

assistant toilet inspector. We all laughed and tried to outdo each other with the most ridiculous stories.

"You want to hear something funny?" Pen Tip said. "I'll tell you something funny. Samnang was a doctor." The tone of his voice made everyone fall silent.

"No, Pen Tip," I said wearily, "that's not true. And don't call me that. Angka might kill me."

"Don't worry," Pen Tip replied. "Everybody knows you're a doctor."

"Comrade Pen Tip," I replied, "don't say that. If you play around like that and Angka believes you, I'm in a lot of trouble. Don't play games."

The break ended and we all went back to work. From that time on it was common knowledge that I had been accused of being a doctor, though nobody knew whether it was true or not.

A week or so later I was resting on a mat and Huoy was lying in the hammock when two teenage soldiers came up. I had never seen them before. They were not the soldiers usually assigned to our co-operative. One of them held a rope in his hand. It was all I could do to persuade them to wait for me to change into fresh trousers. There was gold in the trousers I was wearing and, since it was obvious where I was going, it seemed better that Huoy keep it. They tied my elbows behind my back again. Then they kicked me as I stood on the edge on the hillock. I fell on my face in the rice stubble. Huoy was hysterical. They marched me away past the common kitchen in full view of hundreds of people. If Pen Tip was watching, I didn't notice.

21



THE KING OF DEATH

A WARNING: This chapter tells of the very depths of suffering that people like me saw and experienced under the Khmer Rouge regime. It is an important part of the story, but it is not a pleasant part. So if you wish, or if you must, skip this chapter and go on to the next one.

The soldiers directed me to turn left and right on the paths, and soon there was no doubt that we were heading toward the prison at Phum Chhleav. Then they told me to stop. We waited for about an hour, until six or seven more prisoners and their guards came up. We prisoners were tied together in a line and began walking again.

When we reached the prison another group of tied-up "new" people was waiting, like us the victims of a roundup that had been planned in advance. Our guards tied the two lines together but loosened the bonds around our elbows, enough for the circulation to return to our arms. We sat with our backs to the prison wall, which was part thatch and part corrugated metal, and tried not to look in the direction of the mango trees, where other prisoners were in various states of torture.

"What did you do wrong?" I whispered to a woman next to me.

"Nothing. I don't even know why they took me here," she said. "I've been working very, very hard for them in the front lines." She was pregnant, one of five obviously pregnant women in the line.

None of the others knew why they had been arrested either. Quietly, in whispers, up and down the line, we agreed not to tell the Khmer Rouge anything.

A young guard, fifteen or sixteen years old, asked us disdainfully if we were hungry or thirsty. When everyone said yes, he brought a large bowl full of water. He held it in his hands and the first person leaned over and put his mouth in it and drank like a horse. Then the guard put the bowl in the first person's hands, which were tied behind his back. The first person turned, holding the bowl behind him so the second person could drink like a horse, and then the second person took the bowl in his hands and held it for the third person and so on down the line.

"'No one will take care of you,' " the guard said smugly, reciting one of the regime's favorite expressions. "'You have to take care of yourselves.' "

We spent the night inside the jail, a long, narrow structure with an aisle in the middle and a row of prisoners to each side. We lay on our backs with our heads to the wall and our feet locked into leg-irons attached to a long piece of wood running next to the center aisle. Low wooden partitions gave us each a space to lie in, like a private pigsty, already dirtied with wastes. The air reeked of shit and piss and an odor like ammonia. It was hard to breathe. For me, it was impossible to sleep. There were about eighty "new" people in the jail, and some of them were always moaning.

Early the next morning the noise of a motorcycle came to our ears. The motorcycle approached, downshifted, stopped nearby. I thought: Somebody important has arrived. In the Phnom Tippeday region, messengers and low-ranking cadre usually rode bicycles or horses, middle and upper-middle cadre rode motorcycles, and those at the very top rode in jeeps. A motorcycle rider would be someone like . . . like an officer in the state security apparatus, I decided. Yes, that was about right. It had been prearranged, the fresh capture of political prisoners and our interrogation the following morning.

