

Hand of Innocence

by

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“Help yourself,” the headman said, matter-of-factly, as he indicated an open-sided thatched shed at the far edge of the half-empty village. His face, gaunt and wrinkled, seemed devoid of emotion and his eyes suggested he had seen more than he wanted.

Nhung showed his appreciation in the traditional way, by placing his palms together in front of his broad, brown face. His long, black hair, gathered into a ponytail, and his frazzled moustache lent him a certain bohemian air. He took his leave of the headman and made his way dispiritedly in the direction indicated, along the earthen track meandering around the scattered huts of the village.

He felt wrung out. He had forgotten how sapping the tropical heat could be before the monsoons came. He had endured it for days, travelling in unreliable transport and across dangerous terrain, in order to reach this out-of-the-way Cambodian village near the border with Thailand.

The distance between this primitive, uninviting place, with its lingering odour of death, and Paris, with its pious building and orderly boulevards, seemed like a journey from one universe to another. Now that he had reached it he was not sure what he wanted to find.

A few scrawny children with faces evocative of Oxfam posters peered at him shyly from the doorways of flimsy huts. He allowed his generous mouth to break into a smile but the children responded by withdrawing a little into the huts. No doubt his sweaty denim shirt with its rolled up sleeves and his soiled Levi jeans marked him as an outsider and they had cause to be wary. He felt an instinctive need to reach them, to tell them that he was not there to cause harm but only to rediscover his purpose, his family and his country.

But he could not find the words. His long exile in France, while sparing him the starvations and butcheries besetting his nation, also effectively turned him into a stranger without shared experiences.

His departure from home had been quite innocent. It happened a long time ago. He wanted to become a painter. Ever since boyhood he had found delight in sketching his sisters practising court dances and capturing on paper the lichen covered temples of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. When his French teachers, discovering his interest, introduced him to the works of Renoir, Monet, Utrillo, Dufy, Bonnard, Vuillard, Daumier and countless others, he became hopelessly hooked.

It seemed that studying in Paris, following in the footsteps of those masters, could be nothing short of heaven. So he badgered his father, a wealthy timber merchant, to despatch him to the City of Light.

His father, however, had different ideas. Cambodia needed doctors, engineers and irrigation experts rather than painters, his father declared. Pictures could neither ease hunger nor cure diseases. He wanted his son to go into a profession.

But Nhoung was adamant. Being the eldest of three sons, after two girls, and the apple of both his mother's and his grandmother's eye, his unhappiness over his father's refusal soon caused the womenfolk to bring more subtle persuasions into play. At the age of seventeen he was granted his wish. His mother hung a gold chain around his neck attached to a small jade image of Buddha to protect him from evil and to remind him to recite the Sutras. He was then shipped off tearfully to France.

Paris went to his head. He installed himself in one of those charming studio apartments with sagging floors and balustraded windows and threw himself into his art. Forms and colours simply exploded from his brushes and that was all he lived for.

So absorbed was he with his studies and paintings that he paid no attention to the subtle shifts in military and political alignments touched upon in letters from home. In any event he had a loathing for politics, with its ready expediencies and its back-room deals, and did not share his father's royalist sympathies.

He began to feel uneasy only when the phony neutrality prevailing at the time of his departure erupted into a complex internecine conflict, with some Cambodians choosing to serve in the United States Special Forces and others siding with the Viet Cong. Still others played all sides and grew rich in the process. When the Americans eventually withdrew from Indochina, the Khmer Rouge began their march to power.

At first they did not appear so awesome. The peasants supported them. Indeed, some idealistic compatriots headed swiftly home to aid in the rebirth and reconstruction of the nation. Only his father remained pessimistic. But he discounted that as the view of someone who had lived most of his life in a mummified French colonial protectorate, tied to the ways of the old regime.

Suddenly word came from his father, ordering him to remain in France until further notice. His father told him he was evacuating the entire family to Thailand. That would be a massive undertaking because the immediate family was made up of thirty-three mouths, including his grandmother, his parents, his sisters and brothers, their husbands and wives, and their numerous children.

He thought the move too drastic. So far as he was aware, the Khmer Rouge were only attempting to even out the disparities between the cities and the countryside by abolishing the use of money and by ordering the evacuation of the urban areas. There might be the odd unpleasantness but Cambodians were by and large Buddhists, for whom the taking of life was a sin. Moreover, Prince Sihanouk was still Head of State. So he persuaded himself that the excesses of other revolutions were unlikely to occur.

But that was the last he heard from his family. All attempts to make contact or to secure information failed. The Khmer Rouge had apparently made total secrecy the basis of their administration.

As Nhoung trudged along the village path he reflected on how wrong he had been. The Khmer Rouge, under Pol Pot, turned out to be monsters. They wanted to take the nation back to what they called “Year Zero”, when it was supposed to be ethnically pure and uncontaminated by religion, imperialist ideas and the corruption of urban ways. To achieve that they started slaughtering racial and religious minorities, monks, political opponents and even those within their own ranks who voiced dissent. Idealists and patriots who had returned from abroad met similar fates.

