the supernatural and physical worlds in a deep and personal way’ (Smith, in Ebihara, 1994, p. 147). The imagery of the *Reamker* has resonance to this day. Prach, the man dubbed ‘Cambodia’s first rap star’ (Stewart, 2004, p. 79), who grew up in the large Cambodian community in Long Beach California, has a tattoo of Hanuman, the monkey warrior from the *Ramayana*, prominent on his arm (Leakthina, 2006, p. 103). For Prach the image is one of cultural identity, whereas for the Khmer people the story of the *Reamker* portrays the hierarchical position of the king and aristocracy as rightly won, after a long and difficult struggle against evil forces. This story ‘was Hindu originally but the Cambodian versions, both literary and popular, represent the hero, Ram, as the Buddha’ (Jacob, 1996, p. 8). The Buddha and the king, the religion and the hierarchy, are thus merged, and the character types are starkly drawn.

James R Brandon codified Cambodian theatre in 1967 and pointed out how the characters are strongly cast into six main types: gods, nobility, ascetics, clown servants, middle-class urbanites and peasants/labourers. The drama involves a ‘structural pattern of extension’, rather than the Western theatrical ‘psychological introspection’ (Brandon, 1967, pp. 116-117). Therefore the character types on the stage, while stereotypes by some standards, are clearly meant as models for the audience to identify with and to follow. Obeisance to hierarchy, which runs right through Khmer family and society (and which has come under challenge only very recently, as shown in my novel), is clearly exemplified in this literature, which retains a powerful presence in Cambodian theatre today. Revivals of classical dance regularly feature performance of excerpts from the *Reamker*. In my novel the two main characters take a forward step in their romance at a performance of the Sovannah Phum Classical Dance Association; a section from the *Reamker* is performed where Hanuman’s monkey army beset evil ogres. Ryan symbolically submits to an Asian social structure when he confirms his interest in Malee at the end of this performance. The *Reamker*

is still a greatly revered work in the Cambodian social fabric. An example of its influence arose in my March 2016 interview with prominent writer Suong Mak, where he revealed that he is a nearly obsessive fan (2016, pers. comm., 28 March).

Verse novels, which emerged in the 18th century, were largely based on *jataka* tales, stories of the Bodhisatvas¹¹, and were even more lesson-rich than the *Reamker*. These stories were written by monks and ‘usually the author would choose to write about a Bodhisatva who lived as a prince but there are some verse-novels whose hero is a humble animal such as a frog’ (Jacob, 1996, p. 8). With direct references to the Buddha, these meritorious lives are meant to be inspirationally instructional. However, there is one very famous verse novel, *Tum Teav*, which is a tragic love story based on real life events occurring in the 17th century. The story was passed down orally until the 19th century, when it was written down by the poet Santhor Mok (Jacob, 1996, p. 47). I want to discuss the *Tum Teav* in detail, partly because of its great popular influence to this day, but also because its lessons against reckless love are directly relevant to female characters in *Made in Cambodia*.

Tum Teav is a substantial work¹²; it is still taught in schools to 8th to 10th grade students and has twice been made into a full-length film. Musician, playwright and writer for the National Theatre, Hang Soth, reminds us that *Tum Teav* was serialised in a newspaper in 1960 and that in 1990, after the Vietnamese withdrawal, a play of the story was performed live in the Chaktomuk Theatre, Phnom Penh: ‘The capacity of the theater was 1,200 people, and it was full twice a day for three months’ (Chigas, 2005, p. 218). The play went on to be performed again by the National Theatre in 1993. The many lessons in the story support the strict and conservative society of Cambodia, and, by extension, the moral universe of each member of the Cambodian family in my novel.

¹¹ The succession of lives which led Gautama Sidhartha (Buddha) to Nirvana.

¹² 1044 four-line verses of poetry covering one hundred and thirteen pages of A5 book paper.

Tum is a monk who falls in love with Teav, and she with him. In Chapter Two which, in the translation and analysis by George Chigas, is tellingly titled *Tum's Sin*, Tum's abbot, having consulted the horoscope or 'the numbers', delays permission for Tum to leave the pagoda and marry because the horoscope says he will suffer if he acts impetuously (Chigas, 2005, p. 51). Later in the chapter the abbot consults the numbers in more detail and the prediction is that Tum will die if he leaves¹³. Tum sins by disrespecting his abbot, by following his passions and placing himself above the Buddhist code of order; then he further violates the rules by disrobing without the abbot's permission and leaving his saffron garments in the forest, a wild place full of bad spirits. Teav also was at fault. George Chigas interviewed famous writer Pal Vannarirak, (who is discussed in Chapter Three of this exegesis on modern literature and identity). Vannarirak says, 'Teav is at fault when she does not obey the ancient culture and traditions of the society. Why does she fall in love with someone, especially with a monk?' (Chigas, 2005, p. 226). Not only is Tum eventually killed but Teav slits her own throat in grief. Teav must die as she has disobeyed her mother by refusing to marry the Governor's son in what would have been an excellent match for the family, and has had sex with Tum as well.

As Chigas himself noted, 'the codes of conduct described in the story are still relevant in Cambodia today' (Chigas, 2005, p. 225). Self-control must extend even as far as matters of love and obedience to the choice made by a parent, particularly in rural settings. The moral dilemmas of village girls who have come to live in the city is examined in *Made in Cambodia*. There is a character who enters a relationship with a French man from an NGO. For a girl from a village background this is a significant gamble. After three months she raises the idea of marriage and children: he disappears from her life immediately. She is now tarnished goods and her chances of an auspicious marriage back in the village are virtually

¹³ In the same chapter Teav asks her Nanny to check the numbers to discover whether Tum will come for her. Both times the predictions are right, confirming the Cambodian belief in astrology/numerology/magic.

completely destroyed. She must take her chances with Phnom Penh men from here, a prospect which fills the other female characters with dread. Her only other option is to become a professional girlfriend for Western men, as seen in the Kratie girl in my novel. This is a perilous situation which I discuss more fully in Chapter Four. It should also not be forgotten that the spectre of this relationship disaster must remain in the mind of Malee at all times. She *thinks* Ryan is a good man; she *feels* that she can trust him. But she will never know until they are married. This is a balance to the doubts that Ryan has about the extent to which he is loved for himself, or exploited for his assets.

While *Tum Teav* exemplifies good and bad behavior, there are codes of conduct called *chhbap*, which give an even more direct and practical guide to living. They are as old as the 17th century and ‘have been well-loved and much quoted so that many short passages have become proverbial’ (Jacob, 1996, p. 29). Most of the *chhbap* were written by monks and were used to teach reading, writing and moral principles and have been recited in temple schools for hundreds of years. The *Chhap Kram* urges pupils to a disciplined attitude. The *Chhap Prus* tells a tale of woe when the Chinese money-lenders want their payment: ‘sometimes they tie your feet together and hang you upside down’ (Jacob, 1996, p. 30). This tale bemoans the folly of gambling and avarice, a close link to the many monks’ tales which instruct against ambition and the desire for wealth.

The role of women is extensively covered in this literature and is highly relevant to life in Cambodia today, particularly to the dilemmas confronting the young women in my novel. Kearen Fisher-Nguyen’s work on Khmer proverbs demonstrates the central importance of the ‘virtuous and exemplary woman’ (Fisher-Nguyen, in Ebihara, 1994, pp. 100-101). Judith M Jacob points out that it is often expressed in the *chhbap* that a house has an air of contentment because the wife is a good manager. She quotes a *chhbap* called the *Rajanette*: ‘The kite flies because of the wind, the officer is glorious because his men keep

him secure, possessions are kept safe because the woman knows how to save. It is a contented house because the wife is good' (Jacob, 1996, p. 30). But it is the *Chhbap Srey* (Woman's Code of Conduct), which is the most important. This work was written in rhyme and has been chanted in schools, memorised, copied down and used in tests for hundreds of years (Amratisha, in Leakthina, 2006, pp. 155-156). 'A woman should be shy, soft and sweet in her communication, avoid speaking loudly, move without being heard, and she must be protected, ideally never leaving the company of her relatives before her marriage' (Hiwasa, in Waibel, 2014, p. 133). The *Chhap Srey* was officially taken off the school curriculum as recently as 2007, although, as historian Brinkley points out, the Minister for Women's Affairs, Ing Kantha Phavi recently acknowledged that it is still taught in rural schools; this in a nation which is 80 per cent rural (Brinkley, 2012, p. 212).

My two characters, Malee and Reap, were brought up in rural schools and raised amid the expectations contained in the *chhbap*. This concept of the perfectly virtuous woman (the *srey kroup leakkh*) became an ideal at the centre of Cambodian culture. It reappeared very strongly in the literature of the post-Khmer Rouge recovery period of the 1980s and 1990s¹⁴, as the nation struggled to rebuild its culture, and is still influential (Amratisha, in Leakthina, 2006, pp. 159-160). Malee and Reap may have been raised in this code but, because of the radically changed circumstances in the modern Cambodian economy, must exist in the city and retain the morals of the village while doing so. This phenomenon of the displaced young woman has been much discussed by academics (Derks, in Leakthina, 2006, pp. 195-198) and provides moments of paradox in my novel as the supposedly shy and soft Malee and Reap must behave dynamically and risk their well-being on Cambodia's dangerous highways to return to their families, and for Malee to make a vital contact with Ryan. To a considerable extent Malee remains true to the women's code: she is softly spoken and clever; she

¹⁴ Officially approved by the Vietnamese occupation force; see Chapter Three for more detail.

engineers an outcome which suits her family well. The feisty Reap struggles throughout to control her emotional nature, and finds outlet in the garment worker demonstrations. Reap is fated to return to the village as a virgin bride (Derks, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 194)¹⁵, as would Malee but for her medical education. Still, Malee's choice of Ryan as a partner constitutes a risk. The reader should be well aware that Ryan could leave the country at a moment's notice. Malee could experience great anxiety in such a position, but she manages it well, as an ideal woman should.

Yet more lessons come in the closely related *Gatiloke* folk tales, which were 'told from generation to generation by word of mouth. It was only in the late nineteenth century that they were written down and published' (Carrison, 1987, p. 11), 'providing models that demonstrate the good that comes to people who do good (*thvoe bon*) and the karmic consequences awaiting those who do bad (*thvoe bap*)' (Ledgerwood, in Ebihara, 1994, p. 119). Often specifically it is the desire for wealth outside the limits of one's *kama* which brings down the central characters in these stories (Carrison, 1987, p. 15). Devotion to family and acceptance of social position is at the centre of many tales, and at the centre of the family again is the ideal woman. In the story of *Mea Yoeung*, a young wife is swapped by her wealthy but lustful husband for a more attractive woman. Being a model of obedience, Mea Yoeung goes without complaint to her new husband (a deal which the lower class husband must also accept without question) and then guides him, through her quiet wisdom and intelligence, from poverty to wealth, while her once-wealthy former husband pays for his lust by falling to penury through the indolence and carelessness of his new wife. The perfect wife engineers her husband's fate to its maximum potential because she has earned merit in her past lives and in turn gains merit for both her husband and herself in future lives (Ledgerwood, in Ebihara, 1994, pp. 120-121; Amratisha, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 160).

¹⁵ The internal conflict this causes in young women is discussed more fully in Chapter Four.

Contrasting the Mea Yoeung tale is the story of the origin of the kounlok bird. A widow abandons her three girls when she meets a man who brings her money from his robberies. When she eventually goes to find her daughters where she left them in the jungle it is too late; the spirit of the forest has almost completed their transformation into birds, and they fly away with their famous mournful kounlok cry: they are avian now, but still remember their humanity. The woman, who has committed the dual sins of abandoning her family and also succumbing to the desire for wealth, dies of exhaustion and starvation after following the fleeing birds through the jungle (Stewart, 2004, p. 43). This story is from an ancient literary tradition, with elements of animism and spirit presence coming from pre-Hindu stories of the 2nd century (Jacob, 1996, p. 4). Many other stories are re-workings of Stone Age beliefs in spirits and magic. Many are derived from the teaching of Gautama Sidhartha around 500 BC and focus on individual responsibility and self-reliance. Interestingly, some stories survive in rejection of introduced Brahmanic practices such as human sacrifice, cruelty to animals and the view of women as possessions. Neolithic Cambodian culture before Hinduism held women in high esteem and resisted these aspects of Indian 'civilisation' throughout (Carrison, 1987, p. 17). The central position of the woman in the family and the acknowledgement of female wisdom would be unlikely to have existed in Hinduism.

The social and political implications of all these literary art forms are that princes rightly occupy their exalted positions because they are descended from kings who have won great wars in a mythical past, that men must work hard and that women have a responsibility to act as rudders in their families' lives. All of the literary forms discussed above regained a position of significance in the decades of restoration after the fall of the Khmer Rouge and have been used in the re-creation of national identity; they have become symbols to which the Cambodian people attach themselves, the evidence of which is seen in *Made in Cambodia*.

These traditions are being kept in the forefront of the public consciousness. The stories of the *Reamker* are performed in dance by the Sovannah Phum Classical Dance Association in Phnom Penh every week; and folk tales, as well as *Reamker* excerpts, are performed by Cambodia Living Arts six nights a week at the National Museum (Cambodian Living Arts, 2016, para 1). A few years after delivery from Pol Pot, the classical dancer Chea Samy was found by the Ministry of Culture to be still living and ‘she and a handful of other dancers and musicians slowly brought together a ragged, half-starved bunch of orphans and castaways and with the discipline of their long rigorous years of training they began to resurrect the art’ (Ghosh, 1998, p. 18). The story of Chea Samy’s return to a public position is typical and the renaissance of these arts, as well as the moral codes contained within them, has become emblematic of Cambodia’s return to nationhood.

Theravada Buddhism embraced the animism of the Khmer people, and their monks taught the peasantry that ambition was evil and that destiny and reincarnation would provide the justice not visible on earth. Epic stories, verse poems, codes of conduct and monks’ tales supported the passive and deferential Khmer society for centuries. This position was violently shattered when the Khmer Rouge offered peasant boys guns and power in the 1970s (Chandler, 2008, p. 256), destroying Buddhism and separating families as they went. After the Vietnamese invasion in 1979 and a decade of the milder socialism of their government through the 1980s, the people still craved a return to interaction with the kind of Buddhist symbolism and certainty which sustains the Cambodian characters of my novel. The return to cultural symbols, followed by new social forces associated with the introduction of international capital have created a far more complex and contestable nation.

Chapter Two

Two Cambodias: Symbolic Interaction and Conflict Theory

The world of *Made in Cambodia* is drawn heavily from the social universe I observed during my first visits to Cambodia in 2010 and 2011. I was particularly struck by the strength of the family and by the level of observance of animistic and ancestor spirits, as well as by the persistently robust position that traditional Khmer culture had retained in the hearts of the people. Although many young Cambodians had been displaced from their village or town into the city, their commitment to ideals of family and religion still seemed strong. My observations of the interactions of individuals with the symbolism of hierarchy and ritual became a strong thematic platform for the novel.

Subsequent informal field work in Phnom Penh was rich in anecdotal encounters, which provided models for aspects of characters in *Made in Cambodia*. One such person was a hospitality worker in a Riverside café whose dream was to return to her province to be a rice farmer. She had studied accountancy at the Royal University of Phnom Penh and calculated that she needed US\$1800 to set up. After sending money home to her parents each month she would set aside ten dollars from her monthly wage of US\$130 toward this goal; it would take fifteen years to achieve her aim. Despite her city freedom this girl, and many like her, remained culturally attuned to the village. She never bared her legs in public and even wore button down sleeves at all times; the struggle to retain traditional morals in a city environment became another theme in my novel. Once a month this girl had three consecutive days off and she would return to what she always called her ‘homeland’. The village was a place of order and within its structure she felt natural and secure. Many aspects of my fictional characters Malee and Reap, as well as that of Pa, come directly from these empirically collected family stories.

