

Jim Tully

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*“The stranger and the enemy, we see them in the
mirror ...”*

- Plato

Paris and Rome—1968-69

He rescued me in one riot and saved me from another over twenty years later—1968 Paris, 1992 Bangkok. In between, Hilly's career, such as it was, blazed like a shooting star, doomed to burn itself out.

He had been confronting barricades long before he ever dragged me to safety in the boulevard San Michele, as riot police baton-charged the students waving their red flags and throwing cobble-stones in futile defiance.

Twenty years on his sudden punch in my face stunned me just as the Bangkok mob followed Chamlong out of the Sanaam Luang Park that sultry Sunday evening in May. Racing in their thousands towards the coils of razor wire and the armed troops waiting impassively behind.

"Stay out of it!" he shouted, pushing me away. "I owe this to someone. Get back to the glossy New York magazine where you belong." The fist was unexpected. As I came to the shooting started. I panicked in the confusion and ran for safety.

It was three days before I made my way to the Lumpini Hotel. I hoped Dee would come to tell me. Just as all those years before it had been Yasmin. His fellow conspirators, playmates, proteges. Never girlfriends in the expected sense. Yasmin with those bewitching amethyst blue eyes. They outfaced anyone. Dee who led him through the minefields

along the Cambodian border, tamed wild tiger cubs, or laughing swam the rapids of the Mooei River into Burma when Tully tried to reach the Karen rebels besieged in Mannerplaw.

Summer 1968, I was fresh out of college journalism en route to pick up my new assignment in Rome. First stop Paris. The Berkeley riots came later. In those heady times students saw themselves as the conscience of the world. A world gone astray, its idealism lost. They wanted to remind it, reclaim it, redeem it. I was only an onlooker scribbling from the safety of the street cafes. The battles along the boulevards reminded me of Hemingway's running of the bulls at Pamplona. It was a spectacle. Until it suddenly caught up with me. Hurling me by the seat of my pants.

The riot police I had been so prosily describing as Roman legionaries behind their riot shields showed no mercy on my Macy's suit, their truncheons lashing out as I knelt weeping with tear gas in a gutter where boots that had marched out of Dien Bien Phu and Algiers had little regard for restraint. A girl nearby clutching a torn hammer and sickle flag vanished in the melee. A hand dragged me back across the sidewalk into a cafe—the only one where doorway shutters hadn't been hauled down. I slumped trembling in a chair. Dusting myself and trying to brush away the indignity of those truncheons. Tully only chuckled, handing me a glass of Pernod to steady my nerves. Obligated as I was to my rescuer, I didn't care for his laugh. To him was it no more than a game? The girl who had been waving the flag joined us.

Yasmin. Later Tully told me how from their cheap hotel room in Rue St. Jacques, they could hear the car horns honking da-da-da- dah, da-dah all night long as they made love, fired as much by the demonstrations as by desire.

I expect everyone has known a Tully or two in their time, brightening up their lives for a brief spell and then moving on. Someone remarked once he had the habit of turning a trip into an adventure. Tully was not a person anyone would ever really know. Made up of bits; ambitions, hopes, noble failures, and ignoble ones. I suppose there is a part of him in all of us, although about him everything was insubstantial. As if perhaps he had never actually existed. Someone lifted from a traveller's tale told to pass the time, a story heard so often you believe it however bizarre the twists and turns, changing like Chinese whispers as the tale passes around. But I wonder if it wasn't society doing the adapting while all along Tully's cry to be recognized for what he was sang out like a schoolboy's appeal, ignored.

I was hiding in Ayudhaya, an hour upstream from Bangkok, where I had prudently escaped the riots sweeping the capital listening with only half my mind to an English traveller chatting on, as we sat eating under a hissing paraffin lamp in the night market by the riverside. Below the steep bank the dark Chao Phraya pored its sinuous course. A lone boatman waited among the reeds to ferry the intrepid across to whatever awaited them on the unlit other side. I had heard someone describe Tully as Lawrence of Arabia—but probably from the film, not the fact. Tully himself would have liked to

be Byron. The legend of Byron. That statue in the Borghese gardens he so admired—the only one the students never defaced—the noble cherubic face peering dreamily across distant stanzas. Inscribed with the lines Tully liked to quote. "And there is that within me..."

Was it that something we didn't want to recognize in ourselves? The hunter, romantic, gambler, failure. Certainly Tully was a loser. He knew it, and he hated it. And then with that ability he had to laugh in moments of crisis, added, "The bonus is it's such a nice surprise when things turn out well for once." Add to that he was a loner and loners always stand out. They have an invisible shield around them. "You send out these conflicting signals," I had told him in Rome. "On the one hand you ask us in, on the other you hoist a sign up saying 'Keep Out'."

A sudden monsoon downpour put a lid on my speculations. Hurried farewells to my companion and a dash for my room. Next morning I was up before dawn. The river pale and misty between wooded banks. I caught the 6.05 train into Bangkok. Sitting in the crowded third class compartment crossing the flat river plains, I remembered the three of us, Tully, Yasmin and I, travelling back to Rome together on the Palatine Express. Shunting out of the Gare de Lyon one summer evening, and arriving in Stazione Termini at nine next morning. Tully had a room—his garret he called it—in Vicolo San Simone, off Via Coronari, while I rented an attic apartment nearby in Via del Corollo with a rooftop view, as Tully graciously put it, of bell towers and television aerials.

Tully had gone to Paris on behalf of the Rome Review, a magazine he had founded only a few weeks earlier, after being sacked from Italviews—a small English-language journal. The woman editor had already warned him for his one-word sentences. "Tolstoy can write them. You can't!" My sympathies lay with the editor. My college tutors would have consigned Tully's mistreatment of English straight into the trash bin. His reckless misspellings assumed a defiance one almost admired. Was that why he did it? The readers, like the victims of his ideals, were of no consequence. Tully's battle cry might well have echoed 'no prisoners' as sword unsheathed he dug in his spurs and charged headlong down the slope. So, in the summer of 1968 he went off to Paris on his first crusade with Yasmin as his fellow knight. Yasmin had gone to the inaugural meeting of the Rome Review. A meeting attended by South American revolutionaries, a busker for whom Marxist-Leninism was too bourgeois by half, an Italian count who insisted on interviews with the animals of the Rome zoo for their political opinions, and a renegade Jesuit priest from Scots college who took Tully aside to whisper, "If I want a good old fashioned mass I always go to the Anglican church." In addition came a 'spy' from the British Council—Jolly Jack Buckley—who decided for motives unknown to take Tully under his cultural wing for a while. And finally Carlo, an American painter with a studio above the butcher's stall in Via della Pace. A palette hung out of an open window, if he was in. Carlo assumed the title of 'Carlo Pittore' with 'Pittore Euforico' as an added sobriquet. He was constantly followed like the Pied Piper by a stream of

small boys crying, "Carlo, disegna mi. Disegna mi,"—while the older more sophisticated youths hanging around outside Cafe Columbo in Piazza Navona called out, "Hey, Van Gogh," as he passed. At which Carlo, already burdened by easel, canvasses, paints, bread, wine, cheese, salami and onions, with difficulty clapped his hands to his ears and cried back, "No souvenirs yet!"

That first magazine meeting ended in enthusiastic disarray and, assuming the title of Foreign Correspondent, Tully set off for Paris. And Yasmin? More street-wise in the way of revolutions than Tully, it was difficult to accept she was only a schoolgirl. She had gained her revolutionary credits chipping off the noses from the haughty busts of senators and philosophers lining the horse-chestnut avenues of the Borghese gardens. "But never Byron!" Tully declared, as if to absolve her. Yasmin streaked dripping trails of political graffiti wherever her nightly rambles took her. From somewhere she had acquired a favourite. "11 mito vince sempre (the myth always wins)." Tully adopted this as his banner for life!

Fresh from the idealism of the French student riots, Tully and Yasmin lost no time in complacent reflection of their spirited exploits. Student revolt spread as fast as bush fire. In no time at all the Rome universities were on strike. Even for a time the high schools. Demonstrations were mounted, leaflets scattered like confetti, walls daubed with posters of Che Guevara—the current revolutionary idol. There was an uglier undercurrent. Buses overturned and set ablaze. For a while

even the trams clanging uphill past the Museo dei belli Arti came under attack and stopped operating. At one time it seemed Rome was under virtual siege from student revolutionaries. The air stung with lingering tear gas, carabinieri in riot gear sat in trucks out of the rain, playing cards, waiting. Street battles with riot police became as much a daily occurrence as nightly television pictures showing American planes napalm bombing villages in Vietnam.

Tully as I explained lived in a dilapidated lodging house off Via Coronari, the street of dubious antique dealers who, Tully claimed, "would French polish their own grandmothers if they could sell them at a profit." The lodging house overlooked a piazza that doubled as a parking lot. A flower seller shared the pump below Tully's room where he cleaned his teeth. A few steps higher, behind a green door—unable by reason of her gargantuan girth ever to exit, Libera Spurio the landlady, restlessly roamed the corridors like some antediluvian monster.

Spurio was so vast she needed pulleys to hoist herself out of bed. Confinement had caused her to develop a voice of such booming intensity that if there was a second-hand market in such things among opera singers, hers would have fetched top price. It was a deep sonorous voice that penetrated the warren of alleys in the vicinity so that every neighbourhood alimentaria, pasticceria, lavanderia, fruteria, trattoria, macelleria, fearful of a vocal rebuke, had a boy racing back with her order almost before it was completed. Spurio

received her deliveries like a monk in the monasteries of the Meteora, lowering down a basket from her kitchen window.

Spurio's daily knock on Tully's door was accompanied by a tray bearing no welcome morning cup of tea, but an ancient steel syringe that looked to Tully as if it had barely survived the Siege of Sebastopol, and handing this to him she sank grunting on all fours at the end of the bed, floorboards creaking beneath her colossal dimensions. That first visit, his misgiving deepened when she hoisted up her skirts and barked, "Fai, Professore, Fai . . .(Get on with it). She even had the courtesy to introduce her pallid posterior. Reaching a chubby paw back to pat what she could reach of it, she declared, "Professore, I call it the Internationale." Leaving Tully, fielding his lethal weapon, to imagine all those foreigners who had delivered the deadly dose before, their names and dates pricked out among the vast flaccid folds of flesh. Apart from Spurio, Tully's other regular visitors included a scorpion he named the Dalai Lama because it reincarnated itself each time he dispatched it to Nirvana and a family of fat mice who thrived on the frayed wiring.

For some unaccountable reason Tully praised this less than desirable residence. It had character, he insisted, plus a rather diminished view of Michelangelo's masterpiece— the Castel San Angelo by virtue of a gap across the piazza when the plane trees along the Tiber weren't in leaf. To appreciate this one had to balance on tiptoe on a chair perched above the rickety table below a window that only the winter rains washed.

Day and night consumptive coughs crackled through the crumbling partition where his immediate neighbour, a Norwegian artist named Bjorn, eked out a frail existence on a diet of porridge and cigarettes, his mahoganyed fingers scratching secretive scenes of a pubescent world peopled by eyes staring from landscapes of balls, bubbles, globes and testicles. By day he worked beneath the blankets to keep warm in a bed and a bare room fugged with tar and turpentine and unwashed cardigans. At night he joined the other artists creeping like bats out of the labyrinth of lanes, heading for the piazza with their easels and their unsold art. On the other side of the dark hall Maria occupied a windowless box room. Like Bjorn she too emerged only at night to sell her personal art along the Appia Antica with a blazing rubber tyre to illuminate her torso among the more ancient headless ones, and plied her profitable pleasure from a dismembered mattress in a nearby tomb. Tully's other neighbours were itinerant Sicilian refugees from the South, snoring in the hallway for 100 lire a night, tied to their possessions with twine. Morning and evening Tully picked a way between these recumbent corpses to a doorway Spurio was too large ever to leave.

The Rome Review lacking a sponsor never blossomed beyond raucous editorial meetings forcing Tully to live, by his own admission, off the 'whiff of an oily rag' and little else. He lunched, so he claimed, sniffing foodstalls in Campo dei Fiori market while supper frequently became a raid on my refrigerator. After consuming leftovers he proceeded to explore the bottle department. In dismay I watched the level

of Taylors port drop to zero while Tully, unconcerned, lay back on the sofa listening to Marlene Dietrich singing 'Lily Marlene' over and over again. One day I noticed a small hammer and sickle badge pinned to his lapel.

"I've signed up," he admitted. "Purely for sound economic necessity."

"Since when has sound economics ever been linked to Communism?" I argued.

He put on his bemused expression. "A restaurant—Da Pio's in Trastevere. Yasmin took me there. All the students go. It's in one of those very left-wing quartiers. Where the Borghese fear to tread," he added airily. "Party members get a thirty percent discount. Even Pasolini eats there sometimes."

"For the discount?"

"For the company I hope. Only trouble is it gets a bit crowded. We took Jolly Jack along. He knows Pasolini. Said he might get me a job."

"As what?" I enquired.

He didn't answer directly. He was too busy foraging among the bottles. "About time you visited your wine merchant/' he advised from inside the cabinet.

"What?" I couldn't hear. 'Underneath the Lamplight' had stuck in its tracks and I bumped my head on the low beam switching it off.

"Jolly Jack insisted we went to some dreadful concert at the RAI," he related, re-established on the sofa. "Stockhausen

and Nonno. Ever seen flower pots played or gongs scratched? There was a single viola chord that went on and on until a woman screamed hysterically and had to be wheeled out. Buckley positively chortled with glee. He asked what we thought. 'Shit!' I said. 'Isn't that wonderful,' he said, quite pleased really. I wish he'd stop trying to educate me."

"What's next on the agenda?"

"Opera," he answered gloomily. "Someone called Bumbry. In the Via Nazionale. Is it true when they do Aida in the Caracalla they bring the elephants from the Rome zoo?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'll go to that then."

Sometimes, usually when it was raining, my doorbell would ring at some unearthly hour and I would hear his familiar tramp up the seven flights with Yasmin in tow; dripping wet, steaming out in front of my ceramic stove, daubed with red paint or white plaster. "What's it been tonight? More noses? I shouldn't think there'd be any left to bash."

"There's a whole supply," Tully declared. "I met a park keeper the morning after, with a tray of spare noses. Cicero is No. 53.1 asked if he had one for Byron. 'Nobody touches Byron,' he replied." Tully yawned. "I visit Byron every day on my way to work."

Work in this case was a daily appointment to read The Times to a blind contessa, living grandly near the Via Veneto until she was burgled, when the butler coldly informed Tully his services were no longer needed. After that he got work at the

RCA dubbing studio off Via Nazionale. He had the right sort of voice. Classless. Tully despised class. Later he told me about his father who had been shipwrecked during World War II more times than most people put to sea, and most of these protecting North Atlantic convoys. Determined afterwards never to suffer cold again he shipped his family out to Australia under the assisted passage scheme.

At an age when most boys were delivering newspapers to earn pocket money Tully was scraping for opals in the multitude of abandoned holes excavated around Coober Pedie where more people live underground to escape the heat than above it. At school he answered taunts of 'Pommie Bastard' with his fists not his wits. But in many ways Tully never lost his Englishness. Less tough on the outside than many of his pals, he failed to share their inner sentimentalism—the hallmark of Australian character. At this time, when Tully was about thirteen, his father, despairing of making a temporal fortune in the dust and drudgery of the outback—discovered God instead and took his family to the Solomon Islands.

He was put in charge of a Mission school, 'twelve rivers to ford west of Honiara.' Here Tully grew up, living with the island kids in their 'one-talk' huts. He explained, "It's the 'pidgin' word for friend. There are so many tribal languages that only those who could speak the same 'one-talk' can become friends."

Tully once showed me a faded photo of his hut. To my surprise it was perched up a great tree near a river bank. The

horizon was dominated by a volcano. "Papamanchua," Tully pointed out. "Where the ancient Gods live. At night there is usually lightning and thunder and the locals shake their heads and say the Gods are having a family squabble." The way he described it made it sound like a modern day Mount Olympus in the South Seas. Tully's curiosity encouraged him to seek out priests of the old religion. Old men who could call on the spirits of ancestors and animals to come to their aid. Once his father discovered him in an outrigger canoe engaged in a stone banging ritual to send a school of fish ashore at the nearby Hendersen beach to supplement the Mission's Easter feast. Tully senior was outraged. He told Tully in no uncertain terms that he was in danger of becoming a pagan.

I mention this because it had an unforeseen consequence. Later when he joined the notorious Colonel Frudaker in the search for MiAs—American soldiers missing in action—and then vanished himself in the jungles along the Cambodian border, he survived in a way few Westerners could expect to. But I am getting ahead of my story. Back to Rome of the later sixties. A city in uproar. The old Dolce Vita days of Fellini fast fading, and a new unrest, unease taking hold. It was now the bomb throwing began; molotov cocktails, home-made grenades. Enough to fire-bomb buses. And then the infamous Brigade Rossi—the Red Brigade— was born. Whether Yasmin was ever an active member is open to doubt. Tully declared she was. Proudly too. He had what I can only describe as a romantic view of revolution. Byron was his hero. Sitting up there under the umbrella pines within a stone's throw of

Harry's Bar and the fashionable Via Veneto, Tully memorized the verse inscribed below. "My words may lose their force, my blood its fire, but there is that within me, that shall tire torture and time and breathe when I expire." Byron, he claimed, was an inspiration to rebel against oppression. The fact that he had died at Missolonghi fighting for Greek independence enhanced his immortality. "Writers should die in battle," Tully declared.

"Byron died in bed," I reminded him.

Tully turned on me angrily. "That was the fault of his bloody doctors. He only had a fever; they bled him to death." Tully took less interest in other English poets— though he often recovered from a hangover in the Keats- Shelley museum by the Spanish Steps. He took a dim view of Shelley drowning. "He should have learned to swim," he declared, although he admired the fact that after his boat capsized off Livorno he went down clutching a tome of Greek classics. "Byron gave him a grand send-off—a funeral pyre on the beach!"

Before the ugly side of it took over, there was almost an innocence about the demonstrations. Everywhere there were posters of students in America facing off the National Guard with flowers. A popular film of the time was *Fragole e Sangue*—Blood and Strawberries. We saw it at a popular student cinema in Campo dei Fiori.

In Rome in those days it was still possible to eat well for 1,000 lire including wine. The streets behind Piazza Navona housed several *Vino e Cucina* where at bare wood tables one ate unsalted bread, salami, and rough wine from the Alban

hills. There were paper-tablecloth trattorias like Mario's in Trastevere where soup was only 50 lire, and a Steak Bismarck with an egg on top less than 200. "Why is it called Bismarck?" Tully demanded. "Surely the plates of the battleship weren't so wafer thin?" Mario hurried about cross-eyed so it was usually impossible to 'catch either eye', however impatient one became. On these paper tablecloths it was claimed great verses had been composed between courses, inventions designed, plots conspired. Yes, in those far-off days even the exploiters were innocent.

If I walked home unsteadily after midnight it never occurred to me I might be mugged. I worked out of a small upstairs office near the Press Club wiring off my by-lines, but at a pace that seems leisurely on reflection compared with today's demands of fax machines and hot-line telephones. There was always time for aperitifs in Antico Cafe Greco; partly to spy on who was there among the tailcoated waiters, the Edwardian prints, the damask wallpaper. Or Rosati's in Piazza del Popolo where I frequently bumped into Count Ungaro—one of the original founders of the ill-fated Rome Review.

Every day he had a madder idea than the one before. He wished to employ Tully as his writer to compose an agony column in the national dailies—a medium for imparting his wisdom even from beyond the grave when that inevitable day arrived. Ungaro insisted they interview the incumbents of the Protestant Cemetery near the Pyramid where half the stray cats of Rome assembled screeching to be fed by an

assortment of bizarrely dressed cat lovers. Poor Tully. Yasmin's revolutionary fanaticism apart, he seemed to be adrift, tugged here and there by every stray whim that blew about the city. Frances Riley who, on account of her husband dying a martyr for the Vatican during the war, controlled the Goldoni Theatre and cast her mad son Patrick Persichetti in the leading role of every production, asked Tully to be a tree in the Gentle Giant. In fact he misheard. She meant him to make a tree, but Tully turned up dressed in leaves while Patrick caused terror among the children by his none too Gentle Giant. Tully was even enrolled to play cricket for the sinister sounding War Graves team up in the Doria Pamphilli park on Sunday afternoons, where in the twilight the sepulchral statues of former popes appeared to double as outfielders.

Rome. When I look back, I see a mish-mash of overlapping memories. We were young. And Rome, for all its antiquity, felt as young as we were. Change seemed imminent and we were the pioneers of this brave new world. Of course it all sounds such nonsense now when you look back on it. But for those who were young in the late sixties, whether in Paris, Berkeley, Woodstock, Rome, Prague, yes, it felt like a new spring! Our Troubadours were the Beatles, Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, Crosby Stills and Nash. Awareness was in vogue, and how you went about it was your concern. No one else's. Society had yet to waken up and question this new cuckoo it found in its midst. Meditation, free love—with whom didn't matter—for this was the age of enlightenment, flower power, of loving, not hurting. There was no talk of abuse yet.

No fanatical fundamentalist had appeared to darken the horizon with dogged demands. Some tried transcendental meditation, with or without dropping acid. Others roamed the street chanting "Hare Krishna." I saw one the other day in Bangkok, middle aged, wrapped in a sari, shaven headed, dancing along tinkling his little bells oblivious to the world moving on. A remnant from another age to be regarded with curiosity, hostility even.

Carlo Pittore painted a portrait of Yasmin. I have it to this day. I happened to see the familiar palette suspended from his window in della Pace and went up. Yasmin was sitting perched in a high-backed chair—the only one—her feet scarcely reaching the floor, regarding us with those amazing amethyst eyes, while Carlo grunted, mixing paints with one hand and brushing his teeth with the other. My unexpected arrival so startled him he dipped the toothbrush in the turpentine by mistake with predictable results.

Between gargling and spitting he roared, "Wait! One day you'll see. I mean to be up on those walls."

Yasmin and I glanced around where he appeared already prominent—Carlo as Moses, as Abraham.

"No, not these walls," he exclaimed. "The Tate, Prado, Louvre, Guggenheim. One day I'll be so famous you'll want to remember every word I said. And I'll try to forget I ever knew you!"

I left him painting Yasmin's lips. He always had problems with lips. But he caught the eyes well. In Thailand Tully told me

how he went to a woman doctor who took one look at him and declared, "The eyes are the window of the soul. And you are sick." Her prescription was that he should leave. Yasmin's eyes were like windows. Though all they revealed was mystery. Tully had discovered a book of poems on my shelves by Elroy Flecker with one titled 'Yasmin', and liked to muse over the lines, "When the deep red eye of day is level with the lone highway and some to Mecca turn to pray. And I towards your bed, Yasmin." It was the ending that awed him. "Shower down your love Oh burning bright. For some night or the other night, will come the Gardener in white. And gathered flowers are dead. Yasmin."

What I never fully grasped at the time was how young she was. She seemed as old as us, older. "Old as mythology," claimed Tully. "Circe and the Sirens all wrapped in one. And that priestess who ensnared Theseus after he slew the Minator." "Ariadne," I suggested. He seemed uncertain. "Maybe her too. Only wasn't she a bit bloody, by repute?"

Did he know something I didn't? Bombs had been thrown by the Brigade Rossi—had her hand been behind one of them?

And then fate intervened. Tully might have called it destiny. I had heard rumours that her family were causing a fuss. Tully was declared persona non grata and banned from visiting. Yasmin's mother who was also a writer decided he was a bad influence. Before she met Tully, Yasmin had been such a nice child, she declared. Tully brooded with injured innocence. It was only afterwards he discovered who had been spoiling things for him. Count Ungaro knew the family and conspired

against him. When Tully finally confronted him, he merely wagged a reproofing finger.

"And did you sleep with her?" he demanded.

"Of course I slept with her," Tully shouted. "I loved her."

"And did you —?" Ungaro asked, but Tully didn't answer that.

"Why?" I asked him later. "Why admit it? Never admit that."

"Why not?" he replied staunchly, finding it a little hard to focus after all the wine he had drunk. "I thought he'd understand."

The telephone rang. We immediately feared the worst but it was Jolly Jack. Ail excited to tell Tully he had an appointment with Pasolini for the next day. "On the beach at Ostia. He's filming Medea with Callas. She's very temperamental. So don't be late. Cheerio."

Tully held onto the receiver as if uncertain what to do with it even though the line was dead. He seemed unable to accept good luck.

I didn't wish to sour the moment but I wanted to get the Yasmin business settled. "What else did Ungaro say?"

Tully peered dully at me and put the receiver down. "He said, 'I trusted you. You broke my trust.' Then he became quite agitated. 'What am I to say to her parents? They had asked me to keep an eye on things, and now I learn this.'" Tully broke off his narrative.

"Is that all?" I asked.

Tully slumped down in the sofa, reaching out an arm automatically to flick on the gramophone. "He said I was to leave Rome. He said I must send him a postcard after I was across the border. He said if Yasmin came to see me I must not let her in." He sounded more distressed than I had ever known him. "If she comes banging on the door, how can I not let her in?" He watched me closely. "Could you?"

I couldn't reply.

He had to be at Ostia beach early. When I sent him home after midnight I wondered if he'd ever make it. The mood he was in. But he did. I went round to San Simone next morning to check and he'd left already. When I got back late in the afternoon I found him already waiting, and in high spirits. "So it's been a good day?"

"Wonderful," he said. He couldn't stop talking. Except to ask if I had any cheese. And then to complain the port was finished. He was certainly in high spirits. "Did you know he was poet? And a member of the Communist Party? You know what he said to me? 'First politics, then poetry. Then my films.' Perhaps I should write that down before I forget." He jumped up and down, unable to sit still. Seeing I didn't share his enthusiasm, he demanded, "And what have you been doing all day—digging up the dirt for that scandal sheet of yours?"

"That's certainly one way to describe Italian parliamentary proceedings," I replied. "But what about the filming?"

Tully stood up stock still. Like an admiral reaching for his telescope, he cocked a cupped hand to his right eye. I watched bemused. "That's how he directs," Tully declared. "He doesn't use any fancy gadgets." He mimicked Ital-English, "'If itsa all right through the hand, itsa all right through the camera.'"

After I let him out, Jolly Jack telephoned. "Goodness only knows why Pasolini took him on," he stressed, "unless he fancies him. Tully's artistic ability can be fitted on a pin-head. If you said Van Gogh at him he probably think you were swearing."

The evening hadn't finished. Tully returned. All his cock-a-hoopness had drained out of him. "There's a private dick in the alley, and Spurio's told me she wants the room. I've got to go." He slouched down morosely, head in hands. "It's a bloody conspiracy."

"Flow do you know it's a detective?"

"Because he looks just like the ad. for the Toni Ponzi detective agency. On front of the SIP phone directory. Hat pulled down, newspaper opened, raincoat—the lot."

I believed him, but I was surprised all the same. Then he showed me a letter. "I found this under my door."

I glanced it over. It was in Italian. From a Notario at the Palazzo di Giustizia. The words that held my attention—as they must have Tully, was a startling announcement. He was accused of 'Plaguiarismo del anima dei minore.'

"Yes. I know," Tully responded bleakly. "Stealing the soul of a minor. Not her body, but her soul. That's what makes it worse. It's like a charge out of the inquisition."

"What are you going to do?" I asked, bereft of any advice. He didn't answer. I tried to think what I would do, and couldn't. "You can stay the night here," I said, "if you'd rather."

"What about my things?" he muttered miserably. "What about Yasmin? I can't just run off without seeing her."

"We can bring your things round here," I suggested. "Toni Ponzi must go to bed sometime. You lower them down to me from the window. Then no one will know. We'll be a jump ahead of them."

Which is exactly what we did. Everything he owned went into a suitcase. Once Spurio was in bed she was hardly going to hoist herself out of it. Let alone give chase. We humped his possessions back and went out for a late night pizza in Giovanni Vecchi. Bjorn was there. He'd actually made a sale and was celebrating. He had a pepperpot filled with marijuana and sprinkled this liberally over our crostinis. Unfortunately when he wasn't looking another table borrowed it, quite innocently. In the end the entire clientele staggered out into the night high as kites.

With Tully's approval I telephoned Ungaro next day but to no avail. He was unyielding. "Unless your friend wishes to see the inside of the Regina Coela (the Queen of Heaven) prison, I recommend he leave for another city." And then he added rather oddly, "There is no new City for him. He will tread the

same grey pavements. As he has destroyed his life here. He will ruin it everywhere." It was only later that I realized he was quoting from a poem by Cavafy.

"He is", Ungaro continued airily, "like a thief who steals."

"Oh no," I exclaimed. "I think that's putting it far too harshly. They were friends, they ..."

He interrupted. "He stole her soul, her virtue, her light. If he loved her, as you imply, then for whose benefit?"

I hung up the telephone in despair. For a man who wished to write a problem column, Ungaro made a very difficult agony aunt.

"No good then?" Tully enquired. He nodded solemnly.

I declared, "Come on. We'll show them. One last fling. Let's all go out to dinner and a movie. There's *Zabriskie Point* showing at the Regina Marguerita. I gather Antonioni has been banned from America on account of it."

Tully cheered up. "Yes. If you can act as go-between." And then softly, almost wistfully, added, "I never did. You know. Steal her soul. How could anyone dare do such a thing? Why it's worse than murder."

We went to see the movie. Yasmin sat between us.

Afterwards I put them in a taxi. I had found them the caravan of a colleague, parked up the Via Cassia. I handed Tully the key. It was an odd sort of feeling. A reluctant farewell. Next morning he would leave for Venice. And Yasmin? I could only repeat the lines from Elroy Flecker. "Yasmin."

Bangkok—May 1992

The early morning train from Ayudhaya was a third class only, crowded with market women and their baskets of vegetables, fruit, eggs. The train smelled of fields, and the conversations were all about prices, not politics. These people at any rate appeared unconcerned about events in Bangkok, although quite what direction events had taken it was hard to tell. Television the night before had showed absolutely nothing, and the morning papers had been savagely censored. Home News pages were mostly blank. The train stopped at every station. Somewhere on the outskirts of the city the market ladies all got off. I seemed to be the only passenger remaining. The train didn't move. No announcement was made. I asked a railway worker if the train was continuing into Hua Lampong (Central Station) but he only grinned politely. The Northern road runs parallel to the rail track and for once the traffic was thin. There were no buses heading into town. I finally flagged down a taxi which took me into the Mochit terminal. As usual it was jammed with people but the long distance buses didn't appear to be leaving. Passengers stood milling around the ticket counters with expressions of desperation. The city buses weren't running either. However I finally persuaded a tuk-tuk driver, back seat already piled high with boxes, to get me to Lumpini Park. The Lumpini Hotel is just around the corner.

The jerky, noisy three-wheeler, belching out fumes, somehow reminded me of Tully's final exodus from Italy. He

had been holed up in Venice for a month before I arrived, living in an attic owned by a gondolier in the Parochia San Giachomo where the view was of rooftops not canals. Judging by his worn-down shoes he had spent the time trudging the streets. He was anxious to leave. He had the loan of a much-dented Citroen 2CV if I would lend him the deposit. He wanted to head East. Nowhere in particular. Although Isfahan was mentioned more than once. When I asked him what he'd been doing he was non-committal. I gathered he had made frequent visits to the Chiesa di San Miracolo—but without results. Attendance at the English church on the zattere—where the cleric boomed out 'amens' with such basso profundo they depth-charged the lagoon—and escorting Peggy Guggenheim home from Tuesday poetry readings at the Oxford school took up some of his time. The charm of Ruskin's Venice, or drifting among the islands of Torcello and Burano on a gondola had not entirely eluded him, but now he had finally realized he couldn't return to Rome and the local Questura (Home Office) had called him in for questions. Every day he watched black funeral gondolas setting off for that final journey to the cemetery isle of San Michele. If he stayed longer he was sure he'd be lying in state aboard one!

We drove south from Trieste to Dubrovnik and then inland over the mountains into Kosova and Macedonia. It was spring and sometimes we just parked the jeep off the road and slept on a ground sheet. Tully loved the pencil minarets, cold lemonade and sweet sticky baklava, the colourful Gypsy encampments on the river banks and the flaxen hair children.

"This is the true ancient Greece," he declared. "This is where Alexander came from."

It lacked only a statue of him. A statue cutting a noble pose always seemed to inspire Tully. However, no Alexander on horseback, so we continued to Istanbul where we were housed on the Galata by John Baccus, the American priest. "Someone must have made a mistake," he grinned. "The US base at Izmir got a Welshman, the British Embassy a Yank."

After a few days in the city trying to avoid collision with ancient Buicks and Plymouths, jam-packed, cruising and weaving at full speed, we took the ferry across to Asia. Tully was reluctant only because he hadn't swum the Hellespont in homage to his club-footed hero. We headed south along bad roads, camping in the vicinity of vast Roman amphitheatres, all completely deserted apart from goats. At Pammukalae, where Tully enjoyed the hot springs, a Turkish army officer impounded our passports. He objected to Tully sketching the ruins. Were they strategic sites? My press card worked overtime to gain our release.

After Anatalya, Tully steered east. "Isfahan or bust," he declared.

Entering Kurdish territory the police flagged us down. They advised us not to continue. A few days before a sack containing the heads of five Germans had been delivered. Tully was for going on. "So long as we park off the road after dark, we're safe," he insisted.

I was less convinced. Our only weapon was a rusty spade. That night some sixth sense woke me up. In the moonlight about fifty yards away a silent line of armed men were approaching stealthily. Tully woke when I did, leaped up, ran outside, brandishing the spade and yelling like a maniac. The robed and turbanned figures clutching cutlasses and ancient rifles halted. Tully meanwhile jumped in the car. He always left the key ready and for once the 2CV started. Off we bounced down the stony gully until we got back on the road. We didn't stop all night.

By now the other danger, Kurds apart, was the weather. Late spring snow was falling. One night we parked on top of a deserted mountain pass only to wake in the morning to discover snow up to the doors. The road itself was unsurfaced, wet and treacherous. I was convinced it was madness to continue, but Tully was insistent on going on.

"Imagine," he said. "The minarets of Isfahan!"

We hadn't eaten properly in days and both of us were filthy. I was long past dreaming even if he wasn't and when we reached a turn off leading north into Cappadocia, I got out. There were no hard feelings. He wanted to go on. I didn't. Clutching his worthless IOU, I watched the 2CV trundle shakily down the road. A glimpse of his waving hand. That, I thought, is the last I shall see of him.

I expect nearly everyone who has spent a while in Bangkok has heard of the Lumpini Hotel. Over the years it has acquired almost legendary status. If you mentioned it to any of the old farangs in the watering holes of Soi Cowboy they

might reply, "The Lumpini? I was there thirty years ago. It was falling down then. Is it still going?" In most people's minds the Lumpini was a leftover from another era. A time when Bangkok was still a village of unpolluted canals, Sukhumvit Road virtual open country. "And that wasn't so long ago either," they'd tell you knowledgeably, perched on a barstool they claimed as their own. "Yes," they would reminisce. "Saturday night. No worries about Aids then, or being cheated by barmen and threatened by bully-boys. Pick up a girl in Patpong and jump into a tuk-tuk. 'Lumpini' was all you'd need to say. A five minute hop away." Puffing away at a pipe nearly as old as they are, a light from the past ghosting their smile, hints of nostalgia dimming the eye, gladdening the memory. "There was no name on the door. A steep flight of steps to where Madam fisted your money and produced a key from a box behind the desk, Not that it mattered," they would chuckle. "All the keys fitted all the rooms. Those locks were so worn you'd only have to blow on them and they'd open." Just one of the details they would remember. They might have only been there for a 'short-time' once but they never forgot the detail. Few hotels could claim that.

"Yes," they would nod, happily now. "The short-time rooms were behind a tatty screen. If it was late you'd have to wake up an old hag wrapped in a bundle of blankets on the floor. Once inside, the rooms were so cobwebbed, and the dust lay so thick, they reminded you of Miss Havesham's in Great Expectations. Remember the film? Pip wheeling her around the room in her tatty wedding dress. Now who was the actress? Sybil Thorndike? The old Lumpini. Thought it had

been pulled down years ago. Don't think I'd even remember where it was. Too busy in the back of the tuk-tuk," they'd laugh, with a sly wink.

"Bangkok in those days. You could stroll across the park. Into Sathorn Road. It was lined with trees then. The English church—I haven't been for so long. What's its name? St. Andrews? Christ Church? St. George's?—one or the other. Still there though. Only patch of green left in the road. Know why?—land was given by the King. These days I'm afraid I'm more often in the British hospital next door. Handy position. Vicar only has to cross a footbridge outside his own door and he's at the bedside."

The morning I reached the Lumpini, a woman was busily serving out bowls of noodles from a stall outside. She pointed up the stairs. When I mentioned Tully, described him, indicating his height, her face brightened, and then she frowned in confusion, called up the stairs, and waved me to go ahead. At the first landing an elderly woman beckoned me to follow her to the top floor. She led the way down a narrow corridor, knocked and then rattled a door which flew open as if in surprise to reveal an empty room. Not entirely empty. Some clothes, a couple of paperbacks.

"Farang, come back?" I asked.

She shrugged with an uncertain smile. "Puen (friend) you?" she asked, nodding and muttering to herself as she went out.

I heard her pad down the stairs and sat on the bed with the fan whirling erratically overhead, thinking, "This is where he

lived. Probably the only farang ever to do so. Here he wrote his novel. Here too perhaps he planned his revenge." Tully was good at plotting revenge. With him it was a hobby. I reached inconsequentially for the paperbacks: Poems of Byron, and a well-thumbed Conrad's Lord Jim. They seemed to sum up the beginning and the end of his career, if career was an appropriate title. But I knew why he had stayed here. I knew the moment I entered the room. It reminded me as it surely must have reminded him of another room, another era. Rome, of course.

Here too the wiring draped down like the long dead tendrils of some petrified forest. Here too Tully had been rewarded with a view of sorts, although when I pushed open the balcony door it collapsed into the tangle of briars, which untended for twenty years obscured any sight of the Lumpini park opposite as surely as a well-kept secret. I went into the bathroom. The plumbing appeared to have been plundered and the sink emptied directly onto the floor and flushed down a hole in which, judging by the outraged sounds, a lurking rat had just been aroused from its torpor. In Rome, there was no bathroom at all. Just slimy steps down into Vicolo San Simone where, leaning over a heap of uncleared garbage, Tully washed his teeth at the street pump. Every morning, rain or fine the same four letters faced him. SPQR—crudely translated as 'Sono Porci Quest! Romani.' (These Romans are pigs!)

Today, Bangkok was as unnaturally quiet as the back streets of Rome had been on a Sunday morning. The usual roar of

traffic up Rajadamri Road had been stilled at a stroke. Twenty years before Tully would have wakened to the whine of horse-drawn carrozinas scraping the cobbles like chalk drawn across a blackboard, and then Spurio thumping on his door. "Professore, Professore." Ah, yes. Sitting there on the hard lumpy bed of the Lumpini Hotel, waiting for him as I had waited elsewhere so often before, and yet knowing that this time in all probability he would not come, I allowed the past once more to draw me back to a time when the whole world seemed waiting at our fingertips.