Our group of eighteen prisoners was taken outside, past a parked Honda 90, into a neighboring building, where my guess about the visitor was confirmed.

In Cambodian folk religion one of the main mythological figures is known as the King of Death. He is a judge, the one who assigns

souls to heaven or hell, and he knows all about everyone's good and bad deeds. Nothing is hidden from him. The souls he sends to hell become *pret*, spirits of the damned, the victims of gory and everlasting tortures brought upon them by their own misdeeds. Looking around the room at our group of eighteen prisoners, all of us afraid, dressed in ragged, stinking clothes, I decided that we were already *pret*; our fates had already been decided. The Khmer Rouge who had ridden in on his Honda 90 and who sat smiling at us now—he was the King of Death.

He was muscled and well fed, holding paper files and a black notebook under one arm. He wore a green Mao cap and an old green-and-white krama around his neck. His black clothes and rubber-tire sandals were dusty from his motorcycle ride. He sat down in a chair at a small table and asked us to sit. We sat on the floor while he scanned the files. Several guards with holstered pistols stood at his side.

The King of Death was calm and sweet. He was like Chev, but more sophisticated. For a guess, he might have finished high school, or lycée.

"Please tell Angka the truth," he told us. "If you do, you will not be punished. Angka never kills people unnecessarily, or kills the innocent. Those who tell the truth will merely be re-educated."

One by one the prisoners went before him, sitting at his feet. He read from their files. He knew some of their names. Their crimes were: being a CIA agent, a Lon Nol officer, the wife of a Lon Nol officer, a ranking member of the Lon Nol government. All of the prisoners denied that the charges were true. At a signal from the judge, which I could not detect, even though I looked for it, the guards came around the side of the desk and kicked the prisoner. The guards did not kick everyone, but they kicked the pregnant woman next to me in the ribs and in the stomach for denying that she was the wife of a captain in the Lon Nol army. They dragged her back to where the rest of us sat, and then it was my turn.

I sat in front of the judge with my hat in my lap and my krama neatly folded on my knee. From where I sat I could only see his trouser legs and his feet with their black rubber-tire sandals.

"Samnang, Angka knows who you are," the King of Death began gently. "You were a military doctor. You held the rank of captain.

So please, tell Angka the truth. You will make it much easier on yourself."

Now I was certain that Pen Tip had informed on me. In Phnom Penh, few knew I was in the military, because I hardly ever wore a uniform. Since then I had not told anyone about it. Only a former hospital insider like Pen Tip would know that a government doctor my age would have held a captain's rank. The only thing Pen Tip didn't know was my real name. And Angka didn't either.

I didn't say anything.

"If you tell the truth," the King of Death said, "Angka will forget the past and give you a high-level position. Angka will let you operate on wounded soldiers, and teach medicine to students of the younger generation. The students will look up to you for giving them this knowledge. You will be a hero. But," he said, "if you don't tell Angka the truth, you will be held responsible."

I cleared my throat.

"Good comrade," I said, "I was not a captain, or a doctor. I was a taxi driver. My taxi number was 213755." (The numbers were from my motorcycle license plate.) "I went to Takeo, Battambang, Kampot, anywhere the passengers wanted to go. I'm telling the truth. This is the second time I've been to jail, and still Angka doesn't believe me. I work hard for Angka. I struggle to master the elements for Angka. I do everything for Angka, and I never make trouble. Why doesn't Angka believe me?"

"Because you are a liar," the judge answered in his calm, soothing voice. "Please tell Angka the truth. If you do, Angka will give you an excellent job. You are an educated person. You can lead people. You can help the country develop. You can help the country build its independence-sovereignty."

I said, "Comrade, if I were a doctor I would tell you so. I want to help Angka. If you don't believe me, go to Phnom Penh and check the files at the medical school. If you find I am really a doctor, Angka can do what it wants."

BAM! The kick came to my ribs. I fell over on my side. Then the other guard kicked me with the hard edge of his rubber-tire sandals. *BAM!* I arched my back in agony. The guards took turns with me, first one, then the other. Then the judge rapped on the

table and the guards stopped. They dragged me by the legs back to the line.