At Khmer New Year in April, and Pchum Ben Ancestor Festival in September, Phnom Penh empties out as students, café staff, garment workers and office assistants all clog the highways to return home; families are visited and religious rituals observed. Through the rest of the year shrines or ‘spirit houses’ in shops, homes and cafes are furnished with fresh fruit, coffee and donuts for ancestor spirits to enjoy; further interaction with the symbols of traditional dancing, with its re-enactment of folk tales and stories from the *Reamker*, seemed to help sustain the lives of the powerless majority. It was a point of Khmer Rouge dogma that such recondite Buddhist rituals had been constructed to keep the peasantry in their place, anchored in a historical past. But the Year Zero approach of the Khmer Rouge failed to take permanent root (Strangio, 2014, pp. 14-19; Chandler, 1999, pp.104-108); the world of the recovery period from the 1990s became filled with the return to ritual, and so is the world of my novel.

To rationalise and explain the strength of powerless groups within a traditional society, I researched a number of philosophical and sociological systems. The Symbolic Interaction ideas of Max Weber and George Herbert Mead give a productive account of the way village and family hierarchies have constructed fulfilling lives for peasant groups over millennia. But a transformation of Cambodian life has begun in the last fifteen years with an influx of international capital, and I also look at certain aspects of the work of Karl Marx to understand the impact of this new system.

The Social Rubrics of Max Weber

Max Weber was a sociologist and philosopher of the early twentieth century who steered sociology towards the study of social action through interpretive means. Weber examined the religions of the world ¹⁶ with particular interest in their conditions of social stratification and

¹⁶ Most particularly those of India and China, and also Judaism.

economic impacts. He takes account of complex social relationships and attributes causal efficacy to a range of interacting political, moral, environmental, religious and artistic factors (Campbell, 1981, p. 175). Essentially, Weber organised life around three main categories of type indicators: four types of meaningful human action; three forms of social relationships; and three valid systems of order, all of which pertain to an understanding of the social cosmos of *Made in Cambodia*.

Weber's four types of meaningful human action are: 1. Goal Rational, whether 'rational' (i.e. appropriate or achievable) or not, 2. Value Rational, as in always telling the truth, 3. Feelings Dominated, or affective and emotion based, and 4. Traditionalist, or habitual conduct derived from established practices and respect for existing authority. Individuals vary greatly whether they are mostly goal, value, affective or traditional in their personal style, and may engage in different types of action at different times. Importantly, Weber insists that there is no universal set of social values; rather people must choose their own values from the range of options available (ibid, p. 178). Still, as his account allows that people will tend to make value choices on the basis of the authority structure of the society in which they live, it follows that the educational and cultural background of each person will directly influence choice.

My own observations have supported the idea that Weber's concept of Traditionalist action is highly applicable to Cambodian society. The researched material presented in Chapter One supports this idea; much Feelings Dominated action has been suppressed by Buddhism and its literature. In accordance with Weber's interpretive paradigm I would further contend that Value Rational action has been prized by this traditional society, which has long suppressed Goal Rational behaviour. I would argue that in the last fifteen years there has been a radical opening of the field of choices in Cambodia – and much switching of required behaviours – which has placed burdens of stress on young people. In *Made in*

Cambodia, Malee has had to switch from her upbringing in the Traditional model, an aspiring *srey kroup leakh*, or traditional ideal wife, to become a Goal Rational achievement-oriented professional woman. This transformation could be seen as emblematic of change in the new Cambodia. Malee's sister Reap stands for a huge part of Cambodia's population whose education has been limited. She struggles to continue to suppress her Feelings Dominated side, which has been excited by city life and most particularly by the conflict conditions of unionised protest. Brother Number One has struggled greatly with his new role; he will be discussed further below. Whether young people experiencing this level of change will continue to countenance such value-laden arcania as the belief in ghosts and spirits is a matter which I address in my forty interviews with young Cambodians, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

For Weber the social relationship is the atom of society, and the actor in a social situation takes account of the actions of others and is oriented by these interactions (Weber, 1964, p. 118). Social relationships take three forms: 1. Conflict – varying from physical combat to controlled competitive interactions, 2. Communal – families, national communities, traditional societies, and 3. Associative – based on values or expediency (Campbell, 1981, p. 180)¹⁷. According to Weber, actual social relationships may involve complex combinations of these types, but I would argue here that the interactions of Buddhism and its literature, as established in Chapter One, are overwhelmingly designed to achieve a Communal outcome and to minimise the Conflict outcome. The acceptance of born position (as seen in the *Reamker*), and the discouragement of ambition (as seen in the *Gatiloke* stories), are critically important. Born position involves accepting a position within a family and in a village, and it is the privileges and responsibilities of these positions which give meaning to the individuals' lives. Further, the appropriate observance of these

¹⁷ Associative relationships are characteristic of modern industrial society and of the Cambodian garment worker unions in particular.

responsibilities ensures promotion to higher order lives in the next. The maintenance of ancestor spirit houses, attendance at Pchum Benh and other festivals, observance of funeral and wedding traditions, and respect for the positions of others in the hierarchy, are all important interaction symbols within this framework and also themes which run through *Made in Cambodia*, particularly in the village sections.

But since around 2000, with the introduction of capitalism leading workers to associate in unions, I would observe that the Associative framework of life is now taking a central position, and that this works against the preservation of millennia of hierarchical village interaction. This Associative interaction is in conflict with capital and leads to the kind of industrial/class conflict I have explored in the novel (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 29 December 2014, viewed 6 December 2016). It is worth noting that it is not only peasant or working class people who feel internal conflict at these changes. The Prime Minister, Hun Sen, is himself a Buddhist who donates generously to a wat which engages in all the traditional magical symbolism of the past (Harris, in Sothirak, 2012, p.328). Yet he has also fostered the introduction of capitalism which has led to a Marxian conflict model of society, thence to the demonstrations by garment workers, which he himself goes on to suppress, lethally if need be.

According to Weber all human relations must fit into a system or order, which has greatest significance when it is believed to be legitimate. Weber codified three valid types of order: 1. Traditional authority – resting on the sanctity of long-established rules and the legitimacy of those who have inherited the right to command under those rules, 2. Charismatic authority – of religious or military leaders who have outstanding personal qualities and, 3. Rational or legal authority – where power comes from a set of rules such as elections or other sanctifying processes (Campbell, 1981, p. 182). In Cambodia, traditional authority came from the time of the Khmer kings down to Sihanouk as late as 1970, when he

was deposed by military coup. The American-backed government of Lon Nol from 1970-1975, and then the following Khmer Rouge regime, lacked this traditional authority. Pol Pot failed to turn his position of power into one of charismatic authority by overlooking the need for a personality cult around himself, turning away from the example already set by the Chinese and North Koreans (Chandler, 1999, p. 148). Since the Khmer Rouge time a form of monarchy remains, with King Sihamoni retaining a ceremonial position; but he is a very long way from real power.

It is the Vietnamese-supported government of Hun Sen which has tried to rest itself on the rational authority invested in it by elections, but his election results have been clouded by accusations of vote-rigging, intimidation and even murder of opposition party workers (Brinkley, 2011, pp. 164-165). Even when he lost the election in 1993, Hun Sen continued as de facto Prime Minister until his military coup in 1997. In the 1990s Cambodians were tired of conflict and tacitly accepted Hun Sen's display of power and the support which he enjoyed from the elite (McCargo, 2004, pp. 98-112). He and his party do have a solid supporter base in the country and Hun Sen himself is considered by many to have some Charismatic appeal. But, resting primarily on its control of the military and police, his government lacks legitimacy in Weberian terms. In the late 1990s and early 2000s his government spent five per cent of its funds on health and forty per cent on defence, to pay the huge army full of Khmer Rouge defectors Hun Sen had allowed in, and who were loyal to him (Chandler, 2009, pp. 291-293).

The violent garment worker repressions, which I explore in my novel, reflect Hun Sen's confrontational methods. The base of opposition to these methods is growing. Cambodian-born Teri Yamada of the California State University points out the growing Associative support for garment workers being forged with the large number of university students who now face unemployment in Phnom Penh and elsewhere in Cambodia. 'What

unifies college students and garment workers is their mutual despair and disgust over government corruption' (Yamada, 2014, para 5). A recent garment workers' demonstration turned into a march on Hun Sen's private home. The link between the Prime Minister, the factory owners, the police and courts, and the lack of their Traditional, Charismatic or Legal authority, to put it again in Weberian terms, was clearly expressed by demonstrators who bemoaned what they considered electoral fraud as well as low wages. Images of the event clearly show Buddhist monks were also beaten and detained after this march was intercepted (Getty Images, 2013, Para 1). In response to this, protests against electoral vote-rigging have been specifically banned and journalists have been beaten at demonstrations. In a 2007 survey of 150 journalists, 54 per cent said they had been threatened with physical harm or legal action in the course of their work (Strangio, 2014, p. 197).

Thus, Weber codified ideal social relationships, ways of human action and methods of legitimate authority, all of which can be used to explore the transition from traditional Cambodian society. But it is the work of George Herbert Mead which focused more deeply on the role of symbols in keeping traditional societies together.

George Herbert Mead and Symbolic Interaction

Mead has built on Weber's work by discussing how mind and what he called 'the self' emerge from Weber's codified social processes. Mead analyses society by addressing the subjective meanings that people derive from objects, events, and behaviors in social settings.

The ideas of Mead can be reduced to three basic premises:

- Firstly, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
- Secondly, these meanings are a product of social interaction in human society.

- Thirdly, these meanings are modified and handled through an interpretive process that is used by each individual in dealing with the signs he or she encounters.

(Meltzer, 1975, p. 1).

Reasoning power in human beings, as manifested in their individual and social behaviour, involves reference to the relationships between things by the use of symbols that are learned through interaction, and the most potent shared symbols are those of language, including vocal gestures and the behaviour that is linked to them (ibid, p. 36). These behaviours and gestures very often relate to social position and authority. The establishment of social control and co-operation, which is necessary for the survival of society, depends upon the degree to which individuals in society are able to assume the attitudes of the others who are involved with them in a common endeavour. It has even been said that in Mead's work, 'An individual is merely an abstraction from a social group' (Tremmel, 1957, p. 12). Mead's view is that the self and the mind are products of participation in group life. They emerge in the process of interaction which a young child carries on with other human beings. Mead declares 'that one gets outside of oneself by taking the role of another human being or set of human beings ... thus putting oneself in the position of approaching oneself or addressing oneself from the standpoint of that role' (Rhea, 1981, p. 140).

The high social development of humans depended on them taking these experiences and 'the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself' (Mead, 1934, p. 134). This idea of 'the self' is that human beings become objects to themselves. The absorption of value-laden activities by individuals has the result that people see themselves as a nationality group, sick or well, as an occupation or profession with the concept of a good future/no future etc. 'The human being may come to be many different objects to himself, and in being an object to himself the human being stands over against himself, can approach and talk to

himself, and thus is put in a position of interacting with himself' (Rhea, 1981, p. 138). For Mead, a self exists when the human being selects and points out things to himself and uses these things to organise and direct his conduct. I contend that the world of the traditional Cambodian family and village is replete with the symbols of authority and control, with villages structured from the Head Man down, and families designed with a male head, such as Pa in *Made in Cambodia*, (Zucker, in Kent, 2007, p. 197), and with a central female possessing a clear role, the elements of which have been discussed in Chapter One. Further, there are rich ritual practices of Buddhism centred around the accumulation of merit: following the five precepts¹⁸; engaging appropriately on holy days including prescribed abstinence from food; gift giving to monks; and contributions to the restoration of temples (Ledgerwood, in Kent, 2007, pp. 152-159). When one adds attendance at festivals such as Pchum Benh, New Year and others, there are abundant rich symbols which give the impression of eternal rightness to the social and religious order.

Mead takes the example of Robinson Crusoe (Corti, 1973, p. 49) who, on the morning after his shipwreck, wakes to find his ship has been carried by the tide more than a quarter of a mile offshore. He swims out and constructs a raft to retrieve items from the ship. He selects items of social importance over practical: the 'social character of the perceptual process is an abstraction from a much more concrete social attitude toward the perceptual field' (Mead, 1950, p 150). In other words, people start from social attitudes and perceive each act in terms of its symbolic value first. In traditional Cambodian society a very clear hold on symbolic values of objects and gestures was achieved by authorities early in its history: for example the account of Chinese visitor Zhou Dagan which I cited in Chapter One – the king astride a caparisoned elephant with the sacred sword in his hand. The authority of the king rested on symbols as much as on muscle and weaponry (Zhou, 2007, p. 83). Downwards through the

¹⁸ Something like the Ten Commandments of Christianity and Judaism.

hierarchy each position is an authority symbol in the lives of the ordinary people. In the social constructs of the village and family there is great authority invested in the Head Man, as seen in my novel where it is Pa who must make final decisions which affect the family.

Most sociologists agree that the family is the principle socialising unit for society (Baldrige, 1975, p. 118). According to Mead, people look at themselves through the roles that their parents played and, as recently as 2006, historian John Tully was able to remark, ‘the Khmers today, particularly the rural dwellers who still make up the majority of the population, live much as their ancestors did’ (Tully, 2005, p. ix). But on the question of the individual and society, Mead himself has said that ‘the world that comes to us from the past, possesses and controls us. We possess and control the world that we discover and invent ... That is the world of the moral order’ (Mead, 1923, p. 247). Mead here is taking the idea of the individual further. If we ‘discover and invent’ the world, that means that the individual can be both determined and a determiner. The individual, in Mead’s work, is not merely a recipient, but can be a creator too. As Mead wrote later in his career ‘the appearance of the self is antedated by the tendencies to take the attitudes of others ... (but) others are not relative to his self, but his self and the others are relative to the perspective of his self organism’ (Mead, 1938, p. 153). In the interactionist perspective, the individual is seen as existing in dual systems, what Mead referred to as ‘sociality’. Humans are both determined and determiners; the social self is not only a passive ‘me’, the person also has an active self-directing ‘I’ (Mead, 1932, p. 77). The social order is therefore relegated to the role of co-determination. Since much of the environment’s influence is experienced in the form of meanings learned in social interaction, meanings can become circular and re-constructed.

The prime example of a re-constructed ‘I’ affecting the social order of the village in *Made in Cambodia* is the character of Number One. He has been brought up with the clearest of value-laden roles in that, as first born son, he will take over from Pa as fisherman and head

of the family. His gender and seniority within the sibling structure make his role straightforward, and the interactions of his childhood and early youth have been characterised by the expectation of his succession to Pa's roles. However, an accident means he must make a traumatic readjustment from the village into the modern city. That the fall which badly broke his arm occurred because he was laughing and always fooling around shows that as a teenager he was happy in his position as Number One. When he leaves the village he is also taken from close association with the Buddhist monks and achars, and he must now incorporate new city-influenced attitudes into a reinvented 'I'. When Number One assaults the character Ryan he may seem to be breaching the 'family first' rule, that the wealthy newcomer should be honoured; but it is also understood that the granting of the new cousin Cris to Malee and the foreigner has been an insult to his position. He has lost 'face' and the family understands perfectly that the beating must occur for him to regain it. Eventually Pa negotiates a solution to this problem when he grants Number One an unusually important place at Cris's funeral; Number One may now act magnanimously and welcome Ryan to the family on his own terms. Number One is being returned, through the re-making of his 'I' self, to the 'me' of shared village symbols. The wisdom of the family head prevails and the social order has been reinstated, although subtly reconstructed by the city 'I' that Number One now brings with him.