An explosion, followed by the rattle of gunfire, returned me from my reverie to the present.

Looking back, Bloody Sunday probably came as no surprise to veteran reporters who had seen Thailand's faltering steps towards democracy tested before. In 1976 a similar popular uprising had been violently suppressed. But on this present occasion the military had already stepped down and new elections had been held. Those who had hoped things might change had their expectations dashed when the very parties supporting the military formed the next government, and invited General Suchinda—who had led the military coup a year before, but who now declared he had no further political ambitions—to become Prime Minister. Suchinda accepted and if it hadn't been for Chalad he might have got away with it. For although the newspapers grumbled, the television and radio stations were state controlled. Outside Bangkok ordinary people in the provinces had their opinions

formed more by what they saw or heard, than by what they read.

Chalad was an ex-MP who went on a lone hunger strike outside Parliament protesting at Suchinda's appointment. For a few days no one paid him much attention until Chamlong joined him. Chamlong had been Governor of Bangkok before resigning to lead the Palang Dharma party

Bangkok—May 1992 in the recent elections, under a banner promising to fight corruption. Chamlong, like Suchinda, was an ex-General. But there the likeness ended. Suchinda was one of the super-rich, who preferred to be photographed on the golf course or at lavish receptions. Chamlong on the other hand lived as simply as a monk, eating but once a day, wearing a simple peasant's smock, with his hair cropped close as a schoolboy's. Although married, he declared that he had given up sex. Rarely in Thai politics could two opponents have been so different. Or apparently so, for things are rarely what they appear to be in the world of politics—in this case two ex-Generals seeking to popularize support at opposite poles of Thai society.

What Suchinda failed to realize was the growing impatience of the middle classes being dictated to by the army. Fledgling support for the two hunger strikers grew as the days passed, swelled not just by students but office workers, civil servants, bank employees. As the opposition became more vocal ordinary people joined in, drivers, food vendors, motorcycle taxi drivers, railway workers, state employees. Chamlong called for support from all over the country and on Sunday

his supporters bussed in by the thousands to gather in Sanaam Luang—the Royal Park.

The oppressive heat drove most of the demonstrators to seek shade under the trees along the edge of the park, but as the afternoon waned they came out into the open, waving banners and chanting slogans—"Suchinda Out, Suchinda Out."

For days Suchinda had staunchly resisted all demands that he resign. He could not, he declared, obey the demands of mob rule. In a hysterical speech in Parliament he denounced the demonstrators as Communist trouble makers. In reply to Chamlong's call for popular support, Suchinda had called in the army. "To protect the King, the Buddhist religion and the constitution," he claimed.

As the crowds gathered in Sanaam Luang, the army were unrolling razor wire across the main avenues leading to Parliament and lining up implacably behind it. This then was the uncompromising state of affairs that Sunday evening as I joined Tully and Dee in the foyer of the Royal Hotel, and we set off in high spirits for the demonstration.

There must have been well over a hundred thousand people gathered in the park by the time we arrived, the numbers swelling all the time as more surged in from every direction. Despite his loudspeakers Chamlong was barely audible above the roars of the crowd, excitement mounting by the minute. This was Tiananmen Square, Berlin, Prague, Bucharest. All thrown into one vast clamour for change. Whether Chamlong was wise in the event to orchestrate this heady atmosphere

and lead the demonstration down the road towards Parliament for the inevitable confrontation, even with the advantage of hindsight, is hard to decide. But he did, and the soldiers, for the most part unprovoked, opened fire. How many died then, and later during a three day curfew, will probably never be known.

My own role, I regret to admit, was one of rank cowardice. Tully's punch only dazed me, but I had barely got to my feet before the crowd came fleeing back in panic. I remember a public execution in Yemen; thousands of armed tribesmen surging through Sanaa Square, robed and proudly sporting their Jambir daggers. The soldiers, many no bigger than boys, opened fire and beat the crowd back with whips. Within seconds a rush turned into a rout, everyone clawing a way through to escape, never caring who was crushed, who trodden under. I felt that now. Lines of troops were speeding ahead to block our escape. The crowd surged this way and that. I joined a group running for the river. Soldiers tried to bar our way, snatched and clubbed at us as we raced past. I found myself in a temple compound gasping for breath. I might

Bangkok—May 1992 have been in that Paris cafe all those years before. A monk watched me from a window. But this time there was no Tully on hand to drag me to safety.

In the days that followed we heard all sorts of rumours about the hundreds unofficially missing: corpses dumped by aircraft over the wild Burmese mountains, army trucks packed with bodies emptied at crocodile farms, thick plumes of smoke

rising from the crematorium chimneys at military temples. The official count was forty-seven, the unofficial anything up to seven hundred.

Footsteps mounted the stairs. For a heart stopping moment I thought it sounded like Tully, but they stopped outside another door. The Sunday-like silence resumed. I stretched myself on the balcony and peered out to the park where a shine of water gleamed through the trees. Tully always liked water, sea, waterways. He once told me that in the Solomon Islands, the only entertainment was to straddle a tree trunk downstream through the rapids.

He started out with the same ration of ideals as the rest of us, inflamed by the student jargon of the sixties, only to discover an adult world too moribund for his vaster and more manipulative imagination. He should have grown up. Instead he tried to adapt to causes that were not his either by birth or by creed—and failed. For all his sincere intentions he could not be what he was not born but in a way I rather envied him. How many of us don't dream of setting off into the unknown, voyaging across uncharted seas, yet if the chance came would we take it?

When he was storming the army barricades that bloody Sunday what was he thinking? What was he doing it for? Not democracy. He despised democracy. He scoffed at the whole notion of choice. "Of course you get a choice. Between two or more parties every so-many years. No one seems to care that by voting for a government you surrender your democratic rights. Does the government ever consult you?"

What it amounts to is every few years the people choose another dictator. Here in Thailand politicians just change parties and the same rogues represent a place for years, but if anyone new dares oppose them they'd be assassinated. Do you know there are over 900 paid assassins, hired guns, employed by political parties?"

I didn't interrupt him. We were sitting on the parched grass at Sanaam Luang hardly able to hear ourselves think above the noise from the loudspeakers. The day before, quite by chance, I had seen him outside Parliament sitting among the demonstrators. He told me where he was staying, and then called out, "Come on Sunday!" Sunday was to be the day Chamlong promised to change Thai politics once and for all. Sunday was when the undreamed of happened—the army opened fire on their own people.

Nicaragua—1980

My Bureau Chief in Rio, Bruce Handler, had just flown down from Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. He wanted me to go back. Central America was news. Civil war in San Salvador, armed uprising by Indian peasants in Guatemala, Sandinistas had swept Somoza's thugs from Nicaragua and US military advisers were training Contra rebels in Southern Honduras.

"By the way," called Handler as I cleared my desk, "I got to know a pal of yours, in Managua. Knows you from years back. Met him getting a press card. The press office is at the Intercontinental, 7th floor. This guy was holding up the queue, flourishing some letter from a provincial rag, insisting his paper had a circulation of a quarter of a million even if it wasn't on the official list. 'That's a year, he confessed to me afterwards in the elevator. Name of Tully—mean anything to you? Says you saved his neck in Rome. Never took you for the neck-saving type."

"I'm not," I retorted cheerfully, used to his banter. "You know me. First sign of trouble, run."

"Don't run too quick," Handler came back. "You may miss the story altogether."

I had a drink with Handler at the airport before flying out and again Tully's name cropped up. I don't think Handler had ever met anyone like him. "Strange bird," he remarked with a deprecating laugh. According to Handler, Tully had been up above Matagalpa in the Cordilleras where most of the Contra

raids took place. He had attached himself to an Italian medical team under a Cuban commander. "He had some very ugly things to say about the Contras," added Handler. "You might look into that."

In case it slips some people's memory, in those early days of Reagan's presidency, the Sandinistas were invariably portrayed as cowardly, bullying Communists, while the Contras were heroic freedom-fighters, a myth most people were happy enough to accept and few bold enough to question. Tully did just that and provoked wrath and squawks from editors and others as a result.

"The CIA", admitted Handler, "have him on their hit list." He chuckled, waving for the check. "But so is half the world. Probably discover the Pope's listed as a subversive. Who knows? Perhaps they shot him." Tully, he further explained, got in by crossing on foot from Southern Honduras.

It's easy to forget nowadays that America had declared a land and sea blockade on Nicaragua. Harbour approaches had been mined, land routes guarded by Contras. Not a truck was supposed to enter or leave. At the Honduras border the guard stamped Tully's passport, pointed down the empty road, and gave him a friendly parting clap on the shoulder. Later on I visited the frontier north of Estopono for myself. A forested ridge on the Honduran side dominates the Nicaraguan plain. The frontier post is gutted and daubed with graffiti. The Sandinistas were dug in out of sight among the bombed farm buildings lower down the hillside, rarely returning the constant, indiscriminate fire from above. Tully

had to walk down this exposed highway, straight through the field of fire for some four kilometres, before it curved out of sight in the valley below, where a new temporary border post had been established—no more than a converted caravan looking like a hot dog stall, stamping passports! The real

Nicaragua—1980 frontier and customs check was a further twenty kilometres inland at Somotro.

Tully had another problem. He was accompanied by a French-Canadian girl, a pert little thing clad entirely in punk black and sporting a bowler hat. Tully had met her at the border town of San Marco. A tall loping Gringo and a bobbing bowler hat were too much for the sharpshooters on the ridge. Tully and companion had to endure being target practice with no cover to run for. The Canadian girl seemed quite oblivious to the bullets whistling past them and Tully, reluctantly deciding it was unchivalrous to abandon her, had to step stoically on. After a couple of miles a jeep roared up the valley road, circled behind them, and coasted back, the driver gesturing frantically. They leaped on board amid a renewed hail of pinging bullets, only to find the engine was switched off.

"No fuel," grinned the driver, nursing the wheel.

Even black bowler showed signs of being perturbed. "Merde! Merde!" she screamed clutching her hat, and gazing at Tully with a radiant smile.

This was not Tully's baptism to battle, but what surprised him most was the normality of it all. War as a daily way of life had never occurred to him before.

Several months after I took up my posting our paths finally crossed.

Sanjuan del Sur lies on the Pacific coast not far north of the Costa Rican border. It was the closest anywhere got to being considered R and R during the Nicaraguan conflict. Some people had tried Grenada, a typical Spanish town on the shore of Lake Nicaragua. Grey sand beaches, guitar-strumming picnickers, weekend bathers daring rumours of sharks swimming up from the sea, horse-drawn carriages clip-clopping the flowered avenues, all emphasized the fact that despite the revolution this remained a fiercely conservative town where Sandinistas were outnumbered ten to one. The typical Gringo peace-freak on leave from coffee-picking with big boots and long hair was not welcome. Tully, who had become an ardent admirer of Sandino, and carried his picture, even if it was only a stamp, in his wallet, left after a single day. Sandino who defied the last American invasion in the late twenties with his cry of 'No Vender la Patria.' was a heroic looking figure in khaki sombrero, bandolier and with a red scarf tied round his neck. Inside Tully's money belt he joined the assorted company of the Dalai Lama, Tully's mother, and the black and white photograph of an Oriental girl—name unknown.

Tully had already been in San Juan a couple of days when I arrived. I had set off from Managua for San Juan del Norte,

on the Atlantic coast. We had heard rumours that the town had been evacuated following a raid by Pastore's Contras from Costa Rica. Piranha raids, they called them. Hit and run. Coming up the coast in fast converted launches and unleashing as much terror and destruction as possible before running south for safety. There were reports of helicopter gunships flying from secret jungle bases just across the border. Who supplied and flew them was not hard to guess. However the Sandinistas turned us back at Bluefields. Perhaps they thought the attack on San Juan might reflect badly on their preparedness. Usually they were only too happy to show off the effects of Contra raids. Someone suggested San Juan del Sur instead and rather than waste the hired jeep we drove around Lake Nicaragua, and arrived at sunset.

San Juan is a pretty place, a curved bay sheltered by jungle headlands. At the southern end stood a long breakwater with a couple of gunboats tied up, some sheds and a big fuel storage tank. On the north side of the bay a river flowed over a sandbar where kids frolicked in the shallows and white egrets stalked the mangroves. At low tide you could wade across to a restaurant that sold lobster and turtle eggs. No wonder the Italian medics liked it here.

Nicaragua—1980

The only hotel still open was the Estrella, a rambling three storey wooden affair at the southern end of an esplanade lined by swaying coconut palms and a few rather dilapidated beach bars on stilts, The manageress—a huge lady of Spurio

dimensions—sat in a sagging deckchair at the entrance, a rifle across her knees, and spat when spoken to. Tully called her Madam Guillotine. Given half a chance she would have readily presided over all our executions.

At dawn the ocean swells cruised straight into the open bay, and at evening the sun dropped into the Pacific like a stone. Tully shared an upstairs room with a balcony. By the time I arrived the only space left were huts down a side alley. The Estrella was packed; German volunteers, aid workers, journalists, Tully's medics. The restaurant wasn't functioning, and the only alternative to a wade across the river was to scrounge at the few eating places in town still operating.

I glimpsed Tully before he saw me. He was up on a raised street bar that sold ices and soft drinks, presiding over a bunch of barefoot kids playing street basketball with a sand-filled sock and a stout cudgel. Tully was encouraging the proceedings and, when the game finished, providing the refreshments. "Mama," he cried to the rather jolly barlady, "more juice, more lollies."

When he saw me his response was rather less than I expected. It might have been a week since we parted, not twelve years. That was his way, I supposed. He seemed friendly enough and appeared keen to hear all my news, though he was reticent with his own. A few non-committal comments sufficed to sum up the past. He had been out east—Vietnam, Cambodia but he didn't want to talk about that. The present interested him far more. Here he had discovered a cause.

"Why do you Yanks always choose the wrong side— always the bully-boy, Somoza, Marcos, Battista, Pinochet?" He regarded me circumspectly. "What's wrong with Allende, Castro, Sandino? They went to the wrong prep school? Listen, whatever the American press is saying, the Sandinistas are doing a power of good. Local clinics, land reform. The peasants had no access to medical help before and as for rights, why the whole country was carved up between Somoza's cronies. The people were virtual slaves."

I had listened to the same stories countless times over. How Somoza drowned his enemies in the crater lake in Managua which he stocked with crocodiles. Some of the stories were very far-fetched, but many had a ghastly ring of truth to them.

We had finished our meal such as it was and strolled out along the shore. When the tide was out the firm sand became a local football pitch, but now in the twilight the players had gone home and we had it to ourselves. "At least no bloody cries of 'Hey Gringo'," complained Tully. Years later he was to object as bitterly when the Thais shouted 'Hey You'. "What's wrong with just saying 'Hello'?" But out there on the beach, as the moon stalked above the dark Pacific Ocean, he had other things on his mind. "How you Americans can support the Contras beats me. I'd like to take Reagan to some of those villages after his precious Contras have left their calling cards. They offer cash to those who will join them and those who won't ..." He broke off, adding, "I suppose little kids with their insides blown out aren't

supposed to have political opinions." He glared at me. "I thought you important correspondents were supposed to be after the truth."

"No, we leave that to experts like you. As you say I've been on the job so long I doubt I'd recognize truth if I found it."

Tully laughed, and rested his arm on my shoulder as we walked back up the beach to the Estrella. Here he introduced me to his Italian medics. One doctor was from Rome and we shared memories of the city. It was much later, 10.32 to Nicaragua—1980 be precise, while we were sitting out on the upstairs balcony facing the moonlit bay, that the attack came.

The past half hour had lapsed into silence. Only the creak of a cane chair, a nightbird calling, or palm fronds clashing in a fitful breeze disturbed the stillness of the night.

Those first rockets shrieking across the sky caused more surprise than alarm. All at once the night sky was ablaze with the fiery trails of destruction launched from out at sea, whether from helicopter or gunboat I could not tell. Loud bangs of exploding mortars hit the town. I knew at once what was happening and dived for cover but Tully just stood there gazing, with a rapt expression. The target of the attack appeared to be the fuel tanks out on the breakwater, but several buildings had been hit, and a warehouse was already ablaze. Suddenly a seafront house only fifty yards away received a direct hit and exploded in flames. I was about to take shelter when a resounding crack smashed the roof

overhead, and the verandah ceiling collapsed in a shower of broken tiles and falling masonry. A jarring blow behind my ear dazed me. Next thing I knew Tully was dragging me out through the dust, and lifting me down the broken stairway. In the largely intact hall everyone was shouting at once.

The Germans were trying to build shelters out of the furniture. The Italian medics were preparing to flee for the hills. Tully drew me cautiously outside. Soldiers were running haphazardly along the esplanade in all directions. "Why don't they switch off the lights?" Tully cried. "The town's a sitting target." He started towards the beach, just as a mortar exploded nearby. As I ducked I saw him dive for shelter under the palm trees. It had taken me this long to figure out that if there were cannon then there must be helicopter gunships. At that moment one roared overhead threshing the palm fronds in the down draught. I leaped inside the remains of the Estrella for safety.

Tully meanwhile had taken shelter under the piles of a deserted beach cafe, burying himself among the tin cans and fish bones. The gunship shredded the sky overhead but he felt remarkably safe.

Handler snorted later when I related the incident. "You wait until there's nothing but a low stone wall being chipped to pieces between you and a machine gun a hundred yards away, and the next guy has taken one in the guts and is screaming for you to shoot him." Handler, I may add, had been in the Anzio landing, the Korean Peninsula, the TET

offensive and just about any of the theatres of war you could care to mention.

Tully lay peering out to sea convinced any moment he would spot the Contras leaping out of the waves. The moonlight gleamed on the ocean swells but the black secretive troughs could have hidden any number of landing craft. There were rapid bursts of automatic fire towards the river mouth. The town behind had suddenly plunged into darkness. Someone had finally tripped the power. Cannon were still blazing across the sky and mortars raining down but Tully was disappointed. He had expected something like the Charge of the Light Brigade. All he found was confusion. If the enemy had landed he couldn't see them, only the flashes of gunfire, and soldiers running along the road.

Watching out from the Estrella doorway I saw him come slowly back, a pale figure under the palm trees. "I hoped there'd be a bit more to it," he remarked as we sat amongst the debris.

The attack tailed off after another forty minutes without the fuel depot being hit, although the commandant's houses nearby was in flames. It was now about 1 a.m. Everyone was trying to decide if the government gunships moored to the breakwater had left. Some claimed they had, others said they couldn't move. They had broken down months ago for lack of spares. We had all settled to

Nicaragua—1980 sleep when the Italians returned. They had only got about a hundred yards, it seemed.

At 4.21 a.m. there was a terrific bang and a crack as we came under attack again. Perhaps the Contras had continued raiding up the coast and were now heading back. Certainly the attack, though intense, was much briefer, and the sounds of gunfire and explosions soon retreated beyond the southern headland. Tully, climbing on the roof, said they could see a glow out to sea and insisted there was a battle under way. It was all speculation, guesswork, or both.

Next morning the mothers—mujeres della revolution, led by Madam Guillotine, paraded through the town carrying the twisted metal carcasses of cannon, a metre long at least, and placards condemning Contras, Yanguées, and all reactionary forces. "Vive Sandino," they cried.

Tully thought the spirit of the demonstration was as impressive as the Piranha attack. Later he left with his medics for the North. There was hardly time for a chat. I had the impression he regarded me as belonging to history—a monument from the past. He claimed to despise the press. "Jackals," he said. "Feasting on remains. Not you. The profession generally."

"Well," I retorted hotly, "how about your press card?"

He seemed confused. "Sometimes, it's been more trouble than it's worth," he said.

I saw him climb aboard a bus so overcrowded passengers were hanging out of the doors. The gears ground, the axles creaked, and off it jerked belching clouds of black smoke. I turned back thinking more about a swim than Tully. I was

rather relieved to see the back of him. When he was around he seemed to attract unpleasant surprises.

Bangkok—April 1991

In the spring of 1991, I had been in Bangkok two weeks when Khun Deng asked me to join him for lunch at the Foreign Correspondents Club in the Dusit Thani Hotel. I had met him only briefly once before at a reception hosted by the Siam Society and I was mystified what he would want to see me about. It was also my first visit to the Foreign Correspondents Club. I had decided, perhaps obstinately, that a sabbatical meant exactly what it was, and having spent the past twenty years in and out of press clubs I had decided to give this one a miss, at least temporarily. Through a discreet enquiry I learned that Khun Deng usually lunched there, entertained clients, and generally held court. If he was not at his office after 12 o'clock, this was where one would invariably find him.

"The buffet is extremely good," I was told. "And you'll find Deng a generous host." So it was with an agreeable sense of anticipation that I ducked out of the heat of that April Bangkok morning into the cool palm-treed foyer of the Dusit Thani and headed for the lift to the top floor.

I found Deng waiting for me when I arrived. Deng was a Chinese Thai, tall with flowing white hair that fell around his face and jovial but perceptive eyes.

He grinned. "Have you read Le Carre's Honourable Schoolboy? Well I am the Chinaman with the buck teeth who owns the French bookshop in Bangkok."

Hardly an endearing compliment and also a poor estimate of Deng himself. What impressed me at my first real meeting was his apparent self-effacing modesty. He was dressed in rather unassuming clothes. A light anorak, open shirt, sandals with socks. One might have mistaken him for a poet in need of care and protection, who had barely two baht for the bus. Despite the clothes, he assumed the air of a Mandarin. He had learned his publishing trade, he informed me, in Paris, and his French was as fluent as his English. When I asked him where he looked for culture, without hesitation he answered, "Bangkok. Bangkok is the new Left Bank of the East."

With this remark he guided me to the dining room with its airship view of the city. The sprawling noisy hubbub lay miraculously detached and silent far below. It was as if we had escaped to some cool haven of the Gods. As we took our places at a table by the windows a young woman joined us.

"Miss Rudy, my assistant," Deng introduced her.

She was young, pretty and rather unusually athletic as if she went jogging round Lumpini Park every day. "Windsurfing," she explained.

"Rudy has just come back from Paris," added Deng. "She will be opening my new French bookshop in Phnom Penh."

She rather reminded me of a James Bond girl in the movies, but quieter and probably a lot more competent.

Lunch at the Foreign Correspondents Club surpassed my expectations. To wash it down, Deng ordered abundant supplies of Kloster beer. He leaned forward with a

conspiratorial grin. "So you have given up your very good job in New York."

I had to smile at the speed news travelled. "The magazine was taken over by a French company. I think they wanted a new broom." I omitted that the redundancy terms were generous. "It was time I took a year off."

"And your wife?"

I was beginning to realize that Deng made it a point of coming prepared. "My wife (I almost added, "as you probably know,") is a photographer. Professionally we lead quite separate lives. There's the house and the dogs. And she loves the garden."

"No children to worry about?"

I shook my head.

Deng nodded sagely.

"It seems to me you are rather free. I have a proposition to put to you. If you accept you will be doing me a considerable favour." There was no mistaking the implication. A favour given meant a favour owed. He waited while I finished eating. "A rich American is making a film here in Thailand. He asked me to find him a writer. I happen to know an English author who is writing a book. I saw the first draft and liked it. This writer observes that many farangs may come here to start a new life, but the ghosts from their past catch up with them sooner or later." A faint smile surfaced. "I even described it as a Lord Jim for the late twentieth century, I told him it should be seriously considered for publication. I may

well publish it myself. In the meantime the English author has little money. He lives in a rather poor hotel. But he likes it. It has, he tells me, character. The Lumpini Hotel. Overlooking the park— like the Dusit Thani." He laughed quietly at his own joke.

Rudy poured us all more beer. Deng continued. "I proposed to him he write this film script. The only problem was he had to do it quickly. In ten days. And for ten days work he would receive four thousand dollars. He is pleased, but anxious also. To write like that is never easy. I arranged for him to meet the film producer who told him what he was trying to create. In ten days the film was written. The producer was delighted and offered an additional salary if the writer would help direct the film. My writer was excited. Many years before it seems he worked in films. But last week the film producer sent me a fax. The writer-director has suddenly quit. The shooting is not finished. The script needs adaptation. Do I know of another writer?"

The question hung in the air. The implication was obvious. We both paused. I found myself staring down at the traffic far below crawling at an ant's pace along Rama IV Road. "Do I know this writer?" I asked him.

Deng nodded but I was still at a loss who it might be.

Deng nudged my memory. "He once worked with Pasolini." Deng smiled. "Briefly."

I stared at him with a vacant gesture. "I've no ..

"Yes," he interrupted. "You knew him. Rather well, I think. Over twenty years ago. In Rome."

"Not Tully!" I exclaimed with all the incredulity I felt. "Tully?"

"Yes," continued Deng, leaning forward eagerly. "Tully."

"Good Heavens. Tully? Here in Bangkok? And he's writing a book?"

Deng nodded. "Quite a good one." He glanced at Rudy. "Now he's run off."

In my mind it was the other Tully I was watching. Hauling me out of the Paris riot, lowering his possessions from Spurio's lodging house, helping me through the debris of the Estrella in San Juan. How extraordinary that fate should cross our paths again. I looked at Deng. "What exactly do you want me to do? Finish the film, or find Tully?" Lunch and beer made me feel generous.

"Both. Although I know nothing about the film, I like his book." He paused while the waiter served coffee. "There is something I can tell you as his friend, I think. He is behaving curiously. Perhaps you can help him."

Deng smiled encouragingly. "Go down and see this movie mogul." He appeared to relish the title and repeated it. "The movie mogul is a very rich American. He told me he was, and I believe him. He travels with a considerable entourage and until recently had an entire floor of this hotel at his disposal. He is", Deng searched for a discreet appraisal, "a nice man. But he has the whims and fancies that only the very rich can enjoy with impunity. I am not sure that Tully approved of his

indulgences. I do not want to create a false impression. Only to prepare you a little."

Rudy got up and crossed over to the window. The interview was over. Deng reached into a shoulder-bag and handed me a folder. "This is the script he wrote. You may want to read it. They are down at Bang Saphan, There are two Bang Saphans. Bang Saphan Yai and Bang Saphan Noi. You know what Saphan is?"

"Bridge," I said.

He continued, "A King had a beautiful daughter. Yomdoey. Two men loved her. The King said whoever built the bigger bridge could marry her."

"Yai (big) won?"

Deng smiled. "But the other suitor wouldn't give up. In a rage the King tore his daughter into pieces and threw them in the sea where they became islands." Once again he regarded me with his rather elusive stare. "This is not the jungle. But in many ways your friend, Tully, behaves as if it were. 'Khon pa thuan' in Thai. Un homme savage. The noble savage. Perhaps he should have been born two centuries ago. He once said to me he was sure his Karma, his inner being, belonged here in another age. He informed me the twentieth century is 'just a nice place to visit.' I worry he is beyond his own control. I am afraid he may be a danger to himself and to others."

I could sense him studying me carefully. "And you do want me to find him?"

Deng answered me with a blank stare. "Yes. When you are next in Bangkok please come and see me."

As I left the Dusit Thani the afternoon heat hit me like a blow. April and May are the hottest months of the year in Thailand. By 3 o'clock the streets of Bangkok are roasting. The buses, even the more expensive air-con buses, are

overcrowded to bursting. To take a taxi or an open tuk-tuk is to be stranded in a never-ending traffic jam. "Rot tit!" they curse ('Cars stick'). They certainly did, all the way up Silom Road. What had appeared pretty from the roof of the Dusit Thani wasn't so pretty down on the ground.

In these circumstances the only way to get around Bangkok is to take a motorcycle taxi. That also means taking your life in your hands—or rather putting it in someone else's. To beat the traffic the motorbikes weave, dodge, squeeze, putting knees if nothing else at considerable risk. I always try to choose an older driver on the assumption they have already survived longer, and like older doctors have probably already made their worst mistakes on some other victim.

Unfortunately the only one available outside the hotel looked about sixteen and wore a wrap-around crash helmet that prevented him seeing sideways any more than a horse in halters, and hearing even less. We swerved along the sidewalk dodging the pedestrians while I held on and prayed.

Being a pedestrian in Bangkok is scarcely less dangerous. I once saw an office girl released for her lunch break and anxious to reach a noodle stall across Sukhumvit Road dart forward only to cartwheel over the roof of a taxi hurtling

down from Ploenchit. I even glimpsed her look of astonishment as she whirled by, like paper tossed in the wind. To cross a busy Bangkok street requires all the nerve and skill of a matador. Rome was not much better. I remember years before leaving Rosati's cafe with Ungaro to cross the Piazza del Popolo during rush hour. He waited for a lady with a poodle to brave the traffic and followed briskly in her wake, remarking, "When you cross the minefields of life, it is always better to let your wife lead the way."

At the Oriental Pier I paid my baht and waited on the pontoon to board the next express boat up river. These long canoe-shaped craft back up only for a second or two, the conductor piping whistles, the engines roaring in reverse, the muddy river churning to the boil. And then whether you are on board or not they are off. By comparison the vaporetis of Venice are stately old aunts. I balanced my way to a seat up front behind the driver. The sun glanced off the water, the banks flew by. We passed huge rice barges being towed along in mid-stream, long sargasso-like clumps of water hyacinths drifted down river, flying spray drenching us as we bounced past long-tailed boats carrying housewives home. Naked brown kids dived off wooden piles, women washed clothes from house steps. To escape to the river was to glimpse Bangkok as it used to be before they blocked off, or filled in, most of the canals. Or left those remaining as open sewers.

I landed at Nonthaburi with its white clock-tower, and crossed over on a busy ferry to the other bank. Beyond a

saw-mill a woodland path criss-crossed streams and ditches to an old temple. Lofty trees overhung the bank where off-duty monks relaxed in the shade. I got out Tully's film script and, with the late afternoon sun slanting across the river and a huddle of newly ordained novices in bright saffron robes chattering playfully nearby, I started to read.

"I was writing this novel," Tully told me, when I finally met him that dark night in his boat up the Bang Saphan River, crouched under the low cabin roof, with the flickering candle casting uneasy shadows, and the rising tide tapping on the hull an ever repeated message—"Go, go, go."

"I was staying at the Lumpini, 'Lumpini On The Park', I renamed it. Must be Bangkok's original short-time hotel, or a close second. When I actually said I wanted to live there, the old girl who owns it—sells bowls of kwiteo (noodles) outside, Madam Kwiteo I call her—seemed to think I must be a bit touched. Reminded me of Rome actually, remember Spurio's lodging house?"

Once settled in Tully developed a routine. Mornings he wrote, afternoons he walked—"to give the brain a chance to fill up again". Patpong was the obvious choice with its pavement markets, hustlers, girlie bars, sex shows, massage parlours. He fantasized married life with a clinging girl in the Grand Prix bar and took her out to tea, "rice actually," next afternoon, where they smiled at each other for what seemed an eternity until other girls arrived and tried to broker a conversation. The gist seemed to be that loyalty and love were both immediately obtainable in return for small

novelties like gold necklaces, new clothes, and a rented apartment.

Tully was in no position to offer such niceties, He had scarcely enough money for the rice. Another night he tried the delights of a massage parlour, but the girl of his unlucky choice, No. 27, scrubbed his testicles in the bathtub with a stiff hairbrush and then jumped up and down on his back. After this he lost active interest in any further proceedings. A group of street boys discovered him crouching crippled outside Robinsons Department Store, hailed a tuk-tuk and bundled him off back to the Lumpini.

In this way Tully became the only permanent occupant ever of the premises. In recognition of his status he was rewarded with the balcony room that had once overlooked the park. As Madame Kwiteo thrust open the balcony door it fell off its hinges, and Tully spent the first morning screwing it back with a broken kitchen knife. Despite occasional incursions from street kids short of a floor and reluctant to doss down on the sidewalk in case the police picked them up, he started to write his novel. Madame Kwiteo provided an unsteady table and chair, and for the first time in a long while Tully developed a routine. Early mornings he wrote, later he would stroll across the park. He liked the park. Chinese came and performed strange silent exercises like some slow, statuesque dance under the trees. In the afternoons there were rowing boats on the lake and turtles to watch if one lay on the grass at the water's edge. Early evening out came the joggers, young and old, streaming along the paths. Then as

night fell the food vendors spread their picnic mats and their flickering lamps beside the lake and waited for the promenaders and the courting couples. Tully who had just completed the first draft of *The Farang* and submitted it to Khun Deng, was reading the Trink gossip column in the Bangkok Post when he spotted a piece about an American film producer in town. It didn't seem of any consequence to him until he received a letter from Khun Deng to say he liked the book so far, and enquiring if Tully was interested in writing a film script.

The American Film Co. occupied a suite in the Dusit Thani a five-minute walk across the park. Tully had telephoned earlier, but his appointment seemed to have been forgotten. A bored youth let him into a room cluttered with the paraphernalia of film-making—cameras, tripods, lights, reflector screen, rolls of electric cable—but also competing for space were weight bars, dumb-bells, and a moth-eaten poodle.

"It's a Bedlington terrier," declared a nervous American voice.

Tully turned to see a balding pot-bellied man, teeth-a-chatter in a welcoming grin, wrapped in a bath towel.

"Most people think it's a poodle but it's not, are you Dudley? Dudley is homosexual. Blatant too. Outrageous! Leave the door ajar and he comes back with muddy footprints all down his back. Hi. I'm Billy. Billy G. G stands for Goebbels. You looking for me?"

Tully explained who he was.

"You must have spoken to Bill Johnson. You want to sit down. Just clear a space. Now, where's my hat? I just can't think properly without my hat. Ah." He lifted a broad-

brimmed stetson off a camera tripod, grinned at Tully, and spread himself on the sofa. "So you're the writer, eh? We've already got a writer. What's this?"

Tully passed across jacket covers of his previous novels, rather creased and torn. Billy turned them over. "This photo you?" He peered at Tully. He raised his voice to a command that brought the household running. "I want you all to meet a real writer. He has written a book. What's your name again? Tully. This is Bill Johnson. Bill stops me getting into mischief. Bill, say hello to Tully."

A tattooed giant regarded Tully with a snarl. "Do you like boys?" he demanded. Tully hesitated. Various alternatives came to mind. Boys were best boiled, boys are little bastards, boys should be obscene but not heard. None seemed appropriate for the occasion. He glanced around. A group of crew-cut American boys watched him.

One of them chirruped, "Billy can lift weights same as the strongest man in the world."

"Yeah," declared another. "Billy's got a Lincoln Continental, a Rolls-Royce, ("Bentley," corrected Billy), and a Mercedes 6,000" ("Six hundred"),

A smaller boy piped, "Billy's one of the richest man there ever was. Like Jesus."

"No, Croesus, Peter," Billy corrected gently, basking in their admiration.

A look of consternation crossed his face. "Where's Dudley? Who's seen Dudley?"

"Dudley," they all chorused and rushed out.

A troubled Billy regarded Tully. "I own the Los Angeles Pets' Hospital. One of the finest pets' hospitals in America. We even employ trained canine psychiatrists." His voice lowered, "Dudley has this problem. Defeated every treatment known to dogs."

The boys trooped back breathless, leading an unrecalcitrant Bedlington terrier.

"Has he?" demanded Billy, glaring at them.

Voices wheedled in reply, "Well we don't know. We didn't actually see, did we? Maybe ..."

"Shit!" shouted Billy, throwing his hat at the nearest. Tully felt startled. "Shit," repeated Billy. "Dog shit. That's what he eats. Let him out and off he trots gobbling up dog shit!" Billy looked exasperated. "Where's my hat? I got to think." He turned to Tully. "You write down where you're staying. I've got things to think out." Cowboy Billy G strode off into some Dusit Than! Inner Sanctum.

Tully had already put the American Film Company out of his mind when Madame Kwiteo thumped on his door and announced a visitor: Bill Johnson, a friendlier version than on the previous occasion. He sat on the bed—there was

nowhere else—and informed Tully conversationally that although he had one ball blown off in Pearl Harbor he was still a potent force. A good friend and a dangerous enemy.

"I protect Billy G," he advised Tully. "He needs protecting. Too many people out to con him. Sometimes some small town theatre fails to pay for a film. I telephone. 'Listen,' I says, 'Lady, I got nothing against you. I don't want anything to happen to you. But if that cheque's not in the post by tomorrow you'll have both hands broken.'" He chuckled. "You should just hear them squawk down the line."

Tully accepted this information gravely. "You've come to the right place then. More paid assassins here than anywhere else. Everyone employs them."

Bill Johnson frowned as he grappled to assess this information. He tossed two typed sheets on the table. "This is all this other writer gave us." He glared at Tully. "You got ten days to finish the script." He raised four fingers. "Four big ones!"

Tully could only stare. Then as Bill Johnson stumped down the stairs Tully ran out and called after him. "What's it all about?" A disembodied voice floated up, "F— knows. You're the writer."

It was easy to understand Tully's initial excitement and then the bitter disappointment that followed. He had been offered what most writers could only dream of—the chance to write and direct his own movie, play the part of Pasolini, given a virtual free hand to create a parable, a legend, in

which the order of society was challenged and new possibilities explored. A new Genesis. Then the disappointment of having his absurdly high hopes dashed. To see his story pulled to pieces, his actors sport Billy's philosophy, to discover that he was merely to be the orchestrator for some romp in the jungle with a few pretentious lines of dialogue thrown in for good measure.

I set the script aside and studied Deng's directions. I didn't relish the prospect of being involved but at least it would get me out of the city. In tw'o days Songkran, the water festival, commenced. This may sound a good way to let off steam in the heat, but when a farang becomes the target of every flour bomb, water pistol, bucket and hose pipe, it can get to be a bore. Thais load pick-up trucks with water barrels to douse whoever they can find. One is supposed to join in the jollity, but with about ten thousand Thais against each farang, it is sometimes tempting to just hibernate under the air-con for the holiday. I decided I might even be better off in Bang Saphan after all.

A temple gong solemnly tolled, putting a stop to my studies. A senior monk called from the temple compound and the young novices gathered up their robes and hurried inside. As I left to catch the ferry back to Nonthaburi I could hear the evening chanting rising and falling like eddies in some immemorial tide of time.

Gulf of Thailand—Bang Saphan

By midday Hua Lampong station under its high dome was crowded and stifling. The train south to Sungai Kolok on the Malaysia border left at 12.35, stopping at Bang Saphan Yai six hours later. Only third class seats were left, but my window seat faced front, and there was a fan whirling overhead. The other passengers were friendly and helpful. Once it was established I couldn't understand Thai they left me alone, although 'farang' was sometimes mentioned. We pulled out on time, only to stop at every wayside halt. The only people to get on or off were food vendors who seemed hardly necessary as the passengers had supplies enough for a month. In addition rail staff continually toured the open carriages selling polystyrene containers of spiced mince, rice and cold fried egg. Nobody could starve on a Thai train.

The window offered a passing view on trackside living; shacks and shanties within arm's reach, washing laid to dry on the gravel, babies tumbling an inch from the rails, infants frolicking in stagnant ditches. A contrast to the empty grandeur of the Royal station with the Palace beyond. More undergrowth; listing stilt huts linked by warped planks, patches of bananas, mango orchards, men dragging nets through mud dykes, glimpses of fancy red-tiled villas that could have graced the most exclusive Virginia suburb. Finally open country.