By the time I counted my bruises the judge was already interrogating the next prisoner. The guards had kicked me in the rib cage, in the shoulders, the thighs and the back of my neck. They were professionals. They knew what they were doing. A beating like that would have been hard even on a healthy man.

When all eighteen had talked to the judge, the guards led us outside. We walked in single file, away from the mango orchard, through another grove of fruit trees and into an uncultivated rice field.

There we saw wooden structures with uprights and crosspieces, like soccer goalposts, except narrower and higher. There was a double line of them, each one the same. On the ground in the middle of each, where the goalie would stand, was a pile of rice hulls and wood. In front of each goal lay a wooden cross with a length of rope.

At first I couldn't figure it out. Then I looked farther down the rows, which stretched over several dikes and far down the field. At the far end of the rows, prisoners were being punished in a manner I had never heard of before. They were tied to the crosses, the weight of their bodies sagging against the ropes. The crosses were upright, hanging from the goalpost crossbars. Smoke and flames rose from the fires around the prisoners' feet.

The soldiers stood crosses behind each prisoner and began tying us up.

I thought, I hope Huoy never knows about this. I didn't tell her about the worst things of prison last time, about how they cut the poor woman open. I don't want her to know. It would hurt her. She is so tender. She saved my life. I love her so much. If I am gone, who will take care of her? Please, gods, save Huoy and keep her away from this kind of punishment. But she has little chance. The soldiers will probably come for her anyway, because they are after the wives of soldiers and doctors. It is just a matter of time, unless the gods intervene.

And please, gods, I prayed, when I have gone either to hell or to paradise, keep me away from Khmer Rouge. When I am reborn, don't send me near them. I don't want to be anywhere near Cambodia. If I did something wrong in my last life I will pay for it now, but please, gods, surely this is payment in full. In my next life let me be happy.

I was still on the ground and the soldiers were tying my wrists to the cross. "Just shoot me!" I shouted at them. "Just shoot! Get it over with!" I fought them, but they were much stronger and they outnumbered me. They tied my upper arms to the cross and then my thighs and my feet. Then they threw the rope attached to the top of the cross over the goalpost and hoisted me up until my feet were above the pile of wood and rice hulls. I swayed there, back and forth, with a view of the double line of goalposts and the uncultivated rice field.

After the guards tied all of the prisoners they went around to each pile of rice hulls and lit it with cigarette lighters.

Rice hulls have a consistency like sawdust. Fires with rice hulls give off thick, stinging smoke and burn slowly, for days.

When the cross stopped swaying I was facing the double row of goalposts at a forty-five-degree angle, twisted around to the left. Judging from the position of the sun I was facing due west; the rows ran southwest to northeast. Behind me was the grove of fruit trees we had walked through from the prison. To my far left, at the edge of my vision, was a rooftop of a separate building where teenage girls were imprisoned for "crimes" against Angka, like premarital sex. In front was the rice field, weeds covering the flat patches and the raised paddy dikes, and the horrible, unavoidable sight of the other prisoners hanging like me.

Of those who had been crucified longer, some had already died from starvation or thirst—generally women, their heads dropped against their chests, their bodies sagging heavily against the ropes, their feet burned and blistered. Their sarongs had dropped to the first tight circle of rope around their thighs. They didn't have underwear. Unable to control their bodily functions, they had soiled themselves. Beneath them the fires smoldered.

Oh Huoy, Huoy, I am glad you are not here to see this.

My feet were about six feet off the ground and three feet above the pile of wood and rice hulls. The fire had not yet spread to the wood underneath, but the smoke rose into my nostrils and eyes.

Our group of eighteen prisoners didn't do any more talking. We were too thirsty to talk out loud. We were too busy praying.

Hot sunlight struck me on the back of my neck. The weight of

my body dragged down on the ropes around my arms and legs. My feet had no feeling at all. My fingers were numb but I could still wiggle them. Iridescent green flies whooshed around my head. I shook them off but they returned and settled on the wetness at the corner of my eyes. I shaped my lips and blew air upward but they just buzzed around and landed again on my face, and on my back where the skin was bleeding from the beating.