This concept of 'face' in Cambodia is closely linked to the social status of birth order, gender and wealth, but can be lost and gained depending on circumstances. 'Status' is the social position, whereas 'role' is the behaviour expected in that position (Baldrige, 1975, p. 120) and the playing of role must be seen as occurring within the limits of one's kama, as discussed in the Gatiloke stories in Chapter One. On the subject of the Cambodian issue of 'face' Peter North advises Western employers that 'embarrassing employees in front of their colleagues is mortally offensive, much more so than in the West. No one should be taken to

task in front of their peer group' (North, 2008, p. 207). In Cambodian Buddhist culture emotion is discouraged. Brinkley points out that this also means that there is an absence of conflict resolution strategies and that the typical Cambodian way of regaining 'face' is to jump to a sudden outburst of violence (Brinkley, 2011, pp. 222-223). Thus the episode of Number One and a friend beating Ryan with fence palings is not seen as terribly unusual by his sister Malee. Bizot extends the idea of Buddhist detachment from emotion, 'When I arrived in Cambodia in 1965, I silently saw, as everyone else did, live turtles being flipped on the grill; the backs of otters gashed open with machetes in order to keep their fetters intact (Bizot, 2012, p. 17). He questions whether it is this Buddhist detachment 'that allowed the Khmer Rouge to smash babies' heads against a tree or wall' (ibid). It has also been suggested that it was a matter of 'face' which led Pol Pot to make border raids on the far stronger Vietnam¹⁹, precipitating the retributive 1979 invasion which drove him into the jungle forever (Morris, 1999, p. 45).

In the course of a field trip in 2015 I observed a group of young village Cambodians, mostly under twenty-five years, proceeding, with a monk, to a very large banyan tree situated on a reach of the Mekong River. It was New Year, the end of the dry season, and the tree was known as The River Tree. A solemn ceremony was performed to bless the tree and to ensure that its spirit would allow the river to rise appropriately in the next few months. Afterwards, the young group retired to a shady place to enjoy loud rap music from a huge ghetto blaster; they were dressed in Manchester United and Chelsea shirts. Taking this episode as evidence, it would seem that the adoption of accoutrements such as the music and the football shirts does not necessarily extinguish traditional spiritual beliefs. The young village people who went with the monk to bless the banyan tree had received minimal education outside the nexus of village, pagoda and family. My guide stated that he, who was raised in the same

¹⁹ Pol Pot had been belittled by the Vietnamese communists fifteen years before.

village but gained education, did not believe in the magic of the banyan tree. He respected the belief, and lowered his voice to save ceremony participants from embarrassment as he explained, but the guide belonged to the new Cambodia. The young villagers continued to interact with the cultural symbols of their education; indeed, in some places traditional beliefs have undergone a revival. Anthropologist Matthew O’Lemmon provides data from his ethnographic studies which shows that ‘during and following the destruction of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge, and the resulting loss of monks and knowledgeable lay Buddhist specialists, Cambodians turned increasingly to older traditions such as the belief in the power and efficacy of *neak ta*²⁰ to help fill a void’ (O’Lemmon, February 2014, p.25).

The Cambodian peasant family I present in *Made in Cambodia* is not far removed from the River Tree people or *neak ta*. But the critical distinguishing feature is that Pa is the son of a teacher and sees the benefits of education. His children, at least the more clever ones, have been made to stay at school and the brightest of them, Malee, has attracted the scholarship which takes her to the city and brings the family closer to modernity, and closer to the potentially transformative effect of the ex-patriate Westerner. If, as Mead asserts, humans respond to value-laden symbols, and if they also select from that range of symbols in order to create an individualised ‘I’ out of the socialised ‘me’, the variant responses of family members to the Australian character Ryan become a vital part of that process. And if the individuals in the family have been exposed in varying degrees to Western education, their responses are likely to also vary. The negotiation of position and future through Symbolic Interaction is the backbone of the relationship arc of the novel.

Firstly, Malee sees Ryan as both a romantic prospect and as an excellent match for the family. Because she is a medical student who will not return to the village to marry, she is in the unusual position of being able to negotiate her future, subject to the approval of Pa. But

²⁰ *Neak ta* is the simplest form of tutelary ancestor spirit akin to a grandfather figure and usually associated with a place, such as a forest.

she must assure herself that Ryan will be reliable, something not all Westerners will be. Malee's cautiously hopeful assessment of Ryan's value as a partner improves when she learns of his genuine engagement with the vital symbol that is Khmer dancing; a case has been made to absolve him from the Western opportunist or sexual tourist stereotype, examples of which have been provided to her in the form of Ryan's immediate teaching predecessor and in the story of the village girl who was dumped by the French NGO worker. While Malee needs evidence, Reap is less cautious. She can barely control her excitement at the appearance of such a huge asset, one who may help support Malee and by doing so relieve her of that duty. She dreams briefly one day of learning English and improving her position in the new society, but only briefly. Reap knows that her position is to work in the garment factory and return to the village as a virgin bride. Number One's attitude to the Westerner has already been discussed, and Pa, of course, has the responsibility to further the future position of the family through the Western newcomer.

According to Cambodia scholar David Chandler, 'It is uncertain if this inward-looking, family-oriented conservatism, so helpful in surviving the incursions of foreign powers and foreign ideas, will be of much help if Cambodia hopes to flourish as a twenty-first-century state' (Chandler, 2008, p. 299). I would argue that this family orientation is persisting through the strength of its symbolism and also through necessity. The Cambodian individuals in *Made in Cambodia* interact with the rituals of the Pchum Benh Ancestor Festival as well as with observance of ancestors at spirit houses, twice with the funeral procedures, with the traditional dance enactment of scenes from the *Reamker* and, at the end of the novel, with the correct wedding rituals. Bounded by culture and society, individuals also have the ability to choose from a limited range of options to establish themselves as an individual 'I'. The proper respect for position within the hierarchy of family and the intense interaction with family members, as well as the pursuit of 'face' within the village hierarchy,

adds further to the culture of Symbolic Interaction which, as an offset to powerlessness and poverty, has sustained the Cambodian social system for more than a thousand years and is now under challenge from international capitalism.

Marxian Theory – Class Conflict, Alienation and False Consciousness

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote that the rise of a bourgeoisie class through the means of the Industrial Revolution, ‘has replaced exploitation veiled in religious and political illusions by exploitation that is open, unashamed, direct and brutal’ (Marx and Engels, in Ryazanoff, 1963, p. 28). These words could have been penned specifically to describe the transition from the feudal Buddhist-dominated society of traditional Cambodia to the hyper-capitalist revolution which has occurred in the last fifteen years. But while Marx’s historical paradigm was that the feudal system would transition firstly to domination by the bourgeoisie, which would in turn be rapidly supplanted by communism (ibid, p. 27) it hasn’t happened that way in Cambodia.

In 1863 the French colonialists took over a deeply change-resistant bureaucratic hierarchy where ‘government meant a network of status relationships and obligations’ (Chandler, 2008, p. 174), a good example of Meadian interactionism. The people’s adherence to tradition was demonstrated further in the 1920s when the Khmer section of the Phnom Penh population remained unaffected by the socialist and nationalist political stirrings of the large Chinese and Vietnamese quarters of the city, whose parent countries were in states of transition and turmoil (Tully, 2005, pp. 84-85). Contributing to this complacent insularity was the fact of French negligence regarding education of the Khmer population; only in the 1930s did a tiny portion of mandarin children begin to attend a specially formed lycée²¹. By the

²¹ The lycée was established primarily to educate civil servants for the French bureaucracy.

1950s only one child in sixty completed grade seven of school (Brinkley, 2012, p. 213) and, ‘in large areas of the nation, the first schools were not built until the 1990s’ (ibid, p. 4)²².

By the time Hun Sen asserted himself as the permanent Prime Minister around 1997 Cambodia had fallen very far behind both East and West in terms of industrialisation, the education of its people and in political development. Further, the nation’s infrastructure had been reduced to near-medieval status after thirty years of civil war. Against this background Cambodia became open for business almost overnight to powerful forces of international capitalism, and the seemingly timeless patterns of social interaction were dramatically altered as a result. While capitalist ascendancy was not achieved through the historical paradigm enshrined in Marx’s work, it is reasonable to assert that industrialization has brought the kind of antagonism between capital and labour that he envisaged (Marx and Engels in, Ryazanoff, 1963, p. 67). The kind of violent conflict seen in Cambodia in the last five years, and which I depict in *Made in Cambodia*, has become inevitable.

Class Conflict

Many social scientists have held that social cohesion, order and development are founded on a consensus of belief and value commitment, and on a harmony of interests among important groups in society. Aspects of this were seen above in the valid types of authority codified in the works of Weber and in the interaction ideas of Mead. Marx, however, never establishes any theory of appropriate social stratification in his work.

Commentators have observed that the meaning of the term ‘class’ has varied greatly through Marx’s writings (Ollman, 2001, p. vii). However, beginning from an early work, *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx talks of complex gradations of social rank as ‘an incident of the past which has been replaced by a dichotomously divided society’ (Jordan, 1971, p. 22-23).

²² The education process and the rise of nationalist independence is discussed in Chapter Three.

The dichotomy can be seen on one hand as those possessing and protecting the means of production, and on the other hand those working within it. In Cambodia this type of dichotomy can be seen where the Prime Minister heads a power bloc which is in conflict with a very numerous and largely dispossessed working class. Karl Marx's essential view of history was that the major feature of social relationships has been class struggle, that conflict always had an economic cause and was, logically enough, suppressed by the ruling class in each society (Campbell, 1981, p. 113). This kind of conflict is seen clearly in the demonstrations and struggles of garment workers in *Made in Cambodia*.

In *Capital* Marx points out that the inevitable conditions of industrial capitalism include a prolongation of the working day (Marx, 1959, p. 104), concurrent with an increased intensity of factory labour when compared with that experienced in feudal conditions (ibid, pp. 116-123). Both of these predictions could be said to be true of Cambodia, where garment workers have often been taken directly from work in rice fields to toil ten hours per day in very difficult factory conditions where fainting is common and human rights are suppressed (Thompson, 2016, paras 13-28). And even with 700,000 Cambodians employed in the garment industry at very low wages, jobs are still sought after to the extent that women pay bribes just to obtain an aptitude test; Marx's concept of the Industrial Reserve Army, where reserve workers compete to drive down the price of labour, certainly operates in Cambodia (Marx, 1959, pp. 177-178). Further, control of the apparatus of state by the owner-class in Marxian terms is also clear, with police, military and courts all aligned to the same outcomes: police fire into demonstrator crowds and organisers are thrown into gaol by courts which are presided over by judges who are antagonistic to the Western concept of human rights, and also rightly fearful of the Prime Minister (Murdoch, 2014, paras 8-12).

Alienation

Marx was not the first thinker to use the term ‘alienation’; he adopted it from the speculative philosophy of Hegel, among others, and adapted it and introduced it to the world of what is now called sociology. The term arose in philosophy regarding the creation of God, whose personality is an objective and purified version of Man. In other words, ‘Man is God for himself, but he makes God an external object, that is, alienates Him from himself’ (Jordan, 1971, p. 16). By doing so, man creates his own sense of inadequacy and unworthiness. Bringing alienation down to sociology and the means of production, Marx saw that workers were alienated not only from the product of their work, but also from society, politics and even their own families.

The means of production, exemplified by the garment factories in *Made in Cambodia*, ‘dominate the worker as an alien autonomous power’ (Jordan, 1971, p. 17). The factory itself is an adverse presence, its products become meaningless to the individual. In pre-industrial society workers, if we take the example of a shirt, would, by the application of complex skills, create the fabric from wool, personally sew it, affix buttons and see it worn by a family member or village neighbour, or at least take the item to a town market. The satisfaction in this work, the connection with the object, is considerable, as it was in immediate pre-industrial Cambodian village systems of production. For Marx, man is an assembly of social relations and the thing produced impacts directly and critically on all these relations (Ollman, 2001, p. 27). In *Made in Cambodia* we see Reap continuously re-sewing the same hem of the same type of shirt for years, and never seeing a finished product. The daily exhaustion of factory workers is linked to the repetitive and unfulfilling nature of the industrial task; in Marxian terms the individual is entirely alienated from the thing produced.

But Marx also saw that man would be alienated from society in the sense that man is alienated from other men as an alien objective power (the bourgeois establishment) reduces

human relationships and social bonds to a state where people make use of each other and treat each other as things (Jordan, 1971, p. 18). This analysis was made without account for the rise of unions, not known in Marx's time²³. Also, removed from the interactions of the village, the garment workers make efforts to sustain them in their new environments. Although Marx did not envisage this kind of effort, it is fair to say that for him the phenomenon of alienation was not a metaphysically inevitable process; it was a phenomenon which was accounted for sociologically and which, in his view, could be eliminated or remedied by human action (Jordan, 1971, p. 20). While much of this human action might be seen as having been achieved in the West by unions, and by social reformers from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, in Cambodia the history of this kind of political action, and of associative relationships in the Weberian sense, has barely begun. As a consequence, legislated protections and rights for workers are virtually non-existent. In this sense the alienation of man from political decision-making processes (Ollman, 2001, p. vii) could be seen to be effective in Cambodia, despite the incidence of (widely disputed) elections.

On the subject of alienation and the family, the *Communist Manifesto* asserted that the capitalist system has 'torn the veil of sentiment from the family relationship, which has become an affair of money and nothing more' (Marx and Engels in, Ryazanoff, 1975, p. 29). I would argue that this statement reflects both the hyperbolic nature of the Manifesto and also shows Marx's extreme reliance on economic matters; still, the two assertions it contains are both partly correct. I have found in my own research interviews that the family remains largely together although often physically dislocated; regular return trips to the 'homeland' keep the village interactions alive. Almost every interviewee returned to their family at least three times per year, often much more regularly than that²⁴. The 'veil of sentiment' remains in place despite the imposition of difficulties. The resilience of the Cambodian family occurs

²³ The kind of associative relationship which was an important part of Weber's later codifications of society

²⁴ See Chapter Four for a more detailed account of the interviews.

for three reasons: firstly, the symbols of position have returned strongly from their destruction in the Khmer Rouge era; secondly, in Cambodia there is no government social security safety net providing alternative support; and thirdly, because families can expand to include new members, as long as these members agree to the rules of sharing and providing for others. Marx and Engels could not have envisaged the resilience and the absolute necessity of the retention of family in a Third World country like Cambodia, nor could they have envisaged that industrialisation would bring with it communication devices such as motorbikes and mobile phones which help people conquer distance barriers that would have been insuperable in Marx's time.

While there is a strong humanist element in Marx's work, in that he sees the goal of historical progress as the full development of man's creative capacities, still in his world man has no nature apart from that endowed by his social position, total nurture and no nature (Rhea 1981, p. 8). He accounts minimally for the creativity and resilience of the human spirit. In Cambodia, economic and educational relationships *have* produced a defeated class, but this class has clung to symbols, the compensations of dispossession perhaps, but I would argue that there is a complexity of interaction which Marx took little account of in his reliance on economic analysis.

False Consciousness

Marx's analysis of both feudal and capitalist society included his observation of the creation of what he calls a 'false consciousness' among the productive class (Campbell, 1981, p. 124). This process involves the creation, by the ruling class, of systems of morality and religion to support its own position. The process generally involves the co-operation of a clergy, in an educational and guidance role, which is in turn supported by the power group. These factors create a social and moral cosmos which determines the consciousness of the worker (Marx,

1959, p. 11). I have already discussed in Chapter One the way Cambodia's Theravada Buddhism supported the aristocracy in Cambodia by suppressing the ambitions of common people, its literature providing role model normativity, and the clergy, or *sangha*, promulgating low-ambition and family-centred morality systems for the peasantry to follow. The prize for obedience was the reincarnation system which promised enhanced outcomes in the next life. This system provided what Marx would have understood as a false consciousness. This consciousness could be equated to the symbols of interaction which Mead described; compliant peasants make good workers for capital interests. But the modern opening up of Cambodia, which has brought the capital, has also brought with it Western schools, as well as Non-government Organisations (NGO) with educational agendas, which now challenge the unity of this compliant consciousness; all these influences feed the challenges which now occur to Cambodia's elite.