Drab grey tracts of salt 'farms' pumped by motionless windmills, their sails at rest, as if in silent protest at the

land laid waste. Suddenly a wide river, sampans, rice barges, long-tailed runabouts charging noisily, railway stations ornately pretty, as if competing for some annual gardening club award: white painted fences, tiled roofs, ornamental gardens, clipped bushes, station masters in peaked caps, guards catching keys on metal hoops as the train chugged through, level crossings, waiting pick-up trucks, long drawn-out hoots from the engine.

At Nakorn Pathom a glimpse of the domed stupa before turning south through stubbled rice-plains, harvest over, the land deserted. A scattering of stray palm trees, hills twisted as dragons rising inland.

Hua Hin by tea-time, except that Thailand was the one country where this institution didn't exist. If this was India, the chai wallah would be running down the platform, with his bucket of brew and throw-away earthenware cups dashed to death on the rails afterwards. Years before I had shared a third class carriage from Madras to Calcutta on the Howri Express, with a fakir dressed in rags and ashes, chanting mantras, while a family cooked up on a charcoal stove on the floor.

Through the window the gaunt crags of Roi Et stood out against the sea. Beyond them the mangroves had been rooted up and mile after mile of prawn farms destroyed the coast, interrupted only by wooded headlands. At Prachuab a crag dominated the town, capped by a red Chinese temple.

Jungled hills moved closer inland, Burma lay beyond. Massed clouds threatened. Passengers started pulling down the slit

tin windows, but when the rain came it was pleasant and refreshing. I remembered Tully's story of how once on a train one summer's evening as a boy he had leaned out to bask in an unexpected shower, only to discover it originated from a soldier peeing out of the next carriage. Bang Saphan was the next stop but it was dusk by the time we rattled over a river bridge and came to a halt a dozen

yards beyond the end of the platform. I scrambled down onto the track.

Parked under a spreading rain tree stood a green open jeep that might have been home-made. A farang climbed down to greet me. "I'm Bill," he said.

"The Bill?"

He laughed. "No. We're all Bill's here. I'm Bill Dewar. Bill Johnson runs the camp. Billy G is at the hotel. He got word you would be coming. This is the train everyone comes down on," he explained, hoisting my bag into the jeep. "Climb aboard. Mind the hole in the floor. It belonged", he started to say as we bumped off along a twilight road, "to your pal, Tully. I kind of inherited it when he left. Mind out!" The jeep nose-dived into a flooded pothole and a jet of muddy water drenched my trousers. "Sorry, should have warned you."

"I knew him a long time ago," I said. "I haven't seen him in ... at least ten years."

Bill made no comment. He pulled the jeep into a filling station. Small boys swarmed aboard to wipe the windscreen. Bill bantered with them in pidgin English.

"Friend you?" They pointed to me.

Bill agreed. He was shortish, with cut-off jeans and a bulging belly.

"You fat, you pompooey," they teased.

Bill tossed them tips. "Little monsters," he added ungrudgingly. "All sleep in a tin hut and get about 50 cents a day. Say hello to Charlie."

It took a moment to realize Charlie was a tortoise. By far the largest I have ever seen, the shell decorated in gaudy patterns.

"Charlie lives in the temple. Up there." He nodded towards a temple perched on a steep wooded knoll. Rather unholy sounds of gaiety drifted down. "Playing ball,"

"The monks!"

"Sure. Why not? Enjoy a game. Bit of a problem pitching round the shrines." We roared away in a black cloud of diesel smoke. "Tully bought them a ball. So they invited him to their rooms. Tully got nervous—'What do you do?' he asked, 'pray?' 'No,' they laughed, 'Watch TV!'"

Mist flooded low-lying rice-fields. Ahead rose a barrier of forest, black against the fading light. "We're filming down the coast," Bill yelled above the rattle of the engine. "A secret cove Tully discovered. Fabulous location, jungle, cliffs. Had to bulldoze a road through just to get in the generator truck." His voice changed to a more respectful tone. "Billy Goebbels has taken over the hotel. Just ahead. See the lights?" We

swung round onto a shore road and pulled up outside an ornate pillared entrance.

"You'll stay with me up the coast." Bill indicated the dim outline of the bay ahead. Leaning palm trees curved away to a distant headland. "Tully built this jungle hut," he added as if explanations were needed. He climbed down. "Better tell Billy you're here. He's been expecting you ever since he got Deng's fax." As we mounted the stairs he paused.

"Sometimes Billy may seem a little odd," he cautioned. "I guess he can afford to be. Don't worry. It won't be your fault."

The movie mogul was lying on his bed wrapped in a white bath towel and wearing a cowboy hat. As we entered he was speaking into a cordless telephone. He waved us over, concluded a rather staccato conversation with the receiver, switched it off, grinned and declared, "Howeryouall?" It came out as a single sinuous vowel. I felt I already knew him from Tully's notations.

"I have been thinking," he said, as if the effort cost him megabucks. "God is sex. You know that?" he demanded, catching me off guard. "You want to write that down? Because this film needs sex. I want you to give it just that." He adjusted his hat.

I recalled a remark made by his fellow Texan, Lyndon Johnson, of a particular Texas politician: "All hat but no cattle."

Billy Goebbels frowned with concentration, "Animalism is the highest form of aestheticism. All art needs sex." He stared at me. "This is a great film. Truly a masterpiece. But it lacks sex." He frowned at me. "You understand that? Do you? Tully didn't. He thought ideas were enough." He picked up his cordless telephone and waved us out. "I've got to talk to my lawyer in LA, Gerry, Gerry Steiner." We were dismissed.

It had been raining and the jeep's seats were soaked. Bill remarked, "There's a restaurant along the shore." We pulled up outside a thatched platform listing on stilts over tidal mudflats. Bill whispered, "Be careful. Every time I eat here I get what Thais refer to as 'broken guts.' Tully claimed the cook hates farangs and sticks his finger up his arse before chopping up the chicken." I decided on prawns. "Is that wise?" said Bill. "He's got to peel them."

Tully's ghost seemed to haunt the place. Even as we ate it seemed to me he was a third person, an invisible presence watching us. Why had he left in such a hurry? Where had he gone? Where was he now? Bill became suddenly ill at ease when I enquired. "You better ask Marino when we go out to the cove tomorrow. He's the Artistic Director." Bill looked across at me. "I just point the camera where I'm told and shoot." We both laughed.

Tully's hut lay in pitch darkness with only a storm lantern to guide us. A pale form flitted wraithlike towards us beneath the coconut palms and a hurried conversation ensued.

"Wait," cried Bill, vanishing.

Suddenly with a roar a generator came to life and the hut lit up as if by magic. It reminded me of one of those souvenir matchbox Thai huts on sale at the airport. It stood on stilts over a washroom, steep thatch roof and low

eaves. Bill returned with a short stocky youth he called Lek, a flapping shirt below his knees, and trousers many sizes too large. He listened with a polite smile to Bill's instruction.

Bill turned. "Here's the washroom. Remember to duck your head. Tully said the builder was a dwarf. If you crouch on the stool you can scoop water over yourself from the tank."

When I emerged I found Lek busy sweeping the sand floor outside. A pot was boiling on the stove. The boy watched me carefully. I wondered if he knew where Tully had gone.

Upstairs even the verandah was too low to stand upright. There was a single room with a ceiling fan and basic furniture: a large plank bed and a rough bamboo chair. Bill explained. "I've asked Lek to put a tent up for you below."

"Where does he sleep?"

Bill indicated the floor. "Before dawn he slips out bowing. Makes tea. Brings it up at some unearthly hour. Bows. Never stops bowing. Tully said one day he expected to wake up and find him bowing as he prepared to slit his throat!"

The boy came up with mugs of coffee, placed them on a low table, bowed and stayed standing in the doorway, regarding us.

Bill remarked, "He spends all day washing his clothes and eating rice."

"What about the film?" I said. "What did Goebbels mean? I've already seen the script. I can't pretend to understand it."

Bill laughed. "Only person who does is Billy. And you know what his favourite film is? 2001 Space Odyssey. He reckons the great part about the ending is that everyone loves it but no one understands it. Except him." Bill didn't sound convinced.

Lek had switched off the generator and hung a second oil lantern. The narrow road along the shore lay silent and undisturbed. Even the tide inching over the mudflats rose without a murmur. A waft of sea breeze fanned us fitfully as if it kept forgetting its duty.

"Not a lot here in the way of entertainment," Bill apologized. "Only the Beauty Hills pub." He glanced round at Lek watching us with apparent indifference. "Tully brought a girl down from Bangkok. Met her at the railway station. Decided he needed an assistant. Billy was madder'n hell. Said she was a whore—which was possibly true, said she would corrupt his kids—which was impossible." He added cautiously, "There was this other writer."

I nodded. "I know." Bill looked surprised. I went on, "It's just that Tully's never very lucky. His books tend to sink without trace."

Bill accepted this without comment. "This guy conned BiHy out of ten grand plus a word processor. After a while Billy

demanded to see the result." He raised two fingers. "Two barely legible pages. The film starts with this guy's wife, stark naked, draped in seaweed, floating up on the beach as Mother Earth." Billy was furious, so you can imagine his reaction when Tully turned up with this bar-girl. Thought we were in for a repeat performance. Now I hear she's working at the Beauty Hills pub."

I remarked, "This first writer got 10,000 dollars. Tully only four."

Bill shrugged. "But Billy thought it was a great script. Faxed it to me in Hollywood to read on the flight over."

"So what went wrong?"

Bill seemed reluctant to explain. "I'm going to sleep. Tomorrow we'll go out to the cove. If you want to go anywhere, Lek can take you. He's got one of those little motorbikes." He nodded at the boy who took our empty glasses and departed. I climbed down. The tent didn't seem very inviting. Instead I walked across to the shore. After a while the lantern inside the hut was extinguished. I don't know what I expected. I sat on an open boat and waited.

Lying in my tent on a lumpy Thai mattress I had barely time to turn up the lantern and open the script before sleep snatched me. By daylight the lantern had gone. In its place a steaming mug of tea. Lek had crawled in and out as silently as an assassin. My wristwatch showed barely 6 a.m. but I could hear Bill moving above. I doused myself in the shower and

was ready to leave when he did, Lek bowing as graciously as any court chamberlain at our departure.

The road passed close to some fishermen's shacks clustered round an inlet. Ahead loomed a jungled promontory. We crossed a long narrow bridge over a shallow estuary where mangrove scrub tangled the banks and fishing boats lay stranded on the mud. The dawn sky was overcast and grey. Out to sea stood the humpbacked island of Ko Thalu, and far beyond jagged peaks rose out of the sea horizon. Bill drove through a dense coconut grove before emerging at an open rocky shore. A stiff breeze was blowing. He peered anxiously at the sky.

"Shitty light," he complained. "Be wide open if we're lucky. I can't film wider than 2.8. Oh, by the way." He reached into the back and handed me a book. "Billy said you should read it. The Five C's of Cinematography. His bible."

He turned down a sandy track into a cove where flagged poles marked a channel between the reefs. Sheltering inside floated a few brightly painted boats. Coming out of a hut was a woman. She waved to us. Bill bumped the jeep along the shoreline until a bare green headland blocked the way. We stopped beside a van parked under a tree. Thick black cables snaked out.

"Generator truck," commented Bill. "Can you drop a rock under our back wheel? There's no handbrake. Never is on Thai jeeps."

I followed him through wet undergrowth into a small rocky cove. Red cliffs plunged at either end. Clinging creepers and wild bamboo sprouted everywhere. Broken coral and driftwood cracked underfoot. It looked the perfect setting for castaways, though the ragged group of dispirited actors watching our approach seemed hardly to think so.

The film crew easily outnumbered the cast, busy getting things set up: grips, light gaffers, sound men, camera assistants, the continuity girl checking her script, the slate man chalking up the next take and, hovering in the background studying me with interest, a portly black-robed figure with a ginger beard. Striding up without hesitation came Marino, the Artistic Director. A slim, energetic man, with thinning grey hair, protruding eyes, and a sardonic smile. Bill introduced us with a friendly, "Marino makes kites even the Chinese wouldn't dare fly. Marino", he assured me, extending a brotherly hand to us both, "is Magic."

Magic Marino spent the half hour while the first shot was being set up assuring me that although it was nice of me to come I really needn't have bothered. In Tully's absence he was quite able to take care of everything. "We worked on the script together. I think it is correct to say I made most of the changes necessary. I had to. Tully well .. He gestured ambiguously. Nearby the make-up lady was dirtying the actors' faces. Baffles were draped over microphones and tested, tin foil screens set up to reflect what little light there was. I noticed Bill practising lens stops with his assistant,

Viewing the proceedings Marino added, "Tully liked best to sit in the Director's chair and shout 'Action.' He know of films only from a day at the seaside with Pasolini twenty years ago. He tell us this so often. He walked with his hand in his eye." Marino jumped up, pretending his hand was a spyglass, peering here and there. One or two grips stopped and laughed.

I had this sudden premonition Tully was hidden in some jungle hide-out, watching us.

Marino stopped laughing to add, "He and Billy do not get on too well. The actors do not like him. He always shout at them. Yes. I think we are better off without him. Now everything go much better. He and Billy have big fights."

"Fights?" I queried.

Marino indicated the north end of the cove where a natural arch cut through the headland. "One day Billy is up there. He get so angry, he pick up rocks and throw them down. Tully is lucky to be alive." He did not enlighten me further apart from smirking, "After all, he who pays the piper calls the tune, isn't it?" He glanced up at the sky, adding obliquely, "What are we doing here anyway but stealing the light?"

There was, I admit, a polite attempt to involve me in the proceedings but it soon became obvious that 1 wasn't needed. Billy G didn't show up all day. Sitting idle wasn't really my idea of fun. As we bumped homeward in the twilight I blamed Deng. Why had he insisted on my coming? So that he didn't lose face? No. 1 thought, the cunning old

devil has set this up for one reason only. And chosen the only person he thought might care enough to find Tully for him. I don't suppose a publisher had ever pursued Tully so assiduously before. Perhaps he had finally written something of value.

Bang Saphan Noi

That evening Billy G took me out to dinner. It was the only occasion I was ever grateful for Karaoke. Thais appreciate music when it is at full volume and Karaoke must have been a God-sent invention for them. That night it even drowned out Billy Goebbels. I watched his mouth move—it rarely paused—and smiled politely. There was no need to attempt a reply. He liked to do all the talking. He only paused to swallow pills.

"Virility pills," he winked. "If you don't swallow at once you get a stiff neck."

It was easy to see why Tully loathed him.

On the other hand I was beginning to wonder if Tully had reached the point where he loathed everyone, himself included. As we drove back to Tully's hut, Bill pointed out the beachside house Marino rented. Red Chinese lanterns glowed above the raised verandah. Bill chuckled. "Tully reckoned he'd passed this very spot a hundred times looking for a house to rent and there wasn't one here. He decided God created it overnight for Marino."

"They didn't get on too well?"

Bill avoided a direct reply, swerving to avoid the worst potholes. Either side palm trees overhung the track while far out on the night sea the lights of fishing boats waited like an impending invasion. Bill's words came in snatches as he battled jeep, road, poor brakes. "Isn't there something in

Sunday school about not coveting? Thou shalt not covet this, that and the other? Marino enjoys coveting. If you've got it, he wants it. Otherwise he's not even

Bang Saphan Noi interested. He told Tully, 'That's the game here. If you have someone I want, I am entitled to get them if I can. And of course I will,' he assured Tully who was furious at what he considered a flagrant breach of the house rules. Marino even told him, 'I've got this magic touch. I can get anyone I want.' All Tully wanted was to strangle him on the spot. In a way it was Tully's own fault."

"Why?"

Bill shrugged, "I told you Tully arrived with this girl from Bangkok. I think she came from up North somewhere. He met her outside the railway station. There's a street of work agencies who supply all the sweat shops where kids work like bonded slaves. One of the touts was having a go at this girl when Tully intervened."

Bill parked the jeep by the hut. The generator was chugging and the house lights ablaze. From outside I could see the shadow of the fan performing its mad whirligig. Lek stood there bowing and rubbing his hands. Bill asked for Mekhong soda, and we went up onto the verandah. Once settled on the mats, Bill resumed. "Not wise to play Sir Galahad here. Land of smiles it may be, but the smile is only skin deep. Thais can get violent quicker than anyone I know. Tully suddenly feels a blow on the back of his skull that nearly cleaves him in two and finds three Bruce Lees cornering him against a street wall, feet and fists flying. Tully managed to

dodge behind a parked car which reduced the odds slightly as the thugs could only come at him from either end. He'd been in fights enough times to know that you must never go down. Once down the boots go in. Tully didn't go down, but he was getting to the point of wondering how much longer he would be able to stay up when the police arrived and the attackers fled. Tully had a bleeding nose, a chipped tooth and his shirt torn off. Quite a crowd had gathered to enjoy the spectacle. It wasn't every day they saw a farang thrashed, but someone retrieved Tully's wristwatch, and another came up with a bucket of water. The police wanted Tully to make a report but he said he couldn't remember who attacked him anyway. As he walked off, albeit unsteadily, the girl emerged. Not exactly at his side, but not far away. Tully spotted a foodstall and grabbed her hand to join him. Over a bowl of noodles he offered her a job. His Girl Friday on the film. Can she read English? No. Well, it didn't matter. He gave her two hundred baht—it was all he had— and told her to buy a ticket." Bill raised his glass and smiled.

"She came down and Marino got her?"

Bill gazed silently out to sea. "Money," he said as if the night sea had just released its best kept secret. "Money. Doesn't matter if you're fat and bald with flab belly hanging down to your knees. Thais don't care, call you 'Pa' and pat your guts as affectionately as if it's packed with loot. Marino had more money. Bill was paying Tully two hundred bucks a week, everyone else was getting five times that." He glanced at me.

"I'm on 2,000 a week and it's nothing to what I'd get in Hollywood,"

"Why?"

"Why, because that's all he asked for. Billy's maybe a bore but he's not stupid. I guess Tully really wanted the job, and when you're broke you're not greedy. The grips were getting as much as he was." He yawned. "Sorry, but I'm bushed. Time to find a pillow."

I noticed that while we had been speaking Lek had sidled up the steps and now sat cross-legged leaning against the doorway. You could never be certain how much English they understood. As much for his benefit as Bill's I asked, "What became of the girl—what was her name?"

"Oo," Bill replied. "Marino got bored with her. Perhaps he likes boys better. Once he had gotten her away from Tully he lost interest. Now she's working up at the Beauty Hills pub along with the other girls. On your left as you drive into town. Lek can take you."

At mention of his name Lek grinned. "Now's best when the girls are working." Bill added, "They sleep all day."

Lek was standing up in his shirt-tails, beckoning. He hopped down the steps into the darkness. Next moment I heard a motorbike start. It was one of those tiny Yamaha Pop-pops. All the kids love to soup them up and roar around. For a farang it means tucking your knees up around your ears.

We drove down the deserted coast. Fishermen's huts stood silent in pools of darkness under the palm trees. Dogs stared

into our headlights but didn't bark. The night tide had quietly crept over the mudflats and black outlines of boats floated patiently at their moorings, waiting. The moon glowed dully but the sky was too overcast for stars. Across from Billy's hotel the Karaoke singing was still bellowing out strong. To my surprise Lek didn't turn towards the town but kept going until the road ended abruptly beside a river mouth. A straggle of fishing huts crowded the shore but across the river rose only a dark unbroken wall of mangroves. "Water up," Lek grinned, pointing to the sea.

A sandbar lay across the river entrance as effective as a blockade. In the Gulf of Siam where there is only one tide a day perhaps only four hours out of twenty-four could boats come up river. Lek flashed his headlights as if he was making a signal, and stopped the engine. Watching where he was staring, I noticed one of the black hulls stranded beyond the sandbar start to move slowly into the channel. The muffled 'da-da-da' of a single cylinder Yanmar as it started, and then the quieter 'Do-Do-Do' as it changed into gear. The boat made a circuitous entry crossing to the far bank and then swinging closer to us, before veering away and vanishing into the pitch dark. The noise of the motor faded away.

"Who's that?" I asked.

Lek peered up and grinned. "Pa," he said simply.

At least that's what it sounded like. Then he drove me to the Beauty Hills pub which was a waste of time as Oo wasn't there. The girls who were all volunteered instead, and it was

awkward to get away without buying drinks and not appear a 'keeneo (mean) farang.'

Next morning was grey and drizzly with a stiff wind coming in across the mudflats. I saw Bill standing on the shore squinting up at the sky with his eyepiece. He stamped back, shaking his head. "I'm going down to the cove, but we won't be able to shoot until this lot blows over. Lek, coffee?"

When Lek returned and bowed, Bill said, "I've been thinking. Perhaps you might want to see Karol. He owns some beach huts for hippies. About six clicks out of town. Lek used to work there. He might help you locate Tully. Tully used to go there sometimes to eat. Karol's got a Thai wife. You'll probably find him at his computer. That's who he's most married to."

"What about filming?"

Bill dismissed my offer. "Don't worry. Come along when it clears. I've got some reaction shots I want to retake. There's a fire scene later. We'll shoot day for night about 5 o'clock."

Lek chauffeured me into the town. Bang Saphan consisted mostly of a single busy shopping street. Under the covered market I found a stall selling hot tea and puffs of pastry that dunked nicely. The atmosphere was friendly. Lek drove me on a grand tour, past the railway station to the klong where women were washing clothes and themselves from overgrown steps and small boys were diving from the bridge. Lek seemed to be constantly on the look out. I was getting the impression that he only took me to places for a purpose.

The road to Bang Saphan Noi was under repair and there was an awful lot of mud to negotiate. Finally we turned off onto a sandy track opposite the sign 'Karol's Bungalows.' If I had expected some middle-aged hippy draped in beads and bangles with hair down to his knees I was in for a surprise. A half circle of bamboo and thatch huts, a row of corrugated tin toilets, and a central open-sided restaurant made up Karol's kingdom. The ground beneath the coconuts had been grassed and Karo] was currently squatting beside the grasscutter, scratching his head and cursing Thais in general and the handyman in particular. "Can't they ever see the damn stones? I raise the cutters and he lowers them. Thinks he'll cut it less often." He peered up at me, squinting through his spectacles.

I introduced myself and he got up, dusting his bare knees. He was wearing only a pair of shorts. "Come in," he said, "come and have some breakfast. This can wait. I can't speak this damn language. Can you?" We sat down at a long table covered generously with sauce bottles, vacuum flasks, tea-bags and coffee. "Help yourself. Order what you want. Tully used to come here quite a lot."

A group of travellers sat smoking at the far end. A rich waft of marijuana drifted down. Maps and letters were pinned on a bamboo partition. A row of worn paperbacks filled a shelf. The food counter held a number of notebooks. One for each bungalow. "They write down what they've eaten. Pretty honest mostly." Karol grinned, "Do get the odd one who skips off without paying. Not very often. Happens everywhere."

He spoke with a quiet slow drawl, very different from Billy Goebbels. A gaunt figure with thinning fair hair he sat upright, close to a stained vacuum flask of strong coffee. "If it hadn't been for my hands I'd be still out there in the Gulf working." He held up his wrists for inspection. "They laid me off. Medically unfit. Wife bought this piece of land. Nine rai (twenty acres) for just over two million baht." He peered at me over his glasses. "Couldn't get anywhere closer to the sea. Had I known your cove existed I'd have snapped at it." He looked perplexed. "They showed us that rocky beach where the fishermen's cottages are. Hell, I couldn't put bungalows there. No one said a word about a cove nearby. Apart from Bor Tong Laan—you been there yet? That's real pretty, but it's all bought up. Going to build a darn steel mill, so I hear. Run a pier out three kilometres long through the middle of a beauty spot. Well that's Thailand for you. Someone's making money out of it. Bound to be. The Mayor probably. Or the politicians. Must be the only country where the Minister of Agriculture sells state land to the Minister of Tourism who sells it to Holiday Inn. Happens all the time. If the little people ever protest," he grinned, "there's a knock on the door in the night and they quit protesting. Or they aren't around for long."

He lit up a cigarette, offering me the packet. "Ah, you're lucky. Wish I could give up the darned weed." He peered over his glasses at the group down the table. "Weed. That's the wife's daughter's business. She supplies the weed. Where it comes from I don't ask." He chuckled. "Tully once asked me, how come the customers stay here so long? After all there's

nothing for them to do. 'They're stoned,' I said, 'most of the time. Too darned stoned to leave.' Yes," he reflected, "I'm really sorry he took up and left. He used to come in while I was playing with my computer." Karol nodded towards the trees. "That's my computer hut. Bug has really bitten me. Hell, I can't leave the darn thing alone. Up all hours playing with it. Used to play a game with Tully on it, a 'catch the spy' game. Have to answer a whole lot of questions to get the next clues. What's the capital of Outer Mongolia? Do you know that? Ulan Bator or some place. And flags. You had to know flags too. Yes, I'm really sorry Tully's gone. Sometimes play with the wife's daughter's little girls. When they come back from school. Little Vicky. She's quick. But hell, she doesn't know enough English!"

"Do you know why he left?"

Karol's face puckered up and he gave a shrug that lifted his shoulders to his ears. "Hell knows. Had a row, I heard. Beats me. This Billy Goebbels had some crazy ideas. Told Tully when this film was over they were going to make another one. Called it Genocide. 'Genesis to Genocide— one easy step for Mankind,' he told Tully. Something to that effect. Said they would go into Cambodia to see what a good job the Khmer Rouge had done. Tully got madder'n hell. Said that's why he was called Goebbels. Name to live up to. And Billy yelled back, proud of his name he was. What the world needs is genocide, wipe out a few billion unwanted bastards. Tully lets fly that he—Billy—was an adopted bastard himself, which is true apparently, and was just lucky not to be sitting

out on some sidewalk begging. Then Billy, he gets crazy and starts hurling things. He's a strong man. May not look it but he is. I've seen him hoist tree-trunks you'd need a fork-lift for. Outside he heaves rocks, but if he's inside, hell! he'll demolish the place. He's had to pay a fortune to the hotel already. They were outside. Down in the cove. All started over a little scratch, so that Marino told me. One of the boys got into a fight and had to put a plaster on and Billy saw the plaster and went berserk. He couldn't suddenly have a plaster. Not when they're supposed to be castaways. Started dropping rocks on the boy Max. Tully told him to stop. Marino said talking to Billy in a rage was like talking to a bear on the rampage. While the two of them were at it the rest are running for cover. Billy, when he's in the mood, attacks everything: people, equipment, huts, everything!" Karol laughed. "Must be something to behold. I know how he feels too. I get in a rage about these darned Thais. When the pumps bust because they're sucking sand. Only no one thinks to tell me the well's dry. Get me madder'n hell. They don't care. They just laugh," Karol grunted in disgust. "And the wife, she's no help." He nodded in the direction of the room behind the restaurant. She just tells me to cool down. 'Honey/ she says, 'honey.'" Again the puckered face, the look of perplexity. "Can you figure it out? If you can, tell me. Heck, I'd better get to my computer, at least I can talk to that."

I told him I was going to the cove and asked what I should pay for breakfast, but he wouldn't hear of it. By the time Lek had ferried me back Billy was there already. Watching him dithering nervously as Bill changed lenses for him to peer

through, it was hard to imagine that he was capable of hurling insults let alone rocks.

The 'dolly' rails had been laid out. During the afternoon I rehearsed actors' lines before the shot. Bill even prompted me to cry "Action" after the slate was snapped. Watching all the preparations I was reminded of something Tully said all those years ago. "Pasolini's hands were so steady he could walk along the beach filming sideways. He didn't need the camera mounted on a dolly track!" Yes, I thought, and in those days there was no video either. Here, crouched beneath an umbrella more for protection against rain than sun, Billy and Marino viewed the monitor as shooting proceeded. Later I would listen to Tully's tirade. "So much bloody time and effort, for what? A second or two of Billy's little fantasy on the screen. It seems such a colossal waste. So bloody unproductive. Just think how many mouths those few seconds would feed in a soup kitchen."

"Perhaps the film'll give someone a bit of escape from the misery of their daily lives/" I countered.

"Not this film," he said with resignation.

Is that why he left? The luxury of it all? Tully despised luxury. He despised anything unnecessary. No? What then? I couldn't even guess. Certainly not because of hurling rocks. Tully thrived on arguments. He loved to argue even if it meant backing an opinion he didn't believe in. "Truth is equal and opposite. Aristotle said that," he added to

lend a touch of ancient authority. "No," I argued, "there's only one absolute truth, but different interpretations." He wouldn't accept that. "Why shouldn't there be different truths, each of them absolute?" If it wasn't arguments, why did he leave? Why did he set out on his pilgrimage of destruction and revenge?

Later that evening Lek asked if I wanted to go out for a drive. Bill was busy adjusting the camera and I wasn't needed. Lek drove past a fishing village where the stench from the fish-meal factory smarted the eyes more than tear gas. We followed a dirt track that kept to the crest of the sand dunes. The empty shore below disappeared into the darkness. After twenty minutes the track joined another that corkscrewed around a few huts with a jetty close by.

Lek stopped, "Oo," he announced, and walked off.

After a moment getting adjusted I was aware of someone nearby, and turning quickly noticed a hammock swinging from a verandah. The girl climbed into a half upright position. I could barely make out any details, except her face was pale and Chinese, her voice quiet and friendly. All this was so unexpected I didn't know what to say, let alone how to translate it.

"Oo," she said.

"Tully," I said, and we both laughed.

Two puppets dangled in a Punch and Judy show, but the puppeteer had fallen asleep or forgotten the lines. I knew she was young and pretty, but after a passing moment of arousal

when she put her hand lightly on mine I did not want her. In fact the idea rather scared me. I knew now that Tully was nearby. I could feel him close. Very close. This was one of his damn tricks.

The Castaway

I patted her hand, announced, "Phom klap ban (I go home)," and pressed some baht notes in her hand. She seemed to understand and nodded. I walked to where Lek had parked the motorbike. A moment later he appeared out of the darkness bowing, and we drove away. It is a strange feeling meeting a friend's lover, alone. One never knows what is expected. As we drove back along the coast I wondered if I had done it all wrong. I remembered Bill using the word 'covet'. That was the word Tully would have used. Do not covet. The last of Moses's ten commandments and the first of Tully's?

Avoiding the fishing village Lek steered along a winding path through dense tropical forest, the massive fluted tree trunks all but barring the way. We emerged into coconut groves, skirted a few muddy pools and reached the bay. Here Lek followed the shoreline south to the river mouth of the previous night. The rising tide was pushing strongly upstream, and the boats lay bobbing inside the sandbar. The huts stood silent save for barking dogs, fortunately tethered. Beckoning me to follow Lek led the way between the bamboo huts to a flooded creek stinking of dead fish and faeces.

Reaching under a hut pile he untied a rope and pulled in a narrow dug-out canoe which I mounted with extreme caution, clutching the rocking sides as he paddled to the

far shore. He dragged the canoe up the mud, and taking my hand led the way between clumps of mangroves. We emerged on the bank a little way short of a small boatyard, with boats hauled up on trolleys for repair and caulking. Lek tugged my arm and pointed. Half hidden below the steep bank lay a moored fishing boat fended off by tall bamboo stakes, and tethered to an anchor rope bow and stern. A plank bridged the gap at a perilous angle. Lek leaped across as agile as a cat, whilst I teetered uncertainly, clutching at the wheelhouse roof, and pulling myself awkwardly aboard. A storm lantern glowed inside a hatch. I lowered myself down the steps into a low cabin.

Tully regarded me with a curious gaze, sitting there, legs splayed out on the cabin floor, arm casually crooked on a low stool, glass of whiskey in hand. I didn't want to prejudge things and yet, watching him I was reminded of the theory of chaos—a butterfly beats its wings in the Amazon rainforest, starting a chain of events that ends up with a typhoon hitting the Gulf of Siam. I wondered when the storm would come.

I sat facing him on the matting. "So this is where you live. You always liked rivers, rafts and things. But why?"

"Why?" his voice rose. "Isn't it obvious? You've met them all."

"All that is obvious to me", I countered, "is that you walked off the job. You also have a manuscript to deliver." Reaching back, he picked up a folder and tossed it on the floor between us. "Do you know why he wants it?" The lantern

was wedged behind a beam and his face was obscured by deep shadows. His hands lay quite motionless in his lap.

"What are you?" I asked. "The avenging angel?"

His voice sounded weary. "I don't know. I wish I did. I know I have to stop this!" he insisted forcefully. He gestured outside. "Do you know what he's up to?"

"I've read your script. It all looks harmless enough to me." Given the mood he was in I had expected a torrent of abuse but none came.

"He wanted", Tully enunciated carefully, "a story about a different path of evolution. I even found him this location. Then he goes and screws it all up." A weariness came over him. "I don't want to be linked to this film in any way. I want my name erased." Sitting there in the cramped cabin, while Lek kept solitary watch on deck, Tully described that first meeting with Billy Goebbels. Outside only the lapping tide and the forlorn cry of a nightbird from the mangrove swamps disturbed the stillness. Mosquitoes whined around the lamp. The heat was oppressive and the sweat ran off us. Tully had already removed his shirt. I copied him. Both of us squatted barefoot amid the coils of rope and loosely stowed sails, helping ourselves liberally to Mekhong whiskey and ice from a bucket.

Tully was taking both parts in the dialogue. "This film is about creation. Re-creation," Billy had told him. "I graduated with a Masters in Molecular Biology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. We are on the verge of new creative

possibilities. Hitler knew it but didn't have the know-how." Tully regarded him in alarm. "Let me explain," said Billy. "Got an hour or two? Or three?"

When Tully eventually emerged it was with the sensation that his brain had been bombarded. He walked the length of Silom Road in a daze. It wasn't until he reached the river and caught the first boat going anywhere that he began to recover. Tully got off at the Chinese market and made his way along the narrow klongs packed with rice barges, dodging porters heaving trolleys over the puddled paving. This was the real world. The market jostling with people, tubs of swirling catfish, plucked ducks, baskets of produce. Here, Tully asserted vigorously to himself, was the hub of creation. Not Billy's pretentious scientific sentiments. He started peering, through his cupped hand as he imagined I 'asolini would have done, exploring the possibilities. He 1 warded a long-tail boat crowded with housewives heading pome and discovered a whole world of tiny canals, stilt jaouses, floating foodstalls, shrines. He watched the warm vapours rising above the muddy klong in the afternoon ■sun, and naked brown bodies frolicking amid the sampans. He pictured in a cinematographic sense a spontaneous regeneration rising from miasmatic vapours at the dawn of time, and instantly knew the right title. The Genesis Children,

Tully lived the next days like a man inspired. He toured Bangkok for places that summed up the city. Not only the market and the muddy klongs, but the earthy hustling streets around Patpong, the Chinese dawn—display of gymnastics in

the park, the slums of Klong Toey by the port where the heroin addicts squatted in the cramped alleys fixing themselves a temporary release. Waking up before dawn Tully followed the barefoot monks clutching their food bowls. He squeezed his way through Chinatown, toured the Chatujak market opposite the Northern Bus Terminal where everything illicit imaginable changed hands: ivory tusks, bear's paws, stone heads stolen from Angkor Wat, rare birds. Tully visited the giant Ma Boon Krong shopping centre near Siam Square, squatted amid the Sunday crowds buying Buddha charms from crowded pavements around Sanaam Luang near the Royal Palace. He came away, storing these impressions in his mind, and writing late into the night. What he lacked was a trick. For although he might film children drawn from each of these places, how to bring them together in some unusual and anonymous location? The answer was so obvious he never thought of it until he happened to see a notice in the Bangkok Post announcing a Summer Camp. And who better to lead it than Billy's tutor—Vincent, the ginger-bearded preacher of the Baha'i faith with all the black robes and accoutrements to match? What more suitable stand-in for God or the Devil?

Tully nursed his solution, hoping it would survive. The children would be acting a play before God. Back to nature in their primeval Garden of Eden; throwing over all they had learned. "All the bullshit and the prejudice and the useless information." "What do they learn at school here? See them all lined up in the morning, while the flag is raised and they sing the anthem. That's what they learn. To kow tow to

obedience. They learn to grow up obedient. No wonder they don't understand democracy. Democracy demands disobedience. To ask why, if and but. Here every Thai is trained to be obedient to the 'poo yai'—the big man: military officer, policeman, politician, wealthy businessman. Age has nothing to do with it. The Thai may be seventy and the poo yai a mere snotty lieutenant but the old man bows first. The poo yai never 'wai' first. Children wai their teachers who teach them blind obedience."

"What you want is anarchy," I told him. "It's not as if this is a new country. How has it kept its culture so long? "

"Because it teaches obedience," Tully insisted. "Nothing else."

I accepted this without comment. "And in the centre-piece in your new Garden of Eden there's this Tree of Knowledge, a Pandora's box of answers waiting to be opened. Is that it?"

"Questions, not answers. Don't you see? Answers are just temporary refuges. Prisons if you stick to them. Otherwise halts in the pursuit. Answers are petty things, and anyone who claims to know the answers is petty-minded. Questions are liberation!" He flung out both arms with such force that Lek peered down the hatch and stared at us.

I made a final plea. "Billy liked your script. He told Bill it was a masterpiece."

Tully dismissed this with contempt. "Do you know the next film he plans will be called Genocide. According to

him the world needs purging—a black death of deliverance. 'Isn't Aids enough?' I asked him. 'Aids is a good idea but it's not knocking them out fast enough/ he replied, 'Plus it's costing a fortune in welfare handouts. Myxomatosis was lot quicker.' That's what he said the world needed just now. A Myxomatosis for Man."

I still failed to see why he was so concerned. "It's only a film we're talking about. He's not some mad scientist."

"I am not so sure. I wouldn't put anything past him. He's got this Los Angeles Pets' Hospital he raves about. You know where he's off to next? Cambodia—the Killing Fields. To party with Pol Pot on the best way to create Genocide."

I was beginning to wonder if Deng might be right, that he was going insane. Changing the subject I asked, "What do you do all day cooped up here on the boat?"

He replied, "I'm not cooped up. I'm usually out at sea watching you. You'd never suspect a fishing boat."

His head upturned, only his neck and chin showed. Where were those brooding eyes watching? Although the porthole hatches had been slid back the cabin remained hot and airless. Mosquitoes whined constantly. Apart from the diesel fumes and smoking kerosene lamp there was a rancid river smell, a smell of rot and decay, fever and death drifting in from the mangrove swamps. Tully was a man in a quicksand. If he didn't keep moving he would be sucked under. His voice sounded hollow. "D'you remember Yasmin in Rome?" His head slipped sideways. I saw the gleam of an eye before it

sank into a pool of darkness. "Once I believed you had Yasmin. I thought I saw her slip down via Coronari ahead of me. Your street door must have been ajar. I saw her vanish inside, slam the door behind her. I waited outside, imagining what was going on, wanting desperately to press your bell. To hear your voice on the 'gitofono'. I wanted to hear the guilt in your voice." He raised his hand with only the outside fingers pointing—the sign of the horns—i cornetti. The ultimate insult—you have been cuckolded, your wife has betrayed you and you, you silly fool, don't even know. Tully turned his hand and stabbed it back at himself. "Yes, I wanted to feel jealousy, to bask in impotent jealous rage, imagining what you two were doing together on that bloody great bed of yours. I wanted the absolute luxury of hating you."