The buzzing of the flies was the loudest sound in the landscape. To my right, a woman in her twenties moaned, begging her mother to save her. She was pregnant, with a full roundness in her belly. I did not think she could last long.

Gradually the fire spread below the surface of the rice hulls to the wood. There were no flames, but there was a new smell. I looked down. The hair on my legs was shriveled and burned. My feet must have been blistering and burning, but I could not feel them. My eyes formed tears from the smoke. The guards had built the fire for heat and smoke more than for flames. Their purpose was not to burn us to death but to prolong and intensify the pain of being tied to the crosses.

Late that afternoon, when my eyes were shut against the direct rays of the sun, I felt myself swinging around on the cross. The wind had changed direction. I opened my eyes. The wind blew the smoke away from me, at an angle, but it also pushed the red line of fire farther through the rice hulls. The fire grew hotter, and the heat rose up my thighs. To my left came a quiet sputtering as the man on the next cross peed in his pants hoping to dampen the fire, but it was no use. The drops of urine fell from his feet to the fire, vaporized and rose up again, and the fire burned as strongly as before. The flies attached themselves to my arms and legs, waiting for the wind to die down.

The sun inched toward the horizon and sank. It was then, at dusk, that the wind stopped and the mosquitoes came out.

The mosquitoes came in close, their high-pitched whine near one ear, then the other. I didn't even bother chasing them away.

Oh Huoy, you saved my life when I was sick. You saved my life. May the gods and the winds bring you this message from me, that I am alive for now, that my spirit will always be watching over you.

The moon was nearly full that night. When it rose above the trees behind me, it cast an elongated shadow of the goalpost and of me hanging from the cross in the middle. When the wind picked up, the coals glowed underneath and the fire grew hotter; and when the wind slacked, the mosquitoes came back, whining in my ear and biting my flesh, where I could still feel my flesh. The moon rose silent and calm, and the shadows of the goalposts shortened. The wind stirred the treetops, and the crucified hung like strange butchered animals from the goalposts.

Oh Mother. Oh Huoy. Please save me.

You gods—any gods who can hear. Hindu gods. Jesus. Allah. Buddha. Spirits of the forests and the rice fields. Spirits of my ancestors. Hear me, gods: I never killed anyone. Never, never, never. I saved lives. I was a doctor and I saved the lives of Lon Nol soldiers and Viet Cong and didn't care who they were. So why make me suffer?

Spirits of the wind, I prayed. If the gods cannot hear, then carry the news to them. To any god who has power. Tell the gods what is happening to me.

How Huoy would cry out if she were here. I am glad she cannot see me. Please, gods, do not punish her. She is innocent. Do not let her know what I am going through. I am one of the damned, a *pret*. I am already in hell. And I do not know why. I never betrayed the nation. If I killed anybody in a past life, or tortured people, then punish me and get it over with. If this is vengeance finish it, so my next life will be free.

But I do not think I killed people in past lives. And I do not really know why they are torturing me. This has got to be worse than Hitler and the Jews. Hitler thought the Jews were different from him, like another race. But the Khmer Rouge kill their own race. And the gods do nothing to stop it.

In the morning the guards took down those who had been crucified before us. They put plates of rice in front of the ones who were still alive and asked them questions. Then they tied plastic bags over the

prisoners' heads. The prisoners began kicking spastically, to get free. I was too weak to look for long. Or to care. All I knew was that the sun was hot on the back of my neck and my mouth was dry and my lips were cracked. Whatever was happening between the guards and the prisoners seemed incredibly far away, though it was in plain sight. When the guards dragged the bodies away and put fresh people in the goalposts, I barely noticed. What was left of me was a core—a heart that still beat in my chest, a mouth that breathed, eyes that stung from the smoke and the sun. And a brain that prayed.

After four days and four nights with no food or water they let me down and untied the ropes. The circulation returning to my arms and legs brought a pain that was worse than the numbness and hotter than the fire. I fell over on my back and didn't move.