It has been said that, 'all sociological theories must have something to say about the ubiquity of conflict in social life' (Mann, 1983, p. 62). But in the Symbolic Interaction of Max Weber and George Herbert Mead it is the interactions of self and symbol, of group life and in particular of the family, which have provided the cohesion of the Cambodian social world. I have attempted to make the interactions of the Cambodian characters an important focus of my novel, and to have these standing interactions catalysed by the introduction of the potentially volatile symbol of my Western character. Having brought these two forces together in *Made in Cambodia* I drive them into the heart of the conflict surrounding the garment workers' demonstrations, in order to dramatically expose the conditions of the workers and their Marxian struggle within the chaotic world of international capital. New forces of conflict have created a watershed moment in Cambodian history.

Chapter Three

Literature and Identity

Essentially the traditional Buddhist-dominated culture of Cambodia has never been comfortable with the idea of creative writing or free speech: Buddhist messages are generally suppressive of individualism and conflict, both of which are at the core of Western novel writing. In this chapter I show the development of modern literature in Cambodia and its effect on identity and traditionalism. The first French-educated Cambodian novelists of the 1930s and 40s challenged the authority of their educators, and I discuss the effect this had on Cambodian national identity with the encouragement not only of nationalism, as desired by the French, but of an independence movement inimical to their interests. I also show the cataclysmic influence of the Khmer Rouge era, which murdered writers and closed schools, with disastrous effects on writers, on literacy and on reading markets today. From the early 2000s a small group of writers has attempted to reinstate literature within the national identity. While encouragement has come from NGOs, the brutal actions of the Hun Sen regime²⁵ have sidelined writers and suppressed criticism of the Government. In this context I refer to my own interviews with five important writers for their ideas on freedom of speech and on the synthesis of literature and Cambodian identity today.

In today's internationalised environment there is a high level of fascination with Cambodia, fuelling a steady stream of literature written by non-Cambodians about this nation. Much of this literature has been in the thriller/crime/noir field, with European protagonists and under-developed Cambodian side characters. Other Western writers continue to exploit the grotesque aspects of the Khmer Rouge time. But in the last five years a trickle of literature is beginning to embrace more mature discussion of themes in modern

²⁵ I discuss the Hun Sen regime in more detail in Chapter Four

Khmer culture. I argue in this chapter that, in the repressive Cambodian political atmosphere, novels of social or political criticism can only safely be written by outsiders, and I place my own novel in the context of this literature.

The world of *Made in Cambodia* is only ostensibly free. Factory workers have the technical right to demonstrate, but as recently as 2014 protests have been fired upon by water cannons and police rifles, with lethal effect. My novel reflects this atmosphere of danger and repression in Cambodia. After all of the political explosions of the years 1968 to 1997, the nation's system has mutated to a chaotic, capitalist hierarchy which attempts to impose the systems of order enjoyed by past regimes. The more developed and determined system of opposition they face now is reflective of upheavals in the identity of Cambodians today.

The Emergence of the Cambodian Canon

Many commentators have noted the failure of the French Protectorate (1863-1953) to provide education for their subjects up to the 1930s (Kiernan, 2002, p. 6; Brinkley, 2011, p. 26; Chandler, 2008, pp. 198-201; Brinkley, 2011, p. 212). Colonial powers relied instead on the traditional pagoda school and folk tale education of the Buddhist priests to keep order and to preserve the deferential identity of the peasant class. The turning point in development did not come until 1930 when the Buddhist Institute was established, by the French, as a centre for preserving Cambodian national culture. Its journal, the *Kambujasuriya*, then began publishing the kind of classical religious works and folktales discussed in Chapter One: traditional, conservative material that supported the hierarchical order. But by the late 1930s it also began to include novels in serialised form (Jacob, 1996, p. 10). The Collège Sisowath had opened in 1932, for the first time educating a tiny percentage of Cambodians, mostly mandarin-class children destined for positions in the French civil service. At the same time the French began encouraging Khmer nationalism, centred on Angkor and on the acceptance

of Buddhism (Edwards, 2007, p. 243). The colonialists even set up youth groups on the model of the scouts, along with a system of hostels to encourage young Khmer to visit the historical Angkor Wat and the scenic park at Phnom Bokor in the South East. It was hoped that reverence for these sites would unify Cambodians famous for inter-provincial quarrels based on strong local identities. When novels came to be written, most of them complied with this nationalist cultural agenda. But one undesired result for the French was that the nationalism they expressed began to be tinged with ideas of independence (ibid, p. 30).

In 1939 the *Kambujasuriya* published Kim-Hak's *By the Waters of the Tonle Sap* in sections (Jacob, 1996, p. 10). Rim Kin's *Sophat*, was written in 1938 but not published in Cambodia until January 1942. In both these novels, and in Nou Hach's later *Melea Toungcet*, the Cambodian landscape became a symbol of nation, 'a rural idyll of green rice paddies dotted with palm trees' (Edwards, in Hansen, 2008, p. 156). But while this suited the nationalist ideal, subsequent intellectual discourse between Nou Hach and European personalities of the day ignited 'subtle shifts in indigenous philosophies' (Edwards, 2007, p. 224). Nou Hach's novel *Garland of the Heart* is set in the Lycée Sisowath, where he was educated. The central character, Tike, is a dissatisfied aesthete who excels in languages. 'The restless spirit of youth, experimentation, rejection of the old and embracing of the new, intertwined with the sense of being shaped by another culture and language, which pervade Nou Hach's work, also infused Cambodia's nationalism' (ibid, p. 210). The rejection of French-led cultural assimilation did not suit the colonial agenda.

From 1938 the Lycée Sisowath developed into a hotbed of protest on national issues, such as a proposal to allow Vietnamese citizens entry into Cambodia and to grant them property rights. Rim Kin began writing because he was ashamed in front of Vietnamese student colleagues at the lack of Khmer literature. His plays were performed by nationalist groups with independence agendas. The Vietnamese were the largest demographic in

‘Indochine’²⁶ and saw their potential for leadership of the Lao and Cambodian sectors, but the secular elite of Cambodia saw themselves as members of a distinctly independent Khmer cosmos (Edwards, 2007, p. 228). In the 1930s the Khmer newspaper *Nagaravatta* created and published neologistic compounds such as *mattophum* (motherland) and *srok Khmae* (Khmer country) (ibid). So, the birth of the modern novel in Cambodia, along with independent Khmer nationalism, occurred partly through resentment of the Vietnamese²⁷ but also sprang, in large part, from education programs instigated by the French themselves. The first stirrings of a new identity had surfaced and the novels of Nou Hach, Rim Kin and Kim-Hak, are now seen as the national canon of Cambodian literature.

The French grip on Cambodia was weakened through World War Two and the novels, along with calls for independence, kept coming. The French departed Indochine for good in 1953, but by the late 1950s graduates from the expanded education system of the new king Sihanouk were now objecting to his own intense and egotistical personal style; education had developed a new kind of intellectual resistance to authority in the Khmer identity. Sihanouk’s response was a crackdown on dissidents (Chandler, 1999, p. 67). Left wing agitators were jailed and hundreds disappeared, most taken from their beds in the middle of the night. The flow of new writing slowed. Many communists, including Saloth Sar (later Pol Pot), fled the capital for the jungle or for other countries (Tully, 2005, pp. 142-3). By the 1960s Sihanouk was at odds with the government of the United States over his friendly relations with China and his stance of neutrality in the Vietnam War. In 1968 the United States began bombing Vietnamese camps and supply lines inside Cambodia as well as poisoning and defoliating massive forest and village regions. Sihanouk’s paranoia reached deep into the community; no issue of national identity could be as important as his own

²⁶ The French-inspired amalgamation of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

²⁷ This issue of international ‘face’ resurfaces with tragic results in the 1970s with Pol Pot’s self-defeating military incursions into Vietnam.

survival. The tension in these times was such that the trickle of new writing now stopped completely. Both education and the outside world had come to Cambodia and issues of identity had become complicated (Brinkley, 2011, pp. 28-29).

Direct Political Control

The American bombings and the toppling of Sihanouk's government by an American-supported military regime in 1970, led by General Lon Nol, was the beginning of an extended era of deep confusion in the Cambodian national identity and of a lengthy cessation of creative writing. After five years of civil war Phnom Penh was taken in April 1975 by the Khmer Rouge²⁸ and the city's inhabitants were evacuated to rural areas to work as labourers. The Maoist agrarian 'utopia' had begun and in four years the national identity and symbols of interaction between Cambodians were destroyed.

The important phenomenon for the long-term future of Cambodian cultural identity was that all intellectuals, teachers, poets and writers²⁹ who could be found were murdered. Contemporary literature of the time was devoted to such matters as showing how the *angka's* agricultural and hydrological systems were superior to those which had preceded them. Revolutionary songs were modelled on those from the Chinese Cultural Revolution and sung by the workers or blasted from loudspeakers. For instance, there is the song which celebrates the day of national revolution:

Glorious April 17

Ruby blood that sprinkles the towns and plains

Of Kampuchea, our Homeland

²⁸ Extraordinarily now supported by Sihanouk, who had spent a decade suppressing them.

²⁹ A handful had already fled the country and another few disguised themselves as peasants and joined the rest of the population at hard labour in the country.

Splendid blood of workers and peasants,
Splendid blood of revolutionary men and women soldiers!
This blood changes into implacable hatred
And resolved war,
April 17, under the flag of the Revolution.
Freedom from slavery.
Live, live glorious April 17
Glorious victory of greatest importance
For the epoch of Angkor!

(King Hoc Dy, in Ebihara, 1994, p. 27)

It is clear that from 1975 to 1979 writers inside Cambodia were not able to express their reflections, ideas or feelings.³⁰ Importantly, from the point of view of future writing, literacy was halted, with all schooling forbidden during the Khmer Rouge period. Many Cambodians came out of this period speaking a reduced form of their own language, with grammatical rules forgotten and writing skills severely limited (Tully, 2005, p. 200; Chandler, 2008, p. 279). The effect of this is seen in my fictional character Cean, who reads and writes very little Khmer; the tuk-tuk driver who cannot read a map is a common phenomenon in Phnom Penh. Also, we should consider the character of Pa. His father was a schoolteacher at the time of the Khmer Rouge takeover and as a young man Pa received some education. He was therefore destined for execution (which is what happened to his father) but roughed his hands and pretended to be a peasant, was sent to work in the fields and survived the three and a half years of Pol Pot time. The annihilation of educational infrastructure and

³⁰ Writings of the refugee diaspora in these times were suffused with nostalgic longing for the homeland (Um, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 87-94).

the decimation of language in this time has a major effect on literacy levels to this day, in turn affecting the self-esteem of Cambodians as well as severely limiting the size of the literature-reading public.

After the Vietnamese invasion, or liberation, of 1979 new literature fared little better, being ‘managed by the machinery of the Communist party’ (King Hoc Dy, in Ebihara, 1995, p. 34). The Democratic Republic of Kampuchea (DRK) issued guidelines for material it considered appropriate in novels, prime topics being ‘the brutality of the Khmer Rouge and the misfortune the country experienced from 1975 to 1979’ (Amratisha in, Leakthina, 2006, p. 157). Pal Vannariraks and Oum Somphany were women officials who became very successful. Pal’s *Waning Moon Has Already Ended* tells of the life of a young woman who witnesses the execution of her father and the killing of many women by Khmer Rouge women. Another novel tells of lovers who were parted under the KR and who reunite after years of suffering (ibid, pp. 157-59). So, clearly, many novels were backward-looking propaganda, but a few underground writers fed a need for romantic themes.

In a newspaper interview in December 2002 Pal Vannariraks claimed to have also written for the unofficial market: ‘We didn’t have publishers. There were no typewriters, no computers. We wrote in hundred-page notebooks. A novel was two or three of these, bound together’ (May, 2002, p. 170). The Khmer Rouge had forbidden romance and in the new environment the reactive need for it was great. Book shops would buy the crude volumes and then make hand-written copies and rent them out. In 1984 and 1985 alone, Pal wrote ‘thirty or forty’ of these. Another writer, Mao Somnang, wrote more than a hundred novels under the pen name ‘The Rabbit’; in *Gatiloke* Buddhist stories and fairytales the rabbit is usually clever. Their stories were what Pal calls ‘ordinary stories or love stories’, reflecting the ‘need for escapism and the yearning for love stories on the part of the reading public’ (Amratisha, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 153).

Alongside the romance, a return to conservatism occurred with the re-emergence of the theme of the virtuous woman, already discussed in Chapter One. In *The Garland of Jasmine* (*Kamran phka mlih*) Mao Samnang showed that ‘if a woman insisted on being the perfectly virtuous mother, she could protect her children from all juvenile problems’ (Amratisha, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 159). In Pen Satharin’s *Under the Blue Sky of Tokyo* (*Krom megh barn khiev nai krun tukyu*) a woman overcomes the difficulty of cross-cultural marriage by preserving Cambodian culture through the art of silk-weaving and by being the virtuous Khmer wife, thus showing ‘a continuity from traditional folk tales and verse-novels that taught the concept of perfectly virtuous women’ (Ledgerwood, in Ebihara, 1994, p. 124). Nostalgia for pre-revolutionary structure and order brought this paradigm back in the 1980s, but it has remained as a problem for the modern woman in the context of contemporary global capitalist Cambodia, where many are forced to shift from rural areas to the capital in late teenage years. There they must combine the roles of the virtuous village wife-to-be with the life of the modern city girl, often factory worker, often supporting a large family through their labour (Derks, in Leakthina, 2006, pp. 195-198). My characters Malee and Reap reflect this struggle, with their intense work ethic and deprivation of pleasures.

By the time of the Vietnamese departure in 1989 there had been direct control of literature for over thirty years³¹, publishing infrastructure had been destroyed, literacy severely reduced and most intellectuals and writers had been murdered. A swing to conservatism was part of a more confused national identity and a strong police-state mentality had become normative in Cambodia. Most importantly the shadow of the Khmer Rouge years, which lay over the national identity, needed to be exorcised.

³¹ This includes the years from 1957 when Sihanouk began his crackdown on dissidents.

Survival Memoirs and New Literature

If the eleven years of the Vietnamese occupation were reactive and orthodox regarding the Khmer Rouge time, so was the decade of the 1990s in that the writing market was dominated by dozens of first-hand Khmer Rouge survival memoirs revealing the cruel excesses of the regime. Pin Yathay's *Stay Alive My Son* (1987) and *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung (2000) are two of the most prominent, and they bookend the chronology of publication. Loung Ung's book is written from the point of view of a girl five to nine years of age and focuses heavily on the killing of her father and brother, then the separation of her family and the struggles they had to stay together and to regroup after the wars. Pin Yathay describes the death of two of his children of exhaustion and infection. He must then make the pitiable decision to leave his remaining child behind while he and his wife attempt to escape to Thailand over jungle-covered mountains. After weeks of struggle and privation he arrives alone across the border. Haing Ngor, the actor who played Dith Pran in the movie *The Killing Fields*, produced *Survival in the Killing Fields* with the help of a western journalist. His story is one of almost unbelievable endurance and tragedy as he loses his wife and unborn baby near the end of the regime's period of control, then is caught in the war between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese forces. Haing Ngor also provides brilliant early chapters on life in Cambodia in the 1960s, then as a young doctor under the Lon Nol regime from 1970 to 1975.