He sat suddenly stiffly upright, his whole face revealed. "Yasmin," he said quietly, quoting, "... and when the dull red eye of day is level with the broad highway while some to Mecca turn to pray, and I towards your bed ... Yasmin. It was her, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I thought you wouldn't find out. I wanted something she had. Something untouchable. It wasn't meant to hurt you."

He nodded, staring at me. "When she came to me that night her hair was damp. I could smell you on her. Your shampoo, your musty sofa, your pullover. It was the night before I had to leave, after Ungaro delivered his ultimatum, the night when I asked you if she knocked on your door what would

you do?" He tilted back his head. I heard him hum a bar from Marlene Dietrich. "Later that night you helped me with my .things." He lowered his head on his chest and peered across at me. "I drank your wine. I always wondered what a poisoned chalice meant. Then I tasted it."

"I didn't covet Oo," I said quietly.

He nodded. "You wouldn't be here now if you had." I don't think he meant it as a threat, but in that cramped cabin on the dark river I felt uneasy. There was a noise on deck and Lek leaned down to whisper something in Thai, glancing in my direction. I got up slowly, stooping under the low beams, my legs stiff and numb. "What are you going to do next?" I asked him.

He remained where he was. Motionless. Not looking at me. His whiskey glass, half raised. "Lek tells me you're off to Pattaya."

"Billy," I corrected. "That's where he's paying us off."

"Sex capital of the world," Tully mocked. "That's why Billy's going. Perhaps he thinks he'll discover God there, propping up the Siren Bar."

'Kow Tow'

A week later we all lined up in the cove for the ceremonial 'final wrap' photograph, Billy G, setting the Hasselblad on a fifteen-second timer before scurrying back to his place in the centre. I have the snapshot. Billy's teeth-chattering grin, red-bearded Vincent beaming jovially, the rest of us displaying rather more relief than joy. The final shot of the film required thirteen takes before Billy got the reaction he was seeking: amazement, horror, surprise? I wasn't quite sure.

Compounding everyone's misery was the indecision over a shot from the cliff-top looking down—to which Billy wouldn't agree because his The Five C's of Cinematography declared shots looking down were depressing. So we had to devise a shot that looked down on the action and then rose slowly across the open sea and above the horizon until it was blinded by the sun. The sun was the reluctant performer. Helicopters were discussed. Marino was even told to build a giant kite but the cameraman wisely refused to go aloft just for the sake of Hollywood. The end was rather inconclusive.

Billy was eager to go ahead with his next project, to get into Cambodia to collect material for Genocide.

There had been times while we were on location in Bang Saphan when I decided that afterwards I would come back and live there. The long shallow bay possessed some of the most enchanting seascapes I have ever seen anywhere. Especially at evening, when the dull sky brooded over the mudflats, and crags and promontories rose up along the

distant horizon as if guardians of some enchanted kingdom none of us would ever visit. It all possessed an idyllic quality. Light seemed to dominate, anything else was just incidental: green smudges of hills, and palms, slate grey islands, headlands, rocks, thatch, boats.

Marino told me he was going to come back and paint. And build kites and teach kids. Quite what, he didn't amplify. He had acquired a monkey and cruised around on his motorbike with the monkey on his shoulder.

I told him I was going to live in Tully's hut just to see his reaction. "I'll keep Lek on," I said. And I knew at once what Tully meant by coveting. He had a look that was hard to describe, a hard bold acquisitive look.

Bill and I had both agreed to give Lek some money to go home, home being a farm inland below the Burmese mountains. When we left he waved and bowed. It never occurred to us that Marino had already swooped in and snapped him up.

None of us knew either that the fate of Bang Saphan had already been decided in offices where the quality of light was hardly a commodity that counted when cash was being considered. Businessmen in Milan and Hong Kong, draughtsmen busy at their boards in Bangkok, calculators solving the arithmetic of cut and fill, earth moving machines ordered, giant cranes. Government ministers bribed, politicians suborned, the local poo yai coerced. A steel mill, no less.

Karol had been correct. But why here? No docking facility. No infrastructure as the new buzz word goes. Never mind, build a jetty three kilometres long. Where? There, of course. Slap in the centre of Ao Thian. And the mangroves. Burn them down. Fifty trucks of rock and earth a day for three months to fill the swamps. Build a road. Acquire 4,000 rai of land. If it's a government park or a forestry reserve, buy the minister responsible. And the

fishermen and the farmers? The bulldozers will quickly flatten their huts, and they have no legal land rights. No matter that their families have been living here for generations. Bang Saphan will become the biggest deep sea port in the Gulf of Thailand. And what of the fumes from the factory, and the toxic waste pumped out to sea? Ignore it. After all there would be work for 20,000 people. The shopkeepers were planning extensions, the merchants buying more pick-ups. The hotel owners, and the rest— they would accept. If the greater authority told them it was good for the community, they would accept obediently. For that, as Tully correctly said, is what they had been taught to do since birth—to kow-tow.

Pattaya—Siren Pier

The Siren Bar, Billy's Pattaya rendezvous, began life as a jetty where boats left for Ko Lan island. Gradually the seaward end was extended and the landward side became roofed over.

The covered part housed a number of attractions including a boxing ring, a traditional Thai 'leekay' opera—whose painted performers screeched over the microphones until dawn.

Cramped cages housed assorted animals; an irascible stork, a moody chimp, even at one time a baby elephant restrained by a chain, whose only sight of green was the baize on the billiard tables. There were crates containing sacks of coiling snakes, foodstalls, benches where the boxers oiled up, and an assortment of bars.

What made the Siren Bar unique was that although the streetside bars appeared typical enough, with hookers, male tourists, sailors on R and R—the usual happy-go-lucky crowd you find in such places—the back bars catered for men who liked boys.

These were not gay bars. The gay bars where Thai 'katoeys'—lady-boys, minced about were mostly in Pattaya Land 3.

Elegant establishments furnished with expensive decor and immaculately outfitted barmen. The back of the Siren Bar wasn't like that. Those who liked boys, to correct a popular misconception, were not 'gays' at all. Many had been married. At a glance they seemed quite a tough crowd; hard drinking, tattooed, oil men in from the Gulf, Danish sea captains on leave from Hong Kong or Singapore, a helicopter

pilot, an arms dealer, a man who owned a taxi fleet in Sydney, an ex-bodyguard for the notorious Kray brothers in London's East End. Sometimes a priest in plain clothes, a policeman from Stuttgart, social workers from California, businessmen from Kyoto, a school master from Eton.

The one and perhaps only thing they had in common— they liked boys. Not lady-boys, but real boys. Boys who liked girls, who fucked them when they had a hundred baht or were big enough for the teenage whores of Naklua and nursed their gonorrhoea for days afterwards before going into the Siam Pharmacy to purchase a cure. These were boys who rented motorbikes by the hour and rode dare-devil along the crowded highways, sooner or later limping back bandaged, wounds painted red with mercurochrome. Boys who played snooker till dawn, gambling till they were broke, and sleeping till nightfall on the stools of the bars, or in a farang's bed.

Mostly they were not schoolboys. If they had a short haircut it generally indicated they had just escaped from the Huay Pong reformatory down the coast near Rayong. These were boys who had long since lost the social niceties. They did not bow or wai or say thank you. They were not averse to thieving if it came their way—although generally they didn't because they knew farangs talked and it didn't do to be black listed at the bars. Nowadays they needed a lot of money. Gone were the days they were content to wear flip-flops. Now it was only the latest footgear and fancy shirts, and jeans. You knew when they had a farang by their clean

clothes. When the farang left, or checked them out, the clothes like their owners got dirtier by the day.

The women who ran the bars, the Madames, acted as banks, and depositories for belongings. These Madames mostly came from Udon Thani in the North East. Regularly

Pattaya—Siren Pier they returned and brought more boys back with them to replace those lost in police raids, or who by staying a long time with a farang had gone out of circulation. Most Siren boys were strictly short-time boys who didn't want to stay the night. They earned their couple of hundred baht by putting themselves out the minimum possible and then spent it at the Butterfly disco, or Grand Hall.

The impersonality was double-edged. Farangs frequently forgot who it was they had been with only the day before. Have I or haven't I? They couldn't be sure. To their unpractised eyes most of the boys looked the same. Some farangs were looking for a boy who would stay and some found them. In time they stopped being lovers and became houseboys. Or the farangs sent them to school proud to have 'adopted' such a bright kid. There were farangs whose boy was now at university studying computers or medicine. Boys who married and whose kids were regarded almost as surrogate grandchildren. They might have been an odd crowd to look at, those farangs who congregated at the back of the Siren Bar and were so maligned by foreign journalists on the look-out for a scandal story. Nobody ever cared to mention the good they did. A kid had a broken leg that didn't

heal. The plaster smelt bad. A farang who didn't even know him took him to the free hospital in Banglamong where the doctor took one look, announced that gangrene had set in and that the leg would have to be amputated. The farang wasn't satisfied. He went to a private clinic, paid for a specialist who agreed to save the leg. Back at the Siren Bar another farang organized a whip round— raised 5,000 baht in ten minutes. A month later the boy was walking without crutches. Usually help was on a smaller scale, dental fillings or visits to the doctor. And if a farang did refer to 'My Boy', or a boy to 'My Farang', what of it?

It's very different now. Three months after 'Bloody Sunday', and after the King under the full blaze of TV cameras publicly rebuked Suchinda, kneeling humbly before him, new elections were held. Chuan came to power and vowed to outlaw prostitution within three months. The Siren Bar was raided so often there were soon more farangs than kids. Only the bravest or most foolhardy cared venture in. The new regulations meant more money in police bribes and blackmail. Farangs led away to a cell on Soi 9 crowded with drug addicts, sleeping on the cement floors with their head next to the toilet hole, paid any amount just to get out. Cases rarely reached the Chonburi Court and if they did it was only after the judge had been bribed, the evidence rewritten.

The Siren Bar was Billy's choice of rendezvous a week after the filming was finished in Bang Saphan. I was due to be paid off. There was nothing particularly threatening or vicious about the place, although some of the older youths looked

fairly sinister. In fact it was quite amusing to watch the way kids pleaded for money from farangs claiming dire hunger, instantly going to 'blow it' on the nearest snooker table. I knew what Tully would think of it. It was not that my own sense of outrage had been blunted, but I had seen too many horrors elsewhere to be overconcerned with the moral issue of who loved whom. Western moral outrage always seemed a bit like the English caring more for pets than people. If the plain truth were told, the Thais would probably not care a hoot themselves—after all brothels flourished in every corner of the Kingdom—had it not been for the pressure brought to bear by these do-gooders from afar, who perhaps could have put their indignation to better uses trying to curb all the woeful ills in their own societies first before turning on one which was in a far healthier state.

"Where else", as someone remarked to me, "do the prostitutes take their 'lovers' to the temple to give flowers and thanks?" Thailand had to be one of the few psychologically uncomplicated countries left, despite all the moral molestation from outside. No, I thought, sitting at the Siren Bar, I am not trying to defend this, but amid the rising tides of fundamentalism it was almost refreshing to see Pattaya cocking a snook at the rest of the world. I sensed too that this way of life was doomed. One would return in five years to discover a smart marina in its place, fancy yachts instead of dirty fishing boats, the bars replaced by decorative boutiques. Not even a murmur from its anarchical past

whispering out of the whitewashed walls. Pattaya was set to become a business convention centre, they said.

I drank my Mekhong soda slowly, fending off the various offers as firmly as possible and learning quickly that even to return a handshake or to engage in the briefest conversation was to hold myself liable for ten baht. An hour later when Billy and crew had still not showed up I stepped beyond the raucous cacophony of the Thai opera, and onto the old wharf—swaying slightly on its piles above the inky, sewer-smelling sea below. Two boats lay moored up, apparently deserted. A rice barge converted to a water tanker that plied between Pattaya and Ko Lan island, and a converted fishing boat, half hidden below the level of the piles. It was only as I stood a little astern to answer a call of nature that an all too familiar voice hailed me.

I was so startled I almost lost my footing. Since the river bank in Bang Saphan the boat seemed to have altered.

"It's the mast," explained Tully, still invisible. "That's what you're looking at. I sailed across. It was quieter."

I glimpsed a movement under the wheelhouse. "How do I get down?" I enquired uncertainly.

"Wait." The shadow slid out of sight under the piles.

A moment later he joined me on the wharf. One of the opera performers came out to relieve himself. Apart from the stork shuffling noisily in its cage and drumming its beak on the bars we were left alone. Tully was evidently in a sarcastic mood.

"How did you get on with his Lordship?"

If you're prepared to play the attendant lord I suppose it's okay. Sitting there listening to his crap philosophy for hours, laughing at his jokes. If he'd been to my school we'd have soon sorted him out."

I didn't reply directly except to say, "I've had to put up with more insufferable pricks than I care to count. It goes with the job."

"With your job," he said tartly. "Arse-lickers Anonymous. By appointment to His Serene Highness, King Billy Goebbels. The name always made me want to sing that song. 'Hitler has only got one ball. Goebbels has two but very small.' Emasculates the Nazi hierarchy. He needed someone to tell him he was full of shit."

"And you did."

Tully seemed uncertain. "He told me it cost him less to have me put down than it cost me to buy a pair of shoes. Took me a while to work that out," he admitted. "I haven't bought shoes for so long I can't remember. Trouble with you Yanks. Worship money. He told me millionaires were the aristocracy. Could get away with anything. And he had millions, billions. His Daddy Goebbels left him 147, mostly in oil wells. And that was when oil was three dollars a barrel. So he's improved since then. Used to tell the kids, Thai kids, he had more money than they could ever imagine. Imagine!" he repeated. "Dream, contemplate, string noughts on the end of. It was obscene. Kids calculated how much he earns a minute. The money is supposed to arrive air freight in tins marked pet food. Bill Johnson has been seen after midnight

armed with can openers, floundering up to his eyebrows in empty tins and dollar bills."

We both laughed and the tension reduced noticeably. "Has he paid you yet?" enquired Tully cautiously.

"Not yet. But he will. I'm sure."

"I'm sure he won't. Promises. That's how these beggars get rich. Poor little sods have to pay up on the nail. But not Billy. He asked me if I'd take a percentage of the film takings instead. I told him if anyone was mad enough to go and see it I'd pay him a percentage. You've seen the way he grins. Reminds me of Big George the baboon in Rome, that time Ungaro took me up to the zoo to discuss politics with the animals. I tell you those beasts were a disloyal lot. They'd have voted for whoever tossed them bread rolls or herrings. Except the gorilla," he added thoughtfully, "like King Lear. Too bitter by half to vote." For a moment I wondered if he was seeing himself in that dark hell-hole of a cage or trapped within a mad man's mind, but then he remarked gaily, "Of course, that's why the nuns went. To watch the monkeys masturbate. Never seen so many nuns giggling round a cage. Monkeys always put on a show when there's an appreciative audience.

"Is that what you do?" I enquired, "Put on a show?"

He considered this for a moment. "I suppose I do. I suppose we're all actors a little bit at heart, aren't we? In the glare of the footlights. Peering into the dark auditorium, wondering if it's half empty. I suppose we all thrive on audiences if we're

honest." He looked round sharply. "Wait," he whispered and vanished over the side. I glimpsed his shadow snake out of sight under the piles. Two minutes later his voice, more breathless, sounded beneath my feet. "They're here now. You'd better go."

"I'm staying . . ." I volunteered, but he cut in. "I know where you're staying," as if I was stupid to suppose he didn't. "But I warn you," he called out softly as he slipped out of sight into the cabin, "he's a stealer of souls."

"What?" At that moment the opera sound box squawked and I wasn't sure I heard correctly.

"They accused me once," he added. "He's the real villain. And he'll pay the ultimate penalty."

Later on I found an opportunity to come outside again. I was relieved to find the boat had gone. I remembered what he said about acting. I had forgotten he had been an actor. Amateur dramatics. At the always empty Goldoni, or to packed three-day houses at the top of the FAO building near the Caracalla. Playing Pinter at the Crypt in the Via Nazionale', and Henry in The Lion in Winter. He loved acting. He used to admit it was an escape, and that the roles took over. During A Phoenix too Frequent he turned into a centurion. Is that what he was doing now? Writing himself a script in which he had the principal part? Hero and villain intertwined. Out there in place of the darkened auditorium, the black-out night sea watched him with silent uncritical gaze.

Pattaya—Jomtien

The Postbag of the Bangkok Post always contained letters from disgruntled farangs complaining about Thais, and Thailand, their bad driving habits, police harassment, bureaucracy. Verbal vendettas among themselves swung to and fro between Chiang Mai and Phuket, Songkhla and Hua Hin. Sometimes I wondered why the farangs bothered to come and live here at all. The day I went to the beach at Jomtien the police had just carried out one of their frequent raids and carted away the crowd of boys and girls hanging around the farangs' deckchairs. The farangs usually went unscathed unless they were particularly indiscreet but raids always worried them. Would they be next? That particular afternoon the farangs were in a high state of jitters—two of their number had been taken away for possessing contraband cigarettes. Although it was okay to smoke American cigarettes made in Thailand, it was not legal to possess the same cigarettes made in America but hawked by vendors along beach road and the bars every night.

What really surprised me on my visit to Jomtien was that virtually everybody seemed to know Tully and his book. "That's the new novel on Thailand," they said, and then added, "I hope he's changed the names." The general consensus seemed to be that Tully was a nice guy, if a bit strange, and was unlikely to shit on his own fellow expatriates. Had they known him as well as I did their

misgivings would have been stronger. However, I hinted at nothing which would alarm anybody.

"Geoffrey's who you want to see," Marvin, a bulky hirsute psychiatrist from northern California, informed me. "He's been helping Tully with the book. Geoffrey's your man."

Geoffrey it seemed was everyone's man in Pattaya. A bulky bearded New Zealand ex-naval officer, Geoffrey dabbled in everything—but particularly anything military: Soviet bayonets, Japanese occupation banknotes, medals, insignia. Geoffrey was an expert in detail. He knew where to get anything made, forged, printed, cast, moulded. For safety's sake he had two passports and lived in two places. One of them on the ground floor of a Moorish-style complex back from the beach. Beyond lay swamp, building sites, dirt tracks and that most common of all Pattaya sights—empty shophouses.

"Hard to find," Geoffrey admitted, "but easy to escape from." Was there anything significant in this? Everybody in Pattaya seemed to be on the alert. As Marvin said, "You never know when the sheriff will knock on the door."

The apartments were on various levels, connected by steps and terraces overlooking a courtyard clustered with plants and palms and also a small centre-piece swimming pool. Geoffrey's walls were pasted with souvenirs and memorabilia, mostly connected with the sea and the navy. His drawers bulged with his trade—bayonets, fake medals—"A limited edition," he explained, "produced by the King's medal maker." Wads of banknotes—"Look," he showed me,

"British Army banknotes issued in Malaya. Series 3. There's never been a series 3 issued."

"They're brand new," I said in astonishment.

"Yes," he agreed with a triumphant smile. The smile of a man who knows his trade. "Perhaps they were stolen before they could be issued. They may be worth thousands." Finally we got around to Tully. Geoffrey pointed to the lap

top word processor on his desk. "I've been editing his ■ book. A friend of mine is doing the typesetting. We've had to make a lot of changes."

"And does Tully approve of these changes?"

Geoffrey chuckled. "He doesn't know. He'll be in for a surprise. We're using a Word Perfect program. Tully uses words the computer's never heard of. Things like 'jungled hillsides'. You can't have jungled hillsides."

"Why not?" I was puzzled. "You can have wooded hillsides?"

He shrugged. "Anyway it's full of spelling mistakes, and the paragraphs are too long. He uses commas where semi-colons would be better. Look/' he said, scanning a page on the screen, "'sunglassed policemen'?"

I mentioned something about a writer's style.

"It's not his style I'm worried about; it's the content. If this went out the way it is now half the farangs in Pattaya would be running for cover."

I was curious. "And what you're doing is whitewashing?"

He nodded, "I suppose you could call it that."

"And Deng?"

"Oh Deng's only seen Tully's original."

"He likes it. He told me."

Geoffrey shrugged. "Yes. Well, he's not going to get it. He'll get the revised version," adding, "Tully left it up to me to see to. I'm keeping it locked away." He looked at me with a beaming grin. "Your Billy Goebbels is moving in here. I suppose you know that of course."

This took me by surprise. I knew Billy had been wanting to change house but since I was no longer employed it didn't concern me. Geoffrey led me across the courtyard and we peered through net curtains. The inside seemed nicely furnished. "It's a whole house. Three bedrooms. Billy's bodyguard checked it over. He's got a couple of big Thai boys staying with him. I think Billy prefers them like that." He looked at me. "You should tell him not to talk about his money in front of them. Brought this safe along. Told everyone how much cash and gold was stashed inside. 'More money than you'll make in a lifetime', he tells these lads. Bit silly really, when you could crack it open with a hammer. Thai safes are all the same, covered with fancy locks. But there's always a weak spot, a rivet or something. I think the makers do that for the thieves."

"When's he moving in?"

"Tomorrow. Then he's off to Cambodia for a few days. I'm supplying the press cards to get them across," he explained.

"Pretending to be interviewing the UNTAC troops." He looked at me rather curiously. "Keen on skulls, isn't he? Wants to see a lot of skulls and skeletons. Mass graves. Bit macabre."

"Tully," I said. "When did you last see him?"

Geoffrey looked surprised. "I haven't see him in months. No one has. Ever since he went south to make the film."

I avoided comment. "If Billy's moving in," I said. "Watch out for Dudley, his Bedlington terrier. It eats shit."

"Don't we all," Geoffrey commented. "By the way, you could do me a small favour. I'm off to Penang. Got a friend, German Peter, driving me up to Bangkok. It's my dog. She lives at my other place. It's a room I keep at Lek Apartments. Top floor, D3. She scratches around outside. Can't bring her here, too many savage mutts in the neighbourhood. If I left you the keys could you pop in and feed her? Bowl's outside the door. Only be for a few days. I left a crate of dog food. Used to ask someone else, but when I came back there were always things missing."

"I'll try to keep my hands in my pockets," I joked.

He unzipped a bag. "These are the keys, door and padlock," he said. "Have a swim here if you like. No one else around. Owner's in Chiang Mai and Roon, the handyman, is away planting rice. There's a night guard but he's usually asleep." A car horn sounded outside. "I'm off," he said, "see you when I get back."

I clipped the keys onto those of the rented motorbike I had left outside. The courtyard was now quite dark. There was no

one to switch on the lights. I slipped off my shorts, dived into the pool and floated, staring straight up at the stars. It was an easy place to hide unobserved; clumps of hanging creepers and the dark recesses under the stairs provided cover. That only occurred to me afterwards. If I heard any movement at the time I assumed it was a cat.

It was less than half an hour later as I staggered up the steep flights of stairs at Lek Apartments I discovered the keys missing. My first thought was they had become detached during the bumpy ride along the beach road, but as I borrowed the porter's spares I sensed the worst and raced up to the top landing. I wasn't wrong. The padlock was missing. As I struggled to find the right key I had visions of a room already bare but when the porter switched on the light Geoffrey's keys were there on the table together with the padlock, a bottle of whiskey and a half empty glass. Sitting down to get my breath back I noted with intense relief everything appeared in order—TV, video, the usual things thieves go for. I could only assume the thief had heard me climbing the stairs and left in a hurry. I put the bottle back, emptied a tin of dog food in the green dish outside and repadlocked the door. When I returned next morning the porter was sweeping the corridor outside. I was in a hurry and he offered to feed the dog, and to keep a spare can for the next day as I was planning to go to Bangkok.

It was the third evening after the break-in before I went back, about six o' clock with the light fading. As I opened the door a figure in black clutching a sword leaped down at me

from the ceiling. I instinctively raised my arm to fend off the blow and recognized Tully, We grappled for a moment and then he let go of the sword. If anything he seemed more agitated than I was, and sank exhausted onto the bed, head bowed. I opened the fridge. Four empty dog food tins.

"It was you. I don't understand—where were you hiding?"

Without a word he pointed to the window. I looked out. Apart from a narrow ledge there was a sheer drop. Not even a spiderman could have scaled those walls.

I picked up the sword. It was a naval officer's ceremonial sword. "You gave me one hell of a scare. I thought you were some Ninja warrior."

He said nothing.

"It's a good recommendation for dog food." I picked up a tin. They were all beef flavour. I was starting to feel guilty for locking him in. The windows to the landing were barred on the outside. It must have been worse than prison. I checked the shower to see he had water. "Why didn't you ...?" I was still too perplexed to know what to say.

"Don't ask me any more questions," he said abruptly, and before I knew it he had made a bound for the open door and raced down the stairway. I didn't try to pursue him. I collected the empty cans, put the sword in a cupboard, tidied up and left. Poor sod, I thought, stuck in there for three days. No wonder he had leaped down when I opened the door. It wasn't to attack me, it was to get out.

I was sitting in Mutley's Bar in Soi 14 a week later when I heard the news. At first I made nothing of it. I had been in Bangkok for five days, out of range of gossip. A German tourist had been butchered in his bed. The remains had only been discovered several days later when neighbours complained about the smell and the landlord investigated. Similar stories were so widespread they were usually discounted. Someone 'killed in an accident' would suddenly appear on the beach. When farangs were murdered the police usually dismissed the deaths as heart attacks—even when they were burned to a cinder. The Thais had their own weekly colour magazine specializing in graphic and gory photos of assassinations, murders, road accidents.

It was Sunday and we were waiting for Mutley's 'special'—boiled cabbage, potatoes and roast meat. The only certain way to decide if the meat was lamb or beef or pork was to identify the accompanying sauce as mint, horse-radish or apple. Mike came in and said two boys had been arrested in Chiang Mai for the murder. One of them called Lek had been his houseboy the year before and was, he insisted, a good kid. It was the identity of the German that baffled everyone but as no one knew him, interest focused on the boys who it was later claimed had already been executed in Chonburi. Another German had offered 100,000 baht to do the execution himself, but had been politely and reluctantly turned down. Later someone came in with the weekly murder magazine.

Thai police have a novel way with suspects. They 'invite' them to re-enact the crime, which rather diminishes later pleas of not guilty. There was a photograph of two teenage boys, their faces beaten almost out of recognition, 'willingly' giving their confession. Even now the identity of the farang was unclear—a German tourist called Gimbals. The boys claimed what started as simple robbery went wrong when the tourist discovered what they were up to. A fight ensued and he threatened to kill them. Desperate to escape they went on hitting him until he lay senseless and then fled. A farang had put them up to it, they said. He had told them about the safe. When they were arrested by a suspicious hotel manager in Chiang Mai their pockets were bulging with gold jewellery and 100 dollar bills.

I went home that night none the wiser. Opinions had been divided. Most people declared the German was largely to blame for having so much money around and letting the kids know it.

"He bragged to them he had more money in his safe than they'd earn in a lifetime," Mike said next day on the beach, busy defending Lek as one of the nicest kids he'd ever known—"wouldn't harm a fly." Someone else said he had a vicious temper and had been involved in fights with Farangs before. Then came the bombshell. The northern Californian psychiatrist confronted me.

"Sorry to hear about your boss."

I didn't know what he meant.

"The murder." He showed me the photo in the Bangkok Post. I stared at it incredulously. "But it can't be. He's gone to Cambodia. They've all gone to Cambodia." I grabbed the paper from him and studied it. The headline was definite. "American movie tycoon murdered in Pattaya." I was too stunned to know what to say.

"Hacked to death with a Samurai sword," read Marvin, commenting, "Hmm—juicy. By all accounts he put up quite a fight. Ah, here it is. 'The night guard thought there was a party going on.' Some party!" He whistled. "The boys claim a farang put them up to it. They would, wouldn't they?"

I had no wish to visit the scene of the murder. Instead I set off to try to find any of the film crew. Bill the cameraman had already left for Hollywood, together with the uncut film reels, Marino was in Bang Saphan flying kites. The 'grips' had been recruited locally. I looked out for Vincent, but tracking him down would have involved a search of every gay bar in town. Even Bill Johnson, the bodyguard, had departed on the first flight to Manila. Unlike most people, Billy had far fewer friends in death than in life. When I finally plucked up the courage to go to the apartment I expected police guards, but the place was in darkness. Only the same savage dogs howling.

Riding back into Pattaya I got drenched by a sudden downpour and fled into the Siren Bar where I could drive my motorbike straight in out of the rain. Avoiding the bars and the boxing I sheltered on the covered part of the

wharf waiting for the deluge to cease. Heaven knows what hunch prompted me, but ducking against the storm I peered over the piles. The tide was out. There lay Tully's boat half hidden under the pier itself. "Come on down," a voice called up from the darkness, "I've been expecting you."

Once again we sat in the cramped cabin lit only by the smoking oil lamp. "I'm glad you came," Tully said. "I'm off later."

"Off?"

His hand gestured vaguely. I noticed plaster stretched over the skin.

"The lonely sea and the sky."

"Why?"

He leaned forward and stared at me carefully. "You haven't heard?" He grunted. "Someone's spreading rumours there's a farang behind it. Spurred the lads on, handed them the knives and forks. Held Billy down while they ate him for supper. I'm not saying he didn't deserve to perish. Stealer of souls. Divine retribution. Only I didn't do it."

"But you're leaving anyway?"

"I'm leaving anyway," he agreed. "There are too many 'if's'. Thai police don't worry about social niceties and I don't fancy languishing in Chonburi jail for life."

"I don't see why you're worried. You couldn't have a better alibi. You must have realized that."

Tully scratched his cheek thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right. I really hadn't thought about it like that." He uttered what passed for a laugh. "That would mean letting Geoffrey know. He entrusts you with the keys. I pinch them because I want to find Geoffrey's version of my manuscript but you lock me in the apartment. It does look a bit careless." He nodded thoughtfully. "I think it would be best if you don't mention it to Geoffrey." He slid open the porthole and peered out. "Rain's stopping. Be on my way. Out of the way, that's best? Don't you think? I do. Sorry about

Billy G. At least he was despatched with a ceremonial sword. Better class than a butcher's cleaver. Though I suppose it's all the same for the victim."

"And the book?" I remembered.

He seemed surprised. "Geoffrey's got the book."

"No," I said, "Deng wants the real manuscript."

Tully chuckled. "You mean the one with fangs in it?"

Well it's safe and sound. Tell him that."

"I can't tell him that."

"Why not?"

"For Heaven's sake, he wants it! Now! He's a publisher. Perhaps he's paid you an advance. He certainly got you a job writing the film script even if you did throw it up. I think you owe him the book."

"Do you?" said Tully coldly. "He can bloody well wait, can't he. Until I'm ready. Tell him," he paused, "it's not quite ready."

"I can tell him, but is it true?"

He smiled non-committally. "A bit of fine tuning. Fine tuning the fangs."

I crawled out of the cabin bumping my head on the hatch, and hoisted myself up the wet piles onto the wharf.

I heard him swear as he cranked the engine to life, and watched him edge out on his stern anchor. He was already slipping away, a dark unlit shape shipping seawards. I saw him vanish behind the moored yachts and wondered where he was going and what he'd do when he got there. The rain had stopped. I rode back to Mutley's for a drink. While I was there I recalled our conversation. Tully was worried about being implicated, although he had the perfect alibi—an alibi he didn't want anybody to know about. Yet one he could, in an emergency, call on me to supply.

What was he doing there in the first place? Was it the manuscript he was after? I decided to go back to the Lek Apartments and have a look, although the thought gradually taking shape in my mind was that he wasn't

Jorntien looking for anything except to create an alibi. I examined the sword. There were no telltale bloodstains but when I ran my hand along the blade it felt chipped, as if someone had used it to chop wood and hit a rock.

Perhaps he had had a quick copy of the keys made in one of those kerbside stalls on South Pattaya Road? But what good would that do? I had still padlocked him in. Or had I? I examined the door. The screws on the inside hinges were brightly scored as if fairly recently someone had lifted the door off. But whether it was Tully, I had no way of knowing.

Pattaya—Royal Varuna Yacht Club

I telephoned Deng in Bangkok to tell him about the book. He said he was coming to Pattaya at the weekend, and asked me to have lunch with him at the Royal Varuna Yacht Club. The 'Royal' dated from the time when the King used to sail there before he changed to Hua Hin on the other side of the Gulf. Compared to all the panoply of royal yachts one could only admire the simplicity with which the King pursued his sport. He sailed an ordinary dinghy no different to thousands of weekend sailors the world over. I wondered what he would make of the Varuna Yacht Club now. Most of the members lazing in rattan chairs on the covered verandah were farangs.

Deng sat looking out to sea, recognizable from the back by his long white hair. He was with Rudy. She waved me to join them. I had once asked Deng to name his City of Culture. Now it was his turn. A visiting German professor had proposed to Deng that "culture was the opposite to nature". He looked at me for an opinion. I suggested culture was man's influence on nature.

"What would Tully have said? I wonder." Deng leaned over the table, his head turned to me. Deng seemed able to think better while he ate. I had heard he had been in hospital, but he dismissed this with a smile. "I live in

Pattaya—Royal Varuna Yacht Club hospital. It is my second home. I met a man recently who knew Tully." He did not say who. "He knew Tully a long time ago. He is now very high up in the British Council. I asked him about Tully. He said Tully

was a good man, a thoughtful man." Deng looked at me hard. "But now he has gone insane. A writer who goes insane. Rather heroic, don't you think? Byronic. What can do that to a man do you suppose?"

I picked up on Byron. "Tully used to visit his statue in the Borghese gardens. He liked the words underneath— 'Rome. Guardian of the soul. We orphans of the heart must turn to thee.'"

Deng nodded, turning aside to sign a chit for more food and beer. He peered out seawards under his heavy eyelids. "Tully likes Byron because he is a legend. The heroic legend has taken over. You think that is what he wants to become? A legend?"

"No," I said. "I think he hates himself. I don't know why. He cannot forgive himself for failing."

"Failing?" Deng repeated. "How is he failing? He is a published author."

"I don't think he regards that as succeeding. I don't know how he qualifies success or failure, but he rates himself pretty far down the ladder." I hesitated. "I'm not even sure the writing matters. It's an excuse, an escape."

Deng accepted this without comment. He continued to eat for a while. "You know he cuts his own hair."

"He always has."

"Ah, but why?"

"Save money, I suppose."

Deng shook his head. "Mirrors. He hates mirrors. Why?" He smiled at Rudy. "He is not old like me." We all laughed. "He sees his reflection. He hates to see his reflection. Most people like a mirror. Need minors. Tully goes to the doctor one day—here in Pattaya. Dr. Belem, a Filipino doctor. She says to him, 'The eyes are the window of the soul and you are sick.'" He sighed softly and raised his hands. "So we have to wait for his manuscript. If he will deliver it."

"But you have a manuscript," I said. "The one Geoffrey edited."

Deng interrupted, "That is not a manuscript. That is a whitewash!" He chuckled mischievously.

"Doesn't Geoffrey have the original?"

Deng grinned. "Tully gave him a few chapters at a time only. Just to see." He squinted at the sky. "Soon I shall move my office to Bang Saray. My house beside the sea. But I think the damp will damage my Macintosh computer."

"You like the sea, Khun Deng?"

He was gazing to the horizon as if he saw a solution there. "I like the mountains. Tully likes the sea. On the sea he says he can escape." Deng frowned. "I wonder if he will find any escape."

I got up to go.

"And the murder?" he called softly after me. "You think he had anything to do with that?" I was already far enough away

from the table on my way out to pretend not to hear. I don't know what my answer would have been.

Across the Gulf

"I was looking for a mountain where the Gods lived," Tully explained when I met him some months later on the Cambodian border. "The Solomon Islands, Indonesia, Ceylon. Even in Europe there are mountains where the Gods live. But not here in Thailand. And you know why? In Thailand there are no Gods. Little spirit houses outside everyone's back door, but no Gods." He seemed genuinely surprised, as if he had stumbled on a secret no one else had. "If there are no Gods how can you make a pilgrimage? Where can you make a pilgrimage? Where can you make a sacrifice?"

"Why should you need to?" I asked him.

He had already confirmed what I had already suspected. After Pattaya Tully had returned to Bang Saphan. I wondered if even he knew why. The night he slipped out of Pattaya Bay and hoisted his home-made sail there was a north wind blowing. Perhaps that may have helped make up his mind. Or it may have been geographical—for as I once overheard two pot-bellied ex-marines discussing their plans in the bar of a whore-house in La Ceiba, Northern Honduras—"the only fucking way out is south."

Tully needed a way out. Not just from whatever had happened in Pattaya but from whatever had happened in himself. And something fundamental had happened that even the killing of Billy had not assuaged. "I'm not interested in sex any more," he told me as we sheltered under the

dripping tarpaulin of the foodstall. "I'm not even horny." He paused to stare down at the mud floor as if a past he could never recover lay buried there. He breathed out slowly. "I feel too hollow inside to contemplate desire." He tapped his head, "Sex is all up here. Maybe not for everyone. Not for Marino." He attempted a laugh. "I told him his brain was between his legs." Tully looked at me with a questioning frown. "He wasn't offended. He seemed proud of it. He said and here Tully carefully spoke his words, "There is nothing you can possess that I cannot take away from you."

Yes, it was not only the wind that drove him south that night, there was something else tugging at the tiller, edging him westward across the empty wastes of the open sea. Perhaps he consoled himself, as he sat there with his back wedged against the wheelhouse, feeling a nostalgia for somewhere he had been briefly happy, briefly in love before love and even happiness seemed an illusion he had lost all faith in. What then? Did his jaw tilt a little more firmly, his hands grip the tiller with a more cunning resolution as he set his course south west under the stars? Did the idea of revenge provide him with the only pleasure he had left? He didn't admit as much. Probably not even to himself then, and certainly not to me later.

It took Tully nearly three days to sail south to Bang Saphan. After a night and a day in the open Gulf he became anxious, uncertain of his navigation. Like the fishermen he had no compass or charts, trusting to the sun as a marker and the three sides of the Gulf to stop him falling out of it. He had no

real way of knowing how fast he was going, apart from throwing bits of wood overboard and trying to estimate their speed astern. A sloppy swell kept him company but didn't seem to push him very far. There were no fishing boats, birds in flight or anything that might indicate land.

Once he panicked that he was far further out than he thought, and would end up in the South China Sea. He jerked the tiller across, anxious to see land of some sort, and kept going due west towards the sunset, and after it until a red haze mopped up the leftovers of day, and the last light drained out of the darkening sky. Tully was not a natural sailor. He was too impatient. He hated having nothing to do. He could not abide being alone too long with his own thoughts. Every now and then he lashed the tiller, stretched himself, pumped out the oily water slopping in the bilges, crawled into the cabin, and cooked up something; tea, rice, anything, on the clay charcoal stove.