Nhoung noticed some villagers working in the fields beyond the huts. He would never be at one with them again, he thought. While they were toiling in the tropical heat he was strolling in the Luxembourg Garden; while they were being starved and tortured, he was mouthing inanities about art in Left Bank cafes; and while they were watching their friends and loved ones led to the killing fields, he was drowning his pride with Pernod because his paintings had failed to dazzle the world.

There was now supposed to be peace, brokered by the United Nations. But peace was not simply the absence of full-scale war. How could there be peace when the Khmer Rouge still lurked in the jungles, when the country was carved up among armed factions, when gunfire resounded during the night to leave bullet-riddled bodies the following morning and when innocent people were being blown apart every day by mines planted by the Americans, by the Vietnamese, by Sihanoukists, by Lon Nol sympathizers, by the Khmer Rouge and by Hun Sen supporters?

No one knew how many mines there were or where they had been buried. The best guesses ran into millions. His country had become the ultimate dream for arms suppliers. It offered daily proof of the cost-effectiveness of their killing machines!

He would have gladly abandoned his accursed land to its self-seeking politicians and generals if distant relatives in Bangkok had not passed on rumours about his immediate family. Apparently someone had heard from someone else who had seen his parents at this particular village during their flight from Phnom Penh. The fact that none of his family had reached Thailand was certain. Given the years of

silence, he had long suspected the worst. It was now a matter of facing up to the truth.

After the Vietnamese had overthrown the Khmer Rouge, it was revealed that most of the inhabitants of the village and others who had fled there had perished from starvation, disease or executions. If such terrible fates had befallen his family, he had at least to locate their remains and arrange decent burials. The village headman told him all remains recovered from mass graves, minus those already identified and buried, were located at the open-sided shed at the edge of the village.

Nhung arrived at last at the shed. There before him, on a wooden platform, was a huge pyramid of bleached, grimacing skulls, some partially smashed and others still wearing the rotting blindfolds of execution. The dark apertures which once provided for the human senses still seemed to retain lingering echoes of terminal traumas. Next to the pyramid of skulls was a great heap of other remains -- rib cages, spinal columns, hip bones, femurs, ulnas and the rest.

Nhung collapsed upon his knees and his body heaved with unchecked tears. He suddenly saw the ghastly form and substance of the killing fields, hitherto known only in the abstract. He thought he had gone beyond anger, beyond pain, beyond grief. But he was wrong. A great, nameless anguish seized his heart.

How many must have suffered to leave such monuments to madness! How could he possibly identify his family members from such jumbled remains? He remembered his grandmother had two gold teeth. He laughed bitterly at that wayward thought. To imagine that any skull could have retained two gold teeth for so long was completely idiotic!

Picasso had painted Guernica to express his outrage at what the Fascists had done in Spain. But the horrors of Guernica had been inflicted from the air, at a distance, impersonally, almost clinically. What lay before him spoke of atrocities done at close quarters, in cold blood, with even demonic glee. How could anyone find the appropriate symbols and colours to express carnage on such a scale?

He wanted to bury each of the dead before him but knew it would be impossible. There was no telling which bones belonged with which skull. He picked from the pile of bones a tiny set of ulna and radius, with all the fingers still attached. It had been a child's. It could easily have belonged to one of his nephews or nieces.

He held the bleached relic and gently rubbed away some mud clinging to the finger bones. After a while he brushed the tear stains from his face and went looking for the headman. When he had found him, he asked: "Where might I bury my family?"

"You have identified them?" the headman asked, with the merest hint of surprise in his voice.

“No,” Nhoung replied, holding up the bone. “But I have found the hand of an innocent child. What better to represent what I and our entire nation have lost. Where can I bury it?”

“Anywhere you like beyond the village. Perhaps on the edge of the jungle. Be careful, however, not to wander too far, lest you add your own bones to the pile. There are mines out there.”

Nhoung borrowed a hoe from the headman and made his way to the edge of the jungle. He dug a deep hole so that the relic might rest without risk of being disturbed. After he had placed it into the hole, he unclasped the jade Buddha from the gold chain around his neck and deposited it within the bony web of fingers. He then buried them and marked the site with a pile of rocks so that he could find it should he ever venture that way again.

He rested himself upon the stem of the hoe, sweating and dirty but with a sense of having discharged an obligation. What now? Should he abandon Cambodia to its self-inflicted chaos, as most of the world had already done, and to watch from a safe distance its steady decline into anarchy and atavism? Or should he attempt to salvage what he could from the wreckage? But that could a painter of no consequence achieve? What difference would one man make?

He thought of the mines recklessly scattered everywhere. So long as they existed, there would be continuing tragedies and fresh excuses for apportioning blame. That was probably why the warring factions remained indifferent to clearing them.

There was a small band of dedicated people, however, many of them foreigners, who had taken it upon themselves to destroy the mines, to stop innocent civilians and children being maimed or killed. He had met some of them during his journey and they had told him of the delicate and hazardous nature of their work.

Well, he could do worse than to join them. He too could learn to brush away the earth harbouring those deadly devices. It would provide work enough for a lifetime. The instruments previously employed to paint the tinctures of skin and flowers onto canvas could just as easily be used to serve a more immediately humane purpose. Perhaps his poor father had been wrong after all in thinking that Cambodia had no need for painters.