The flow of memoirs by Cambodians has now stilled, but the influence of this literature on the national identity has been profound. Loung Ung has been accused of exaggeration and misrepresentation for the purpose of selling books in the West (Melus, August 2013, pp. 107-125), and there is now a strong feeling in Cambodia, among writers and the general public, that enough has been said (Pers. Comm. 2016, Sok Chanphal, 21 February) yet ongoing Western attention to this era, including the proposed filming of Ung's story, keeps a dark cloud held over Cambodia, to the extent that it is seen by some as an

exploitation of the grotesque, posing as public interest. The new generation grows up in the shadow of the survivors but, as is reflected in the Cambodian characters in my novel, they are trying to look forward, to shrug off the burdensome identity of Khmer Rouge survival. In 2006 novelist Geoff Ryman reflected the theme when he commented: ‘Cambodian literature matters. It matters because of the extremity of Cambodian lives. But at times it seems as though the only thing westerners know about Cambodia is the Khmer Rouge’ (Ryman, 2006, para 4). He went on to partly justify this phenomenon: ‘Malaise and malfunction – how to explain them without reference to the catastrophes of the past?’ (ibid). Since this assertion was made generational change has been moving literature into new territory, less defined by that past. Cambodian society can still be interpreted with reference to the Khmer Rouge era, but writers within Cambodia will now directly reference those times only sparingly.

Since 2000 new writers have begun to emerge, some of them encouraged by the NGO Nou Hach Literary Association and the longstanding Khmer Writers’ Association. The volumes of fiction published in the 2000s show a tentative emergence from tradition. *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writing from Cambodia*, released in 2004, contains seventy pages of fiction, mostly very short fiction derived from the style of *Gatiloke* folk stories in both their structure and moral content; the other two hundred pages are taken up by interviews, essays, rap lyrics and the entire transcript of a TV documentary on the Khmer Rouge. The evidence of this volume would support an often-made assertion that Cambodian fiction writing lags behind other South East Asian nations. A more recent collection is ‘*Just a Human Being*’ and *Other Tales from Contemporary Cambodia* from the Nou Hach Literary Association, another slim volume of twelve very short stories collected over ten years, many of which again are derived from *Gatiloke* styles. The 2014 bi-lingual collection from Nou Hach Association *Who’s It For?* features another thirteen similar stories collected from

competitions run from 2006 to 2013. While writing competitions and volumes like this aim to develop writers, their impact on the public consciousness is small.

One of the most prominent writers to emerge from this system is Sok Champhal, who published six novels in the 2000s as well as some short stories, three of which were collected in the Nou Hach *Just a Human Being* book. ‘It’s a free form of fantasy,’ he says of his writing (2015, pers. comm., 17 October). In an interview with the Phnom Penh Post in 2012 Chanphal said he connects with his audience by keeping it simple. Some of his novel titles are *Tale of the Lamp*, *The Letter of Love*, *Gentlemen Love*, and *Winter Love* (Ngor, 2011, para 5-7). Chanphal says he has an agenda ‘to teach people about love’ (ibid) as an antidote to increasing selfishness in the new society. In my interview with Chanphal in 2016 he agreed that the four short stories which have been translated into English show the strong influence of *Gatiloke* monk stories (2016, pers. comm., 21 March). His moral stories do not touch on public or social issues, but reflect issues of personal morality, on not coveting wealth and of being kind to other people, traditional Buddhist messages. Chanphal’s work could be seen as reflecting the nostalgia many people feel for the simpler times before international involvement in Cambodia breached its Buddhist unity.

Sok Chanphal may address personal issues in his work, but many writers have tackled public issues and found that the wishes of the elite must be obeyed in Cambodia. In a 2012 interview with *New Mandala* magazine, poet Tararith Kho said:

‘It is my interest, as a writer, to write what I see and feel. I have received repeated warnings and threats against my life. I have people who have witnessed that my life was also on the edge for speaking on behalf of the oppressed to advocate for human rights and freedom of expression’ (Cain, 2012, para 3).

During 2010 and 2011 Kho was a ‘Scholars at Risk Fellow’ in the United States at Brown University’s International Writing Project. He had been co-founder of the Nou Hach Literary Association but had to resign in 2010 and flee the country because of death threats, not from individuals who did not appreciate his work, but from high government officials.

This kind of Government repression of writers goes on, and continues to have an impact on the national identity. Phina So is a writer and Director of Women Writers Committee – PEN Cambodia. She is a social activist as much as a writer. In February 2016 she self-published a collection of stories with other women writers called *Crush Collection*, stories about being strong, hopeful and independent women. Another collection called *My Most Critical Day* was launched in November 2016. I asked in my personal interview with her whether the same thing that happened to Tararith Kho could happen now, she opened her eyes wide and retorted, ‘Of course.’ She claims that writing about poverty and social problems is allowable, because everyone understands the social conditions in her country. But to write anything *directly* critical of the government or any member in it is very dangerous. Her works and the research and social work activism which is her profession are directed at raising the assertiveness of Khmer women. She says the ideal woman identity put forward in the *chhbap srey*, and as revived in the official literature of the 1980s, is still very potent. ‘Women are brought up with it and men expect it’ (2016, pers. comm., 14 March). Phina has completed a Masters in Social Work at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and is a leader in the community. Her work is to enhance the personal independence agenda of Khmer women, but she can only continue to write as long as her work does not directly criticise the elite.

Suong Mak is a writer who has looked at social problems in a new way and whose work may be modernising Cambodian ideas of identity. One well-known book, and his personal favourite, is *Boyfriend*, the first Cambodian novel featuring a gay male couple. His

most recent novel *Meteorite* begins with characters that are sperm; their dialogue is quick and snappy as they sprint off towards an ovum. Nine months and ten days later a baby boy is abandoned in a rubbish bin. Mak reads newspapers for ideas. His 2005 novel *Death in Aranh* focused on women trafficked and sold in brothels. ‘Those articles inspired me to write my novel criticising society,’ he said (Roth, 2012, paras 1-4). He has received some negative feedback from readers about the themes of some of his books, but most of it was about *Boyfriend*, with people asking why he must only write about that kind of love (2016, pers. comm., 28 March). That Mak received criticism for this story reflects that he is prickling the conservatism of the Cambodian identity; that he is able to write reflects that he is not specifically critical of the elite.

I also interviewed Cambodia’s new voice of poetry, Chhengly Yeng, and a powerful newcomer, Sou Khemrin. Both these writers have had books of their own poetry published. Much of Chhengly’s work has also found its way into Nou Hach publications and he spends days off from work going around the country promoting writing in schools and launching books for children. One in particular that he showed me is a cartoon book aimed at nine or ten year olds entitled *I’m Not Afraid of Ghosts*, his own attempt to counter fear in a nation of many ghosts. Of the possibility of Government interference in his work he smiles and says that it is ok to talk about social problems, but if he writes a *direct* criticism of the Government or anyone in it, ‘I might not be here to write any more poems.’ (2016, pers. comm., 2 March). He is deeply affected by poverty in his society and feels he is able to say some things, while other things he cannot. But new poet Sou Khmerin has run closer to troubled waters; he describes himself as an ‘independent writer’. The Government has taken an interesting new tactic in dealing with him, by asking him to join their political party. They have asked ‘several times but I deny to join. Day by day I live in fear. Sometimes I don’t dare to write anything involved with bad thing of the Government.’ But have there been direct

threats? ‘No one has threatened me yet, but I still live in fears because some writers were arrested and other are living in third country’ (2016, pers. comm., 15 March). He has vowed to continue as an independent writer and ‘continuously write about the fact of the Government’ (ibid).

One of the problems facing Cambodian writers is that still only a small percentage of the population can read. In 2010 only thirty per cent of children ever made it to middle school (Brinkley, 2012, p. 219). Writers face great competition from visual media imports and it is often said that people are so busy working and studying, that they have little time for reading literature. As a consequence, publishing opportunities are rare. But efforts are being made. On 20 February 2016 I attended the launch of the Khmer Collaborative Writers’ Group (*slap paka khmer*) in Phnom Penh. This group was set up by Yeng Chhengly, Phina So and others as a way of encouraging writers to keep going in the face of discouragement from most people in the community. The extent to which writing has been removed from the national identity can be seen in a comment by Sok Chanphal that many of his own friends actively discourage him from writing, seeing it as a useless activity because it doesn’t make money (2016, pers. comm., 21 February).

Writers struggle along with no Government, and sparse public, support. In this environment it is very difficult for writers to impact public consciousness with a new novel, and if a novel is critical of Government, personal safety is compromised. Suong Mak points out that Cambodian people spend so much time with social media that the market for fiction in book form has shrunk. ‘There is a popular website which buys some writers’ stories to publish on their page and I sell my stories for this page only’ (2015, pers. comm., 18 October). In 2013 Sok Champal won the SEA Write Award in Thailand, but now releases his writing only through his own blog (2016, pers. comm., 21 February). The new writers have had their moments in the public eye, as shown by the newspaper articles I have cited, but the

marketplace is increasingly tough. In this environment it is not unreasonable therefore that interested foreigners should write about this nation.

Fiction by Non-Cambodians

In the last hundred years a great number of Western writers have been moved to write about Cambodia. French colonial novels began around 1919, but most literature has been stimulated by the post-Khmer Rouge image of darkness and crime, much of it genre fiction featuring European central characters, with Cambodians as colourful sidekicks – saleable exotic objects in agreement with post-colonial identity stereotypes. But a few writers are beginning to create fiction from points of view that Cambodian writers may not engage with, creating more developed Cambodian characters as they do.

The French colonial novel *Saramani Danseuse Khmèr* (1919) by Roland Meyer, is a kaleidoscopic 180,000 word trip through all levels of the Cambodian social cosmos in which a Frenchman falls in love with a dancer. The tone is very sympathetic to the Khmers and critical of colonial greed and lust, as well as of royal mistreatment of dancing girls. George Groslier's *Return to the Clay* (1928) features another central Frenchman figure; his 'return to the clay' is an abandonment of the falsities and vanities of the western world in an embrace of Khmer simplicity (Osborne, 2008, p. 100). In the 1920s Andre Malraux released a novel *Le Voie Royale* during which he depicted the Khmer people as animal-skull-worshipping fetishists, and famously compared them to a plague of insects (Malraux, 2005, p. 159). The book was based on his own adventures stealing statues from the Banteay Srei monuments in northern Cambodia. As translator Howard Curtis said, 'none of the "native" characters is established as an individual, and the "savage" tribesmen are depicted as bestial, even subhuman' (ibid, p. xiv). Meyer and Groslier present their Khmer subjects as simple beings, unspoilt by civilization, in a classic 'noble savage' trope of colonial literature.

As I discussed in the section on the Cambodian canon, Khmer writers in the 1930s and 40s developed the rural idyll image of Cambodia as a national identity. But any such image in the West was smashed by thirty years of internal trouble from 1968-1997, including the Khmer Rouge years 1975-79. Novels soon began to appear exploiting a new Cambodian image of darkness and crime, but lacking developed Cambodian characters. Even before the fall of the Pol Pot regime, John Le Carre released *The Honourable Schoolboy*, a spy novel spread over London, Hong Kong and Shanghai, but also featuring a tense and well-researched sixty page section set in Phnom Penh, as the Khmer Rouge march to victory. Frenchman Loup Durand produced *The Angkor Massacre* in 1983, a saga of unflinching loyalty and romantic intimacy between European characters, while in *Black Heart* (1987), best-selling writer Eric Van Lustbader sends his hero deep into the Cambodian jungle. Margaret Drabble released *The Gates of Ivory* in 1991. A significant focus of the book is a prominent (fictional Booker prize winning) English fiction writer who is drawn to Cambodia in the early 1980s when the Khmer Rouge were hiding in the jungle after the Vietnamese takeover. It is a well-informed look at the situation in those years, but its main focus remains the internal lives of its London-based characters and their past relations with the missing writer; occasional Cambodian characters are side-players at best.

One novel which draws closer to real issues is Australian Christopher Koch's *Highways to a War* (1995), a story of the Vietnam and Cambodian conflicts of the 1960s and 70s. The main players in the drama are Australian and European, but the tone is certainly sympathetic to local culture. One briefly important character is a young Cambodian photographer and love interest. She is very much the independent new woman, an educated girl from a wealthy family who retains some traditional spirit beliefs, but her impact on this large novel is minimal. More recently Geoff Ryman's *The King's Last Song* (2006) engages the reader on at least five time-frames from the days of Angkor to the 'present' in 2004.

Among the stories woven through this is that of Map, who avenges the killing of his parents and the occupation of their farmhouse by Chams, There are so many dead that he thinks, ‘The spirits of my family will have been washed away on floods of ghosts. Cambodia has floods of murder more regular than the Tonle Sap’ (Ryman, 2006, p.185). Map is illiterate, a child during the Khmer Rouge era, and he reverts to the spirits, ghosts and demons of his childhood. Here we come closer to a realised Cambodian character, but Map is a casualty of history and war, almost a symbolic character. His battles with inner demons are static and almost clichéd; they help to drive one of the various sub-plots. A spate of Angkorean historical epics has emerged since then, with *God King of Angkor* (2012) by Gregory A Waldron, followed by John Shors’ *Temple of a Thousand Faces* (2013) and John Burgess’ popular book *Woman of Angkor* (2013), all working on a certain level of Western public interest in the Cambodian past.

Much of the other literature written by non-Cambodians since the 1990s more directly exploits the image of darkness and criminality. One of Shamini Flint’s ‘Inspector Singh Investigates’ series, *A Deadly Cambodian Crime Spree* is set around the Khmer Rouge War Crimes Tribunal. There has been a volume of crime stories called *Phnom Penh Noir*, edited by Christopher G Moore. Of the fifteen stories three are by Cambodians. There is one long story by Suong Mak, which he was asked to make particularly dark to fit the noir theme; one was commissioned from prominent journalist Bopha Phorn and one very short one comes from poet Khosal Khiev. One of Moore’s own crime novels *Zero Hour in Phnom Penh* features his detective Vincent Calvino tracing a missing barang in the chaotic days of the United Nations intervention around 1993. Adam Hall’s *Quiller Salamander* has the hero (Quiller) undertaking a rogue mission inside Cambodia to stop another killing fields. Andrew Nette’s *Ghost Money* is another detective/missing person yarn placed in the lawless years of 1992/93 immediately before the United Nations intervention.

The theme of Western hero and static Cambodian side characters continues through the thriller field. In K.T. Medina's *White Crocodile* young single mothers begin disappearing from a village near the home of a mythical white croc, while mine clearers from England are being blown up in an apparent murder spree. Heroine Tess comes over from England to sort it all out. The five main characters are English, Swedish, Scottish and Croatian and what little input there is from Cambodian characters comes from familiar types: women victims and corrupted males, whether cops or crooks. The most recent entry to this field of writing is the novel *Cambodia Noir* by American journalist Nick Seeley (2016), in which an American news photographer is employed to find a missing Chinese-American girl. His hero struggles from one beer, joint and fix to the next but still manages to stay a step ahead of murdering and heroin-smuggling American and Hong Kong Triads, as well as the Cambodian Army and police, in a narrative laced with hard-boiled dialogue. A Cambodian driver and a news-crew off-sider make brief appearances in which their characters are not developed.

Most of these books are essentially popular fiction exploiting exotic locations, but they can at times can throw light onto Cambodian culture for Western readers. The Shamini Flint volume reveals much about the politics behind the war crimes tribunals and their effect on the Khmer people. Many of the *Noir* stories are written by people with personal histories of significant contact with the region and a clear desire to share their insights. *Ghost Money* features two Cambodian characters whose backstories are given considerable exposure. But still we have a writer looking back in history, selecting a dark time in Cambodia's history for exploitation. Throughout this work there exists a binary of non-Cambodian protagonists solving problems, with one-dimensional locals providing colour.