Dawn the second day rewarded him with a low line of mountains to the west. Because all land looks much the same from the sea he had to go close in before he had any idea where he was. And then to his relief the jagged peaks of Roi Et cleared the morning clouds confirming that he was not far north of Prachuab Khiri Khan. He contemplated putting in to Prachuab, tempted, as he watched the high headland of Mong Lai slip past revealing the open bay beyond, white buildings under the palm trees, the jetty crowded with moored fishing boats. Far ahead the bay ended in jagged outcrops and islands. Prachuab Bay sucked him in, lulled him

with a sense of wanting to belong somewhere, that he only shook himself out of when it was almost too late. By now he was close enough inshore to see the line of breakers across the river mouth, people watching him from the little pagoda-roofed salas under the wooded slopes of 'mirror' mountain, with its see-through hole on the northern spur, and the thousands of monkeys that swarmed down from the pagoda on its peak. Monkey mountain, Tully titled it familiarly. But it was the familiarity of the place that now alarmed him. He had stopped here on the way up, eating at the night market, swimming up river where a dam created a pool. He had even taken kids out fishing to the islands. "No," he

determined. He pushed the tiller over, and crouched in the cabin, fiddling with the valve and swinging the crank handle until the sweat poured off him and the engine finally responded with a smoky phut-phut-phut, and accelerated him away from what he now perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be danger.

Leaving Prachuab Bay behind him he coasted between the offshore islands in a sloppy swell with a stiff breeze catching him from the south. Breakers boomed in dark caverns, small white birds swooped below the red cliffs, seas boiled over unseen reefs. He told me afterwards he considered becoming a hermit and living there the rest of his days in a cave or a bamboo shelter. Instead he headed out to safety, watching the long empty shore slip slowly past as the red sun dipped over the purple peaks of the Burmese mountains.

That night he navigated from memory, ticking off in his mind the headlands, bays and settlements. By midnight he was a mile off Bor Tong Laan; brightened by the arc lamps of the fishing boats along the jetties, and noisy with the throb of engines. This was familiar territory. This was homecoming. But as he reached the next headland he smelt smoke. Since we had left the burning had commenced. And on such a scale that the acrid smoke drifted out to sea in a mist lapping the surface. The pungent tang took Tully back instantly to South America; hundreds of miles of burned-out stumps lining the bulldozed highways of the Amazon. It had started then, the destruction.

He nudged the boat closer inshore, straining to see. The dark rim of mangroves had become a pale emptiness. Occasional patches of flame flared up. It seemed ironic that they had chosen this location for their 'Garden of Eden'. Where would it end? He pictured the pale levelled swathes spreading inland. Only darkness shielded the devastation. Tully had a presentiment of doom, not just

Across the Gulf for this small corner, but as if the destruction was some implacable land-devouring monster gaining momentum as it moved, leaving in its wake mile upon mile of empty cement shopfronts and unrented high-rise condominiums, sweeping golf courses and gouged-out shrimp farms. He peered hard to see how far the burning had gone, as if by wishing hard he could somehow forestall it. The drifting smoke smarted his eyes, but the fishing settlement at the head of Ao Thian seemed unmolested

What about the fishermen, the farmers? Were they inured to these disasters, or to the decisions they had no control over—rivers dammed, forests felled, seas polluted? Was there some Machiavellian plan afoot or was it progress as defined by the World Bank? Who were they, these nameless accountants and architects mapping out the new world plan? As he rounded the headland the smoke diminished. By daylight he would be looking into their film cove—that had escaped unchanged since the start of time until now.

Why? he wondered. It was almost as if man was taking revenge on nature for all the centuries of oppression it had wreaked on him in the past. Revenge. Given the chance he would destroy all the bulldozers, chain saws, pile drivers, dump trucks.

He cruised out from under the black cliffs and saw the far scattered lights of Bang Saphan Bay. This would perhaps escape despoliation. For the time being. What chance was there of his returning? He pointed the boat towards the dark shore, occasionally probing a bamboo pole over the side to test the depth, trying to remember the channel through the shallows. How happy and carefree he had been here. He wondered what had become of Lek. What was it Marino had told him with a sneer? "Anything you can possess I can take from you." With a grim smile Tully watched the dark line of palm trees grow in height and listened for the dull boom of surf breaking on the shallows.

Bangkok—Suriwongse Hotel

It was Marvin who told me. He had a letter from Marino. There had been a fire. Marino had been asleep and was awakened by an explosion that engulfed the house in a ball of flames. Fortunately, the butane gas had been stored below and the blast had dissipated in the open. What had seemed an inferno became a raging fire, allowing him and Lek to escape by jumping from the window at the back. Apart from being badly singed they were both unhurt. The house however had burnt to the ground and the owner was demanding compensation, claiming the accident was due to Marino's carelessness.

I knew—don't ask me how I knew—instinct again. I had nothing to go on but I decided to take a risk and wrote in confidence to Deng. Once again he suggested we meet at the Varuna Yacht Club. As before I found him at his usual seat facing out to the sea.

"In Ko Samui I have a house up in the hills," he told me. "Do you think Tully would like to stay there, write a book perhaps?" He glanced at me.

"I don't think Tully would like Ko Samui—too many tourists."

Deng commented, "I thought perhaps the boat."

"I'm not sure he actually likes being on the sea. He likes to have it handy. Tully likes to think he can escape. He hates feeling trapped. Cities have that effect on him."

"But he liked Rome?"

"Yes, but even from the heart of Rome you can see the mountains. The only part of Bangkok he liked was the river."

Deng accepted this. "I told him Bangkok was the new Left Bank. We were deciding a venue to have the book launched. He wanted a rice barge on the river. Guests to be blindfolded, pulled to a wharf by rickshaw, paddled out. He wanted them to forget where they were. He told me he wanted the whiskey bottles relabelled Mandalay Rum." Deng bent his head to eat. "A poem by Kipling. 'On the road to Mandalay where the flying fishes play'. He quoted it in his book." He said to me, 'Young men go West, old men go East.'"

"What did you decide?"

"We compromised. A foodstall on the pavement."

"For a book launch!"

Deng leaned back and laughed. "Noodles and champagne! Very Left Bank."

"Would anyone come?"

Deng surveyed me with an commanding look. "They will come if I ask them." He forked himself a generous mouthful. The table was crowded with dishes, mostly spicy shrimp and squid. Even Deng found it hot. He dabbed a napkin at his forehead. "Tully likes spicy food. He likes 'nam tok'—you know this?"

"It means waterfall?"

He laughed. "It is also spicy grilled meat. Tully was driving from Tak to Khon Kaen and he saw a big waterfall by the road. He stopped and asked to eat 'nam tok' beside the nam tok, but the food vendor couldn't understand. She thought he wanted to photograph the waterfall or drink it. She couldn't understand he wanted to eat it."

I smiled, imagining the confusion. "Whatever was he doing in Tak?"

"He had an idea of following the river all the way to Chiang Mai. He said to me, 'I will take a small boat all the way—explore it? 'It is explored already?' 'Not by me,' he replied. 'You will get bored/' I said, 'Go to Mae Sot—that is on the Mooei River. Across the river is Burma.' I have a house there. I think I will build a hotel there. I told Tully to go and try it. Easy to escape from. Across the river is the road to Mandalay." Deng smiled.

"And did he?"

"I don't know." He turned his head to face me squarely. "I think he will need to escape somewhere. I can see Tully with a Karen army. He needs a cause. His fault was to be born in the wrong place at the wrong time. He should have been born Viet Cong or PLO. Instead he is born Southend-on-Sea. But Southend is not fighting for its independence. At heart he is Lawrence of Arabia. Deep down Lawrence knew he could never be an Arab. It was a cause he wanted. We need to find Tully a cause before it's too late." And once again the parting comment, barely audible as I moved away among the other

chattering club members. "I have been thinking about this fire in Bang Saphan. I think if Tully were God he would set fire to the whole world."

I remembered those parting words when I saw Marvin shortly afterwards. Marvin who had sent faxes to just about every NGO operating in the Far East had suddenly been invited to set up the Ministry for Social Welfare in Albania. Marvin whose origins sprang from central Europe had now decided his future lay in the Balkans and was daily wrestling with lists of impossible sounding words.

He sat in a beach deckchair clutching his Albanian dictionary and composing a letter of complaint to the Bangkok Post. Marvin liked to write letters of complaint. He indicated a chair and offered his bananas. I expressed my doubts concerning Marino's accident. Confidentially, of course. After all he was or had been a consultant psychiatrist and the confidence of the couch was synonymous (or so I assumed) with the confidence of the

Bangkok—Suriwongse Hotel confessional. "I can understand him wanting to kill Marino—revenge, jealousy, hatred—but surely not to risk hurting Lek. Lek, after all, was his trusted houseboy."

Marvin sat there large and slow moving. His fastest walking speed was about half a mile an hour. Expressions changed on his face as slowly as cloud patterns. "Why not? Lek deserted him, went willingly to the enemy. In Tully's eyes that would brand him a traitor. And you know the punishment for that." Marvin slit his throat with a finger and then licked it. "Umm,"

he grinned. "Or perhaps he was a sacrifice. Tully liked to go up to Buddha. He liked the steps leading up to the great Golden Idol. He went there late at night. I think he would have been happier if it was Baal or the Mayan God—Itza. Someone he could sacrifice something to. Tully found prayer a bit dull. If he'd written the Bible Isaac wouldn't have been so lucky. Tully didn't want God to hide his knife in the clouds. He wanted to use it for him here on earth."

He chuckled, "I wonder if sometimes he didn't step back and see himself for himself and laugh. You know he used to stick notes in my gates if I wasn't in and signed them KBE. Not 'Knight of the British Empire' but 'King of Bogus Emotions'."

I was in no hurry to return to Bangkok. Now the film was finished, I had my own articles to work on. I also happened to like Pattaya. I liked to stroll the garishly lit streets at night even though I was not actually seeking anything or anyone. Here I had an advantage over Tully, I was not condemning. In fact I saw little to condemn. There was more to condemn in Calcutta or Fez or Bogota than here. Pattaya had nothing to hide. It lived in the open which was its greatest threat because the eyes that came to pry had it made easy. Far worse abuses took place behind the closed doors of countless cities, but these went unreported. Pattaya was doomed, not because it flaunted its way of life before an increasingly censorial world but because it pretended not to care. "Mai ben rai" (it doesn't matter). The great statue of Buddha smiled down indulgently on the goings-on below. Sex was not a sin as such in Buddhist eyes. Sex was a concern of

the body, not of the soul. This was something Tully refused to accept.

When I went up to Bangkok it was only for the day and I usually had breakfast at the Suriwongse. I have known people come to Bangkok and virtually never leave the hotel. Tony Roberts told me he stayed there two months once and only ever went outside to post a letter. Guests literally lived in the coffee shop of the Suriwongse.

I was still trying to get my breath back after the motorcycle taxi almost despatched me to Nirvana, when I watched with some surprise the ponderous presence of Vincent move regally across the room and wait for the chair to be pulled out for him. He was assisted by a small boy, whom he later obligingly referred to as 'a small possessor in charge of a large possession.'

Vincent did not condescend to turn his head to see who else was there. His boy fetched a cardboard box into which Vincent dipped his hands and produced a china teapot, which he handed to the waiter as gravely as if it were a holy chalice. The waiter bowed. Vincent solemnly produced a packet of tea and jar of marmalade, Oxford one might safely assume.

It was only once these preliminaries had been accomplished that he turned his attention to the rest of the room and surveyed the other incumbents. It seemed to take him a moment to decide whether to recognize me or not, but once he had he indicated I should join him, and inclined his head to welcome me. Vincent must have been one of the few people who could make a simple 'Good Morning' sound like a

confidence. He quickly disposed of Billy, "A tragic demise, dear boy", adding, "Did he ever pay you? No—well he won't now!" which for some

reason made us both laugh. "Yes, it was an adventure—wasn't it? But such a lot of humbug. To pretend to recreate the Garden of Eden with yours truly as God. Quite reminded me of Venice. Tully was there. But not a church going type. Did you ever go to St. George's? On the Salute? Just a stone's throw from Peggy Guggenheim's. Such an exquisite garden, if you could find somewhere to sit without putting your teacup on a work of art. Venice—ah, memories. To return across the lagoon on a still summer evening, the golden orb on the Salute, the campaniles, St. Marks." He leaned his head so close I felt his beard. "City of light. And dark. Baron Corvo liked the dark side. Canaletto stole the light."

"Marino," I interrupted, "he spoke of stealing the light."

Vincent chuckled. "Marino is an artist. He claims he has paintings in galleries in Amsterdam. Marino stole anything he wanted—words, women, boys, ideas. But we all do. Marino was more Greek than Dutch. He was born there." He paused to spread marmalade on his toast, the tip of his pink tongue flicking out in anticipation. "I loaned Tully Corvo's *Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*. It seemed appropriate. Tully called it 'Toad in the Hole' and gave it back. Said Corvo was a fraud." Vincent raised the lid of the teapot and inhaled the aroma. "They were opposites, weren't they? Tully passionate, but lacking passion. Marino with too much for his own good. Is that why Tully was so concerned about his immortal soul? He

didn't have one. He must have lost it." Vincent smiled at his little joke. "He searched everywhere. Even claimed Billy Goebbels had stolen it." Vincent gave the teapot a discriminating stir.

"I read his palm once. My stock in trade, you know. Always popular with the parishioners. Had my own little bijou hut in the park at Eastbourne. Shall I pour? Sugar? You know he hadn't got a life-line. I've seen a lot of palms, but my dear, his was hardly human. Lines going all ways. Might have been leaving Charing Cross station."

"Did you tell him?"

"Did I tell him!" Vincent stared aghast as if I had spoken some heresy. "Tell him he was doomed? My dear, what do you take me for? There is such a thing as etiquette! Said he had a most unusual hand. I wanted to take a print and compare it, but he refused."

"Compare it. To whom?"

Vincent peered at me over his tea cup. "To whom, dear? Why to the late Greats. That's to whom. Crippen, Rasputin. Why?"

"I don't know. I thought perhaps you might have one of Byron."

"Byron, did you say? Now that would be interesting, Byron. But not in the same class. I once saw the print of Corvo in Venice."

"Corvo the procurer?"

Vincent laid down his knife. "He was much more than that, my dear. Do you know the story of Desire and Pursuit? He rescues a drowning girl and dresses her up as a boy to become his gondolier."

"Sounds like a pantomime."

"It probably was. Corvo's real name was Rolfe, Father Rolfe, though he was never actually ordained. Wrote Hadrian VII. One of the great pederasts," he proclaimed solemnly.

"Marlowe died in a tavern brawl over a boy. Rimbaud died in a boy brothel in Cairo."

"Billy G ...," I began.

Vincent quashed that. "Mustn't speak ill of the dead. Anyway he wasn't in the same class."

"If you want to find Tully where would you look?" I asked him.

He dabbed a napkin at his beard, A waiter brought him the Bangkok Post, and the bill. "You'll find him where the Gods live. He has a penchant for such places. Most people try to delay that meeting as long as possible, but Tully was always eager to move on."

Cambodia—Poi Pet

Three months passed before I had word from Tully again. A girl called Dee brought it. The message was cryptic enough. I was to go to Aranyapradet and cross the border bridge into Cambodia. If I couldn't bluff my way past the Thai officials by pretending I was with United Nations, then Dee would arrange for a guide through the minefields. I should not worry, he added, that the guide had one leg and one eye. He had now learned the right route. Tully would be expecting me in the Khmer market at Poi Pet in three days.

Now we were sitting in a crowded hut less than a mile over the border eating fried rice while outside the monsoon rain pelted down and muddy paths between the covered stalls ran awash. A photo of Hun Sen was stuck on the bamboo wall along with a semi-clad Madonna, and a calendar with the King of Thailand. Prince Norodom Sihanouk did not appear to be represented. Tully called for more beer, Carlsberg or Heineken. At the equivalent of 50 cents a can it was a pleasure to enjoy. It didn't seem to matter that it was still only 9 o'clock in the morning.

I had walked across the border earlier waving my press card. The border was a hubbub—Thais going in, Cambodians coming out laden with every type of goods imaginable for the market on the Thai side. The railway line that used to carry the Bangkok to Phnom Penh train was abandoned, although I noticed that the station hut by the level crossing was being repaired. Here the Cambodians operated open wooden

carriages, like sedan chairs on wheels to transport the lazy Thais back to the car park. Naked Cambodian infants begged this route, carrying even filthier babies. Every so often the Thai border police chased them with batons away into the bushes and the minefields. Tully had been correct about the guides. They hardly possessed a complete set of eyes and limbs between them, although this didn't seem to deter them humping contraband across to avoid the border tax.

"Don't be tempted to buy the whisky," Tully insisted. "Chivas Regal for 50 baht. Two dollars!" he scoffed, adding a confidential tip. "Inspect the cap. Where it's sealed. You can see it's been opened and re-sealed. Whatever's inside, it ain't Scotch!"

I had crossed the road bridge into Cambodia, avoiding the hut where the Thais have to show their passes. A Cambodian guard referred me to a friendly Bulgarian officer, Major Ivanof, who was relaxing in a deckchair in the shade smoking a cheroot. He glanced casually at my passport and waved me on. Here the UN ruled like a latter-day colonizer. A convoy of white UN trucks, was coming through, soldiers of every nationality: Russian, French, Ghanaian, Bangladeshi, Dutch. Military tents and corrugated army huts stood set back from the road. Tully's girl, Dee, walked ahead and paid me no attention apart from the occasional glance to check I was following. We passed a statue of a Khmer deity welcoming us with its many arms outspread, and then a partially shelled hospital.

A line of mutilated young men lined the route to the market, all on crutches, holding out hats for coins. In the shade of a tree a woman was selling small animals. Dee stopped to look. By the time I caught up she was off again threading a way between the stalls—just in time too as storm clouds were threatening. The Poi Pet market here seemed far more diversified than its twin on the Thai side.

I bought a blue plastic rain cape, printed 'shower attack', for ten baht—or 40 cents. The same stall also sold army hammocks and marijuana, either loose or by the one-kilogram packet. A UN policeman strolled by without interest. Dee progressed by a rather circuitous back route along a muddy lane lined by brothel shacks, where even at this early hour the girls, faces blanched by dried talcum powder, were eager for business. Some even announced their nationality, calling out "Vietnam" or "China" as they beckoned. Against the chalk-white skin their lips stood out in crimson as if they were vampires.

Just as the downpour commenced, I followed Dee across a log over an open sewer to what I would never have recognized as a restaurant. Tully sat casually at a table barely under cover, feet splayed, can of Heineken to hand. He looked relaxed and confident. One could have been forgiven for assuming he had fed here every day for years. He seemed so much more at ease than I was. He wore a sort of safari hat to keep off the rain, and a red neckscarf loosely tied inside his open shirt. Just like his old hero—Sandino. Yes, I thought, fragile frontiers and civil wars suited him.

Dee sat at another table tending a pair of tiger cubs, cute little things that might have been kittens if they hadn't made such threatening hisses. "I don't think they're real tigers," said Tully. "Their stripes go the wrong way. Here they call them fish tigers—sua plaa. First night they slept in the warmest woolliest place they could find—between my legs. I was worried in case they woke up hungry and forgot where they were."

"Why?" I asked him. "Why am I here?"

"I thought you might like to have the manuscript. Or the two-thirds that's finished. I'm rather stuck for an ending. It'll come. Nature'll take care of it, I'm sure."

"Nature? What's nature got to do with it?"

"A lot. I like doing it first and writing it afterwards. Hopefully there's a ring of truth."

At the end of the hut where they were cooking, the television was on showing lions and elephants. Tully watched it but I could see his thoughts were elsewhere. "I've been there too," he announced. "I've trekked through the green hills of Africa with the Masai and speared a lion. Had to. I've also sipped red wine on safari up on the crest of the Naguramen Escarpment looking over the Rift Valley while the cook boys roasted Tommy Gazelle over the fire." His expression clouded. "But it doesn't account for much, does it?—memory, last year's bank account. One day you're in credit, then it vanishes like suntan. Can't put your finger on it."

Someone you slept with once who slips away before dawn. Unless you're going back, there's no point."

"No point to what?"

"To anything. Not unless you're going back."

"And you're not going back?"

"Where to?" he replied rather absently.

"You could have posted the manuscript to Deng," I suggested. "You don't need a personal courier."

He grinned. "Need or want. The old Buddhist principle. It's all right to have what you need, but not what you want. Perhaps I needed someone to hear me out. Not that unusual is it? It's not a confession and I don't need an absolution, but I suppose life isn't that simple."

"No it isn't," I agreed. "You spoke of bank accounts. There's some accounting to be done. Billy G for instance. Maybe you didn't actually sing the song, but can you deny playing the tune?"

Tbilly looked at me strangely. "I deny it absolutely."

"Listen," I tried again, "you're an actor. Henry II. Why, you played him. 'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?' Exit Becket."

"The play wasn't Becket, it was The Lion in Winter. Another scenario altogether." He crumpled the empty beer can and placed it on the bamboo table.

"Marino? That wasn't just an accident."

Once again he regarded me with an air of injured innocence. "Do you know I had half a mind to visit him? I rather like him. But only as an enemy. As a friend I loathe him. Too bloody smug. Knew all the answers. As an enemy I can enjoy him."

"And did you?" He declined an answer. "I was too busy trying to sink the boat off Ko Thalu. Considering how she leaked I thought she'd go down like a stone. I wanted a channel that was deep enough but from where I could get ashore. In the end she went down gracefully, sails set, bow nosing under as though she belonged there. After all a boat has a soul too, doesn't it? I wonder what ever happened to Yasmin?" he remarked, taking me completely by surprise. "I heard she graduated to full membership of the Brigade Rossi. One of those who bombed the Bologna railway station. At the trial they kept them in steel cages. Like wild brutes. I think she hanged herself. Couldn't stand the idea of being caged up for life. Decided to quit."

"Are you sure?" I asked him cautiously.

He leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "It seems likely, doesn't it? I can't see her playing the system. Can you?"

His lovers always seemed to belong to that mildly bizarre category. Trapeze artists in a circus. They hung above the real world, suspended in illusions, swooping towards each other with split second timing that too frequently failed, leaving them tumbling apart into reality. Now, it was Dee. The latest partner in his performing troupe. What was the alternative? He was a bit like the wild tiger cubs Dee was fondling. He didn't belong to the domestic species. He didn't mate for life

like geese. Dee, his latest exotic companion, a girl for whom like him frontiers counted for nothing, wandering here and there buying whatever strange animals took her fancy, Tully declared, "If we ever lived together long enough it wouldn't be a family we started but a zoo."

Dee was just like the tiger cubs. One moment playful, the next hissing.

"At least she's honest," Tully remarked. "She admits she's looking for a Japanese. Claims the Japanese have good manners. Says she doesn't like farang smell. Smell! What smell? But she wrinkles up her nose and says 'Pak men' (smelly mouth)."

Dee had already gone outside. "Where's she gone?" Tully complained. "She told me she wanted to buy snakes. I loathe snakes." He added moodily, "What do Japanese smell of that's so special?"

"Blood," I suggested. I was due to go to Kanchanaburi soon to write a piece on the Death Railway. This aroused Tully's curiosity.

"Mention it to Colonel Dan, Colonel Daniel Frudaker, who you are going to meet shortly." He waved for the bill and paid. The rain had eased up, but we had to bend double under the sagging awnings, and hop the open streams.

"Where are we going?" It was hard to catch up without slipping.

On the road outside he was bargaining fares for two of the most decrepit motorbikes I have ever set eyes on. Tully had an excited look about him. "I am taking you to one of the most remarkable men alive. Not only is he heading a search for MiAs, but he has actually found some."

Leaving me to make what I could of this astonishing news, he mounted the motorbike behind the grinning driver and set off. There was no sign of Dee. I think Tully may have been looking for her, for his motorbike suddenly swerved up a side track and stopped at the overgrown railway line. A little way along the track, returning refugees were boarding a train that would take them to Battambang and Phnom Penh if they were lucky. The antique carriages were pocked with bullet holes. In front of the engine there was a single carriage crowded with local people jostling to get on board. Tully who had been scanning the passengers remarked, "The front coach travel free. That's why it's so popular. Only drawback—it's there to set off any landmines."

By contrast the refugees looked weary and confused. The UN were giving each family \$50 per adult, \$20 a child, a plot of land, hand tools and basic materials to build a house, when they reached wherever they were going. Most it seemed were destined for Phnom Penh. Tully said something to his driver, waved to me, and we were off again, driving along the corrugated road, avoiding the worst of the flooded holes, but keeping strictly to the right-hand side. One legacy from France that hadn't changed. Another as I later found to my pleasure, when we stopped at a very unassuming roadside

foodstall, was coffee and crisp bread rolls. We had stopped to shelter from a downpour, but Tully's mood had changed. He was silent and uncommunicative.

After the rain let up we continued, slipping and sliding. The countryside lay flat and uninterrupted on either side; rice-fields and scattered palm trees. There were very few people and these were either small children or old men. "All the ones in between were killed off," Tully remarked later. "Ever notice how you don't see any kids between 14 and 20? There aren't any." He counted back on his fingers. "You work it out. That's when the Khmer Rouge were in."

We had been driving for twenty minutes when a truck coming the opposite way swerved wildly, the driver leaning out shouting. Our drivers halted. Mine turned, grinned and announced something. At that moment there were sounds of gunfire.

"Bandits," Tully called back.

We waited undecided for a while. A few hundred yards ahead we could see a number of stopped cars and people standing about. A UN truck came up. Tully flagged it down and spoke to the soldiers in the cab. We followed cautiously.

As we neared the scene there were more shots and we could see the bandits sauntering casually away over the fields, clutching their rifles. Tully made light of the incident as if it was an everyday hazard. "Usually out-of-work soldiers," he said. "Bit tough on the locals."

We had barely gone another two hundred yards when two renegade soldiers stepped out into the road brandishing AK 47s. My driver skidded to a halt in a deep rut and a violent argument ensued. By now the UN truck had vanished and we were left to fend for ourselves. The tirade went on for several minutes as other cars roared on by. We couldn't expect any assistance from them. Finally Tully's driver pulled out a 500 riel note (about 25 cents), which one of the soldiers pocketed and let us go.

As if this wasn't enough, another mile down the road we passed a bus that was being held up by six soldiers, one of them armed with a rocket propelled grenade launcher, spare grenades strapped across his chest. They were too interested in robbing the poor unfortunates on the bus to be worried about us but as we tried to get past one of them pointed his AK 47 straight at me. I fully expected to expire in a hail of bullets, but nothing happened.

After an hour or so we turned up a side track. It was little more than a footpath. The main obstacles were wandering water buffalo towing ropes. Finally we stopped opposite a thatch hut. Large sunflowers grew along a bamboo fence. Some girls were waving. Beneath a lean-to shelter a hammock was swaying. When we reached the hut, Dee sat up with a grin, cuddling her tiger cubs.

Tully remarked, "She's like that. Likes springing surprises."

A matronly lady emerged from the living quarters dressed in a bold red print frock, dusting her hands and wai-ing.

"Mama," introduced Tully.

The floor was beaten dirt with a raised sleeping platform. In a corner a blackened pot smoked over an open fire fuelled by coconut husks. We sat down. The hut was bare but not poor. I noticed a print of a younger Prince Sihanouk, some unlit joss sticks and a calendar of astrological signs. Mama brought us cups of weak coffee.

"Where's the Colonel?" I enquired.

The ride had given me time to catch up on the MiA (Missing in Action) scenario. It was an emotive issue for Americans, and one that even after more than fifteen years refused to die down. Despite lack of any firm evidence, many Americans remained stubbornly convinced that there were still PoWs held against their will in camps in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. If there was any single reason for the American government continuing their trade embargo with Vietnam this was it. Teams of specialists carrying lists of army records had gone in. Although bones and skulls had been exhumed, airlifted back home with full military honours, many US veterans and families of the missing deeply distrusted Washington which they suspected, rightly or not, of abandoning the PoWs and then covering up the betrayal.

Tully glanced at his watch and stood up. "Colonel doesn't usually get up much before midday," he explained. He saw my expression. "The Colonel isn't someone you just walk in on. He's a thinker. He meditates a lot. He goes into a trance. That's how he discovered the whereabouts of the MiAs. You can't just walk in on someone in a trance." Tully seemed

slightly embarrassed by this homily. He led the way across a stubbled rice-field to a smaller hut, half hidden behind a bamboo palisade.

Inside the hut, cross-legged on a mat on the dirt floor sat a large man, dressed in a simple blue peasant's smock and baggy trousers, his head shaven, his arms folded, biceps the size of cantaloupes. To add authenticity a photograph of the same but younger man in military uniform was pinned to a beam over the bamboo sleeping platform. The Colonel regarded us with pale sombre eyes. Tully introduced me. I had never seen Tully defer to anyone. But he seemed in awe of the so-called Colonel.

"Special Forces. Nam. '67, '69," he announced, not getting up but inviting us to squat if we so wished. "I tell you we could have won that war there and then. It was will that was lacking. The will from Washington. Washington betrayed the American people then, just as they are betraying them now, I tell you, and I defy you or anyone to prove me wrong. There are hundreds of our boys still out here, languishing in camps in the jungle, or so brainwashed they no longer know who they are or where they came from. Slave labourers sold to the Chinese to build roads, or to log forests in Laos." He nodded solemnly as if contemplating the terrible injustice. "You shave a man's head and expose him to the tropical sun in nothing but rags for ten years. With no medicine, only a handful of rice and a little salt twice a day. He gets weak from malaria and dysentery, covered with suppurating ulcers. Riddled with worms and lice. You make him work from

before dawn until after dark, bent double planting rice, digging rocks. You lock him up at night in a bamboo cage alive with rats and mosquitoes, that stinks of shit and piss. You have guards whose idea of pleasure is beating and torture, for whom a farang broken in body and in mind is the highest object of fun." His hands which had remained quietly clasped across his belly, now opened like a lotus as if to reveal their secret. "Can you imagine what that man will look like, the colour of his skin, the condition of his teeth if any rotten stumps still remain? His hands, his feet." His own hands closed, his head tilted back, his pale eyes watched us, beneath drooping, almost Oriental lids.

"They might be blue-eyed?" I suggested.

The Colonel did not deign to comment. He dipped his hands in a bowl of water and dabbed them slowly over his skull. Finally he raised the bowl itself and poured it over his face. Mopping off the drips, he stared at us with a stubborn look, as if daring us to challenge him. "I was taken prisoner. After a parachute drop over the Plain of Jars. I was held in solitary confinement for forty-nine days. I saw men like me taken screaming out of cages and forced to play Russian roulette. I saw men taken away who never came back. I heard men being tortured, pleading with their torturers to shoot them. I saw men degraded as no human being ought ever to be degraded. I have lived with those scenes for many years. I have one mission. One mission only. To find those boys that remain and bring them out." He allowed us to consider this before continuing. "I have

veterans associations, I have families in the States backing me, because they have lost faith in the government, and I am their last hope." He focused his attention on me, as if to give me the sole benefit of what he had to say. "Last week, or to be precise nine days ago, a middle-aged man walked out of the jungle a few kilometres north of here, and sat down in the house of a Cambodian family. This man could not utter a word. Judging him to be mentally deficient, and clearly on the point of starvation, the family took him in. The villagers were of the opinion that this mute man was the traumatized survivor of a Vietnam prison camp."

The impact of this announcement would have been stunning anywhere, but in that bare hut in the jungle, it was acutely so. Tully was watching to see my reaction. I pulled out a handkerchief to mop up the beads of sweat. The Colonel barked out something quite unintelligible and a boy came in with a tin bowl of water in which bobbed rather surprisingly a large chunk of ice.

"Won't you drink, Colonel?" I offered, after Tully and I had finished.

"Gentlemen," he declared solemnly, "I only drink my own urine. It is something they made me do. But now I believe it kept me alive. Gandhi, you may recall, drank his own urine. Urine contains a protein, Interferon," the Colonel emphasized. "It has been shown to stop cancer. Even Aids."

"This man, this mute," I said. "Can we see him?" I was thinking that if it was true, and I suddenly wanted it to be

true, then this would be the first American prisoner to come out of Southeast Asia alive since 1975.

"Tonight. I'll take you to see him tonight."

"Tonight?"

"He has been living like a wild animal in the jungle. Only at night does he feel safe. He has a fear of daylight. At daybreak he runs back to the jungle where he came from. Once they tried to follow him but he is cunning, and can make himself virtually invisible. He comes out only at night for food."

It seemed a plausible explanation.

The Colonel bowed to us. "Now if you'll excuse me. I have my only meal of the day." Waiting in the doorway stood the boy with a dish of plain rice, and a saucer with a pinch of salt.

We walked back to the hut, where Dee was eating a bowl of noodles that looked and smelt very hot. Mama brought us out steaming bowls, chopsticks, spoons, a small tray of ground spices. Dee stirred heaped spoonfuls into her bowl. I noticed even she was perspiring freely. She offered Tully her bowl.

He took a sip and grimaced. "Burns my lips," he hissed, rinsing his mouth out. "Like it, but my bloody lips burn."

Dee laughed. "Chun ben sadic (I am sadist)", she chuckled, leaning over and offering strips of raw meat to the tigers. She indicated one. "Nitsai dee (this one good manners)." The other one hissed at her. "Nitsai mai dee (this not well behaved.)"

The afternoon was long and rather tedious. I kept watch on the hut across the paddy field but there was no movement. The boy squatted outside the palisade fence, under the shade of some papayas, waiting on the Colonel's commands. Rain showers came and went. Later the sky cleared and the lowering sun shone briefly through the palm trees. The Colonel suddenly emerged from his hut. As if by magic our two motorbike drivers appeared together with a third and we all climbed on. Half of the family made use of the occasion. On my bike there were no fewer than five bodies. One child in front of the driver, myself with a boy on my back, and Mama in between. We drove west in convoy towards low jungled hills. The setting sun highlighted distant peaks rising over the horizon, banked by threatening clouds. Twice our motorbike broke down. Once the chain snapped and tangled up on the sprockets. I was sure we could go no further but to my amazement the driver had a spare. His only tool was a pair of pliers but he replaced the chain in no time.

As Tully had predicted, the village we were heading for lay on the edge of denuded forest; scattered tall trees, thick undergrowth and high grass. I wouldn't have wanted to have to force a way in. The village consisted of a few huts. On the outskirts there was a check-point manned by two teenage soldiers with automatic rifles almost as tall as they were. They were smartly turned out and seemed well disciplined. Quite a contrast to the Cambodian soldiers I had seen sitting by the road, with nothing to do but extort what little money they could from the passing civilian population.

Once inside the village the motorbikes were parked and while Mama's family visited one house the Colonel led the way to another further off, with a swing hanging from the branches of a mango tree. An old man came out, wai-ed, gave us a toothless grin and squatted cross-legged on a bench. Inside an oil lantern had already been lit. Another man wrapped in a sarong came forward, laughed and greeted us with an oddly accented, "Bonsoir." We joined him inside on the platform that seemed a feature of all these houses. Beside him was a bowl full of assorted beer cans cooling in water. He insisted we help ourselves and refused payment, continuing to mutter cheerfully in his unintelligible French. I noticed a woman peering in from a smoky kitchen at the back. Two small girls came up giggling shyly. Out of his own territory the Colonel seemed less formidable. He appeared undecided whether to stand or sit.

"L'homme, il arrive," declared our host. "Chaque nuit. Le meme temps."

I glanced at my watch. 6.35. "Those boys outside?" I asked Tully. "Why the check-point?"

He seemed surprised by my question. "Khmer Rouge. I thought you'd realize. This is a Khmer Rouge village."

When I think of Cambodia it is the paradox of it all that puzzles me. In the West we expect such hard and fast rules that we cannot comprehend when these don't appear to apply. This village for example: Khmer Rouge soldiers; a child's swing; a man who speaks French and gives us foreign

beer. And shortly, unless our expectations were about to be dashed, a missing POW crawling out of a jungle hide-away.

He didn't crawl. Suddenly a stooping shadow filled the doorway and there he was. He said not a word, although whether it was his stillness or ours which was the more obvious I couldn't tell. Our friendly host however took him by the wrist, guiding him to the platform. A girl arrived with a heaped bowl of steaming rice, and returned with smaller bowls—spiced fish, string beans. Giving us the briefest glance the stranger scooped small balls of rice in his fingers, and dipped them into the other dishes.

Our host laughed and joined him. "Mangez, mangez," he said to everyone.

I think we were all too interested trying to glimpse the man's face, half buried in shadow. He was certainly of indeterminate race. Everything about him seemed grey, his unkempt hair, his bony hands, his haggard features, occidental or Oriental? I started wondering just what percentage of our troops were black, Spanish, American Indian? The blond-haired, blue-eyed GI belonged to the musical South Pacific and yesterday. Were there photos? There must be photos. Our host was still chatting in a friendly disarming manner to his mute guest, even though the conversation was one-sided. I asked Tully about photographs. He shook his head. "He sees a camera and he runs off."

"You do speak to him?"

Tully cleared his throat. "Of course. Well, the Colonel does. Haven't you, Colonel?"

The Colonel, standing in even deeper shadow, said nothing.

"How about 'Name and Rank'?" I said it quite loud and clear, hoping to provoke a reaction. For a moment the figure stopped eating and turned slowly to face me. His eyes stared into mine. If I had to describe those eyes, I would say they were blank either of recognition or curiosity. He turned back to his meal and resumed eating. I wanted to try something. Pulling out my pad I wrote in block letters, three words.

"Who are you?" and pushed both paper and pen in front of him. Our host laughed and held the lamp closer. For a moment the man hesitated and then slowly he picked up the pen correctly, and scribbled something. Then he dropped it, in a sudden awkward movement. I tried to make out what he had written. Certainly his hand moved left to write. But then so do Thais when they write. This scrawl wasn't Thai. But what? A signature? I was about to try again when the Colonel stepped in.

"Don't," he insisted. "We have to do this slowly. We don't want to scare him."

His action angered me. "If you're so convinced, let's take him to a hospital. To a specialist."

The Colonel's voice sounded grim. "Lock him up in another cage? They've locked up too many 'vets' already. When they let them out they're worse than when they went in. No, we'll do it my way. This is my responsibility."

It was an odd tense feeling sitting in that ill-lit hut: a mute man eating, another speaking French and Khmer, mosquitoes whining, geckoes gulping their noisy 'Gek Ko' from close by. I stepped outside where it was cooler. Lanterns glimmered in the other huts. The night sky had cleared and a strange glow rose above the black line of trees. I suddenly realized it was the rising moon. A full moon, or nearly. Everything here was disorientating. I was the outsider, not the mute stranger. What I admired was the way he had been taken in. Would I have done the same to a speechless tramp in the American backwoods had he come into my house uninvited? When I got back the man had gone. Our Khmer host offered us more beer but the Colonel seemed fidgety and anxious to be off.

Tully said, "You can never tell with the Khmer Rouge."

Mama's family were waiting beside the motorbikes and we all returned to the farmhouse. The Colonel did not delay, but without a word set off for his own hut. I began to wonder whether his odd behaviour was to avoid too many questions. I put it to Tully, "He presents us with what he claims is a missing POW and then curtly refuses to discuss it." I suggested, "Let's go and see him."

"You won't be able to," said Tully.

I was in no mood to listen. There was no need even to borrow a flashlight. The moon shone bright as day. At the bamboo gate the boy barred the way. He was quite emphatic. I tried to push past but he produced a knife. "No," he said.

I was close enough to glimpse inside the hut and I realized what Tully had meant. Squatting beside the oil lamp sat a girl preparing a long opium pipe. The Colonel lay stretched out on his side, his shaven head gleaming in the yellow light. I watched as the girl moulded and wanned the small lump of opium over the flame. The boy kicked my shin, and cursing him I limped back.

