



Unlike Choeung Ek

Tim Croft

1

From here, out on the balcony, I can see the ruins. They seem less impressive than the travel brochures had indicated. Perhaps it is the haze or the pollution from the motos or both?

Below, people shout as they try to move their bullocks from the oncoming path of the trucks and tanks as they rumble through the streets. The ice in my coffee clinks against the glass from the vibrations. Sometimes small pieces of building break off or a tarp collapses, and all at once I am reminded that the city is falling into a state of disrepair.

You stare at the television while drinking Pepsi from a tall glass and, unlike me, decline ice. Water beads on the outside of the glass like the sweat on my neck and arms and your forehead. I wonder what you think when you watch the television. From the balcony, I sit, leaving the door slightly ajar so I can hear the television and watch you lying on the bed.

Of course we are told nothing new. There is never anything new. We will be the last to know if anything happens. All we can do for now is wait.

The café where we eat lunch is virtually empty. A few soldiers sit under the ceiling fan in the center of the café playing cards. An old couple, perhaps French, play backgammon in the shadow of a parasol on the patio and drink cappuccinos. The soldiers look bored, just as you do. From somewhere outside there comes the occasional burst of gunfire although the papers say the city is safe and with the soldiers in the café I allow myself to feel the illusion of security.

When I tell you that it occurs to me the presence of soldiers puts us more at risk by making the café a possible target, even through nothing more than association, you merely lean in on your elbows, smile at me and say, eat your croissants.

This is what I like about you. I say, are all Americans so optimistic? All you ever want to do is eat and pretend everything is going to be okay.

You eat your bread by tearing it in half and then dipping it into the nutty fish sauce that I cannot develop a taste for. You chew the bread and say, But everything is not okay.

I say, No.

2

The ruins are mostly as expected, although after visiting Choeng Ek they seem useless and dull to me. You point over to a row of statues that leads to a courtyard. Each statue has whiplash-like scars across its face, as if struck repeatedly. You say the jungle vines growing over the entire wat caused this effect by shielding parts of the stone from the sunlight for hundreds of years.

We buy glass bottles of Pepsi from a vendor in the courtyard. The vendor is a young man, maybe twenty. It is very hot and we are both extremely thirsty. I give him 20,000 riel and do not ask for change. This is more money than he will most likely make in a week. I press my lips to the top of the bottle and gulp down the cola while you ask the vendor for a straw, pointing at them in a jar next to the cigarettes.

I take some photographs of you standing in front of various parts of the temple. You do not say anything. Instead you smile sadly and in each picture I take you are holding the glass bottle against your stomach, as if it were a child.

How unlike Choeng Ek this is, I think, where I had tried to take a photograph of you while you stood in line in front of a bullet-marked wall. I realize now how insensitive that was.

You read the guidebook. We pass crumbling statues and as we ascend further up the temple, through a series of steps that access stone plateaus, I take your hand. You look at me and say that this whole place was once littered with landmines. We stop and read from the guidebook: *when one side was forced to retreat they mined the temple, placing landmines under steps and on the statues. In turn, when the other side was forced to give up the temple and retreat, they re-mined it, restoring the old mines to new positions and adding hundreds of new ones. Many civilians who came to pray here were killed or seriously maimed. Even today many unknown live mines are still hidden around the wat in the jungle's undergrowth.*

3

When we return to the hotel, you lie down on the bed and sleep. The heat and the moto ride back have left us both exhausted. I lie beside you and try to sleep. The ceiling fan is whirring at full speed but even the breeze it sends over my body does not help to cool me down. My body is covered in sweat and I cannot sleep. I want to have sex with you but you look too peaceful to wake.

I put my underpants on and go out to the balcony. An army truck is parked on the other side of the road. Soldiers stand about, conversing quietly between themselves. They light cigarettes and lean up against the side of the truck, or kick a football to one another over the cobblestones. A soldier looks up at me and regards me with an expression of disdain. He wears aviator sunglasses that don't fit his face, and a red kerchief around his neck. Whenever I see the army I know that things are still under control.

I go back inside and order two Pepsis from room service, along with ice. I lie back down next to you. I close my eyes and think about how I hardly know you after all these weeks.

When I wake you are no longer there. It is dark in the room and mosquitoes have bitten my leg. The television is on with the sound turned down. A helicopter hovers above the rooftop of a building somewhere as foreign emissaries claw at a rope that hangs below it. It is a scene of almost indescribable chaos. All around buildings burn and dark smoke plumes into the acrid sky. For a moment I feel an anxiety well inside my gut until I wake further and realize that this is old footage, a scene from Viet Nam.



My eyes adapt to the dark and the blue glow from the television. From the balcony, the army truck is gone and so is one of the bottles of Pepsi near the nightstand. The ice in the bucket is melted.