Along with the crime books a new phenomenon in Western publishing has appeared: fiction volumes written by Westerners exploiting the Khmer Rouge era from a kind of 'grotesque other' point of view. Patricia McCormick's 2012 novel *Never Fall Down* is a

work of fiction based on the life story of an eleven-year-old boy who survived the Khmer Rouge time by learning to play revolutionary songs (McCormick, 2012, p. 216). Harriette C Rinaldi's *Four Faces of Truth* comprises four fictional perspectives on the Pol Pot time. Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* is 'an electrifying love story set in the Khmer Rouge killing fields'. *In the Shadow of the Banyan* by Cambodian-American Vaddy Ratner is a fictionalised version of the author's own story. These sagas are often enhanced versions of true stories. They fulfil a market in the West, but one which goes over well-worn territory. Positioning themselves as full of concern, they prey on the grotesque history of Cambodia, not engaging with issues of direct relevance today. The feeling expressed in my interviews with Cambodian writers is that enough has been said already (2016, pers. comm. Sok Chanphal, 21 March). These books reinforce an international identity which is an embarrassment inside modern Cambodia.

More recently there has begun a trickle of fiction which addresses issues of relevance to modern-day Cambodian people. Laura Jean McKay's book of stories *Holiday in Cambodia* features nineteen separate snapshot-style stories spreading from 1969 to the present. One highlights problems of garment workers, another centres around a nightclub singer in 1968 at the time of the American bombings; also there is a look at the dangers of unexploded ordinance. Other stories are satirical portraits of ex-patriate Europeans, one about Australian holiday-makers foolishly endangering themselves and falling into the hands of the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s. The work shows an intimate knowledge of Cambodia and its people, as well as a critical eye for the foibles and motivations of Westerners. Sue Guiney is an American author who has spent twenty years in Cambodia. Her novel *A Clash of Innocents* is set in a Phnom Penh orphanage and looks at the reasons Western characters have for coming to Cambodia to help; some hide a past and some embrace the guilt of others for their own reasons. The most developed Cambodian character is an eighteen-year-old girl who has been

adopted by the central American woman and must decide on accepting a scholarship to travel to college in the U.S. Guiney's other novel *Out of the Ruins* features her most complex Khmer character, a young nurse at a woman's health centre in Siem Reap who loses her faith in a Western doctor after an incident involving the sexual exploitation of minors. These books have sold well; they involve discussions of real issues and feature Western and Cambodian characters interacting on a level which allows greater depth in the Cambodian identity. It is into this section of literature that I contribute my own novel. *Made in Cambodia* includes five developed Khmer characters, all of whom contribute to a discussion of important issues: the survival of the family; marriage culture; extraordinary change in the lives of young women; relations between Cambodians and Westerners; the importance of 'face' for males; problems of the Khmer Rouge and their former victims living together and, of course; the position of garment workers in the new global capitalist Cambodia.

While the French colonials promoted the identity of the simple Khmer and the rural idyll, this was smashed by the Khmer Rouge years of 1975-1979. With Cambodians themselves recovering from trauma, Western writers exploited not only post-colonial notions of the guileless Khmer, but did this within the new identity-context of darkness and crime. Since the destruction of infrastructure by the Khmer Rouge it has been a very long road back for Cambodian literature. With the restrictions on free speech within Cambodia it is much easier for socially critical fiction to be written by outsiders, but only a tiny amount focuses on real issues of the new generation of Cambodians, those born since the conflicts. I believe I will be breaking into new territory with my novel, which examines families and individuals in Cambodia, their spiritual beliefs, and which takes as its motor the conflicts over garment workers' wages.

Chapter Four

The Modern State: Cambodian Traditions in the New World

Since the elections which were supervised by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993, Cambodia has opened up to global capital. In this chapter I assess the impact of this capital on society and discuss the extent to which economic elites have become a new authority structure in partnership with Government. I argue that, under the control of former Khmer Rouge captain Hun Sen, the hierarchical structures and institutionalised corruption of past regimes have seamlessly returned to Cambodian society.

The Cambodia of my novel is a dangerous place in which to protest or speak out politically. The new capital has, above all, created garment factories which have radically altered the lives of hundreds of thousands of young women and their families, giving rise to unprecedented social and economic issues; the intimidation and violence of the new elite over wage issues is clearly set out in the demonstration scenes in my novel. Many of these women have left their families for the first time ever, and I engage directly with the question of the effects of change on the spiritual beliefs and family contacts of young people. The forty personal interviews I conducted in Phnom Penh in 2015 and 2016 reveal a strong but not universal retention of traditional beliefs. The opening of Cambodia to outside influence has also brought an influx of foreigners, and I consider the new types of relationships which occur between Western men and Cambodian women, particularly considering the position of women who engage in the life of the professional girlfriend. In this chapter I also discuss the effect of the introduction of large numbers of Khmer Rouge defectors into military, social and Government life, considering the theme of ‘living together’ which has such an important place in Cambodian society and in my novel.

Made in Cambodia reflects the idea that there are two worlds running parallel in Cambodia and that society has come closer to the Marxian conflict paradigm which I established in Chapter Two: an elite owner class is isolated from a very numerous and lowly-paid working population, with a small middle-class in between. The question whether the classes will move further apart or come closer together is a living issue today. Violent confrontations at demonstrations of garment workers from 2013 and 2014, such as I have depicted in *Made in Cambodia*, are an example of the upheavals which will continue to occur as Cambodia remakes itself in the modern world.

The Garment Industry and Political Corruption

On the election of Cambodia's democratic government in 1993, a twenty-year ASEAN trade embargo was lifted and Cambodia experienced an explosion of direct foreign investment. In only two years, 1995 and 1996, Cambodia approved US\$2.8 billion in fixed-asset investment from outside nations, that figure climbing to US\$5.5 billion by 2002. Of all the enterprise that arrived in Cambodia in those years, the garment industry has had by far the greatest impact (Clayton, in Tsui, 2007, p. 99). The value of garment exports rose from US\$27m in 1995 to US\$1,607m in 2003, almost 80 per cent of total exports, and the industry employed 600-700,000 people, 90 per cent of them women³² (Derks, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 194). The exports now earn Cambodia around US\$3bn per year. This emergence of factories ignited the social revolution of girls leaving their villages to live in the capital and other towns and to support their families from there. Appendix 2 shows the strong population movement to Phnom Penh and major towns since industrialisation. This graph is also a revealing historical document in other ways, depicting the rush of refugees to the city from the civil wars and also the incredible evacuation on day one of the Pol Pot time.

³² This figure comprises one in five of all Cambodian women between the ages of 18 and 25.

Made in Cambodia draws much from conditions at the end of 2013 and in early 2014 when most workers earned around US\$80 per month, some as little as US\$65. Their essential demand of Government was a raise in the legislated minimum wage to \$160 per month, which reflects an internationally assessed poverty line. Many workers survive on a low-nutrition diet of boiled noodles to survive. They work in hot, ill-ventilated factories where fainting is common and workers are often revived by a process called ‘coining’, where coins are rubbed vigorously on the upper body to increase blood circulation, generally leaving marks which take days to heal (France 24, 2015, paras 8-11). Furthermore, as the ethnographic studies of Annushka Derks have shown, and as is discussed in my novel, many young women experience stress by being caught between the morals of the village and their imagining of new ways of being in the city: a balance of traditional village values and what is deemed acceptable modern ways (Derks, in Leakthina, 2006, pp. 195-203). To send money home to their families in the country they work overtime of 10 to 12 hours per week to earn an extra \$10 (James, 2014, paras 3-7).

Throughout 2013 a series of demonstrations, road blockages and strikes disrupted the industry and drew national headlines (Teehan, 2013, paras 1-4, 10-12). Police beat protestors with truncheons to break up crowds. Violence increased as protesters hurled rocks and bricks at police, who responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon. At the November 12 demonstration, police fired into the crowd and an old woman rice seller caught a stray bullet and was killed; I was personally moved by this incident and have described a similar event in my novel. Then on 3 January 2014 nearly a thousand workers who had been on strike since 24 December 2013 gathered for a protest. Tension was mounting because garment manufacturers had been unable to fill orders. After some terse exchanges and rock throwing by demonstrators, police fired live ammunition into the crowd, killing five people and wounding over seventy (CBC News, 2014, paras 1-5). That night twenty three union

organisers were taken into custody, where all but two have remained for at least two years. Dozens have fled in fear of their lives and are now living in various parts of the countryside. The next day, security forces and masked thugs stormed an outdoor camp of CNRP opposition party supporters at Phnom Penh's Freedom Park with sticks and axes and for the next several months the park was off limits to any form of protest until demonstrations erupted again six months later (Campbell, July 2014, paras 2-6). These events have inspired my depiction of demonstrations in *Made in Cambodia*.

The stakes here are high in this critically important industry. The intimidation and violence used by Hun Sen's elite, backed up by a 'malleable' court system, is the ultimate statement of the way these forces intend to hold on to power. A recent article cites the 1996 address in Cambodia by economics Professor Dr Walden Bello, who warned: 'Governments and people in countries that want to be newly industrialized would do well to ponder carefully the consequences of fast-track capitalism and ask themselves: is this a model worth reproducing?' (Nathan, 2014, paras 6-9). The course on which Cambodia embarked was then described as 'hurricane capitalism' and the incredible gaps between rich and poor were described: gold-plated BMW 4WD vehicles parked beside beggars in the street (ibid, paras 1-3). But the flaw in the system for the elite comes with a reality that the Cambodian government is now more reliant on the global aid environment than at any other time in its history.

Western aid provides around half Cambodia's government revenue and many donor nations have condemned the violence against garment industry demonstrators. The garment vendors, such as K-Mart and Levi's, have also publicly deplored the kind of Government action which I have depicted in *Made in Cambodia* (May, 2014, paras 9-12). What has been privately communicated by them is unknown. In September 2014 protest groups picketed the Cambodian embassy in Brussels as part of an international day of action in support of

Cambodian garment workers (Guguen, 2014, paras 1-8). The government's message to the people may well be that the old forms of informal power (patronage and corruption) will remain, but the Prime Minister is clearly playing a balancing act, going as far as he can in intimidation and violence without prejudicing aid or NGO money. In 2015 the Government-legislated minimum wage was raised to US\$120 per month, just enough to quell the level of urgency of protests and to keep the garment factories in Cambodia, with neither side claiming to be satisfied (Vuthy, 2016, paras 1-2).

On the question of Government patronage and corruption I invoke the index of Brinkley's history, which lists twenty-three separate categories of corruption: police, oil reserves, health care, forest concessions, the donor community, are just a handful. He cites a report by a team of consultants working for USAID:

Corruption is structured more or less as a pyramid, with petty exactions meeting the survival needs of policemen, teachers and health workers, but also shared with officials higher in the system. Patronage and mutual obligations are the center of an all-embracing system. Appointment to public office hinges on the payment of surprisingly large sums, and these payments are recouped through a widely accepted right to collect bribes. And impunity is the norm (Brinkley, 2012, p. 184).

This description could equally have been written to describe public administration in the court of Angkor, as I described it in Chapter One. In this context the delivery of low wages is the essential oil that smooths the deals with capital in the labour-intensive garment industry and the crackdowns on union-inspired demonstrations, which are such a major part of the novel, are the government's end of the deal.

The social and cultural scene in Cambodia, which bubbles along beneath this tide of high finance and government, has become more complex in the last ten years. With some education and with outside cultural influence, not to mention the introduction of unions and some support from the middle class, the people are pressing for cultural change in the matter of government corruption, as well as in other issues. Strangio remarked in the *Mekong Review* of October 2016 that, ‘the patronage-based political system headed by Hun Sen ... is fast approaching the outer limits of both the country’s resources and the limits of what the Cambodian people are willing to endure’ (Strangio, 2016). Dissatisfaction with electoral practices and intimidation at the last two elections has increased significantly. Through 2015 and 2016 the Prime Minister, as well as his son and heir apparent, Hun Manet³³, have repeatedly warned that if the Government is not returned at the 2018 elections the result would be military backlash, probably dictatorship (Kuch, 2015, para 1). Cambodia is now close to the kind of class-based Marxian conflict model which I discussed in Chapter Two. Public antipathy to the Government continues to grow out of the traditionally compliant culture, and the preferred model of the Prime Minister is to negotiate only after violent force has failed.

The World Bank Report of September 2016 acknowledged two decades of strong economic growth in Cambodia and that ‘The garment sector, construction and services have been the main drivers of the economy’. However they also report ‘weak public service delivery which impede(s) inclusive development’ (World Bank, September 2016, paras 1-5). The message is that strong growth averaging about 7% over fifteen years has not been shared by all. But, when assessing the situation, it is important to note that the growth has actually occurred, and that for all its faults the Hun Sen regime has given stable government for twenty years after an extraordinary series of civil wars, and has presided over this growth. It

³³ Hun Manet is an army general and also designated youth spokesman for the Government and was a graduate of the US Military Academy in 1999

is also worth noting how far behind its neighbours Cambodia had fallen by the time of the 1993 elections, having completely missed the economic boom of the 1970s experienced by Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand (Swann, 2009, p. 8).

The garment worker conflict and the corruption in daily life are at the heart of the question of Cambodia's democratic national identity and these issues are impacting on the Government's image. A recent article by Professor Teri Yamada, Cambodia expert at California State University, advised that she had been going to Cambodia to work on literacy issues every year since 1995, but that when she arrived there in December 2013 during the garment workers' strike, the atmosphere was definitely different. 'Everyone I knew was talking about political change – including tuk-tuk drivers, in an atypical expression of public outspokenness' (Yamada, 2014, paras 1-6). Walmart and Nike have refused to endorse unions' demands for further wage increases and more conflict looms (Stangler, 2016, para 1). In October 2016 protests occurred over the latest issue in the industrial war, the introduction of short term (three month) contracts, which have been imposed even on senior operators (David, 2016, paras 1-3). Bitterness against the manufacturers is foremost and the public mood on this important issue runs strongly against the government.

Spirit Beliefs and Connection to Family

The phenomena of industrialisation and urbanisation which I described in the section above have created the unprecedented social revolution of young people, mostly women, leaving the village to live away from their families. This in turn has created a major challenge to the unity of the family and to spirit beliefs, which are very much bound to ancestors and the village environment.

In Chapter One I traced the origin of Cambodian spirit beliefs back to pre-historic times, before Indian traders brought their pantheon of Hindu Gods to syncretise with

animistic indigenous ideas. I have also reported from time to time in the pages above that these spirit beliefs have been retained largely intact across nearly two thousand years, in both the capital and in the country. In this part of the chapter I refer to two sections of my novel where spirit beliefs are examined and I discuss forty interviews conducted in Phnom Penh in 2015 and 2016, in which I asked educated young Cambodians about their connections to family and their relationships with ancestor and other spirits.

The most dramatic appearance of spirits in *Made in Cambodia* occurs when Malee and Reap return to their village to find that their Uncle Meach and Auntie Kim, very recently arrived from France, have been drowned in the river that morning. The story which greets them on arrival is that the black birds, the ‘raven’ as they are universally known by Cambodian English-speakers, had perched on the house the day before and persistently held their position despite all efforts to frighten them away. The spirit lore of Cambodia holds that in these circumstances a household member will die within three days, or that at least someone will be subject to extreme misfortune or illness. The raven is a bird of ill-omen.