"How many pipes?" I asked Tully, who was non-committal. "Listen," I told him as we stretched out on the sleeping platform under a single net with Dee and the tiger cubs to one side. "I'm going back. I've got to check this out." I hoped he might agree to come, but by his silence I could only assume his loyalty was linked firmly to Colonel Dan. One of the tiger cubs decided to explore me. I just hoped it was the one with the good manners,

I was awake long before dawn. Tiger cubs sleep during the day. Night is when they are active. These were hyperactive. If they weren't trying to twist the net into knots, they were having a go with my hair, or nibbling at my toes. Tully seemed to sleep through it all, while Dee moved this way and that so that if it wasn't an elbow in my eye it was a knee in my back.

The three drivers were sleeping in the lean-to outside where a lamp was burning. I woke one up and said, "Poi Pet." He understood, got up, spat, relieved himself on the sunflowers and was ready to go.

By the time we reached Poi Pet it was broad daylight but too early to go visiting the hospital. I breakfasted in the market,

under the watchful eye of Hun Sen. Rice, fried pork topped with a fried egg, and a can of Budweiser to wash it down. Finding my way out past the marijuana stall I set off towards the bombed-out hospital. I hoped there would be a foreign medic, and there was. A French doctor with Medecins Sans Frontieres. What I had to find out was too difficult to fool around with, so I told him and waited for his opinion. He seemed more interested in Colonel Dan than my mute POW, and asked me to describe him in some detail.

"Frudaker," he frowned. "I will tell you why I am curious. Two months ago we had an American doctor from UNTAC in Phnom Penh, A Doctor Freidaker. He was here for a month, but there was something—how you say?—suspicious. Drugs missing and not accounted for. When I asked to see his papers he said they were coming. Always coming. One morning the UN police arrived from Phnom Penh looking for him, but when we went to his room he had already gone. He was a strongly built man, very quiet, with strange eyes, watchful"

"It sounds like the same man," I agreed.

"I don't say your mute may not be a foreigner. May even remotely be what you suggest, but this Doctor, this Colonel? Is a strange coincidence. No?"

I had to agree with him. "I'm going back there now," I said. "I want to find if he is there and bring him out." The doctor shrugged helplessly. "I would go with you. But I have my

clinic." He pointed outside. The queue of waiting Cambodians was increasing by the minute.

"The other problem is the Khmer Rouge." I explained about the check-point. The Doctor seemed rather surprised, and asked if I could show him on a map. As I left I heard him pick up the mobile telephone and speak to someone in French. All I could recognize where those two ominous words, 'Khmer Rouge'.

It was difficult convincing the driver not to return directly, but first to go to the village of the mute stranger, We communicated in my pidgin Thai. I was sure there ought to be a short cut, because from the farmhouse we had doubled back towards the border. My driver finally agreed, but there was an anxious half hour before he swung off the main road and headed along a mud track towards the range of wooded hills. I was hanging on so hard I didn't have much chance to look around. The blast of a jeep horn took me by surprise. My driver slid for safety into shallow ditch. An army jeep roared past, blinding us with dust. The Cambodian soldiers waved their rifles and laughed at our discomfort.

We were only a kilometre out of the village and the jeep had already disappeared among the trees ahead when there was a sudden very loud explosion.

My driver braked hard. Ahead a cloud of smoke rose lazily above the line of trees. A crackle of automatic fire followed. Two short volleys and some single shots. Then silence. My driver had already turned his bike around. He was clearly not interested in staying and reluctantly nor was I. The question

in my mind as we headed back along the path towards the farmhouse was who had the landmine been planned for? Only Tully knew I was returning. On the other hand when he discovered the driver gone Ah, but the other drivers would have told him 'Poi Pet.' It was too confusing to allocate blame. One thing was certain, though. If the army jeep hadn't passed when it did we would have tripped the landmine and been blown to smithereens.

It was past midday by the time we reached the farm. The moment I arrived I knew something was amiss. The women for once were unsmiling. The motorbike drivers were gone and so was Tully. When I pointed to the hut across the paddy field, I got very glum looks. I knew they were blaming me for whatever had happened.

I walked across to the hut, only to find, as I expected, it was deserted. The Colonel had even fewer possessions than Tully to pack. While I was there I heard the motorbike start. By the time I had emerged my driver had vanished. I walked back to the road and waited half an hour before a passing UN jeep pulled up and gave me a ride back to Poi Pet.

I half hoped I might find Tully or Dee in the market, but they weren't. Later as I sat at Kim Kim restaurant in Aranyapradet eating an overpriced and underdone hamburger I happened to look inside my bag. Tully's manuscript, which I had certainly packed the evening before, was missing. He never intended me to have it in the first place.

Back in Bangkok the first thing I did was go to the American Embassy. I wasn't the only person looking for Colonel

Frudaker. Quite apart from the UN police in Phnom Penh, he was wanted in the US, "for a number of crimes" the US consul informed me darkly. Frudaker's wife, Brenda, was also anxious to find him. Her parents had put up their northern California home to raise a \$50,000 bail bond for Frudaker, who skipped off to Cambodia instead. They stood to lose their house by the end of the year if he was not found. According to the consul, "He has bilked families of MiAs out of thousands of dollars, convincing them he could trace their relatives."

So it was a scam, I suppose. I hated having to admit it. I couldn't help wondering who that man we met from the jungle really was. Where had he come from?

Penang—October 1991

I went to Penang to renew my visa. Although it's possible to overstay and pay a fine of 100baht a day to Immigration when you leave, should anything go wrong once your visa has expired you are liable to be arrested. I didn't fancy languishing in Chonburi jail or paying an exorbitant bribe to the police. I caught the Butterworth Express out of Hua Lampong station at 3.15 and arrived at Penang next day at noon.

Much of the journey is spent asleep. The sleeping cars are well designed, one roomy seat facing another along each side of the coach which converts to lower and upper bunks curtained off, with ladders to climb up, racks for the luggage and the corridor running in between. Supper if ordered arrives as the deepening twilight rushes past outside. Soon after the attendant makes up the bunks. There's a decent sized washing room at the carriage end, and if the rhythm and rattle of the train lulls you to sleep as easily as it did me, next morning you wake up to a misty dawn outside, rubber plantations burying the rolling hills and just time for a tepid cup of coffee before pulling in to Had Yai.

From here it's another hour to Padang Besar on the border for Customs and Immigration. Although it all seems like pandemonium for a few minutes with everyone pushing forward, within no time one is through, changing money and getting a cup of tea and an egg sandwich on the Malay side,

reading a copy of the Star and waiting to board the train through to Butterworth.

There are two types of farangs who get off the train at Butterworth and make their way along the covered catwalks to the rusting yellow double-decked ferries plying to and from Penang Island. There are the young backpackers resolutely unbowed beneath heaped-high packs, clutching water bottles and well-thumbed copies of South East Asia on a Shoestring. There is also the other type of farang, late middle-aged, paunchy, clothes a bit worn-out, a battered overnight bag, shoes down at the heel. Invariably single and male. If they carried a bottle it wouldn't be water. They needed no travel guides to accompany them on their journey. They knew their way blindfold. They came on the visa run. Arrive one day, visa the next—usually arranged by the hotel for a small commission—and out day three, back to Bangkok or Pattaya, waiting to welcome them once more to their favourite watering-holes in Soi Cowboy or Beach Road.

Tully had told me of a small Chinese hotel in Love Lane. I guess the name appealed to him, for the Pin Seng hotel was nothing to boast about. A high-ceilinged room, a shower and fan controlled from outside, for 20 Malay dollars-US\$8.

Penang is a Chinese town, and except for one tall round tower in the centre, the colonnaded streets, rickshaws, waterfront, colonial mansions and temples can't have changed much if at all in the last fifty years. The Chinese themselves behave with studied indifference to all outsiders, Malays and Europeans alike. This is their town.

I rented a bicycle and set off for the New China Hotel where Geoffrey was staying. It was neither Chinese nor particularly new but Geoffrey appreciated rather more comfort than Tully. What I was curious about was why he was there at all. New Zealanders don't even need a visa for Thailand. There is a reciprocal arrangement between the two countries. All Geoffrey had to do every three months— unless he got an extension, was to cross the border at

Padang Besar, turn right around and come back. He didn't have to come to Penang at all.

"I like it here," he said with a bluff laugh. "Baked beans are cheap. So is cheese."

I couldn't believe he came simply for food. When I assumed his prolonged stay had something to do with the death of Billy Goebbels he hotly denied it.

"Of course not. Why should it?" But his cheery smile had faded. "Thai police have been active recently. Bit like the film Casablanca. 'Round up the usual suspects.'"

"You?"

He hesitated. "Pattaya Police are getting greedy. They all want to drive Mercedes cars. Only needs a trumped-up charge, or a complaint, and once you're in Soi 9 jail, it's very expensive to get out. So far I've been lucky. Thing about Thai police, if they can't pick you up on the spot, they lose interest. They know they'll get you next time. I move house quite often. Recently the police stopped a farang in the street and told him they were going to get him and me and

someone else. I thought I was safe at the beach, but after the Billy Goebbels business I'm not so sure."

"You're in the clear about all that. The farang they suspected was Tully."

Mention of Tully irritated Geoffrey. "Tully's a bloody fool. Rule number one: Don't shit on your own doorstep. If Tully ever had any friends in Pattaya he's lost them now." He frowned in disgust. "When he first came he said he loved it, said it was a place where everyone could live out their own fantasies. Said the world needed places like Pattaya to keep itself sane. Then he turned against it."

"Perhaps he felt it turned against him," I suggested.

"How?"

"It didn't provide whatever he was wanting. Tully takes things on very personal terms. He gets a bad book review and condemns an entire nation. Perhaps he felt Pattaya had rejected him and struck out in revenge with the book."

Geoffrey looked doubtful, "He told me the town had a death wish. He said to me, 'People who have been successful in business elsewhere failed there in a spectacular fashion. They bought bars no one went to, paid high prices for worthless leases, drank themselves into a coma. Or they bought businesses that their Thai partners suddenly swiped.' Tully said doing business in Pattaya was the financial equivalent of falling on one's sword." He shrugged. "He may be right. He may be right."

"But you do all right?" I suggested.

He grinned, "Scrape by. Have to."

"Tully told me he admired you for your eye to detail. How you could spot a mark on a medal, a dot on a banknote, that made it valuable."

Geoffrey gave an embarrassed chuckle.

"Talking of detail," I continued, "I don't suppose you remember fixing the hinge on your door at the Lek Apartment? "

He looked puzzled. "Has someone broken in?"

"No," I reassured him. "Not that I know of. The door was a bit crooked, that was all."

"Was it? Can't say I noticed. Perhaps someone may have. I really can't remember. There's always things need fixing, aren't there?"

"And that sword of yours?"

His face brightened, "Ah, my naval officer's accoutrements. "

"Do you use it to chop things up?"

"I do not!" he declared indignantly. "Anyway. How did you find them?"

"Them!"

"Yes, there are two, I keep them hidden behind the pillows."

So, did Tully let himself out? Did he provide the weapons even if he didn't use them? Was he there watching Billy Goebbels being butchered? Turning up the volume on the

Penang—October 1991 music tape deck to drown his screams, while outside the friendly old night guard nodded indulgently at the partying he supposed was going on? Was that sword used to hack at Billy's head, and chop off the hasp lock on the safe? I was no Hercule Poirot or Sherlock Holmes. I didn't need to find out. But I didn't want anyone else to either.

I spent the afternoon sitting on the sea front near old Fort Cornwallis. Rusty cannons pointed out to sea. The story goes that Francis Light who founded the colony got the land for Georgetown cleared by loading a cannon with coins and firing it into the jungle. Tully seemed to be having much the same effect on Pattaya. He was unrepentant. "There is a small clique that live off the carcass of Pattaya—like blowfly maggots," Tully claimed. The poor maggots it seems were on the run.

I had supper with Geoffrey. We went to MacDonalds in the round tower. It made a change from noodles. He counted off on his fingers friends of his who had already left. "Now Bob has skipped bail. He got into Malaysia. Paddled across a creek at night. Turned up in Kuala Lumpur. Said he'd lost his passport. Can't go back to Thailand though." He reached for the toothpicks. "If it goes on, it'll be like the Philippines. The big exodus."

He was returning to New Zealand soon. It was the time of year when the Arms and Militaria fairs were held—one of his bigger money spinners. After we parted I walked back through the busy Chinese streets to the seashore. The old

colonial governor's building was lit up but empty. The green park behind the esplanade lay drowned in darkness, silently preserving its secrets. Next day I would take the train back to Bangkok, but I was giving up hope of finding Tully again. I couldn't even guess where the trail lay. I only knew that he was stranded out there in the same or another darkness, somewhere.

Cambodian Border—Near Pailin

Acting on a hunch, I decided to try and find Dee. Some weeks had passed since Cambodia, and the festival of Loi Krathong was approaching. This falls on the night of the November full moon. A krathong is a candle-lit float traditionally cut from the fibrous stem of a banana plant and decorated with flowers, blossom, and candles. Loi means to float. The festival is the way Thais give thanks to the spirit Gods of the water, and an apology for all the abuse done to them in the name of progress. On that night Thais everywhere carry their floats to the water's edge, sea, river, pond or lake, light the candles and pray that the bobbing float will carry their wishes away with them. It's the traditional occasion when everyone returns home to their families. I thought there might be a good chance that Dee would go home to Phanom.

I looked it up on the map. Phanom Sarakham lies due east of Bangkok, about 150 kilometres north-east of Pattaya. I decided to make the trip on a rented motorbike and left at dawn, turning inland along a winding road that joins Route 331 north of Sattahip. This is a straight road with little traffic and I was able to keep up a good speed. After an hour or so the rolling wooded hills descended into flat rice plains. The monsoons had been blowing for the past month and the land was all a lush green. Thankfully the rain held off and by ten o'clock I reached the outskirts of Phanom.

My dilemma was, how do you start looking for someone in a town when you haven't a photograph and only a nickname?

But I had one clue. I once heard her tell Tully that she sold things outside her house in the market. Phanom was one big bustling market. The town was bordered on the west by a deep muddy river with stilt houses along the bank, and a large temple compound. The rest was a labyrinth of narrow lanes, crowded with wooden houses. Every house seemed to have a stall outside, and every square inch of street was covered with produce or people selling it.

I also knew Dee's father was a schoolteacher. Not that that helped much. All my early enquiries produced a suspicious blank. "Why?" they wanted to know. But you could tell what they were thinking. "This farang is looking for his whore." It wasn't very pleasant. I tried strolling about thinking I just might see her but I quickly gave that up. Phanom is a place where you need to concentrate where you are stepping, otherwise you'll tread on a basket of eggs or a tray of tomatoes. Looking around and down at the same time is impossible.

I knew Dee liked to play video games as did most Thai kids. When I asked if there was a game parlour I was directed down a tiny alleyway to an open shopfront selling radios. A couple of Nintendo game machines lay on the counter hooked up to a pair of TVs. A schoolboy sat on a high stool playing. I started my usual story but it wasn't until I mentioned the tiger cubs and the schoolteacher that I noticed a response. After quizzing me why I wanted to see her, the owner informed me I had the wrong name. There was a girl called Toy who lived nearby, liked animals, sold

things. She came in to play video games, and her father was a schoolmaster. Luckily the shopkeeper spoke a little English to augment my poor Thai and was happy to practise it. Toy, he told me, was a good kid, but she didn't get on too well with her family as she had left school and kept going away on trips. An elder sister, he added, was at university studying languages for the diplomatic service. All this came as a considerable surprise. The man tapped his head knowingly. "Toy, Keng. Keng mak (very bright)." As to where she lived—why, the boy playing the games would show me.

A few minutes of hopping down the street dodging market produce brought us to an open doorway. The boy pointed and disappeared. I peered in. There amid a clutter of stores of every kind sat Dee watching television. The tiger cubs were confined to a large cage. For an awful heart-stopping moment I thought she would refuse to acknowledge me. Neighbours were already gossiping outside and I heard 'farang' repeated. At that moment a portly man approached from the rear of the shop and regarded me curiously. Dee said nothing, so I introduced myself. They were an awkward few minutes. I felt any second I would be out in the street, the door slammed shut, and none the wiser. However, fortunately the mother arrived from their second shop across the road. Well dressed and wearing plenty of gold jewellery, she smiled good-naturedly, and going to a large refrigerator handed me a can of cold beer. Dee reluctantly made room for me to sit down, but remained staring fixedly at the TV screen.

I finally managed to persuade Toy or Dee to take me on a tour of the town by motorbike. We drove to the temple. Here, relatively out of sight of everyone, she consented to speak. She even smiled.

"Tully," I said, "where is he?"

Now it was her turn to go blank. She didn't know. She hadn't seen him for a long time.

Marvin once told me that the farang who lives in Thailand goes through three stages. At first he believes everything he is told, then he realizes it's all lies and is pissed off, and finally he knows it's all lies but he doesn't give a hoot. However to suggest that a Thai is lying even when it's obvious is to cause unforgivable loss of face. Instead one has to virtually apologize for being mistaken. I apologized and Toy/Dee smiled amiably. After that we went for a drive down to the main highway for a meal of fried rice, and while we were eating she told me about Tully. How he was living in the jungle, alone.

"And the other farang?" I indicated bald head and biceps.

She told me he had become a monk. This was less surprising than it sounds. Virtually every male in Thailand, during some stage in his life, but generally when he is young, shaves his head, dons the saffron robe and enters the monkhood for periods of between one and three months. In a way it was rather like the dutiful Moslem making the Hajj to Mecca.

This farang—Dee referred to him rather uncomplimentarily as Uan (Fatty)—had taken up residence in an ancient shrine

on a mountaintop astride the border. The Khmer Rouge controlled the site for strategic reasons. Occasionally Thai pilgrims were allowed back.

And Tully? For once I did believe her when she said she didn't know.

"But can you take me there? Or somewhere near?" I asked her. "If I rent a Suzuki jeep, will you guide me there?" As an incentive I added that if she found any animals that took her fancy there would be room in the back. I did not, I insisted, mean Tully any harm. I suggested returning in a few days with a jeep.

She shook her head. "I come to Pattaya," she said. "Then we go Khmer."

She didn't wish me to drive her back to the market. Instead she saw me off, back on the road to Pattaya.

I got back in time for the festivities. All along Beach Road women were making krathongs for sale, and all along the seashore Thais were paddling out to release them onto the ebbing tide. Meanwhile fireworks were let loose with reckless abandon, rockets flying in all directions, crackers exploding underfoot. I imagined Dee releasing her candlelit krathong into the muddy waters of the Phanom klong and wondered what wishes she was sending off on board.

Dee arrived two days later. I had already rented the jeep in anticipation. She brought the tiger-cubs of course. They were far more hostile than they had been. I suspected being cooped up in a cage teased by every passer-by had caused it.

When I tried to stroke one, it hissed and struck out, clawing my cheek and barely missing my eye. After that I threw them small live catfish from a safe distance. Dee didn't go out. In Thailand there are eleven flavours of noodles including shrimp, tom yam (fish soup), pork. She cooked for herself, washed up and spread out a mat to watch the television. She was in a friendly mood, laughing and teasing, though what it was all about I was never quite certain. Later I gave her a sheet which she wrapped herself up in. I didn't invite her into bed as I didn't want to risk changing allies into something less certain. But when I switched off the light she came across, still wrapped in her sheet, and commandeered most of the bed.

I spent the night balanced on the edge, never knowing when I was going to fall on the floor. We had planned an early start but Dee was no eager riser and it was seven-thirty before we finally got away. It is frequently asserted that Thais cannot read maps, but that's usually because they are shown maps in English. Dee and I had already spread my torn map of Thailand out on the floor while I translated the names. I knew we were going somewhere south of Aranyapradet. It took us four hours to get there. I expected the route to become difficult and I was not disappointed. There were times we turned one way, only to double back a few miles later, when I wondered if she really knew herself where we were going. Aranyapradet is quite flat, but south along the border towards Pailin isolated mountain outcrops rise up above the plain. The rice-fields give way to logged-over forest. Tall grass and wild bamboo shroud the hills, which

gradually link up into one long range of mountains pointing south to the Gulf. Much of this area is now designated a National Park and contains within its boundaries some of the most extensive rainforest left in Thailand. This mountainous area extends into Cambodia and is one of the main strongholds of the Khmer Rouge. From the Khmer side steady shipments of uncut logs and gems cross into Thailand. The Thais pay only lip service to any UN sanctioned embargo. When there is business to be made the Thais have no qualms trading with anyone, Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Shan warlords, Karens, Khmer Rouge.

We drove south of Aranyapradaet for two hours before turning east again. Dee seemed to know where we were going, which was more than I did. All the road signs were in Thai which I cannot read. I know now what it's like to be an illiterate. In Thailand I am one. The roads branched and branched again. At intersections soldiers watched us from the shelter of huts. Usually if I waved first, they waved back. We were only challenged once and Dee seemed to handle that satisfactorily. I began to worry quite how close we were to the border. I had no wish to find ourselves in no man's land and tried to explain to Dee about the landmines. "Ra burt! (explosion)," throwing up my hands. But she only laughed. By now even the dirt track was so rarely used grass grew down the centre.

The misunderstanding arose because I assumed that we were going to see Tully. Sometime later in the afternoon with black clouds massing overhead, we entered an area of logged-over

forest and parked the jeep at the foot of a wooded mountain, the higher slopes shrouded in mist. The path was steep until it entered a glade. On the far side, guarded by two stone warriors, a stairway rose up the mountainside. Many of the stone slabs were cracked or had slipped, while sections of a balustrade, carved like a snake, toppled at unsteady angles, or lay smashed and overgrown by roots. Dee, carrying her cubs safely inside a rattan carrier, strode up ahead of me. I panted behind with less enthusiasm. After an interminable climb the steps ended—more stone warriors, and set back like giant rock buttresses, partly obscured by vegetation, massive statues of standing Buddhas carved out of blocks of stone, with moon eyes and sensual lips, peering out of a tangle of roots and creepers.

A flagstoned path led between them to a rock sanctuary, its dark entrance supported by massive pillars and capped by a cracked lintel. Peering inside I could make out, from light filtering through the partly collapsed roof, a huge recumbent Buddha and in the gloom rows of stone warriors and dancers making elaborate gestures. Or they would have been had not most of them been decapitated with only torsos and stumps of limbs remaining. As I came out I saw Dee talking to a monk. She was kneeling before him, wai- ing, while he smoked a cigarette. Finally, hitching his saffron robe more securely over his shoulder he pointed to a row of small wooden shelters on low stilts under the trees. Monks' robes were hanging out to dry and stray cats nosed a row of empty food bowls. It was only now that I realized too late my mistake. Ahead, with his back to us through the doorway,

squatting on the raised floor and rocking his body slowly backwards and forwards was the all too familiar figure of Colonel, Doctor and now Monk Frudaker.

Dee ignored my astonishment. "Uan. Uan!" she shouted.

The rocking paused. His head half turned.

"It's Tully I came to see," I explained. "Do you know where he is?"

There was no response. The rocking resumed. Then the voice said sombrely, "I am a forest monk. Tully is a forest beast."

More cheerfully than I felt under the circumstances, I remarked, "You're a hard man to find, Colonel."

"Not Colonel. Not Colonel any more. Phra. Phra— monk." He swung right round to face me through the doorway. The narrow verandah and four steps separated us. "This is a sanctuary. Do you understand? I am guardian of this sanctuary. So keep your gutter press out. Or I'll tear you limb from limb." His quiet voice and those huge biceps made the threat the more effective.

"I am not here as a reporter," I said.

"What then?" he shouted. "Cosmopolitan coffee table crap. I know your magazine. How many years have you sat behind your desk churning out crap for New York condo dwellers? Until you turn into it. You believe in its importance.

Sometimes you even air your concerns. You go on about how concerned you are about the homeless or about Aids. Just to be concerned is a gross indulgence." He moved to the edge

of the verandah so that he sat there towering above me in his robes. He lowered his bull head towards me. "You sum up New York philosophy. Christian philosophy—The Good Samaritan: 'I care, therefore I help.' Buddhist philosophy: 'It is my duty to help but I should not allow myself to become involved.' New York philosophy: 'I care very much but I do fuck all.' I am not concerned about Aids. I do nothing. I regard it as a vicious quirk of nature. There have been others. There will be more."

"Yes," I said evenly, "and there's a lot of people in the States paid you to try help find their missing relatives. I suppose the press got all that wrong too." I was watching his folded hands. I didn't doubt that they could strike very fast, like the head of a cobra. Now for the first time I noticed he had a companion in the hut. A young monk with a shaven head. Was it the boy who had been his protector in the village? Was the opium pipe there too? I wondered. To aid his meditations? But Frudaker did not seem put out by my remark. He looked thoughtful. "The power of the press. Have you ever considered how dangerous that can become? Nowadays, the press can turn elections, topple governments, even destroy presidents. If ever a voice is raised in criticism, it howls, 'Freedom of the Press—cornerstone of democracy.' Once it succeeds in its ambition and takes over power completely, it will forget about democracy. A new dictatorship. A new arbiter of morals, maker and breaker of rulers and ruled alike, manipulators of meaning, distorters of truth."

"Isn't that all a little far-fetched? There are some responsible papers."

He made no reply. I felt a drop of rain and glanced up. The black clouds massed overhead. I hoped they would pass but somehow doubted it. Frudaker also stared at the sky,

"We always hope it will shit on someone else," he remarked.

Watching him sitting cross-legged, his powerful frame shrouded so unlikely in saffron, I wondered if this was atonement.

"Trouble with Tully, he's an idealist with too many ideals to know what to do with." Frudaker solemnly held up his hand.

"You want just one to be in this business. Make money, feed the waifs, fuck the women, love God. One. His ideals keep tripping him up. He collects them like a kid hoards marbles."

"You don't have any such problems?"

He pivoted a curious glance at me and bellowed with laughter. "Ever heard of the 'Werewolves' in Vietnam? We dressed like VC, ate like VC—we were more Viet Cong than the Viet Cong. We were the only unit they truly feared. We lay in wait for them in the jungle when they came back from their own 'Vampire patrols'—sneaking into our camps and killing our boys in their sleep." The Colonel paused to make sure I was following him. "That was when we tracked them down, on their way back. Never a shot fired, just four live VC strung up feet first and slowly, very slowly slit open from neck to prick."

With mocking delicacy he picked at the folds of his robes. "These don't fool you any? They don't fool me. Don't worry." And then once again in self-mocking salute he raised his hand in a Buddha blessing. "One ideal at a time."

Suddenly I knew who he reminded me of. A bail-bondsman in LA who started a health food restaurant down on Ventura. A huge guy, he used to sit in the back kitchen eating a 16oz porterhouse steak with the air excluder fan on, and then hitch up his Buddha robe and wander among the tables where the clients sat eating their avocado pear and carrot sandwiches, wai-ing and distributing blessings.

"Do you know where Tully is?"

"I know where he was."

"Where?"

He looked at Dee and nodded. "Bai (go)," he told her. He lifted his robes to get up and stooped into the low doorway.

"I just want to find him," I called to his back.

The voice came disembodied. "Find him, eh? I cannot promise you'll find him." The hut door shut behind him. A moment later it opened just enough to permit his young novice to squeeze out. The boy squatted motionless watching me with cold hostile eyes.

I glanced at my watch. It would be dark in an hour. Where were we going to eat or sleep? Dee announced her decision. "Klap lot (Go back jeep)," she said, heading for the steps down the mountain. At that moment the storm broke. We

ran for the temple and sheltered under the overhanging roof, already drenched and shivering with cold. A monk came running through the dusk with an umbrella. He called to Dee and she beckoned me. Monks' umbrellas must be the biggest in the world. The three of us were able to shelter, splashing through the mud to a hut. Inside was a mosquito net and a mat. Shortly afterwards the monk returned with a towel, an oil lamp and a bowl of cold rice. Things could have been worse. Dee's main concern was for her tiger cubs, but they seemed to suffer their hunger stoically. Outside the rain sheeted down.

Next morning was bright and clear. In the compound monks were sweeping up after the storm. Frudaker however did not appear. The same monk gave us rice and some fruit. To my surprise there was another hut occupied. As we were eating two young Khmer Rouge soldiers emerged yawning and laughing. They regarded us with a moment's curiosity, said something to the monks, picked up their rifles and walked away along a path into the forest. I was relieved our way down the mountain lay in the opposite direction.

I had not thought much about it when Frudaker described Tully as a forest beast. I assumed he meant it as a crude comparison to his own spiritually elevated status. It was only after we reached the jeep and Dee pointed down a path into the forest that I wondered if he could have meant anything else. We walked for about an hour through sodden undergrowth before reaching a stream swollen by last night's rains. Frogs hopped among the grass. Dee stopped and let

out the tiger cubs. In a moment, showing no fear of water, they were pouncing in the shallows quite at home. One caught a small fish, scooped it out and threw it, playing for a while before it began to eat it from the tail up, hissing savagely at the other cub when it came near.

Dee looked up at me and pointed ahead. "Bai kondeeo (go alone)."

"Gly maak (long way)?"

She shook her head, "Mai gly (not far)."

The forest closed in almost at once. There was no path, only dense undergrowth. I struggled ahead for a while and stopped. I wondered if he knew I was near. As I crouched there I realized another human being could be six feet away from me and I would neither see nor hear him. But maybe I would smell him. In that tropical damp the scent of human sweat or tobacco, especially those cheap Krong Tip he sometimes smoked, was as sharp as a light switched on. Now, as I waited in the gloom I seemed to think everything that was unthinkable in the sunlight. This was no friendly forest to me, no picnic in the New England woods. But to him? Had Tully escaped here as an outcast, or one seeking refuge? I might cringe in the shadow but I doubted that he did. On every side trees, ferns, strangling creepers, green palms, poised to pounce. But not on him. Is that what Frudaker had implied? That Tully had chosen to live like a wild animal, a creature like those tiger cubs who you might befriend, but never tame or rely on, unpredictable as the trees, as the very rampant undergrowth?

I wanted to find him before he found me. He would live near water, he would need a shelter, and yet if I hadn't suddenly looked up I would never have discovered it. I was expecting some sort of primitive lean-to; sticks and leaf thatch. Tully sat legs dangling on the edge of a platform about thirty feet up between the branches of a great fluted forest tree.

"I've been watching you," he called down. "Willing you."

I looked at the bare trunk. "How do you expect me to get up?"

He reached back. Next moment a rope ladder fell uncoiling to the ground. It was made out of creepers and stretched when I tried my weight.

"No," he assured me, "it won't break. Don't look down. Remember your Boy Scout days."

I took him at his word. Tully was bigger than me, and he used it. He helped pull me to safety. I looked about me. The platform was built of bamboo lashed crudely together. At the back, against the main trunk, he had constructed a shelter. A raised flap of thatch in the roof let in light. Inside I glimpsed a hammock. Sheltered outside on a raised platform, a fire smouldered on a bed of sand. Beside it a tin cooking pot hung up to drain. Some half coconut shells served as food bowls, with smaller pieces for scoops. A piece of plastic had been angled to trap rain water into an earthenware jar and he had a lamp cut from a beer can.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" he suggested with exaggerated politeness.

I watched the smoke drifting slowly up among the branches.
"I thought I would sniff you out," I remarked.

He laughed.

"Does Dee know you're here?"

The answer was obvious. "Yes of course she does."

I was still puzzled. "Why did she take me to see Frudaker?"
And then I realized. "It was so that he could warn you, wasn't it? But why?" I asked, sitting down. At thirty feet up, the forest world appeared very different from ground level. Apart from the general airiness, I felt more at ease up here.

"Why what?" he replied. "Why am I here?" He reached up to a small bamboo tray hanging from a branch, selected a hard green fruit, and took a bite. "It's called a farang, like us. Bitter." He didn't offer me one. "We may not any longer know the lore of nature. Only the impulse. Our ancestral seas still surge in us." He held the fruit to his ear like a seashell and listened. Then he plucked at his torn shirt. "I could throw off civilization as easily as taking off my clothes. I'd turn myself into an animal, given half the chance."

"Could you?" I asked, but he didn't hear me.

Tully had given up the entire human race as if he was the last of a species with no one compatible left to mate with.

"It was the tiger cubs, I suppose. I wanted to see if I could communicate with animals. It's no good speaking to them, but before man could speak how did he get by? I tried to imagine a pre-talk stage, to think in pictures not

words." He grinned. "Try it sometime. Try thinking pictures at someone. Only you have to break it down. Like a film storyboard. I've tried it with Dee's cubs, sending them pictures of me from their point of view to get them to come close."

I watched him, wondering if this is what it had come to then. He had abandoned trying to understand people and turned to animals instead. "If you had a biblical hero who would it be?" I expected him to say St. Francis.

Without hesitation he replied, "Daniel. He never sacrificed his faith in God."

"I thought you didn't believe in God?"

"I believe in a creator. I feel it in the forest. A creative force. God has become too hierarchical—Popes, synods, bishops, rabbis."

I said "I seem to remember you admired the Dalai Lama."

He smiled and murmured part of a chant, "Om padeh ma ..."
Then he said "Have you heard of the Green Man? It's the friendly spirit of the forest. The one to protect you."

"Are you in need of protection?"

He didn't answer directly except to comment, "I'm coming to the opinion that all this," he gestured vaguely into the green canopy around us, "has more right to inherit the world than we have. I think the best future for the world is for mankind to become extinct."

"And you'd volunteer." I meant it as a joke.

Instead he said, "When I lived in the Solomon Islands there was a famine on Malaita, another island. People starved to death. The native priests set off in outriggers to find a school of dolphins. They 'spoke' to the dolphins and the dolphins swam ashore to be slaughtered by the starving islanders. It's no use you trying to disbelieve me. I was there. I saw it." When I didn't contradict him, he added, "The old priests told me the spirit of dolphin is very generous. Far more than we ever are."

"What are you suggesting? That mankind sacrifices itself for the sake of the forests or the animals?"

"It would be a step in the right direction."

"Direction? What direction?" I tried to sound patient, but it wasn't easy. "The end of civilization, art, music, religion—is it worth all that?"

"Civilization," he muttered darkly. "All civilization does is teach us how superior man is. And is it so very valuable—when you see what it's done?"

It was impossible to answer him. I knew he had gone farther out than I could ever reach.

"Well, is it?" he persisted.

"It's why you and I are here now," I said.

We sat in silence on the platform. Although we were suspended only thirty feet up it felt much higher. We might have been perched above the rest of the world. Sometimes

when the wind hit the forest canopy the whole structure swayed.

Tully might have read my thoughts. "Nothing new about treehouses. Mogul emperors used to hold cabinet meetings from them, their ministers waiting on the ground below, the Emperor perched midway between heaven and earth passing on divine instructions." He contemplated the branches overhead. "In the Middle Ages the Medici Dukes had the finest architects design them. Even laid on water, flowing through hollowed-out branches."

I glanced about. "A few creature comforts certainly wouldn't come amiss if you intend to spend the rest of your days here. Make it your launch pad for the hereafter?"

"If there is a hereafter I'm not sure I'd want it. I don't think they've designed one yet for me. Golden pavements and heavenly choirs are not my scene and I certainly don't want to be reincarnated. The chances are I'd be born starving or sick. A slum in Calcutta or a famine in Africa."

"An animal then? A wild animal?"

He seemed uncertain. "If there are any left, I'd probably be born in a zoo." He smiled. "If I ever was reincarnated, there's only one thing I'd like to be."

I waited, uncertain what to expect. His reply took me by surprise. "A decent water-colour painter. It must be wonderful to catch the mood of sky and sea, and put it down." And then more sombrely, he added, "These dogooders, ramblers, ecologists, animal welfare types. They

don't understand the savageness of the forest. They want to patronize it." He went on, "That's something else I've realized. The jungle makes human beings cringe. Sense their own futility. That's why they want to hack it down. Revenge. Nowadays man's out for revenge on everything. And he has the means to do it. Sometimes I feel as if my existence was condensing to the size of a pin-head that will suddenly explode. Does that mean I'm getting near my end? I feel as doomed as this forest." He sat there in silence for a while gazing down. "Have you ever felt as if some switch were pressed condemning you to follow a course in which almost involuntarily you shed the value? you believed in, until before you know it, you have reached a point where if you wanted to return, you couldn't? In the end I can visualize myself living here like a hermit off nuts and wild fruits. I should be appalled at the prospect but it also holds a nagging appeal." He tossed the core of his farang fruit out into space. I heard leaves rustle as it fell.

"I once had a lecture on poverty from a woodcutter in the Philippines. He only earned a dollar a day and had to support thirteen children, 'I'm not poor/ he told me, 'Poverty is not having children, not having a wife, being sick, being lonely, being far from God.' I realized that, of the two of us, I was the poor man. I want to possess so much. And so little." He hesitated before adding forcefully, "Listen, any fuck-ups I've made are my own fault. No one else's. I'm not having any of this psychiatrist's crap— blaming my family. I love my mother. She's a remarkable lady. Eighty-seven, drives, plays a mean hand at bridge. Only just stopped playing golf."

"Your father?"

"My father died. God, he was brave. Never complained. He was a man you respected. I was a bit in awe of him. Like God."

"I thought you didn't believe in God?"

"God's the headmaster. You can't just give him up. He sits at a big desk behind a thick wooden door marked 'Enter'. It's amazing how much he knows about what's going on. Even in the second form." Tully gazed out into space.

"Get out of here," I told him. "You've made the experiment. You discovered something. Now's the time to leave."

He hardly seemed to hear me. "Ever wonder why? Was man born with a genetic failure? Better Noah had drowned. If he saw how the human race has progressed I'm sure he would have wished he had. The age of the chain saw. Night and day. Day and night. Did you ever see the forest on fire? Thousands of miles of blackened stumps."

"It's the way things are," I said.

His eyes had a faraway look. "It's not as hard as you think watching someone die. Not after you've seen thirty, sixty."

Where was he? I wondered. Nicaragua, Vietnam?

"If you're ever in Phnom Penh go to Tuol Sleng. S. 21 in the Khmer Rouge extermination guide."

I noticed his hands were trembling. "You sound as if you've been there?"

"Only as a tourist," he said.

"I thought you were going to claim you had been captured."

"I was," he said quietly.

"When was that?" I didn't believe him. It sounded like another myth to add to his repertoire.

"I was at the Royal Hotel. The other journalists had got out. When the Khmer Rouge came into Phnom Penh just to be a foreigner marked you down as a criminal in their eyes."

"You overstayed your welcome?" I said flippantly.

"I met someone I liked," he said softly. "And I missed the last bus home."

With an intense effort Tully steered his thoughts back from the brink of wherever they were. He gazed around him, as if he was memorizing it. A look of farewell.

"Just a patch or two left in Thailand to keep the tourists happy," he mused. "And if the economy keeps on booming they won't need the tourists. They'll be able to plunder the lot."

"It's the way things are," I repeated.

"No," he said in a voice of despair, "it's the way we have made them. Not the way they are,"

There was little enough for him to bring out with him.

The Three Pagoda Pass- November 1991

It was only during the next few days that I found out what had happened about the MIA business in Cambodia.