They tied my hands and feet. They tried to make me kneel, but I fell over and they grabbed my hair and shook my head until I saw the plate in front of me. On the plate was fresh rice with two small salted fish on top.

"Are you a doctor?" a faraway voice asked. "A captain?"

I tried to form words, but my mouth wouldn't work. In front of me was the plate heaped with rice.

"No," I whispered. "Give me water. Then shoot me."

"If you tell the truth. Just tell Angka the truth, and you will have water and rice."

Blood had trickled into my mouth from my cracked lips. "Just shoot," I croaked. "Please, I can't bear it. Please, Angka, if you don't trust me, just shoot. I will be happy to die. Just shoot."

"Bigmouth!" the guard exclaimed. He shouted to other guards, telling them to come over. They pulled me to a sitting position. Just before they put the plastic bag over my head, I glimpsed the pregnant lady next to me. She already had a bag over her head and she was kicking convulsively with both feet. They tied the bag around my neck, I couldn't see anything, and they pushed me and I fell over again. I tried to breathe, but the plastic got in the way of my mouth and there was no air and I went wild, struggling to get the bag off, but I couldn't and my feet were kicking and I couldn't see. Then they pulled the bag off and I took great gasping lungfuls of air.

They took the bag off the pregnant lady next to me, but it was too late. She had died of suffocation. A guard ripped her blouse apart

and pulled down her sarong. Then he picked up his rifle, which had a bayonet attached. He pushed her legs apart and jammed the bayonet into her vagina and tried to rip upward but the pubic bone stopped the blade so he pulled the bayonet out and slashed her belly from her sternum down below her navel. He took the fetus out, tied a string around its neck and threw it in a pile with the fetuses from the other pregnant women. Then he reached into her intestines, cut out her liver, and finally sliced her breasts off with a sawing motion of his blade.

"Good food," he remarked to the other guards. Then he bent down between her legs where the wound was still quivering and he said, "Ha! Look at this! Her cunt's laughing." The other young guards came and looked and stood around, grinning. The flies whooshed around the body of the poor woman, whose crime had been marrying a Lon Nol soldier.

I lay on my side without moving. They would disembowel me next, just for fun. It was nothing for them to cut someone open. Just a whim. They would come for me soon. But the seconds turned into minutes and then they walked away with the woman's liver and breasts. "Enough food for tonight?" said the nearest one, and another said in a voice that was fainter and farther away, "Yes, I think so. Probably enough."

Time passed. Five minutes or five hours, I did not know the difference. A rubber-tire sandal shoved my shoulder and then I was on my back looking up at a guard. He said, "This one isn't dead yet. Give me some water to pour up his nose."

Another guard came over and I found myself staring at a thin, brown-colored waterfall descending from a pail.

The muddy water splashed down near my nostrils and some of it went into my mouth, which was partly open. I started to choke and cough but at the same time my mouth began to work and I swallowed. I had never tasted anything so good. A change came over my body, a stirring of strength. He kept pouring and pouring in a thin, steady stream to get into my nose, and some of it did, but I tilted my head back and it filled my mouth and I swallowed again and again. The water also got in my eyes, but I blinked and concentrated on the brown water pouring down.

When the guard emptied the pail and walked away, I felt much better.

At twilight, the guards untied us and helped us walk back to the jail. Of our group of eighteen, only five of us were still alive, and none of the women. My feet and legs were covered with blisters, which popped underneath as I walked.

They gave us watery rice, and after four days with no food it was like a banquet. Then they dragged us by the arms into jail and locked us into the pens again. The next day I expected to be killed but they gave me a bowl of watery rice again, and the same the day after that.

They made me work around the prison. I gardened and raked and saw the "new" people coming in and only a few of them leaving alive. In the daytime vultures wheeled overhead. At night, the wolf-like *chhke char-chark* snarled and growled as they ripped the flesh of corpses outside.

Then they loaded me into an oxcart and drove me to another jail with thatch walls. Here the prisoners plowed rice fields and tended oxen and ate the rations of watery rice. It was like the front lines, except harder, and we were all terribly emaciated, with arms and legs like sticks. I spent two long months at this place, living from one day to the next.