In my novel family members evince a variety of reactions to this event. By the time we encounter them, Ma and Pa are resigned to their loss and to the inevitability of the ravens’ power. Reap, the less educated of the two sisters, is stricken with terror, reflecting her strong belief in the efficacy of the black birds. Malee’s reaction is more complex. She is close to becoming a doctor. She knows the scientific reasons that people die and she consciously disbelieves that ravens are spreading magic, but she still shivers involuntarily at the news of their appearance. Malee is torn between the rational, scientific education she has received, and her years of childhood conditioning. This reflects my interviews: a significant number of educated young people retain the belief in black bird powers. It is my strong impression that in rural areas and among a less-educated cohort of participants, the result would have favoured the raven beliefs much more.

Ancestor observance also has a strong presence in my novel, both in the funeral ceremonies and in the observance of the Pchum Benh festival. In the years after the Khmer Rouge many Cambodians experienced feelings of guilt that they had survived when so many of their family members had not. As a consequence the observance of Pchum Benh became critical to the psychological health of the nation, but the trauma deepened in those provinces which were deficient in monks with the knowledge to conduct appropriate ceremonies (Zucker, in Kent, 2008, pp. 195-209). In *Made in Cambodia*, however, the village has elders like Pa, as well as monks and achars, to guide the new generation. My research interviews revealed a huge level of observance of the Pchum Benh among young people, with many travelling enormous distances from the city to be with their families at this time, just as Malee and Reap do in my novel.

The interviews to which I refer were conducted in Phnom Penh during April 2015 and February/March 2016. All participants were volunteers and the interviews were conducted under guidelines agreed with the University of Technology, Sydney, Ethics Committee. Thirteen interviews were conducted with students of the Norton University, nine at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, five at the Australian Centre for English (ACE) while the other thirteen I selected from people working at cafes and hotels in the Phnom Penh Riverside area. All were aged between eighteen and twenty nine years and all had experienced at least five years of English language training and were able to communicate in English.

The interviews involved answering questions about spirit beliefs and family connections and were used mainly for qualitative purposes although I have completed a table of results which I include as Appendix 3 to this exegesis. I have also added the official Question Sheet as Appendix 4. In answer to the starter question of whether the participant believed in ancestor spirits who live on in some form and can influence, or be influenced by, the deeds of the living, 27 participants (or 67.5 per cent) said yes, seven said no, and six were

unsure. I then asked about people who died violent or untimely deaths and whether they became bad/unhappy spirits needing special ceremonies, appeasement and encouragement. The belief here was still strong, with around 60 per cent stating a clearly held conviction. This 60 per cent belief-level was fairly consistent whether the participant was raised in the country or the city. This consistency between country and city was maintained regarding beliefs in raven power (46 to 50 per cent) and in the special ability of monks to fight bad spirits, including the ravens (around 57 per cent belief in each area).

A greater gap appeared when I analysed the results on the criterion of parent education level. Where at least one of the participant's parents had completed the Cambodian Certificate of Upper Secondary Education, the belief in spirits dropped to 60 per cent, compared to 75 per cent for those whose parents were less educated rice farmers or shopkeepers etc. This education divide became more dramatic again when considering the number who believed in raven power, which I considered the most radical of all the traditional spirit beliefs. Only 30 per cent of participants with an educated parent believed in raven power, while 60 per cent of those with less educated parents did believe. Of the believers that I interviewed there were three who claimed personal witness of the death of a human being because of a raven visit. My policy at interview was not to press for details of this nature, but to record such experiences when they were volunteered, so there may well have been others with an experience of this sort who did not mention it. But those who claimed that close friends or relatives had died in this way related their stories with a proud kind of avidity, almost as if the association with ravens made them in some way special. Interview Number 1/18 claimed she had been close to three people who died after raven visits, all on the very day after the visit. My character Malee in *Made In Cambodia* would fall into the category of participant without a school-finishing parent. Although her Pa knew the value of education, his schooling ended in mid-teenage years with the Khmer Rouge and, like

many people in that position, he had never been able to return. But belief in the raven was not limited to those with uneducated parents, as the table at Appendix 3 clearly shows.

I sought detail of the nature of ancestor spirit belief. Most believers were of the view that those who died untimely or violent deaths became unhappy or angry spirits. This included deaths in road accidents, of which there were quite a number reported, and which also included ancestors who had perished at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Women who died in childbirth were also unhappy spirits. For these spirits it was believed that an especially long and complex ceremony should be performed, in which they were encouraged to come home to the spirit house of their families. Without this ceremony the spirit would wander unhappily. After the funeral another ceremony would usually be held one hundred days after the first, to convince the spirit of its welcome. Participants held many different ideas about where the spirits really lived. Some said they lived in the toilet, some said under the house with the animals, another was clear that the spirit stayed outside where firewood was kept and yet another said under the steps or anywhere that humans didn't go. One participant thought spirits swirled all around the house and were dressed in white. Despite some disagreement on this level all were clear that a spirit house should be replenished on at least a weekly basis with fresh fruit, coffee and maybe doughnuts and sweets. This was essential to keeping spirits happy and feeling welcome. A number of participants said that if they did not attend Pchum Benh then an important spirit, such as a deceased grandfather, would then go roaming unhappily, looking for the non-attender.

There was a very high rate of 95 per cent participation at Pchum Benh, compared to the 60 per cent who strictly believed that unhappy spirits needed extra attention and appeasement. Of the participants who attended the festival without believing in its tenets, some reported that they attended simply to please their parents, but many expressed their genuine feeling that attendance at the festival was a kind of community responsibility. For

example Interview Number 1/8 stated very clearly that she was an atheist. In her case, education seemed to be a factor. Both her parents had completed the Certificate and her father was an NGO worker for Lutheran World Vision; she was a graduate in Economics. With advanced education and strong outside religious influence, the whole family still attended Pchum Benh. Throughout my interviews there was a feeling that attendance at Pchum Benh was an important community obligation. I saw this as an indication of the Buddhist ideals of self-denial and community spirit holding up against individualist Western cultural influences.

Only three of the 40 participants did not attend the Pchum Benh festival. Interview Number 1/12 was working in a well-known bookshop and was the son of the proprietor, a very well read and thoughtful man with whom I had shared some advanced political conversations in the preceding year. He has rejected all spirit beliefs as irrational and his son acknowledges he has been heavily influenced by his father. Interview 1/16 claimed it was too expensive and seemed simply to have a waning interest. The other non-attender, Interview Number 1/11, had turned Christian. Her mother was a fanatical Buddhist who kept six spirit houses and also the bones of her deceased husband, the participant's father, in the house, believing they would bring good luck and to show him that he was still loved. But participant 1/11 had been taught English language as a teenager at an NGO in her homeland and was proselytised by a Christian women. When she had throat cancer this participant believed that the timing of her recovery coincided with her conversion to Christianity and that consequently it was the Christian God who had the power. She also claimed to have been stalked by a bad girl spirit/ghost who tried to get into her bed with her on a nightly basis for a period of weeks. When she threatened the spirit/ghost with the Christian God the girl never returned, proving to this participant that Christianity was stronger than Buddhism. This girl appears to have split from her mother over her beliefs; she was the only participant who did

not regularly visit her parent or go to her homeland³⁴. It is a phenomenon in Cambodian culture that NGO presence has brought with it conversions which have affected the religious unity of the nation (Harris, V, in Kent, 2008, pp. 293-306).

But outside of this example, my interviews support the idea that the family remains very strong in Cambodia. Of the 40 participants I interviewed in Phnom Penh, 26 had been raised in the country. This statistic supports the perceived trend³⁵ that young people are moving from the country to the city for work and study. Every participant apart from 1/11 was sending money to their parents every month. I am sure that if I had been able to include less educated participants from an industry such as garment manufacture, the incidence of the country-raised would be even higher. Apart from 1/11, every single country-raised participant claimed to visit the homeland at least three times per year. Many did the trip four or five times, almost certainly including Pchum Benh and Khmer New Year as two of the trips. Young people, such as Malee and Reap in my novel, have become accustomed to making lengthy, hazardous road trips on motorbike. In my novel Ryan is amazed that Malee would ride more than three hours to Kep in the rain to see him. To Malee it is business as usual.

The evidence of my interviews supports the assertion that the family remains strong, and that young people like Reap, Malee and Number One are supporting their parents in the country. It is also clear that the belief in the spirit world remains strong, and that education has a strong role in eroding these beliefs. Participants with educated parents recorded a much lower incidence of belief in the black birds, and some well-educated participants were either atheist or had taken up other religions under the influence of NGO education. It is likely that further exposure to outside ideas will continue this process.

³⁴ Even as a Christian this girl still qualified as a believer in spirits.

³⁵ See Appendix 3.

Professional Girlfriends

The opening of Cambodia in the late 1990s may have brought capital which created factories and urbanisation, but along with it came foreign nationals in business, as teachers and NGO workers, and in many other fields. This Western invasion brought unprecedented social options for Cambodian women: Western males as boyfriend and marriage prospects. I see my novel as not only an examination of the direct impact of capital but also as a serious examination of various forms of transnational relationships.

In Cambodia, relationships can come in many forms. Of course, transactional sex-for-cash work exists in Cambodia³⁶ (Ditmore, 2014, pp. 22-31). But many more complex relationships also occur, often ending in traditional marriage outcomes, as we see with Ryan and Malee in *Made in Cambodia*. Through the character of the Kratie girl, my novel also pursues the phenomenon of girlfriend relations and the complex ‘professional girlfriend’ situations. I argue that virtually all these relationships include some form of negotiated transaction, in the traditions of Khmer and Asian culture.

The exchange of money and goods for womanhood is deeply engrained in Asian/Cambodian culture (North, 2008, p. 89) as it has also been for centuries in the West. In my novel Ryan is shocked when he has to take Malee shopping, a kind of down payment, to prove he is a worthy suitor. He has been raised in the relatively recently acquired middle-class Western culture in which women have independent wealth, and he has difficulty adjusting to customs in a nation where women have little money of their own; he must also adjust to a culture where most resources are shared among a family. To a degree the whole novel is a process of Ryan adjusting his being to an Asian model. He is presented with the possibility of marriage to Malee, but he is concurrently given the opportunity to liaise with a

³⁶ Despite a law of 2008 making sex work illegal

very attractive professional girlfriend who will engage in whatever level of relationship he desires. Ryan is tempted, but ultimately not while Malee is an option.

The situation of professional girlfriends in Cambodia is intriguing. Many young women will move to Phnom Penh for legitimate bar work and opportunities to meet foreign boyfriends. Some women will settle for men who visit Cambodia for a couple of weeks annually, as does the Kratie girl in my novel, but are likely to be concurrently working to improve their options. In the introduction to her book *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia*, Heidi Hoefinger argues against one-dimensional feminist critiques of young Cambodian women's positioning in their relations with foreign men. While observers 'erroneously brand them with the commercialized and stigmatized labels of 'prostitutes' or 'broken women' (*srei kouc*), ethnographic data demonstrates that they engage in relationships more complex than simply 'sex-for-cash' marketplace exchanges' (Hoefinger, 2013, p. 3). Hoefinger's book is the result of seven years of ethnographic study and conversations with nearly 300 men and women. She rejects 'the "indirect" or "freelance" sex worker label that is so often used in NGO reports that attempt to describe this stereotyped group' (Hoefinger, 2012, para 7-9). Instead she sees young women in search of opportunity, excitement and romance. While these women do not see themselves as 'sex workers' they do rely on the formation of relationships as a means of livelihood and they may involve themselves in overlapping transactional relationships, sometimes without the knowledge of their partners (Hoefinger, 2013, p. 3). The ultimate goal for these women is often to engage in non-transactional sex in a conventional marriage-like relationship. Often women have made a conscious decision to escape 'deeply violating situations and social conditions' such as abusive marriages and they 'innovatively make choices and negotiate structural inequalities with fortitude and ingenuity, while finding pleasure in daily life' (ibid, p.7).

In *Made in Cambodia* the violating situation that the Kratie girl is escaping is work in the garment factory, where she has been deemed too slow, as have many girls like her. Women who return home to their village empty-handed must wear a badge of shame (Derks, in Leakthina, 2006, p. 200). It should be presumed by the reader that to avoid such ignominious loss of face she has gambled on romantic attachment with a Westerner, possibly Ryan's friend Tom or a friend of his. In this sense she is not unlike the girl who was discussed by Malee and Reap in Part One of the novel, who has been rejected after three months by her French NGO lover: if she returns to the village she will be treated with contempt by the 'good' village girls. The Kratie girl also cannot return and she is left to the precarious life of the girlfriend.

This section of the novel in Kratie also gives Tom much of his purpose in the book. He has been in Cambodia for much longer than Ryan and actively participates in a professional girlfriend arrangement. If Ryan joins him in this kind of relationship, Ryan will become more like Tom. As such Tom is a Mephistophelian figure, but one who is troubled at heart by his abandonment of his three-year-old daughter in Minnesota, a matter he has kept secret until the bus ride back from Kratie. He tells Ryan that, effectively, Ryan is crazy not to take the girl, for Ryan's only option is the world of responsibilities which marriage to Malee and her family will entail. But Tom then admits that sometimes he wishes he was more like Ryan. The professional girlfriend episode in Kratie therefore indirectly stimulates Tom to reconcile with Marie, the wife he left behind, and to return to the United States at the end of the novel.

An important aspect of Hoefinger's work is that she pays attention to male counterparts like Tom. She remarks that she found examples of 'sensitivity and vulnerability experienced by some Western men in order to counter typical hegemonic discourses around neo-colonialist masculinity and problematize binaries of oppressor/oppressed' (Hoefinger,

2013, p. 7). In other words, the situation of oppressor/oppressed is non-binary and more complex than traditional discourse would allow. My own aim throughout *Made in Cambodia* has been to resist reductionist stereotypes of transnational partnerships. Ryan and Tom are both sensitive to the issues experienced by the girls; Tom thinks he is improving the Kratie girl's life by introducing her to Ryan. Ryan has been tempted, but the special fascination he has for Malee, and she for him, over-rides all. But through all this it should be clear that Malee also remains fully aware of the transactional aspects of her relationship with Ryan; she is a member of a family after all, and her duty is to improve herself to the benefit of everyone, in accord with the familial interactions outlined in Chapter Two. This is not Tum and Teav, sacrificing themselves on the altar of impulse and individualism; Malee is right for him, just as he is right for her and, importantly, he is right for her family too.

Apart from Hoefinger there has been little serious study of the professional girlfriend situation in Cambodia. A body of work exists covering the scene in Thailand, beginning with Eric Cohen's *Lovelorn Farangs* article in 1968 and with more recent books by Askew (2002) and Wilson (2004). In 2014 Larissa Sandy produced the book *Women and Sex Work in Cambodia: Blood, Sweat and Tears*, focusing on the high level of tolerance of sex work in Cambodia (especially as a culture from the French colonial era) and how women become locked into debt bondage. While focusing on legitimate motivations of sex workers, such as family support values, the book concentrates on traditional sex work and does not address professional girlfriends. If analysis of the Cambodian situation is late coming, that should be no surprise; the political upheavals in Cambodia began from around the year of Cohen's Thailand article and continued until the late nineties, when the economic opening to the West occurred, bringing with it the extraordinary rate of catch-up change I have been discussing in this chapter. Hoefinger's work also vindicates very substantially the position I had already taken in my novel, which in turn was derived from my own observations and from the

narratives of ex-patriates in Phnom Penh. Not only does this blurring of romance and transaction lines occur in the professional girlfriend situation, but it also spills into the central relationship and marriage between Ryan and Malee, as it does for many other real-life couples in Cambodia.