According to Tully it was not so much the landmine, about which he denied any knowledge, as the arrival of the French doctor, that prompted Frudaker's hasty departure. Alerted in time by his boy, Frudaker escaped out of the rear of the hut, unseen. He and Tully were on their way back to the Khmer Rouge village when they saw two truckloads of UN peacekeepers speeding across country ahead of them. As the mute man from the jungle was regarded as an essential source of future funds from MiA support groups in America, Tully and Frudaker decided to wait until night before attempting to kidnap him.

All day the UN peacekeepers strove to keep the two armed factions apart. The dead Cambodian soldiers had been removed and an uneasy calm prevailed. UN soldiers patrolled the village perimeter. That night and the next the deaf mute never appeared and they came to the conclusion that hearing all the commotion he had taken to his heels and fled back into the relative safety of the jungle. As to stay longer would put themselves at risk Tully and Frudaker reluctantly headed back to the border.

Tully was guided through the minefields in the dark by a one-legged guide. The most dangerous moment according to Tully was when he stepped just off the path to relieve himself

and nearly detonated a mine. He could hear his urine hitting metal.

Meanwhile Dee strolled over the bridge crossing quite openly and waited for them with a samlor—a three-wheeled rickshaw towed by a motorbike. In this they all squeezed with difficulty, together with six crates of cut price beer from the market and a dozen cartons of army rations from the Gulf war selling at 15 baht a kit—including, explained Tully, an excellent beef stew, cocoa, peanut butter, biscuits and a wad of toilet paper. They headed south for the safety of the Khmer Rouge controlled border area near Pailin. Frudaker took up residence at the temple just over the frontier and Tully decided to hide in the jungle. Dee acted as postman. Frudaker, despite his denials, had taken a number of photographs of the MiA—usually in a rather shadowy setting. But the scam, although Tully steadfastly maintained there never was one intended, had been busted. Publicity in the States put an end to it. Especially after the mute was found and declared to be probably Thai.

"They would say that, wouldn't they," added Tully. Having seen him I could easily share his doubts.

Ever since Tully walked barefoot out of the jungle I had been trying to think where best he could go. His passport was so stained by damp to be barely decipherable and his visa had long since expired. I didn't know if the police were on the look-out for him or not. I was due in Kanchanaburi and knowing Tully's liking for frontiers I suggested we visit the Three Pagoda Pass. I think it was the name that appealed to

Tully. In Thai the description was more accurate—Three Chedi. The pass—held by the Karen—was a vital component in their long battle for autonomy against the SLORC military overlords in Rangoon.

The Karens were a cause Tully had somehow overlooked and because I felt responsible for persuading him to abandon the jungle, I encouraged him. I should have known by now that to give Tully a readymade cause— particularly a lost one—was like telling Lawrence of Arabia it was impossible to take Aqaba from the land. It was the challenge. I can see all this with hindsight. At the time I felt it was exactly what he needed to make a complete break from the subversive influence of Frudaker, and his self-imposed isolation in the jungle.

After going on for over forty years of civil war the Karen still held a strip of land along the Thai border, west of the Mooei River with Mannerplaw its headquarters. Unlike the Burmese the Karens were mostly Christian—Baptists. Their equipment was old, their weaponry outdated and only recently they had lost one of their most important outposts, Sleeping Dog Hill, guarding the approach to Mannerplaw. The current rainy season had put a temporary halt to the SLORC campaign but it would resume at the start of the next dry season. Tully plied me with questions. If I could not answer them that did not seem to deter him. I think he supplied wishful answers of his own.

I have omitted to say that before we set off, we returned to Aranyapradet to allow Dee to cross the border and buy

something to keep her content. She returned with a pair of parrots to sell in Phanom. As we approached Kabin Buri, we were flagged down at a police check-point. When they noticed the parrots, their smiles broadened and they demanded a fine of 2,000 baht (\$80). "Wild birds are illegal," they told us.

Dee offered to set them free, but they wouldn't accept that. "They are not wild," she insisted, "I have had them since they were born."

"In that case," the police captain replied, "if you can show me the eggs they hatched out of, I'll believe you."

By now we were all laughing at the ludicrous situation. The fine gradually came down. Finally 1 had to pay 500 baht. As we drove off Dee vented her disgust at the police, and then blamed us.

"Police see farang. Know farang have money."

This seemed unfair considering I paid for both the birds and the fine but Dee remained in a black mood, muttering to herself all the way into Phanom.

"We were lucky," said Tully. "Think what we'd have had to pay if they had found the tigers."

It took Dee less than ten minutes to turn the parrots over to her long-suffering family to look after. Meanwhile her mother kindly provided cold beer, and plied us with enough snacks to last a week, including a carton of eggs. Thais like eggs more than any people I know. They have them on or in anything and everything. They also put everything in them. A

Thai omelette contains minced pork, peas, vegetables, rice, mushrooms and even more chopped-up egg. Dee came out with a bag, and food for the tiger cubs, climbed in the jeep and we were off.

We w'ere lucky with the traffic around Bangkok and it was barely dusk when we joined the A4 for Nakhon Pathom. Our only immediate worry was fuel which we were almost out of. When we just managed to pull into a gas station with the needle hitting the bottom of the dial, Tully duly acknowledged divine assistance. "Khop khun maak, Pra jao. (Thank God)," he declared.

Dee retorted, "Thank the petrol station."

It was only a small point, but it set me thinking just how wide was the cultural divide between Buddhism where there is no God and Christianity which relies on one. I mention this because Dee subjected us to a long diatribe about the meaning of Christianity that took us all the way to Nakhon Pathom. Tully seemed to understand her but even he was bewildered by her assertions. The gist of it was that Jesus was never crucified. If he was God then he couldn't be. It just wasn't possible. Tully bravely tried to explain but I could tell that Dee was unimpressed. Unlike Tully she accepted reincarnation as a matter of course. To her it also explained evolution, which was something I am sure Darwin had never thought of. Dee had an answer for everything. Her answers like her choice of animals were certainly never dull. She seemed to be horrified by Tully's neglect for his soul.

"I don't care where I die," he declared. "It's up to my soul whether it can make it or not."

For Dee, as for all Buddhists, the prayers, chants and funeral rites were essential to help the spirit of the dead to find its way. To die unknown, ignored, unremembered was too awful to contemplate. "I shall die in Phanom," she declared as if her life there was already mapped out.

"And the Japanese gentleman?" Tully asked.

"He will live in Phanom too," she announced. "He will open big shop in Phanom. Sell everything."

Tully and I must have shared the same vision of an animal supermarket for we both burst out laughing.

It was dark by the time we reached Nakon Pathom.

Fortunately all roads seemed to lead to the towering golden chedi in the centre. We made the mistake of parking in the grounds and while we enquired about hotels, Dee instantly discovered a woman selling what looked like squirrels. The prospect of a battle between tiger cubs and squirrels all night long in a hotel room was more than even Tully could accept. The hotel lay beyond the market, across a narrow river running straight through the town centre. We managed to park the jeep inside the hotel, persuaded the disbelieving lift-boy that what were snarling in the large rattan cage were just a couple of cats, and took over a pair of adjacent rooms. One bathroom was reserved for the tigers, whose hissing only diminished once they had devoured a large catfish apiece, including the bullet-hard head.

Tully and I left Dee with her charges and crossed the river to the market side looking for somewhere to eat. We sat down at a place that sold duck and he started to brood over Dee's conversation in the jeep and how the Thais in general regarded us. White rice and sliced duck, capped by the inevitable egg, arrived together with a tin mug of cold water, but Tully was too busy waving his spoon and fork at the adverts around the wall to eat. "They copy us, but they only see the pictures. They can't read the script. And what do they see? Levi jeans, Pizza Hut, Coca Cola, Big Mac and the worst movies. What sort of models, what sort of impact, I ask you?" The duck tasted very good. I merely added, "But it's the same for us, the other way round."

"Is it?" he persisted. "At least we are interested in their culture. In what makes them tick. And they'd rather we didn't. They only want us to see Buddha smiling." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Whenever they know you speak Thai, what do they say? You hear them quickly tell others, 'Farang poot thai dai' (can speak Thai). Not as a compliment, but a warning—telling them to shut up in case the farang will know what they are saying! You know what they call us—'Keenok'. Kee (shit), nok (bird). Why? Because we fly in like birds and are full of shit."

I protested humorously, "That's not unique to Thailand."

He grudgingly accepted this. "I've seen them smiling sweetly at foreigners but saying the most awful things to their face."

"Be over the border tomorrow," I placated him. "Try your luck with a new culture." I might have been handing out candy to kids.

"Do you really think so?" he said.

Next morning we reached Kanchanaburi by nine, but Tully was eager to press ahead and wasn't interested in the famous bridge over the River Kwai. "Nothing like the bridge in the film," he complained. "Just an old railway bridge."

"Tully," I reminded him, "that was a story. Fiction."

He just shrugged. He and Dee had been having one of their sparring bouts that always ended in mutual abuse and sullen silence. After Kanchanaburi the road follows the river valley north-west; wide fields of sugar cane and further off the Burmese mountains. Gradually the valley narrows, the hills close in, the forests thicken. A rusty steam engine stands isolated on a piece of track like the last train, stranded for ever. The road climbed up to 'Hellfire Pass', where thousands of POWs and slave labourers had died digging a cutting through the mountain. We stopped for breakfast, and Dee cheered herself up with a bowl of red hot noodles. Ahead a sign pointed up a track towards the cutting, but all we found was a deserted cafe named House of the Rising Sun and a rather forlorn plaque inscribed by the Burma Star veterans which read:

When you go home, tell them of us and say,

'For your tomorrow we gave our today'.

The road worsened; holes, cracks, mud-slides. Rain fell and the sky closed in. Overhanging cliffs towered above us, jungled creepers snaked down, banks of cloud lifted like gunsmoke off the forested slopes. The rain teemed down, reducing visibility to zero. We almost missed the fork in the road. And then something happened. Something so unforeseen and unexpected. We had stopped for shelter and some lunch in a layby sitting out of the rain while a woman cooked us fried pork and rice, when one of the tiger cubs crawled out of the jeep window Tully had neglected to close. He saw at once what was happening and ran back to stop it. The cub, frightened, snarled, jumped and scampered off straight into a pack of wild scavenging dogs. The cub hadn't a chance. It was over in moments. The dogs lunged in snapping and by the time Tully beat them off the cub lay quite dead on the ground. I

The Three Pagoda Pass—November 1991 watched Tully regard it. He picked up the limp body and threw it into the undergrowth. It was hard to tell how upset he was. Dee remained silent but Tully kept repeating he had killed it.

The rain eased slightly, visibility cleared. We reached the end of a lake although in actual fact it was the valley that had been flooded. The dead branches of a drowned forest scarred the still grey surface. The road curved inland to avoid swamps. For a moment the sky brightened and we glimpsed a pretty red-roofed temple on a low wooded crag, and then the mist blanked it out. "Like a traveller in an archipelago,"

commented Tully miserably. "The mist clears for an instant and you catch a glimpse of the other life."

We got to the bottom of the pass by four. There was an unmanned police post and beyond a mud road rising steeply. Tully was for going on, but I pointed out we did not know what was up there. What would we find? Even now the light was fast fading. We drove instead to Sangkla Buri. Below the road a line of houseboats lay moored offshore. At this point the river emerged from a gorge and widened into the lake. What appealed to Tully was that half a mile or less beyond the houseboats, a rickety wooden bridge crossed over, supported on tall spidery poles. This in Tully's opinion was the very 'Bridge on the River Kwai'. He insisted we stay there, and negotiated the jeep down a steep track to the waterside where sunken pontoons zig-zagged out a hundred yards to the houseboats. The huts floated on rafts of bamboo, some listing badly, and most uninhabitable. Tully prowled about as excited as an explorer and laid claim to one that even had an electric light and two bedrooms opening onto the unsteady waterlogged verandah. It reminded him, he told us, of a place he had stayed on the Ichito River, waiting for a raft to take him down the Amazon.

I think the owner was as surprised as we were to find anyone foolhardy enough to wish to stay there. Just to hump our bags out meant rebuilding a section of the pontoon, floundering about kneedeep in mud in the pouring rain.

Apart from the rather spectacular bridge, when the mist lifted we had a glimpse of an unusual temple, that could have

been straight out of the Mayan ruins of Palenque—dominated by a steep slabbed tower. Once again it took Tully back to Central America, but it was not a vision he could share with Dee. After supper in the town square—or what passed for one, where Tully objected strongly to being labelled tourist, we returned to our watery home. The rain had ceased and a wan moon rose over the silvery gleam of the lake and the silent hills beyond. If Tully found peace that night it was his last for a long time to come.

Climbing up to the pass next morning rain was sheeting down and the road had fragmented into muddy torrents. Even in the four-wheel-drive we could barely drag ourselves out of the worst bits. There were several precarious moments when I was sure we would turn over, but Tully bullied the jeep this way and that and churned a passage through. By the time we reached the top, the downpour had eased off. The mud-slide ended a few hundred yards downhill opposite three white stupas, the smallest barely taller than head height, draped in sodden prayer flags. Below us the valley disappeared into the clouds, while beyond, a range of jungled peaks rose above the wraith of mist; dark and sombre. There were no Thai officials, just a check point with two flagpoles. The familiar red, white and blue and the unfamiliar purple and red flag of Burma. But was it Burma or Karen territory? From a low hut beside the border soldiers with Gurkha-style hats regarded our approach.

We soon discovered our mistake. Until a month before the Karens had control of the pass, but there was infighting

between the Karens and the Mons—another insurgent group. In the ensuing battle the town was largely destroyed, and taking advantage of the situation the Burmese forces stormed in. It was Burmese soldiers grinning at us from the shelter of their hut who waved the jeep in and then ordered us out of it. We sat down at a bare table and were invited to fill in what looked like an old hotel register. A sign announced a \$5 entry fee to aid town reconstruction. There was no town visible, just the mud track dipping downhill with a sign that read 'Yangoun 185 Km'. One of the soldiers tapped Tully's wristwatch and held up his fingers to indicate six. As it was already 2 p.m., time seemed short. We drove off, passing burned or partly dismantled wooden houses.

"No wonder they need our five dollars," Tully remarked.

A town of sorts did emerge on either side of the street and just as the next downpour fell we reached a market raised on piles and ran for the shelter of a tea stall, shaking the rain off us while a kettle boiled over a primus. The tea came strong and sickly sweet with dollops of condensed milk. Tully bought a fat green cheroot and attempted to fire the wrong end. The Indian stallholder corrected him. A Burmese woman stately in a check sarong surveyed us as she smoked an even larger cigar.

"Quite at home," chuckled Tully. "Tea and ., . whatever those doughnutty things are. Jolly good for dunking anyway." He waved for another plateful. "And look at that wrecked car," he said with his mouth full. "If I'm not mistaken that's a Union Jack." It was only painted on the roof, but in Tully's

imagination the curtain of fifty years parted. Beside the Three Pagodas, the British flag still flew.

A decrepit truck, pedigree long past recognition, panted slowly past, a cluster of giant tree trunks chained together hanging down behind. "Poor bloody forests," muttered Tully.

Dee watched him closely. "Money?" she demanded.

Tully obliged and watched her slosh through the mud to stalls selling everything from Mandalay rum, Burmese blankets, schoolroom slates, old banknotes, brass gongs and green stone rings. Dee invested in the rings. "At least no bloody animals," remarked Tully, watching her admiringly.

"What'll you do now?" I asked him.

"Go on I expect," he replied with a glance at the dark clouds swirling overhead, "when the rain stops."

I wasn't sure what he meant exactly. It had never been my intention that our visit was any more than sightseeing. The rain let up. We paid for our food in Thai baht— Burmese kyats, even crisp new notes were on sale only as souvenirs. Half a mile down the road we reached another check point where a sign declared we could go no further. "Never take these signs too seriously," said Tully, strolling past. An agitated Gurkha-hatted soldier ran after us, waving us back with his rifle.

"Listen," I said as we returned to the market, "it's no use. You might be able to get out, but you can't get in. They'd spot you in no time."

Tully seemed nonplussed. "Shave my skull and don a saffron robe, like Frudaker. Perhaps I'll do it anyway."

As we drove back up the lane towards the border, Tully veered left without warning and slithered up a steep side road that led us towards a forested crag. A wooden arch spanned the road and beyond, taking us by surprise, a temple of three red-roofed, overlapping-eaved pagodas silhouetted against the misty hillside.

"It's a real pagoda!" exclaimed Tully enthusiastically.

I was Jess impressed. "Are we going to spend the night up here? Or go back to that sinking raft?"

Tully didn't seem to be listening. "Real pagodas," he laughed.

Dee laughed. We were all drenched, standing in a no man's land we had to be out of at the stroke of six. I failed to find much to laugh at. Tully cruised slowly back up to the checkpoint, waved to the soldiers and pulled away from the three white-washed stupas.

A bank of mist seeped downhill to engulf us. Tully, scanning the forest slopes muttered, "There has to be a back way in,"

For once I was glad of the rain. It put a stop to anything foolhardy. We found some chalets, alpine in outlook; pine-log walls, thick blankets on the beds.

"All we need is a blazing fire, lederhosen and bags of Oom-pah-pah," Tully declared. Dee opened a small basket to reveal a mongoose she had bought while no one was looking.

Tully still brooded over the dead tiger-cub, detesting all dogs, wild ones in particular.

"Perhaps you can get the other one a stray cat for company, paint some stripes on it." I thought it was a good idea.

Tully didn't. "We'll release it. Find its habitat and release it."

The chalets had a rather good restaurant. Steaming bowls soon crowded the table, plus plenty of beer. The rain had stopped and a faint moonglow rose over the black mountains. Tully decided he was going for a walk. Dee and I strolled down towards the three white chedi but Tully suddenly vanished. I suppose we must have waited half an hour keeping a watchful eye on the border check-point, where a single overhead light blazed when suddenly I heard angry cries far off, followed by a couple of shots. I watched Dee anxiously, but she seemed unperturbed. We waited, uncertain what to do next. Dee decided he had been shot and was performing a macabre charade to this effect when out of the darkness some figures emerged. Tully, followed by three soldiers, two with their rifles pointed at him, the third using the butt end to bully Tully along. They didn't stop at the check-point, but with a few final clouts, most of which missed, sent him flying under the white crossbar.

Tully picked himself up and ambled over towards us. "I was only taking a stroll. I think I surprised them." As we set off back to the chalets, he added ominously. "I've found my way in."

Next morning as we set off, our bags packed for what I assumed was to be another trip across to the border market for breakfast, Tully suddenly wrenched the wheel hard over and we lurched unsteadily into a side track, bumped across a ditch and jolted to a halt before a board nailed to a post with the single word in English, 'STOP' and some Burmese squiggles underneath. A few hundred yards ahead I glimpsed the red roofs of the pagodas above the trees.

"I can't read the Burmese writing," Tully remarked thoughtfully, releasing the brake and moving slowly forward. He faced me with a sly grin. "It said 'Stop' and I stopped." He reached for his bag, opened the door and climbed down. "Now I'm going on."

"Where?"

He stared ahead, for a moment uncertain. The track ahead vanished under pools and mud. He turned back to me and grinned. "Yangoun 185 klicks."

"If you get there."

He glanced up at the patchy sky. Below us white mists were rising like a flood. "Give Dee some cash, won't you." He smiled at her. "Want to come for the trip? Dee want to come?" Dee watched him with a curious intensity. "Dee likes borders but only to buy things," he answered for her.

Dee didn't seem surprised by his decision. It was as if she already expected it. "I go back Phanom," she said.

"I know," he said slowly after a pause, "I know," and started walking off down the track in the direction of the temple. He

had gone ten yards, when Dee suddenly banged on the horn. Tully waved.

I called after him. "Next time you decide to go and get yourself shot, let me have your manuscript first."

"Now there's a cold-hearted bastard," he laughed back.

"Deng will get his manuscript, when I'm good and ready. Not before." He waved again and kept going. We watched

The Three Pagoda Pass—November 1991 in silence as his outline slowly diminished, melting in the morning mist. But even then we still imagined we could make him out. A pale sun rose behind the clouds. The mist lifted. The track suddenly became clear. A brown thread wending into the hills. Tully had gone. A dog barked.

Beside me Dee shivered. She turned her eyes back from the track and examined the green stone rings she had bought.

We sat awhile in silence, each lost in reverie. Finally Dee said, "Tully, he not come back." It was as if the world outside had silently swallowed him up.

Bang Saphan Bay

At Nakon Pathom, in the courtyard of the Great Chedi we parted. Dee told me she wanted to return to Phanom by bus. It was never any use arguing with her. I watched her mount a motorcycle taxi to the bus station, burdened with bags and cages. I suddenly felt alone.

Pattaya had lost its appeal. Instead of driving east I turned south to Petchaburi with its white temples on the peak above the town and the cable car for the pilgrims. It was too late to reach Bang Saphan that night so I stopped in Prachuab Khiri Khan, eating in the busy night market, and strolling out on the pier; trucks of fish and ice roaring up and down, the boats lit up by arc lamps, unloading. I couldn't help wondering where Tully was now; beaten and manacled in some wretched cell or squatting down to eat rice in some remote village hut. And Dee, I missed her. "God help the Japanese gentleman," we used to joke. But I couldn't help envying him either, and wondering, like Tully, what was so wrong with us? That time I drove her around Phanom I noticed a graveyard of stone crosses. When I asked her what happened to the Christians, she said, "We killed them all." I remember Tully trying to explain to her what a novel was. Dee nodded. "I prefer cartoons," she said. Perhaps she was right. The best way to read life was by cartoons.

Next morning I continued to Bang Saphan. Leaving the main road and driving the ten kilometres into town felt

Bang Saphan Bay like coming home. The familiar sights; post office, clock-tower—out of time, level crossing. I kept going to the beach and rented a bungalow at Boon Son Resort; twin rows of tatty thatch bungalows at right angles to the sea. Tully had been friendly with the woman who owned them, a wiry gypsy lady wearing a lot of gold. Tully claimed she howled like a wolf when the moon was bright. The charred remains of Marino's house stood back from the beach. I was told he had taken over Tully's old house. There was no wind and for once the tide was in, a still grey sea lapping the shore. A long line of bending coconut palms and the green promontory of Mae Lampong beyond. It hadn't changed.

I found Marino at home, busy as ever, involved in some complicated cooking instruction with Lek. He greeted me uncertainly, brushing a hand across his thinning hair. His protruding eyes scanned me closely to decide why I was there. Rather reluctantly he invited me up and called Lek to make coffee.

"I heard about the fire," I said. "I'm sorry. I hope ..." He shrugged, throwing up his arms, touching an elbow here, a knee, a cheek. "Just a singe." A quick smile that switched off. "Very lucky. Lek too. I saved him, you know."

"Of course." I agreed, wondering if it might not have been the other way round. "What was it? A gas cylinder I heard."

Once again the brittle flashing grin. "Perhaps. Who knows? I didn't start it. Owner tell me I knock over lantern, set roof on fire. At three o'clock? We are all asleep. Why oil lantern? We

have electricity." Lek brought up the coffee, bowing but giving me a suspicious look.

"Tully," I said intentionally so that he would hear, "have you seen him? Has he been back?"

Marino lit a cigarette "They found his boat. You know that?" The bulging eyes regarded me. "Yes. Out there near the island." We both stared through the coconut palms to the calm sea and the low grey hump of the outlying island. "In one of the channels. A fishing boat caught her nets."

"Why do you think he did it?"

Marino lifted his hands and laughed. "He was mad. He lived on impulses. I am only surprised he didn't burn his house down too."

I looked at him. "You don't think ... ?"

A brisk shake of the head. "No. No. Certainly not." Then the sly smile. "We cannot give him too much credit, can we. I heard rumours that he was responsible for Billy G's death. If we are not careful we will turn him into a legend. He would like that. Yes. He would like that." Marino nodded reflectively. "Tully, he say to me a lot of crazy things. He tell Billy, 'I came to make a film of a new beginning. Not a new end.' Billy he like it. Perhaps we write it over his tomb."

Marino leaned back, shaking his head. "'Sex,' Billy say to me, 'is a spark in the wilderness. A moment of self-gratification with someone else supplying the music.' Look I write it down. He say we use it in the film." Marino chuckled. "'Sure,' I tell

him, 'we have two twelve year olds playing with each other and saying it.'" He drained his cup slowly. "You like more coffee? I tell you why he sink his boat. He come back. For sure. Oo—she see him. Lek—he see him. Tully think he is the invisible man." Marino laughed. "He come back and he find his paradise finished. A steel mill like a steel dart through his heart. Who does he blame? Man. God. Perhaps if he has a bomb he blow up the steel works. Boom Boom! He blow up the world. Once he tell me I am like Pizzaro—an evil adventurer come to destroy the Inca king."

Marino paused, staring out to sea. "I tell you his trouble. Many ideas but no results. 'Idee sono tanti, risultati sono niente.'" He tapped his head. "No talent. Why his books do not sell? He blame the publisher, the critics, even the

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readers. He cannot blame himself. And he hate books. Why? I ask him. 'Books,' he say, 'people read once and throw away. A painting they see again and again.' I am a painter. I have paintings in Amsterdam, in Athens." Marino shrugged. "He is jealous. One of his problems is he hate himself. No, not hate—dislike, despise, can see no good in. That is why he hate mirrors. He hate to see his own reflection. He see a stranger not a friend. That is why he cannot love. You cannot love if you are bitter like he."

"Lek. You bring us more coffee, please. You like something to eat maybe? A French omelette. I teach Lek how to cook European. Tully teach him only chips." Marino thought that was funny. Then more soberly, "Something happen when he

make the film. He start to see life in cinematographic terms. He view even his own moods like a Fellini movie. All of life became a storyboard. A cartoon perhaps. But he lose sight of what he thought he believe in. One day he say, 'Marino, what is honour?' As if he lose it and we have to look for it on the floor. So I tell him Shakespeare when Falstaff say, 'Honour what is it? A word. What word?—air.' He was troubled about something. He tell me a story from Rome, long time back. He has this girl. Somebody complains. They tell him to go. Accuse him of plageurismo del anima. Stealing the Soul. Now he has been listening to the BBC—the World Service. You know he lie in bed alone and listen to the world outside through a small black box, name of Sony."

I wasn't sure if this was a joke. Down below I could hear familiar sounds of cooking.

"Trial of Socrates. Found guilty of not acknowledging the Gods." Marino spoke slowly to get out the words correctly. "Substituting other divinities and corrupting the young. For which the punishment is death! Tully. I tell him. How can one corrupt the young when they discover corruption for themselves? Like fire. When you were child what you did together, how you play together? No one tell

lim Tully

you. No one orchestrate your antics. We did not need anyone to tell us. We were our own Gods. Only later come the other Gods. Gods of society to repress us. Tully he does not listen. I tell him honour is nothing, corruption is nothing. I tell him he

is not guilty. But he want to be guilty. He want the world to be guilty. He want to blame everyone."

"There is some special word for it, for sure. But you see his dilemma. He cannot love anyone or expect them to love him when he dislike himself as intensely as he does. On the surface he may seem bright enough but imagine the dark cold wretched hole of a world he lives inside, by himself. It must be like living in the dark when one has given up hope the sun will ever shine again."

The Salween River- December 1991

Leaving the Three Pagoda Pass, Tully quickly abandoned the vicinity of the highway. There were too many troop movements; army camps, check-points. The Burmese were reinforcing their positions and making them secure against any future counter-attack. Tully spent half a day hidden on the hillside watching all this activity before he decided to strike north into the jumble of mountains, looking for a watershed that would lead him in the direction of the Mooei River. The going was very hard and his only weapon was a stolen machete he had found in a banana grove on the outskirts of the pass. Tully had one great advantage tackling these conditions. He had grown up first in the Australian bush and then in the dense rainforests of the Solomon Islands.

When he was fifteen, together with three boys from the Mission school he had set off to climb the summit of Mt. Papamanchua. This soaring peak was home to the ancestral island Gods and forbidden territory by customary law— the law of the paramount chiefs. Carrying only meagre supplies, they had forded rivers, climbed cliffs, hauled their way up waterfalls with the aid of giant creepers, hacked through the jungle while leeches dropped on their heads and down their backs, and the rain never once let up. At night they made shelters from sticks and leaves, and fires using the dry insides of rotten logs. In the end their rations dwindled down to roasted cassava.

Tully relived those days now as he struggled to make headway across this rugged terrain. In the Solomons it was an earthquake that turned them back. The Mission boys were convinced it was a sign that the Gods were angry at their intrusion. The earthquake and the even fiercer tropical storm that followed caused treacherous landslips and the rivers boiled over with such ferocious torrents that to cross them meant risking certain death.

Since those far-off days Tully had augmented these experiences in other places. Apart from the jungles of Guatemala and northern Nicaragua he had walked with the Masai across the Loita hills, south of the Rift Valley. A country he became convinced Hemingway had described in his *The Green Hills of Africa*. Although the terrain was rarely as rugged as the Solomons just keeping up with the Masai and living like them off the land required all his powers of endurance. Now as he clambered on all fours up to the top of one ridge only to find an even higher one confronting him, as the sweat poured off him, his stings itched, his sores stung, so he fell back on those days with the Masai—Mobashu, to whom some white hunter had bequeathed a dinner jacket that now proudly adorned his red shaku like an emblem, and over which he hung his armoury of clubs, spears and arrows. Only when he was digging out ground bees, skinning goats, or throwing his hunting club with such a wonderful dexterity he could bowl over a running gazelle at seventy paces, did Mobashu remove his dinner jacket. At night he carefully folded it for a pillow.

They were two hunters and one second-wife; a giggling well-fleshed girl, who teased Tully for doing his endless washing, and who despite being loaded with the entire arsenal of cooking pots, spare spears, sleeping mats, and

The Salween River—.December 1991 herding three goats still managed to outpace Tully up even the steepest incline.

Tully imagined her now, beckoning him to catch up so that no matter how exhausted he felt it was beneath his pride and dignity to allow her to know it. All day the Masai strode ahead. They never skirted a patch of jungle, or a slope of head-high grass where lion or buffalo could charge them any moment. Like ants they went straight over everything. Tully who had decided he wanted no special treatment had thrown his matches away at the start and emptied his water bottle. Masai made flame with a fire-stick, spinning this between their hands onto a piece of wood gripped by their toes across a knife blade. Squatting there, ready to dash dry grass onto the smouldering sawdust and blow it ablaze, even Tully finally mastered the trick. Going without water all day, however, he found hardest to endure. Once they had crossed a swamp at midday, the muddy water smeared with buffalo droppings, and the Masai offered him this to quench his thirst. Mobashu even kindly scooped the fetid water into Tully's water bottle. Tully sensed it was just another test and he braced himself for the challenge. To his surprise there were no ill effects. No cramps, or diarrhoea. 'Bolivian Whisky' the Amazon traders had called it as they dipped a jug over

the sides of the boats, allowing the silt to settle before they drank.

Tully chuckled at the memories as he lapped from a similar muddy pool high up on the jungled slopes of the border mountains. In fact when he analysed it Tully was far better off than he ever had been on similar trips. He still had half a dozen of the Gulf war ration packs, a plastic cape he had purchased in Poi Pet, a Cambodian army hammock with mosquito net and a spare pair of patched shoes. He even had a few mosquito coils left. He didn't need a compass, he used the sun.

At night he strung up his hammock with the cape above as a shelter. There were no wild animals to worry about. In Africa they had had to build a boma—a barricade of thorns around the camp. One night just as Tully, convinced they were in tsetse fly country, was struggling into his mosquito net and enduring the Masai scorn, a lion, tempted by the scent of goat, leaped the boma. While the hunters were fighting it off, Tully was trying to get untangled from his mosquito net before the lion turned its attention on him. Goats, he thought, as he spread peanut butter on his biscuits. He never wanted to see, smell or taste goat again. The Masai killed them by suffocation and then drank the raw blood. But the real delicacy was the intestines, and Mobashu tore these out and handed strips around for munching on the spot. Lying in his hammock, Tully amused himself by wondering how an authentic Masai restaurant would go down in Paris. Probably better in Tokyo where they liked raw food. That night as the

rain poured down he dreamed of an African night and a sky brilliant with stars. Later, in the early hours when even the restless ticking of the jungle quietened for a little while, he listened for the nightwatchman's bell, just as he had the time he slept in the bungalow his mother had been born in long ago in the Peradeniya Gardens of Ceylon. "Within a curve of the Mahawelliganga," he murmured drowsily, "the great sandy river..."

On his fifth morning Tully stumbled out of the trees onto a stream and stepped straight into an army patrol washing clothes and themselves in the rock pools. To dash back would have made them even more suspicious. Instead he reached for his press card. "Reporter. Newspaper. English reporter," he announced, smiling at everyone. In doing this he failed to see where he was going, tripped and plunged headlong into a pool. The entire patrol collapsed with laughter. By the time Tully had crawled out the soldiers had already fished his bag from the rocks. The press card had sailed away to land in the lap of an officer

who was able to inspect it and greet Tully in English. Tully took one look at the outdated weaponry and the youthful ill-equipped soldiers to decide he had fallen into safe hands. This was the Karen Army.

"Not quite all of it," laughed the Captain in command. Tully noted the shoulder tags. KNU: Karen National Union. He had arrived.

The Karens were as interested in his scanty supplies as Tully was in theirs. For his Gulf war rations they had hollow

bamboo stuffed with sticky rice. They examined his possessions in detail; the plastic cape, the hammock, plying him with a stream of questions; "Name? From where? Religion? etc." Tully did his best to supply the answers and allay any suspicions they might have had as to why he was there.

Tully had set off with one ambition—to reach the Karen Army, but he hadn't considered what he would do once he arrived. Tully, the reporter, was all very well as an introduction. But even if he later wrote up something who would he send it to? He doubted too that a mobile patrol really wanted the added danger of a reporter tagging along. Tully shared out his remaining rations and received in return handfuls of sticky rice. Many years before he had been a part-time soldier with the Territorial Army, and while modern weapons meant nothing to him, he was agreeably surprised to discover the weapons the Karens possessed might have come straight out of any World War II armoury: Lee Enfield rifles, Bren machine guns.

A friendly youngster no older than sixteen offered him his rifle and in a moment Tully was clipping on the familiar magazine with its 'W' spring and sliding in the rounds so that the heads overlapped correctly, snapping back the bolt, checking the backsight. Hours spent stripping Bren guns on Monday evenings in a cold and draughty hut under the stern eye and barking reprimand of a retired Regimental Sergeant Major had not been forgotten. He could hear the orders and the joke they had made of them then. "Cock. On-Off. Fire . .

. " Tully stood up and went through a clumsy attempt at arms drill before dropping face first on the ground in the first apology of a 'leopard crawl' he had performed in twenty- five years.

The Captain laughed. "You Tommy!" he declared.

"Not exactly," Tully panted.

"I fight with Tommy," the Captain announced. "Fight Japanese. Fight with General Wingate."

To Tully's astonishment he unbuttoned his top pocket and produced a campaign medal.

"British army," he declared proudly, adding a small joke, "but no pension."

"Many Karen British soldiers?" Tully enquired.

The Captain nodded. "General Bo. Sandhurst. Many Karen fight with British Army," adding scornfully, "Burmese fight for Japanese. Karen fight for British, Now British forget the Karen."

Tully had heard it too often. Old treaties forgotten, old loyalties ignored. All part of the diplomatic swindle, 'Lying for your country!' policies of appeasement. How he despised the Foreign Office. How many 'old soldiers' like this man had risked their lives for that cultivated myth, 'Empire'? He remembered Empire Day in the Solomons when the most beautiful girl in class was dressed in white and called Britannia. And how her various 'children' came up, one by one, dressed for the part, reciting, "I am your Maori child. I

am your Indian child." But when it came to the crunch and 'Imperial Red' fled off the pages of school atlases, who did Britannia remember then? What promises steadfastly made, so conveniently forgotten?

Tully made an impulsive decision. A gesture to help even up the score. He conferred with the old Captain. "I'll share the risks and I'll share the rice," Tully told him. "If I can't keep up I'll quit."

The patrol Tully had met up with was moving north towards the Salween River where the Karens were having difficulty acquiring strongholds. The opinion was that the Burmese were still establishing communication links and constructing supply routes in readiness for an assault across the Salween river on the Karen stronghold of Kawmoora. To overcome Tully's confusion over the lie of the land the Captain drew the salient features on the sand. The junction of the Salween and the Mooei rivers, the mountain range in between, the two main Karen camps at Kawmoora, and Mannerplaw. He tried to show Tully that even though the Burmese had taken Ti Pha Vicho—or Sleeping Dog Hill, which up till then had been the Karens' first line of defence, and although Mannerplaw was now within mortar range, unless the Burmese crossed the Mooei River into Thai territory it should be impossible for them to take the camp. "The Thai Army have assured us they will not allow the Burmese to come into Thailand."

The purpose of this patrol was to disrupt Burmese communication lines wherever possible and hamper their advance. Also to link up with other Karen forces at Mae Ra

Hta on the Salween river whose base confronted Sleeping Dog Hill.

The Burmese had recently been supplied with new weapons by China along the Old Burma Road. Coolie labour had carved out this hair-pin trail in 1937 between Rangoon and Kunming to convoy essential supplies to help Chiang Kai-shek fight the Japanese invasion. Nowadays military hardware moved in the other direction, back into Burma, while trucks carried teak logs out to pay for it.

Chinese weapons included recoilless rockets and a new type of cannon in addition to a whole range of mortars— 80mm, 105, 106 and 120. However the Captain refused to contemplate defeat. "Victory does not always depend on weapons," he told Tully. "For forty years we have fought them. We will not give up now."

Tully was impressed by the spirit and discipline of these Karen fighters, many of whom were only teenagers wielding rifles as tall as themselves. They wore cheap camouflage jackets and trousers, and marched on flip-flops. It was a tough march. Like the Masai there was little time allowed for rest. Recreation was tuning into music on one crackly transistor or stewing a forest rat.

Four gruelling days across some of the toughest country Tully ever imagined brought them within a day of the Salween River. These Karens knew the lie of the land—the streams, the watersheds, the ridges to follow, the landmarks. There was also a camaraderie that Tully felt increasingly a part of. No one questioned where he had been, where he was from,

why he was there. He was accepted as he was. No more, no less. What impressed him were the many small acts of kindness and help he was constantly receiving. Whether it was a younger soldier helping him over some particularly treacherous ground, or overloaded themselves offering to carry his bag for him.

Tully was particularly inspired by their cheerfulness and lack of complaint, despite the fact that almost all had already lost fathers and brothers in the long struggle and the remnants of their families were scattered in refugee settlements across the Mooei River—relatives whom they hadn't seen in months, sometimes years. None of these hardships dented their ardent nationalism and belief in their right to rule themselves. The way they spoke of it, Mannerplaw might have been one of the capital cities of the world rather than a muddy transit camp under constant siege.

On the fourth day as they moved steadily through dense forests from one watershed to the next, one of the advance party came hurrying back. The patrol advanced with extreme caution and in complete silence. Scarcely a twig snapped. Suddenly they stopped. The Captain crept forward. Tully, close behind, could hear sounds ahead;

The Salween River—December 1991 footfalls, the creak and knock of wood and an occasional murmur of voices.