Then I was released. Soldiers escorted me and some other prisoners back to our cooperative, which was in a new and semipermanent location.

They took us to the common kitchen and told us to sit down. The soldiers went in to report to Chev.

Huoy had seen us coming but she hadn't recognized me and I didn't want to say anything. She was cutting vegetables for cooking. When she finished she sat on the ground with her back to me and began cutting thick slices of banana trunk. Before the revolution banana trunk was pig food, but on the front lines it was used to add bulk to our rations.

Chev came out and the soldiers read off the list of names. When she heard "Samnang," Huoy froze, then turned around and stood up. She was shaking. She called out in a choked voice, "My husband is here! My husband is here!" in spite of her attempts at self-control.

Chev told me, "You can go see your wife. She's waiting."

We walked rapidly toward each other but we were afraid to embrace. I put my arm around her shoulders like a casual friend and took her aside.

I whispered, "I have survived. Don't worry. I will stay here with you."

Huoy was barely able to say anything. "What did they do to you?"

"Don't talk right now. I have survived."

After dinner, when she got off work, Huoy brought me to a canal. Somehow she had procured a bar of real soap. She bathed me and scrubbed me, fighting back the tears when she saw how tight the skin was on my rib cage. The infection on my ankle was worse than before. Sores covered my legs and neck and chin. She asked me what had happened. I said, "Sweet, don't ask. I don't want to see any more tears."

Huoy insisted. She wanted to know why I was so skinny, why I had so many blisters, what they had made me do.

I said, "If you love me, don't ask. I love you and I don't want to tell you."

Huoy let my old clothes float away in the current of the muddy water. I put on a sarong and we walked slowly back to where she had been sleeping, in a long, narrow hut with a thatched roof and no walls. She had a single hammock. Someone gave her a rice bag and she made a double hammock for us with needle and thread.

That night she snuggled next to me. She kissed me again and again. Then she put her lips next to my ear and whispered that she had been sure I was dead. There had been a big purge, she explained. Hundreds of people had been taken away by the soldiers, tied up, a few at a time, without any reason given. Few had returned. Their places had been taken by people from other cooperatives, including—and she whispered names to me.

I lay back in the hammock, staring in the darkness. Around us were hundreds of people in close quarters, in hammocks or on the ground. We couldn't really talk now. That would have to wait.

I was amazed. Amazed that I had lived, that the gods had let me survive a second time, against the odds. To have my arm around my wife's soft female form, to feel her breathing. To hold her. She was so giving, so comforting. She was alive. And she had told me joyous news: My father was alive too.

22



CANDLES

THE LAST TIME I had seen Papa, he and my mother were hurrying after the oxcart holding Pheng Huor, Nay Chhun and the children. From there they had all gone to a front-lines cooperative much like mine, only farther south, near the foothills of the Cardamom Mountains. They had not fared well. First the three children had been taken away—sent off to a youth group, to be brainwashed into forgetting their parents and loving Angka. Then my aged mother had been sent off to another work camp in the jungles. They had not heard from her since.

Three adults remained: Papa, Pheng Huor and Nay Chhun. By the whim of Angka, or the gods, they had been transferred to my collective while I was away in prison. My father was put in a longhouse, a thatched roof on poles, with barely enough space to lie down between his neighbors. Pheng Huor and Nay Chhun were put in a second longhouse and Huoy was in a third. There were twelve of these longhouses in all, with roughly two hundred people in each for a total of approximately twenty-four hundred people.

My father was assigned to a work group of elderly people. He fixed hoe handles, wove baskets, made bamboo shoulderboards and did other light tasks. It didn't take him long to spot Huoy in the common kitchen. Her grief-stricken face told him what her lips could not, that she thought I was dead. My father consoled her, urged her to keep hoping. Every afternoon he went to Huoy's longhouse to visit. When Huoy came back from work he was already there, sitting on the white piece of plastic next to her hammock.

A bond grew between them like father and daughter. The time