‘Living Together’

An extraordinary aspect of Cambodian life often noted by visitors is that ex-Khmer Rouge cadres and their erstwhile victims now live among each other, in the city and in villages, and must get on with life together. This phenomenon has an important place in my novel: ex-patriates Ryan and Tom speculate on the past life of their boss Mr Dith; Ryan wonders about the history of the patriarch of the Sovannah Phum Classical Dance Association; but of course it is the uneducated Chean, a man of country origin, who made perfect KR recruitment material around 1974 and who, as a fourteen year old, marched into Phnom Penh wearing the black pyjamas and went on to be a guard at Mr Dith’s work camp.

To understand how this phenomenon came to be, it is important to understand key political events of 1993 and 1997. Elections in 1993 were financed and overseen by the United Nations and were meant to create a parliament which gave formerly warring factions an appropriate stake in a new system. But the assembly was complex and eventually it was managed by two Prime Ministers, Prince Ranariddh³⁷ of the royalist party FUNCINPEC and Hun Sen of the Cambodian People’s Party. Ranariddh had won more of the vote but Hun Sen was incumbent and refused to budge. The new parliament quickly returned to traditions of corruption, increasing their own salaries to 65 times that of a policeman (Tully, 2005, p. 223). Strangio has remarked about this time, directly after the United Nations-supervised elections of 1993: ‘The democratic project ... produced a mirage on the Mekong, an illusion of

³⁷ The son of Sihanouk

Western democratic forms behind which the country operated much as it always had' (Strangio, 2014, p. xiv). Democratic forms sat awkwardly on top of the traditional hierarchical structure of society.

The greatest problem was that the nation had two Prime Ministers. In early 1997, just four years after the UNTAC elections, Hun Sen irritated co-Prime Minister Ranariddh by striking a defection deal with former Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary and accepting 3,000 Khmer Rouge into both the army and his personal bodyguard (Chandler, 2008, p.289; Strangio, 2014, p. 75), effectively all into his private entourage. Then on 30 March there was a sign of what was to come when grenades were thrown from passing motorcycles into an opposition demonstration. Hundreds of Hun Sen's bodyguard³⁸ had unexpectedly arrived to watch the demonstration, and their ranks opened up to let the attackers through to safe escape. More than twenty people were killed including Opposition Leader Sam Rainsy's personal bodyguard who threw himself onto a grenade; Sam Rainsy himself was lucky to survive (Brinkley, 2011, p. 111). Then, in July, Hun Sen launched a bloody pre-emptive coup in the streets of Phnom Penh where over a hundred FUNCINPEC officials and prominent supporters were killed (Chandler, 2008, p. 290). Hun Sen has remained in power ever since amid regular complaints of corrupt and intimidatory electoral practices, which have culminated in murder. The message sent to the Cambodian people was that the Khmer Rouge were to be allowed back with impunity, as an integral part of the community.

Even the court set up to try Khmer Rouge crimes in 2006 was corrupt and secretive (Brinkley, 2012, p. 319). Hun Sen insisted that these crimes be tried by a Cambodian court and many critics accuse the tribunal³⁹ of being poorly set up and soft on the defendants: 'allegations of corruption and politicization have dogged the ECCC's glacial process' (Campbell, 2014, para 7). It is widely accepted that the Tribunal was hamstrung because it

³⁸ Filled with ex-Khmer Rouge cadres

³⁹ The full official title is the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)

was coming too close to Government figures, even the Prime Minister himself. Only one conviction was achieved in eight years at a cost of US\$200 million (ibid). Strangio cites the case of Meas Muth, former head of the Khmer Rouge navy who lives in a substantial house in Ta Sanh Cheun village. Muth ‘disavowed any responsibility for what took place in the 1970s’ (Strangio, 2014, p. 236). He was Case No. 3 at the tribunal and even though there was a clear paper trail linking him to killings and purges, his case was vehemently opposed by the Government. The head of the tribunal Kasper-Ansemethn resigned describing ‘serious irregularities, dysfunctions, and violations of proper due process of law’ (ibid, p. 237). Now it became clear that even the most deeply implicated ex-Khmer Rouge were to be treated with impunity.

This issue of former KR operators and their victims living side by side in Cambodia has long been a major social issue. In my novel Chean and Dith encounter each other after more than twenty-five years. Dith had been placed in a work camp where Chean was a guard as a teenager. Whatever transpired between the two men is not specifically revealed in the novel, but it is clear that Chean knew of the fate of Dith’s wife and child, and it is to be presumed that Chean had participated somehow in their deaths. As Nic Dunlop described it, ‘As a fighting force, the Khmer Rouge no longer existed, but former members were everywhere: as government officials, army generals, village leaders’ (Dunlop, 2002, p. 4). A now-popular saying goes, ‘They are all around us; we live among the tigers’ (Mason, 2013, p. 5). The fatalistic acceptance of this situation by Cambodian people is demonstrated in a more colloquial and optimistic rendering of this, which I use in Part One of my novel: ‘As long as killing stop, no worry’.

The reality of KR victims living with their former captors began as early as the Thai refugee camps, as we see in the memoir *Under the Drops of Falling Rain*: ‘All around I look and I see Khmer Rouge, not wearing black pyjama but wearing normal clothes. Smoking,

playing card, napping. Like they never been soldier. Like they never kill' (McCormick, 2012, p. 167). The narrator of this memoir sees it as a 'crazy game' but it is one which all Cambodian people have been playing ever since, playing it in order to survive. In an interview with the London *Independent* Nic Dunlop said he was surprised that when he found the former Tuol Sleng torture commander Duch, the man walked straight up to greet him openly. But Dunlop checked himself because no Khmer Rouge members were on any sort of wanted list: 'The entire issue of justice was a new concept' (Dunlop, 2010). This is the kind of expediency over morality which typifies the entire post Khmer Rouge administration in Cambodia; passivity, as ever, was the key to survival in the Pol Pot time and many people went along with things they were ashamed of later. Chean's recognition by Dith is traumatising for Chean and he must confess his involvement to Ryan, with the effect that their relationship is never quite the same again.

The 'new world' in Cambodia since the introduction of global capital, and the government of Hun Sen, has become a more fractious, contestable place. A new elite group of capitalist, Government and ex-Khmer rouge military figures has taken over many Government positions, and deals with foreign capital may well be struck by corrupt means. But with money entering the country from outside sources, and from NGOs and foreign aid, there is a scent of opportunity which was never present under the time of royal power and Buddhist dominance. Of the less educated classes, professional girlfriends and garment workers take whatever scraps are left after the elite has taken its share. A small middle class is developing and, under the influence of outside education, voices of dissent are increasing and traditional Buddhist spirit beliefs begin to erode. However, with suspected election-rigging, lethal attacks on worker demonstrations and with assassinations of political opponents, the government is losing what moral authority it might ever have had. How long it can hold

power in this way, and to what extent this elite will go to retain its position, is the enduring question for modern Cambodia.

Conclusion

For nearly two thousand years the structured interactions of Cambodian society have stood, giving purpose and meaning to the peasantry, structure and security to the elite. This social order has been buttressed by the teachings of Buddhist monks and by traditional literature which exemplified the rightness of the position of king and aristocracy, while providing abundant role models for a passive peasant people whose rewards would come with *kama* and reincarnation. The sociological theories of Max Weber and George Herbert Mead can be used to give an understanding of the way interactions of social position and symbols provided meaning for the peasant class in this society and continue to do so today.

Since the 1930s challenges to this system have steadily mounted, beginning with the movement seeking independence from the French in the 1930s, which was fueled by the nation's first European-educated writers. Since then modern literature has attempted to influence social and political outcomes but freedom of speech has come under assault from the governments of Prince Sihanouk, the American-backed Lon Nol, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and the ten-year Vietnamese occupation. Modern Cambodian writers struggle to have an impact with the infrastructure of education, destroyed under the Khmer Rouge, still being repaired and with the repressive nature of the Hun Sen government. But with considerable international interest in this nation, non-Cambodians continue to write about it, with some literature beginning to engage in serious themes related to the rapid rate of change and integration with foreigners.

In the last fifteen years the transformation of international capital has caused the social upheavals of urbanisation, the creation of factories, particularly those in the garment industry, the unprecedented migration of women from the villages, and, in particular, of new kinds of relationship with foreigners from wealthy Western nations. The challenge for young women has been particularly abrupt, with the social paradigm of the village-centred ideal woman

revolutionised. Women now commute to cities to work and support ageing parents, far from the moral unity of the traditional village setting.

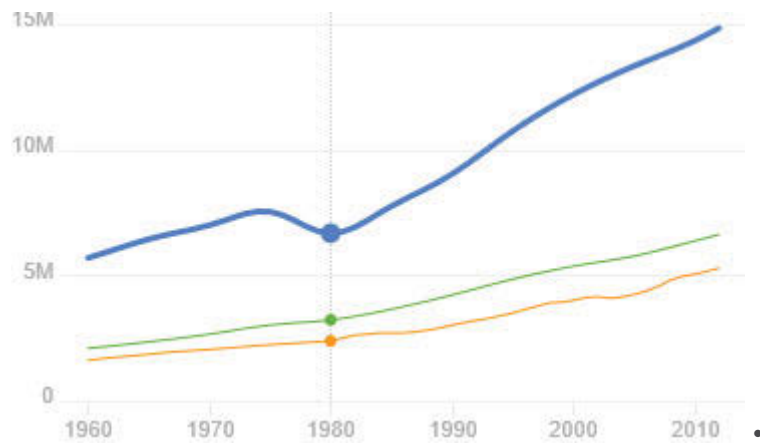
In the new Cambodia an elite still holds economic power, but there is a scramble for position, and a renegotiation of symbolic interaction by the bulk of the population. Taken away from the field and village, workers are now forming associative groups to combat the power of elite capital, to demand improvement in wages and working conditions. The conflicts which have ensued in the last four years are unprecedented in Cambodian history.

Made in Cambodia examines these important issues and looks closely at new types of relationships arising between European men and Khmer women. The characters of Ryan, Malee, Tom, the Kratie girl, Mr Dith and Janey all interact with the scent of permanent relationship in the air. The characters of Number One and Pa, and their interactions with Ryan, further expand this theme of the renegotiation of position and the place of the foreigner in the new Cambodian dynamic. The theme of renegotiation spreads to the economic and macro-social world, the formation of unions and the unprecedented challenge to authority. In my novel it is the love relationship between Ryan and Malee which projects Ryan into the middle of these disputes in order that he may establish his face as a suitor.

My novel captures Cambodia at a crossroads moment in its history, where imminent events, such as the 2018 elections, may decide whether the nation will evolve into a genuine pluralistic democracy or regress to military dictatorship. In my novel I have tried to capture this moment where change and renegotiation are new. The fate of Cambodia is in the hands of its people, its unions, its voters and, still most importantly, of the Prime Minister and his elite.

Appendix 1 – Cambodia Population

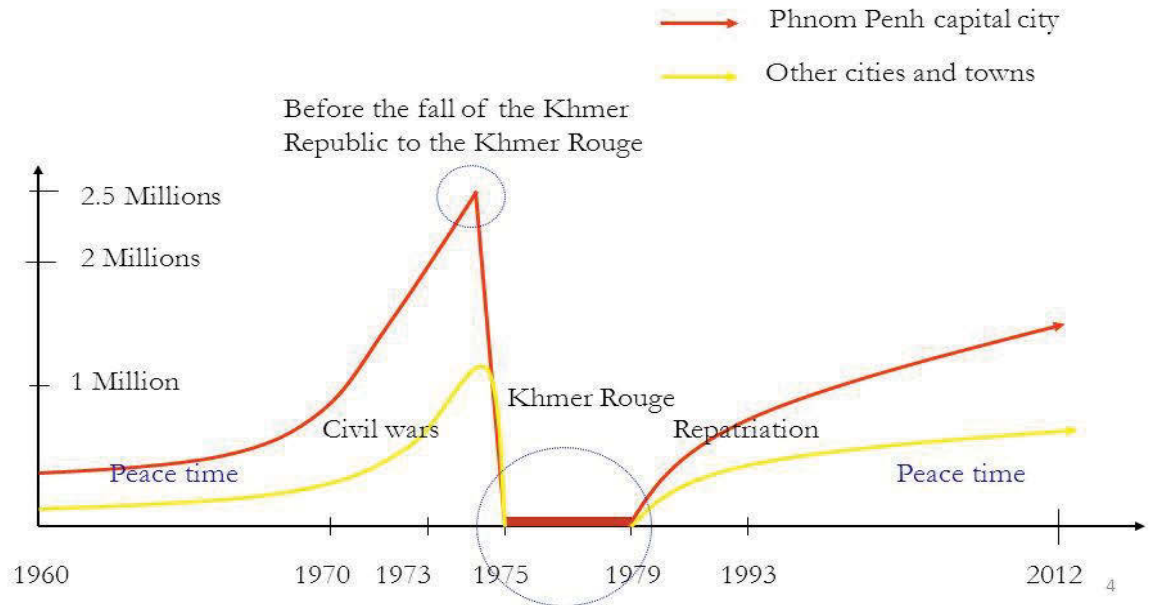
14.86 million (2012)
Cambodia, Population



The green line shows the steady population growth of Laos, the orange is Singapore.

Appendix 2 – The impact of Industrialisation on Urbanisation

Key Urbanisation trends: As shown in the Graph, urbanisation in Cambodia is on the increase after the Khmer Rouge regime which provide opportunities for investors not only in the capital city but many other emerging cities and towns with diverse business possibilities



Appendix 3 – Table: Statistics from Interviews April 2015 and March 2016

Participant Group:

Forty Cambodians between the ages of 18 and 29 who have had 3 to 8 years of English language training.

Definitions:

Believe in spirits – participants believe that when people die they live on as spirits which have contact with the living world. Spirits can be happy or angry, depending on the manner of the death.

Believe in black bird (raven) power – participants believe that when the raven sits of the roof of the house and will not go away, then sickness or death will occur, usually within three days.

Believe in monk special powers – participants believe that monks’ prayers can help cure you when sick and that they can also fight the power of bad spirits, especially the ravens mentioned above.

Note: Twenty seven stated belief in ancestor spirits, seven did not believe with six uncertain.

	Raised in Country (26)			Raised in City - PP (14)			Parent Finished School (20)			Parent not Finish (20)		
	Yes %	No %	? %	Yes %	No %	? %	Yes %	No %	? %	Yes %	No %	? %
Participants believe in spirits	69.3%	15.3	15.3	64.3	21.4	14.3	60%	25	15	75	10	15
Participants believe in black bird power	46.2%	42.3	11.5	50	28.5	21.5	30%	50	20	60	30	10
Participants believe in monk special powers	57.7%	38.5	3.8	57.1	35.7	7.1	40%	50	10	65	30	5

Appendix 4 – Interview Questions

Name: Age: Sex:

Where were you born? What part of Cambodia were you brought up in?

How many years have you spent in the country/city/town?

What is your highest education level? How many years English training have you done?

Parents and Grandparents

What is/was your father's occupation? Mother?

What education did your parents have? What social status in their community?

How old are they?

Spirits

Do your parents have a shrine to spirits in their house? If yes, do they put out food and drink?

Do they believe in ancestor spirits?

Do they believe that the woods have spirits or that a street or house may have a spirit?

Do they believe people who died suddenly or unexpectedly have bad spirits that need appeasing?

Are there any family members who died unexpectedly? What has happened to their spirits?

Do they believe that birds or other animals are spirits or are messengers from dead ancestors?

Repeat questions for grandparents

Interviewee

Where do you work? How much are you paid? If not work, how survive?

Has your education helped you get a job?

How often do you visit your parents?

Do you send money to your parents or other family members? If yes, how much and how often?

Do you believe in spirits? Repeat questions for parents if necessary.

Do you give to monks? Why? Why not?

Do you have a shrine at home? Why? Why not?

How many times in the last five years have you attended the Pchum Ben festival? If you attend, are you appeasing your own ancestors or those of the whole village or town?

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