I drink the remaining bottle of Pepsi without ice and imagine that you have gone for good. You will not be coming back and there is nothing I can do. I am alone. I imagine you have taken my passport along with my papers. You have taken my clothes and all that I have is what I'm wearing; a pair of unwashed boxer shorts. Now I will have to go to the embassy in the ruins of the city and file for a new passport. If it is still open. This is doubtful. I will have to send for more money and get new clothes from one of the few remaining Western stores.

Of course this is all ridiculous. Your bag is next to the nightstand on your side of the bed, but I allow myself the fantasy and build it like a house of cards.

I leave the lights off and lie back down on the bed. I think about the reports I have to file within the next few days, before I leave. Will my recommendations be given serious consideration or will they be disregarded like everything else I have submitted?

You enter the room softly and I can see you looking at me as I lie on my back in the dark.

Where have you been?

You were asleep so I went for a walk.

You didn't take your passport, your papers.

I didn't go far, just along the river and through the gardens.

They're the two most dangerous places to go at night, especially for a woman on her own. Haven't you read the guidebook? Something bad could have happened to you and I would have no way of knowing.

I can take care of myself.

4

For the first time since we have been here we eat at the café alone. The street is quiet except for the occasional cyclo or moto speeding by over potholes.

The café owner brings us fresh bread but doesn't say anything. He waits for us from behind the counter and reads a French novel.

I drink the iced coffee while you read the English language paper. The gunfire is more frequent and I expect the city to fall any day now. I have lost faith in the army and so has the city.

I say, What do you think happened to the old couple that used to play backgammon here? Do you think they have left?

You sip your Pepsi from the glass and keep reading the paper. I wonder to myself how many more days we will have before we must move on, before we must part. I have an overdue report to file when I get back home and my friends have expected my return many weeks ago. They will wonder what has happened to me.

A bullock-pulled wagon loaded with furniture passes by the front of the café. A man walks next to the bullock flicking it forward gently with a whip and a woman, wearing a straw hat, sits at the front of the wagon holding a baby.

You eat bread with the nutty fish sauce. I watch as you dip pieces of bread into the mixture, trying to get as much on before you bring it to your mouth at which point you manage to drip half of the sauce from the bread onto your napkin.

I say, I'm not going to miss seeing you eat that.

You say, But you will miss me?

When I pay the café owner he tells me that tomorrow is the last day he will open the café. You wait outside under the parasol. He says that after that there will be no more coffee or fish sauce. The city is no longer safe. He is going back to Marseille in France. He has a brother there. I tell the man that I will miss seeing him around but he just shrugs and goes back to his novel.

We walk slowly back to the hotel. Most of the shop facades are boarded up and the majority of the cafés have closed. We discuss whether today we should visit Angkor Wat, which we have been saving until last.

You say, It is too hot in the afternoons to do anything.

I say, We are running out of time. We might have to leave tomorrow or even tonight.

Instead we go back to the hotel room and make love. You smile the whole time but I am sad. The heat is overpowering. Our bodies are drenched in sweat. I feel tears well up inside me when we lie next to each other afterwards but I do not show them to you. You have closed your eyes. Your eyelashes are beautiful.

5

Angkor Wat is more magnificent than either us could have imagined. You wear the white hat that I bought you in Laos and a red oriental style dress. A breeze blows across the temple but it is still hot so we buy more cola from a vending cart and I take photographs of you on the steps leading up to the shrine. You stand on the raised stone platform in front of the statues of lions with their mouths broken off.

Maimed children come by. Some have only one leg; others have no arms from the elbow down. I take photographs of you with the children playing Thai football against the temple priests in the background.

We walk back to the first gallery, passing hordes of tourists taking photographs of the pillars decorated with lotus rosettes and dancing figures. I take a photograph of you drinking with a straw from the bottle of cola with the tourists taking photographs of the shrine in the background. You flick the hair away from your eyes. Sweat collects on your face and around your neck. I take your hand and we walk to another gallery.

Neither of us can say what we are both thinking: this is the end. I know this and I can tell by the way that you stay silent that you know this too. At first I thought I was the only one that would be affected by this but now I see it in you as well. We walk into the gallery and stare at the apsaras and the garuda-headed snakes.

I take more photographs.

You say, You are never in any of the photographs you take.

I say, I don't like being photographed. If I look at a photo I have taken then I already know I was there.

You ask a boy standing next to a lion statue to take a photograph with us both in it. I offer him 10,000 Riel and he takes the camera. I put my arm around you and look into the lens. You put your free arm around my waist and hold the empty glass bottle in the other hand, pressing it across my stomach.

This is the only photograph of us taken together that I will have.



From here, out on the balcony, I can see the ruins. The haze still enshrouds the city. I have decided that it is a mixture of pollution and climate. Behind me the hotel room is empty, except for my packed travel bag on the bed. I am waiting for a call from the front desk informing me that a taxi has arrived to take me to the airport.

Earlier we exchanged phone numbers and addresses. You said you will write and I said I will call.

The ceiling fan whirrs above me but the only relief it provides is a small breeze. I unbutton my shirt and drink Pepsi from a glass bottle. There is no sign of the army but the city has not fallen. It probably never will.