The Captain beckoned and Tully slid forward, peering carefully through the screen of leaves and grass. Not twenty yards away, a line of porters were stumbling along a narrow path bent double by heavy loads. They looked in a pitiful

condition, barefoot and half starved. Was this how it had been, building the Death Railway? At that moment an army patrol pushed past, overtaking the porters, thrusting them aside. One of the porters slipped off the path, unbalanced by his huge load. A soldier from the rear lashed at him with his rifle butt. In a few minutes the porters and their guards disappeared down the path. The old Captain put his hand on Tully's shoulder and drew him back. Neither of them spoke a word until the patrol re-formed a safe distance away. The Captain gave an order and two of the patrol slipped away into the undergrowth. Sentries were posted. No one spoke. Half an hour passed. As silently as they had departed the scouts slipped back, crawled up to the old man and whispered. The Captain beckoned the men together. He spoke quietly and at some length.

Turning to Tully he said, "They are building a bridge. We are very close to the Salween River." Once again he conferred with the scouts who nodded in assent. "It was a former outpost of ours. With their new mortars Mae Ra Hta is in range, We must go see." He said nothing more. For the next hour the patrol rested, ate some rice, cleaned their weapons. At five o'clock they prepared to move out. The light was already fading. They climbed up a steep slope. Two men each to the Bren guns, two to each box of ammunition. The slope was capped by a rocky outcrop. Crouched between the boulders they were able to look directly down into a steep gorge. Below them the path disappeared under an overhang, only to emerge onto a bridge built of felled logs lashed crudely together. Under the direction of an officer, porters

were at work, moving rocks and wedging support props below. Although the bridge was less than ten metres across there was a considerable drop below to the stream.

The Captain watched for a few minutes and then wriggled back. The patrol moved off in a circuitous route, down the hill before doubling back towards the stream lower down. Here the river was broader, flowing over rapids. The outpost above was hardly visible. Tall overhanging trees shaded the river on this eastern side, and the undergrowth was sparse. Tully understood why they had waited for dusk. By day they would have been easy targets for any sharpshooters positioned above.

It was dark before they reached a safe place to camp. The choice seemed to be either to continue to the Salween River, or to attack now before the preparations were complete.

The Captain conferred with Tully. "The bridge we must blow up."

Tully's reply was obvious. "With what?"

The old man beckoned him. In one of the ammunition boxes were some sticks of explosive. "Dynamite," said the old man. "But no detonator." Placing a lantern on the ground he sketched the outpost with a twig. "Blow bridge. Here attack. Across the river,"

Tully grasped what he meant. Diversionary tactics. Blow up the bridge as a decoy and use the confusion to counter-attack across the river lower down by the rapids.

The old man scratched in the dirt, "Our mortars here. One Bren above the bridge. One take across river."

"And the bridge?"

The old man nodded doubtfully.

Tully had already been thinking about the bridge ever since he saw the dynamite. Many years before in Coober Pedie he had helped an old miner with his blasting. It was all very primitive. Drill out a line of holes, drop in a stick

of gelignite with fuse attached, tamp in sand. "Cripes. Carefully!" the old miner used to yell. "The bloody gelly's sweating more'n I am. We'll all blow sky high!" The trick was the length of fuses. For them to all blow together you cut them in decreasing lengths. Longer at the start, shorter at the finish. It was Tully's job to light the fuses, scampering from one to the next. The old miner taught him to cut them the right lengths himself. "Then if you do blow up it'll be your own bloody fault and no one else's."

Tully thought he could blow up the bridge from below, but there were two drawbacks. He'd never used dynamite and he didn't have any fuses. One solution occurred to him while he was lighting a mosquito coil. The smouldering coil. Except it was in a coil and liable to snap. He remembered something else. That first day when he fell in the stream his bag got soaked, and he had to dry the coils out. While they were wet they could bend. He told the old man his plan. A lot of debate followed. No one knew if it would work. Could they get the charges into position undetected? The glowing coils might be

spotted. Tully came up with another plan. Train a rifle on each glowing coil. If the dynamite didn't explode, then shoot it. It soon became obvious to Tully that since the plan was his own it was up to him to execute it. In the excitement he agreed, and once he had agreed, he couldn't get out of it.

They decided to attack the next evening. Morning found Tully preparing his fuses. Fortunately it was a hot day and the green threads of pyrethrum dried out nicely. It was only as the shadows lengthened he had misgivings. Misgivings that would have multiplied if he had not concentrated solely on the job to be done.

The Captain scratched a plan in the dirt. "Crawl upstream here," he advised. "Dynamite here. Wait here."

Tully could only nod. Two hours later, having descended the slope to the rapids, he was carefully making his way upstream, the two charges tucked under his shirt and the fuses already lit shielded inside an empty plastic water bottle. He was suddenly on his own.

At first the only problem was to avoid slipping on the rocks. There was no moon. The night sky was overcast. Except for the faint glimmer of water it was pitch dark. Although he had barely two hundred yards to go it took close on an hour. Apart from the dynamite he had a rifle slung across his back and this kept slipping, threatening to trip him behind the knees.

Tully was suddenly aware of overhanging rocks. A dark shadow loomed overhead. He had arrived under the bridge

before he knew it; the roar of rushing water silenced his movements. He presumed guards were posted but he hoped they wouldn't be looking down. The thought of being caught in the glare of a flashlight unnerved him. Steadying himself he started to climb the steep rocks under the bridge until reaching up he could touch the logs. The soil was loose and sandy and his main danger was not to dislodge a stone.

Tully scooped out two deepish holes, a yard apart, firmed the sticks of dynamite in place, and drawing the fuses from the water bottle—relieved to find them still glowing— he carefully planted them, dead end first, into the charges. Working with sweating gelignite years before had overcome any unnecessary fear of explosives.

Tully backed off, squeezing his way slowly down, feeling on tiptoe for footholds and lowering himself to the stream. He edged away, turning often so as not to lose sight of the two red points of light. He went perhaps thirty yards and then crouching between two rocks he unslung his rifle and brought it to bear. His hands trembled and the sights wobbled. Years before as a kid armed with a shotgun he had often been sent into the Australian bush under orders to bring back supper or go to bed hungry. That had been a shotgun. With a rifle he had never been much of a marksman. Tully concentrated on the faint sparks of light.

The waiting seemed for ever until suddenly to his surprise a mortar went off, followed by the crackle of automatic fire. Tully dared delay no longer. He aimed at where he had last

glimpsed the glowing pinpricks. As he squeezed the trigger the night seemed to explode about him.

Near Sleeping Dog Hill- December 1991

Tully recovered consciousness to discover himself trapped by falling debris from the bridge and illuminated by a bright flare descending slowly above him. From all sides the burst of machine-gun fire, and the crack and whine of bullets indicated the attack was continuing. The loud bangs of exploding mortars told Tully that the Karens were shelling the outpost from above the overhang, while the more sporadic gunfire from downstream suggested the counter-attack had begun, although how successfully he had no means of knowing.

Tully tried hard to free himself but failed, a combination of rocks and timbers pinned him so effectively that although he could wriggle his hands and feet he could not squeeze out of the trap. The first flare died only to be replaced by another. There was a lot of shouting going on above him and he lay flat for fear of being seen. After a few more loud bangs the mortars ceased. Soon afterwards to his dismay so did the volleys of gunfire downstream. The counter-attack must have failed. Instead of the cheers of the victors ringing from the rocks above there was an ominous silence. Soon after Tully saw coming towards him the glare of flashlights dipping this way and that as they searched.

More shouting, hurried steps among the rocks and suddenly an unwelcome glare blinding him. Squinting

Near Sleeping Dog Hill—December 1991 against the torchlight, Tully saw the faces of curious soldiers peering down at him.

"British," he cried hoarsely. "Journalist. Reporter. Help me, please."

More voices joined in. An argument seemed to be developing.

"English reporter," repeated Tully. "Press. Newspapers. The Times. BBC."

After more orders the soldiers started shifting the timbers that trapped him. Two pairs of arms hauled him none too gently to his feet and proceeded to drag him protesting up the steep side of the stream. Once on the path he found his hands lashed behind his back with a wrench that tore his shoulder muscles. He swore and someone laughed. When they came to the bridge Tully could see that although one half had blown away, the other half had fallen back and lodged itself among rocks lower down. Stepping carefully there was no difficulty crossing. Poked and prodded from behind, hauled in front, Tully was half dragged, half pushed into the outpost.

He could make out very little; lanterns, faces in half shadow, thatch huts. A man in authority pushed the soldiers aside to inspect Tully more closely. Bringing his face even closer he sniffed him. He stood back and said something. Whereupon Tully found himself being searched. Hands going through every pocket. "Press card," Tully said with as polite a smile as

he could muster in the circumstance. "Green card with photo." He glimpsed something being examined. "Yes. Yes," struggling to see it better. More orders were given and Tully found himself manhandled into a bamboo cage. Tall enough to stand straight but barely wide enough to move. His protests were ignored. A soldier squatted outside, smoking a cigarette. He turned to Tully and smiled. With his hat pinned up on one side he could have been a Boy Scout. There the similarity ended. It started raining. The rain became a deluge. Stuck in his

cage Tully shivered. He rubbed his face against the bars to push the wet hair back from his eyes. Outside the young soldier sheltered under his cape. As the long night wore on, there was another enemy looming over him—the memory of another cage, other blows smashing his face, his ankles shackled to leg irons, and the terrible fear of waiting for the worst to come.

At dawn, Tully watched as the outpost came to life. The camp consisted of two groups—soldiers and porters. If in his plight it was possible for Tully to feel pity for anyone, his sympathies were with the porters—beaten and bullied, digging trenches, building walls, carrying earth and rocks. He never saw them allowed to stop and rest for a moment. He could only assume they were fed before they started and after they stopped. Most were in a pitiful, starved condition, cuts and ulcers covering their bodies.

Nobody brought Tully any food, although the soldier outside gave him some water, holding up his bottle through the

bamboo bars to Tully's open mouth. It was only now that Tully realized two other Karens had been captured. Badly wounded, they sat, blindfolded and bound, on the mud outside the commander's hut. Even from a distance Tully could see blood stains seeping through their tunics. When they collapsed from exhaustion or sheer pain they were kicked upright again. The officer came out and questioned them. Tully could hear no audible replies and guessed they gave none for the officer lashed at them with a stick and one of the guards drove the butt of his rifle into their faces. The Karens, who Tully could not recognize, must have been resigned to their fate, or in too much pain to care.

Repeatedly the officer shouted at them. Sometimes he grabbed them by the hair and jerked their heads back, but he got no response that Tully could see. Finally they were beaten and left lying on the ground. Tully could only wonder whether a similar fate awaited him.

Later in the morning the officer strode out of his hut and approached the bamboo cage. Tully tried not to show his alarm. He stood there regarding Tully through the bars—a big man with a broad Mongolian face. He had been standing with his hands behind his back, now he suddenly swung one up and thrust it at the bars. Tully had no space to move. He felt something thin and hard forced into his mouth and gagged. It was only as he spat it out he glimpsed green and realized it was his press card.

In precise English, the officer said, "I do not like reporters!" He sneered at Tully through the bars, turned and strode off. Tully tasted blood where the card had cut his lip.

While this had been going on the slave porters had paused to watch. Now one of those nearest moved closer, pretending to be clearing the ground. Suddenly without daring to look up he whispered, "Aung San Su Chi." He had to repeat it before Tully realized what he meant. "Democracy?" whispered the porter bending double as he scabbled for stones. He was fortunate that the soldier on guard had moved off to light a cigarette, and apart from occasional backward glances was chatting to the other guards near the Karen prisoners. "Aung San Su Chi," the voice repeated desperately, and Tully nodded. He now knew who the porter referred to. "Me student," whispered the man. "Revolution for Freedom and Democracy," as if it was a slogan he had learned from a leaflet.

Tully could only make out snatches of what he said. "Death camp. Death march. Student slaves," and like the low murmurs Tully had once heard during a visit to Lhasa, 'Dalai Lama—good. Dalai Lama—good/ only now it was "Aung San Su Chi", in a conspiratorial whisper. Followed by something so dramatic Tully wondered if he hadn't misheard. "Bring knife." Followed by, "Get free. Tell world."

Any further dialogue was cut short by the return of the guard. However later on there was a downpour so intense that even the guards took cover. For a few minutes until the storm passed visibility was reduced to zero. Tully, shivering

cold and stiff with his eyes pressed shut, felt a hand on his hands squeezed through the bars, and then the unmistakable sense of the rope binding them cut. A warning voice whispered. "No look. No look. I cut bamboo. You run."

It was happening too fast for Tully to take in. He could hear the man panting as he struggled to sever the crude lashings. Tully blinked the rain from his eyes. The storm if anything was acting as an accomplice, thunder and lightning, and now a wind lashing the trees. The clearing was momentarily awash, and even the porters were running. "Go! Go!" came a cry. Heaving back with all his strength Tully felt the rear of the cage give way. He fell out, crouched and with a bound leaped for cover. As he ran, he heard, or imagined he did, the faint cry in his ears, "Aung San Su Chi. Aung San Su Chi."

Tully's first leap had landed him among rocks, the second sent him flying down a steep slope falling headlong into a dense tangle of sodden undergrowth. Something was cutting his foot. He reached down and found to his surprise the plastic press card wedged against his instep. So far he had heard no cries, no shots, but a glance overhead told him the storm was lessening. Tully jumped up and ran. He came to low cliffs and slithered down, slipped, tumbled, turned an involuntary somersault, and landed in rushing water.

The rain was still pouring straight down, pounding the rapids into a veil of fine spray. Tully threw himself forward, trusting to the current to wash him over the rapids. Rocks bumped him and just when he could hold his breath no longer his feet touched gravel and he forced his way to the far bank. Tully

scrambled ashore on hands and knees, dragging himself into the undergrowth. Within the shelter of the trees he barely
Near Sleeping Dog Hill—December 1991 paused for breath. Up again, he headed into the forest away from the outpost as fast as he could run, the tenor of being caught firing him with a desperate energy. It was not just the Burmese, but the Khmer Rouge, and the hounds of Hades all on his trail. He stumbled straight on—like the Masai, not avoiding the thicker patches of jungle, but embracing them as a refuge. The rain poured down all that day rinsing away any sign of Tully's passage as surely as a rising tide. Tully did not pause to rest. He kept going in what he hoped, in the absence of any sunshine, was an easterly direction. As the distance behind him increased it was not only fear of pursuit that haunted him, but the vision of what reprisals must now be taking place once his escape was discovered.

He spent the night in a shallow cave near a waterfall, too weary to care if he was wet or bitten to death by mosquitoes. Not to death—not yet. He had been saved for the time being and wondered dully if he even deserved it. Someone would pay the price. The student who had helped him must surely by now be screaming in tortured agony, or already dead. So vivid was this nightmare that Tully clapped his hands to his ears to shut out the terrible cries. Except now it was other faces and torments that haunted him: the pits in the Killing Fields as the victims were clubbed to death and thrown in, Billy being butchered, the booming music drowning his screams. Tully grimaced in anguish. "I could have saved him,"

he groaned. "I could have warned him. But would I? Now I would. Given the opportunity again I would," he insisted. Forget the excuses, he was the puppeteer, pulling the strings. He had encouraged the boys, fed their greed, dismissed any uncertainties they might have entertained. He was playing Pol Pot. Billy G was his own Killing Field. In his tortured mind the distinction between what was and what might have been vanished. Reality and fantasy entwined in one awful nightmare.

At first Billy stood his ground, teeth chattering, mocking them. Then his rage took control. He started breaking up the room like a mad gorilla, advancing on them, ready and roaring to tear them apart. The boys leapt back in fright. Lek struck at him with the sword, slicing his shoulder open to the bone. In fury and pain Billy turned on them both like a wounded beast, and the other boy lashed out. In panic and terror they struck and struck again at this bellowing giant who would not go down. His blood sprayed over them. Now there was no stopping them. They cut at him to shut him up, to halt the terrible sounds he kept making as he thrashed on the floor, trying repeatedly to rise, until the last groan ceased, the last twitch stopped. Even now in frenzy they could not stop hacking at him, chopping his carcass limb from limb.

"The safe!" Tully shouted. "The safe! Remember his boasting. All that money! All that gold!" Like automata they turned their attention slowly to the strong-box, hacking off locks that parted at the first accurate blow. Now they were

screaming with a fresh frenzy—the sight of wads of banknotes, the glint of real gold—like pirates aboard a treasure-ship—a fever of blood-lust and gold-lust that sent them hysterical with excitement.

Outside the night guard heard nothing, saw nothing. Or if he did he preferred to believe it was a party. Like the three monkeys: hands over ears, over eyes, over mouth.

Tully lay there gagging in the mud. "At least I have the book," he told himself. "I'll change it. I'll put all this in. The Burmese part. I'll make it better. Make it ring true," he persuaded himself. "This one won't sink without trace like all the others."

How many crimes, rightly or wrongly, had been pointed at him? He was guilty. In too many ways. Guilty of malice, of myths, of lies. What was it the Duke of Verona cried at the end of Zeffirelli's film of Romeo and Juliet they had spent so much time dubbing in the RCA Studio off Via

Nazionale? "All are punish-ed. All are punish-ed." Yet he was free. Someone else had died for him, or was slowly dying now. A complete stranger. A student hearing that Tully was a reporter had made a last desperate gesture. For what? To whom? This student, whose last hope was that his story of enslavement should reach the outside world, had handed the baton to a fake. Tully lay on the cave floor, rubbing his face in the dirt in despair. The boom of falling water outside pressed on his ears like doom.

Mae Sot—January 1992

I got back from New York on January 20th, after spending Christmas and New Year with the family. Emptying my post box I found a letter from Deng dated ten days earlier. Apart from the season's greetings, Deng wrote to say that Tully had turned up in Mae Sot. It needed a map to find where it was. Somehow I had assumed Mae Sot to be up in the north near Chiang Mai. I finally pin-pointed it a hundred miles west of Tak on the Mooei river. Mae Sot, according to the guide book, is a border town full of gangsters and bandits. The book claimed it had a frontier atmosphere out of the old Wild West, although whoever composed that either had a vivid imagination or knew nothing about the Wild West. I telephoned Deng to tell him I was going. He said I should like it. He liked it. He had opened a bookstore there and was planning a hotel. "No problem with a book at bedtime then." It didn't sound as funny as I meant.

I didn't hurry setting off. I had hurried too often before for Tully, to no one's advantage—his or mine. It took me a few days just to settle back into Bangkok, which was pleasantly cool for once, catch up on my mail, check any outstanding stories that might stand closer inspection. It was nearly a week before I went down to Pattaya and there I had to wait a day longer than planned as it was high season and all the Suzuki jeeps were booked from the

Mae Sot—January 1992 place I usually went—a jeweller's shop off Beach Road. He gave me a fair rate and the

advantage that I only had to telephone him to extend the rental.

"Where to this time?" he asked.

Most rental companies don't like you to take the jeeps further than fifty kilometres but I had never tried to pretend that was the case. I think he rather liked to think of them travelling. Locked up in his jeweller's shop it gave him the fancy of other places.

"Mae Sot," I told him.

He seemed surprised. "Don't drive it into Parmah (Burma)."

"Can I?"

He didn't know. We looked at the map. A bold red road line continued west all the way to the Burmese coast at Moulmein. Whether one could actually get there was another matter.

As it turned out one would need an amphibious vehicle to make the journey. Four kilometres west of Mae Sot, flowing along a broad flat valley, the Mooei River creates the natural frontier. There is no bridge, nor any sign there ever was. I drove there by easy stages, stopping the night at Ayudhaya in a commercial travellers' hotel overlooking the river. The outside corridor offered an agreeable view over a weedy backwater with long-tail boats plying up and down, and moored houseboats. I had to abandon sitting outside my door with a beer. Judging by the constant traffic up and down the corridor, and the noise from the adjacent rooms, Thai commercial travellers don't just expect a bed. They need to

have someone to share it. Next morning I set off up the main north road to Chiang Mai, reached Tak by afternoon and turned west. Almost immediately I entered hill country, high wooded hills, with fine cross-country views of forested mountains reaching into the far distance. It reminded me of Maine or the Appalachians, except for

the hill-tribe people along the roadside in their traditional costume. The hills kept going all the way to Mae Sot and then let me down gently into the Mooei river valley.

Mae Sot itself consists of two long parallel streets with traffic flowing opposite ways. Make a mistake and you have to complete the circuit all over again. I was looking for the Siam Hotel, spotted it too late and virtually had to drive back to Tak for a second attempt. The Siam Hotel is one of those big bare, Chinese hotels, functional and hygienic but with any trace of character surgically removed. Even on a hot day they feel cold. Perhaps that is the idea. I took a double room on the second floor—all rooms in Thailand are double, tried to find a restaurant in town, failed, and drove the four kilometres west to the river.

There's a car park above the river, and a market for souvenirs alongside. Not the sort of market that would interest Tully, or Dee for that matter. Not even a stray cat in sight. None of the chaotic bustle of Poi Pet or the unfrequented air of the Three Pagodas—where one felt a foreign visitor was a rare event. Here tourists, trucked in by the busload to gaze across the river at the forbidden bank on the far side, turn round and purchase wood carvings, cloth and ceramics to prove they

had been there. Tully who had developed a taste for cheap Burmese cheroots had to send a boy to swim across the river to fetch them. No, sniggered the rich Thai traders, they weren't the sort of cheap local produce sold here.

The Mooei River at this point is hardly a hundred yards wide but fast flowing, although, unless my imagination is playing tricks it seems to flow in the opposite direction to the way it should. An open-sided hut houses the Thai border officials and something similar but less obvious stands on the Burmese side. Some rather rickety jetties stick out into the stream and a small long-tail boat with a deafening engine shunts pedestrians, Thai and Burmese, back and forth.

I sat in the Thai-side hut watching and wondering what to do. There was no shortage of passengers although unlike the border at Aranyapradaet, none of these were carrying very much. A big Burmese boy in a sarong was playfully practising his Kung Fu on two smaller boys with backsides hanging out of their pants. Nobody paid me any attention.

While I was sitting there staring out in mid-stream watching the over-loaded and overpowered craft churning its way across the torrent, I suddenly noticed a familiar face. I think she noticed me first. A face looking my way with a smile. Dee, who else! The boat was no more than a long dug-out with this huge engine mounted on an iron peg on the stern, a propeller shaft long as the river was wide, and a propeller that spent more of its time threshing air than water. Loose planks decked the craft and it was on this that the crowd stood or squatted. As the boat roared into reverse alongside

the staging, a sudden general movement nearly pitched everyone overboard. Dee landed with a bound that took her up the jetty and by my side with a couple of extra leaps. For once she seemed really pleased to see me. Gone was the sullen reticence I had become accustomed to. I soon found out why.

She pointed back across the river. "Tully bai kook (go jail)," she declared with a broad grin. Thais have this often infuriating habit of finding others' misfortunes extremely funny. She raised her arms, crossing her wrists. "Damruat (police) jap (seize). One day already."

"Why?" She shrugged. "Mai loo (don't know)" —which Thais also always say when they invariably do know perfectly well. She tried out her halting English. "Tully him say ..and gave up.

My first thought was to take the boat back across the river and try to get to see him, but Dee refused. "Mai dai. Mai dai (cannot)," and pointed to my wristwatch. "Bit laeeo (closed already)."

I realized what she meant. The Thai-side office was shutting up, the boat owner was struggling to wrap a tarpaulin cover over his monster engine, and the stallholders in the market were putting away the souvenirs. Everyone was going home.

I asked Dee if she was hungry, but she wasn't, so I drove her back into town where Tully had rented an unfurnished room above a shop. It would have been spartan but Tully had a knack of making something out of nothing. Old boxes draped in red cloth for tables. Planks balanced on flower pots for

shelves. Plants probably dug up in the park potted in tins. A fishnet on the wall ornamented with curiously shaped bits of wood. As Thais virtually live, eat, sleep, and socialize on the floor, a couple of large coconut mats sufficed, and furniture was unnecessary. Dee offered a bowl of water with ice from downstairs. It was strange sitting opposite her in an unfamiliar place like this. There was an intimacy that pleased me. Dee laughed and indicated Tully's head being chopped off. I looked around for the tiger cub. "Look-sua, teenai?"

She pointed towards the terrace.

This explained the fishnet. Tully had caged the terrace with net up to the roof. He had also built a fishpool with toughened plastic sheets, fitted some tree branches along the wall, and strewn the tiles with tussocks of grass and bamboo. In the pool catfish swirled in grey shadows. I noticed that some looked badly scratched already. Those that had got away. To my surprise a timid white kitten appeared.

Dee laughed.

"Tully say look-sua lonely. Find kitten at temple. Now cat think it look-sua.

"Tully," I said.

Dee looked puzzled. "Tully not same. Tully very strange. Tully not speak." She pointed at her eye. "Tully look. Always look."

"Look at, or look for?" "Look at," she agreed, but could not add to this. She told me that Tully had sent a telegram to her. That was before Christmas. When Dee arrived she was shocked by his appearance, "Tully very thin, (phom maak),"

and by his haunted look. As far as she could understand he had reached the Mooei River a week before, having not eaten in days, managed somehow to swim across and was discovered half drowned on the Thai shore some twenty kilometres up the valley, (or down I should say), by an Irish missionary who managed a camp for Karen refugees. As a result he wasn't robbed, for surprisingly the Burmese had not removed his money belt. Perhaps they were waiting to do that after they had disposed of him. The missionary, Father Brennan, took Tully back to his camp in the mission pick-up and looked after him until he was fit enough to manage on his own—which in Tully's case didn't take long.

"And so Mae Sot." I smiled at Dee.

She nodded.

Outside it was already dark. Although it should have been the dry season, Mae Sot had a climate all of its own, The storm broke just as we were trying to find a restaurant and we ended up eating at a noodle stall sheltered in someone else's doorway. I ate with one hand clutching an umbrella that the gusts of wind tried to tug away. Cars splashed past along the road. In the end we were only soaked up to the knees. If Mae Sot was a Wild West town it must have had a change of sheriff recently. Noodle stalls seemed the only entertainment going. Not wishing to compromise anything, I left Dee to her cats and returned to my Chinese hotel. Much to my surprise the room-boy asked if I wanted him to bring me company. When I declined he offered to come himself and told me to

remember his number. Perhaps I'm wrong about Chinese hotels after all.

Next morning the rain was still falling in a fine but penetrating drizzle. I drove around Mae Sot at least twice before I managed to park near Dee's shophouse. We had to buy some raw meat for the cats, and then fried pork for ourselves. It was ten o'clock before we reached the riverside.

While I was in New York I had renewed my press card. Now I thought it might help get me into Burma. If only to see Tully. There was no problem leaving Thailand. I sauntered down to the jetty alongside Dee. As I stepped on board I half expected a whistle to blow and some Thai official to come running up shouting. Nothing happened. The engine, which must surely have been taken from an Abraham tank, roared into life. The propeller threshed air, rocks, sand and water to bring us to the Burmese side where a long single plank jetty poked perilously into the stream. We tiptoed unsteadily to the shore and were making for an exit in the fence when a soldier hurried up and stopped us. I explained that I only wanted to go to the market. I thought once in, it would be easier to locate Tully. The soldier was friendly enough. He seemed keen to practise his English. After we had exchanged names, countries, religions, he left me to consult with a superior. Then he returned and told us to come back in an hour. By now my umbrella was working overtime. Back we trooped, damp and desultory along the sinking jetty, onto the next boat and over to the Thai bank. By the time we repeated the trip an hour later I was beginning to feel like a commuter.

This time I told Dee to go on ahead without me and find out what she could about Tully. Dee departed and I met my soldier pal, who escorted me through the exit and waved me goodbye. I thought I had made it. The path was hemmed in by a low fence and led onto the end of a muddy market street. I hadn't stepped beyond the first stall when a voice called after me. Pretending I hadn't heard I strolled on. Tully would surely have bolted, jumped a few fences and fled to the hills. I prefer to do things more officially where possible. Not that this attitude helped

much. Within moments I was surrounded by three uniformed guards, one bearing a brass Immigration tag.

They were very polite, invited me to sit down, asked what I wanted. I showed my press card and tried to explain that I was looking for a colleague who had come across a few days before and not returned. Perhaps there had been an accident. My card was handed back.

"We don't like reporters," I was informed coldly.

Never have I tried to change my profession so swiftly.

"Writer," I said. It didn't convince them. As for 'my friend', he had entered illegally and was now detained.

Was there, I suggested, any way I could help? If this was Thailand such a suggestion would be instantly understood. Recently in New York a friend had remarked, "The corruption there must be terrible." "Not at all," I replied, "at least I know I can buy my way out of virtually any difficulty." I meant it as a compliment not as a criticism. At this moment Dee strolled

back and I called her over to be go-between. She clarified the situation in no time. The atmosphere became instantly more cordial. Dee set off again with one of the officials and I sat waiting, wondering if I had enough baht notes to make everyone happy.

I had rehearsed a blatant lie that Tully worked for the BBC. Now, remembering the SLORC Junta denounced all foreign newspapers as enemies, and branded anyone found listening to the BBC a traitor I dramatically amended my story. Tully I told them was well meaning but harmless with personality problems. The phrase aroused their curiosity. 'Personality problems?' It seemed to suggest everything unstable imaginable. It wasn't a complete lie either. The officials conferred together. One of them was sent off after Dee.

I expected to be in for a long wait, but to my surprise Dee came back, grinning and pointing to where moving briskly towards us strode Tully. Apart from being unshaven

he seemed none the worse for his confinement. I saw the officials casting anxious glances at him as if at any moment he might run amok. They beckoned me. I was about to pull out my wallet but there was no need. We could go, I was informed politely, and they escorted us, Dee included, back to the riverside, along the jetty and even into (or rather onto) the boat. Waves and smiles, and we set off back for the Thai shore.

Tully who until then had been looking rather grim, suddenly smiled. "How did you work that? You old bastard."

I waited until we were out of earshot of the engine. "I told them", I said as we walked up the shore to the jeep, "you were a writer gone insane." He didn't comment.

There was something different about him, however, that I couldn't identify. He was happy enough to talk about the jail—which he described as a box. "Put me in this bloody box." But when I asked what had happened since the Three Pagoda Pass all he said was he had been captured and escaped and he'd write it all up in the book one day. Dee was correct about the way he looked. Catch him off guard and he was staring at something invisible to anyone else. He reminded me of veterans out of the Vietnam war, whose eyes alone told something of what they had witnessed. In fact, when I come to think of it, rarely during those three days I spent up in Mae Sot did he say anything very much. Once when I caught him out staring, he turned to me and said rather uncertainly, "De you ever feel you could reach up and touch it?"

"What?"

"Everything." And then with resignation, "Nothing," adding savagely, "But that's all bloody dreams, isn't it. The so-called stuff of life," he dismissed with contempt.

I noticed he wasn't eating meat. "No need to kill any more bloody animals than necessary," he remarked caustically.

"Tully," I said, "the world is more than one dead tiger cub, or a vanishing rainforest." He didn't answer.

My unreserved admiration was for Dee who accepted his moods and his brooding without criticism. What had she ever got out of their relationship, beyond boats and treehouses and borders? Scarcely any girl's idea of romance. But then Dee wasn't just any girl.

One thing he did speak about was the book. "I got something out of my system writing it. Bit of an indulgence I suppose. The next one will be better I promise," he grinned. "Cross my heart and swear to die. Everything in it is all perfectly true." That's what I'm worried about, I thought, but didn't tell him.

Bangkok—May 1992, May Riots

Sitting there in the Lumpini Hotel on that silent Tuesday evening the hotel seemed to be in mourning for an innocence that had been lost long before any of us were born. I wondered how things might have turned out differently. If Tully hadn't met Ungaro whose palazzo he passed daily, Yasmin or Pasolini even, or Billy Goebbels. Just how far back does one need to go to discover that fatal key, which, as Tully himself admitted, once turned sets in motion a chain of events leading inevitably . . . ? Here I stopped. One couldn't simply name or blame the point of embarkation. There were the winds to be considered, the tides. I remembered something he told me in the treehouse. "Ancestral seas surge in our blood." He might have added, "Whose ebb and flow and tortuous currents we have no more control over than the fish." Victims of fate as much as of fortune? Who knows?

But as bursts of sporadic gunfire rattled over the city like the final salute at a state funeral I couldn't help drawing a thread however tenuous between his day on that Ostia beach with Pasolini—poet, idealist, innovator, run over in the road by one of his rough trade leather lovers—and the film Tully directed here in Thailand for oil mogul Billy Goebbels who in his own way was also an idealist and also ended up in a box. Bits of him, that is. "It was divine justice," insisted Tully. Adding as one might say of grave-robbers, or despoilers of Pharaonic tombs, "He was a stealer of souls." The self-same

charge that had been levelled against him all those years before in Rome.

I suppose in the sane, rational society we are supposed to be living in, where people are expected to think first and act after, stealing another man's soul hardly seems a justification for chopping him in pieces. It sounds straight out of the inquisition, which in the West it probably was. Tully became gradually convinced his soul belonged out East. While not a Buddhist himself he subscribed to the point of view that it was the spark that lived on when the body died. "After all," he said, trying to spear noodles with his chopsticks at a roadside foodstall, "I wouldn't want to be born again with all the memories and all the legacies of this life, would you? All our past cock-ups carrying on with us?" Tully's idea of his soul was like a silver dollar dropped in the sea. Green and crusted but only needing a spit and polish to be bright as new. In Tully's eyes, to steal a soul, to extinguish that spark, was among the worst crimes in all humanity.

What crimes was he hoping to avenge? The children's bodies blown apart by Contra grenades in Nicaragua, hacked to pieces by the Khmer Rouge, the long queue of Cambodian amputees lining up on their crutches, clutching for coins. The injustice wreaked by the few on the many for so long, the destruction of a landscape he loved, mangrove swamps smoking, roads carved through hillside slopes, treeless and abandoned. Unless you can come back in spirit to haunt the consciences of the quick and the ruthless, what purpose the sacrifice? In the grand tapestry of the battle of the world to

what effect the fallen, except in a still point, a small spark that can only fade? In the moment of truth what did he stand for? Was he still seeing himself waving that red flag above the bonfires and the barricades all those years ago in Paris, chasing down the boulevard San Michele with Yasmin at his side, eyes weeping from tear gas, the exultant roar of the mob ringing

in his ears. Only this time in Bangkok almost to his surprise the barricade parted and let him through.

Who or what was he running for as they rushed the coils of razor wire? Some fleeting vision he held? A vision of what just might be, held to in that minute before the guns fired their broadside salute? Who was he doing it for? He had said, pushing me aside, that he owed it to someone. Was there any person to whom he felt an obligation to make this gesture, anyone he would hold the baton of democracy for? I couldn't think of one, and somehow I doubted it. Tully like most of us was too darned selfish to risk his own life for anyone else. No, I decided, he was just caught up in the whirlwind of events. Once started he couldn't turn back. Trapped at the top of a waterfall when the only choice left is to plunge. Perhaps the answer lay in the book. Too many answers perhaps. And most that no one wished to know.

The manuscript lay in a plastic folder on the Lumpini Hotel table. Scrawled in pencil across the title page he had written, "In the event of my ultimate demise?" Underneath, a page torn from a memo pad had the message, "Deng, publish this or perish!"

I sat looking at it for a while, imagining the time he spent typing it, the thoughts going through his head, incidents, memories. The way we rearrange truth—or our version of it. I didn't open it. I didn't need to know what it contained. Instead I slipped it inside a plastic shopping bag where it felt suddenly harmless like a defused bomb. There was a tuk-tuk parked outside. Without thinking I said, "The Oriental Pier." I felt suddenly too dispirited even to bargain over the fare. For once the traffic wasn't heavy along Silom Road. I got off at the end and walked up the narrow lane to the jetty.

I knew what I was going to do. I only didn't quite know how. It was as if I was about to push him overboard, rather than his manuscript. I was afraid everyone would notice. I

wanted it to sink without trace. Let the dead bury the dead. After all what point in revealing the past now, with all its bitter secrets?

The stern of the express boat was too crowded for anyone to notice, and no one was looking. I simply allowed the bag to slip out of my grasp into the churned up wake. The surge of water sucked it down. I didn't see it surface. But I didn't look either. In a way it was like scattering his ashes. I didn't even feel very guilty. After all he was the one to quote truth being equal and opposite. Let his truth lie beneath the muddy waters of the Chao Phraya. And let his soul fly free. I glanced up as we bumped a jetty to see across the river the soaring chedi of Wat Arun stark against the pale sky. I thought of Dee and her parrots and dared hope she was safe and sound. So that some day for sure she could meet her Japanese

gentleman. I took the boat all the way out to Nonthaburi with its clock-tower, crossed the river on the busy ferry and walked through the fields to the wat. There was no one about. I sat in the cool sala by the waterside under the spreading trees and listened to the monks chanting from the temple.

If one ever had to compose an epitaph, write what? An idealist without an ideal. Or as Colonel Dan Frudaker suggested, too many. Tully carried them with him, along with the creased covers of his own books, a bit muddled up, bundled together in a bag. In countries where they didn't belong, or he didn't belong.

But there was to be an epitaph. Hardly one to match his hero Byron, although Tully with his ability to mock his own foibles may have had a wry laugh if he knew. It came in the Hollywood Variety Magazine a year later. For Billy's film somehow, against all odds, survived. The sixteen hours in the can did not just gather dust on some studio shelf. Someone, somewhere, had put the pieces together— although in a rather odd order, ignoring all of Tully's directions. Someone cranking celluloid strips slowly

through a moviola, matching a movement, piecing Billy Goebbels' fantasy together, keeping in all the bits Tully loathed so much and would have had out. And Variety Magazine's comments? The scenery they said was magnificent and the cinematography excellent, but the direction was, "uneven and unremarkable," and Tully's

screenplay was, "simplistic and pretentious, although the occasional line came through."

I read it in one of those so-called 'art' magazines that have a habit of arriving uninvited through the letterbox. It was not the sort of magazine one would usually admit reading, even to one's wife. But I think I'll tell Yasmin. I think she will understand.

Phnom Penh

A year after those bloody May riots in Bangkok I was in Cambodia covering the United Nations sponsored elections. Here the mood was very different. In Thailand following the Bangkok May riots nothing in essence changed. Victims and heroes were forgotten as quickly as conveniently possible.

In Cambodia however there was an air of festive enthusiasm shared by everyone. Prince Sihanouk, father to his people, was back. The UN were not only pouring in troops and aid but, with the establishment of UNTAC, provisionally administering the country. Everyone was daring to hope that thirty years of civil war, and the reign of terror by the Khmer Rouge, might finally be over.

Phnom Penh is tiny by comparison to Bangkok. From the air it appears as no bigger than a small riverside town at the junction of the mighty Mekong, and its equally large tributary the Sap, flowing out from that vast inland sea—the Tonle Sap. Sea-going cargo ships lie moored out in mid stream much as in the Chao Praya River of Bangkok, but here the similarity ends. There is not a single high-rise breaking the skyline of Phnom Penh—only the freshly gilded higher spires of the Royal Pavilion, gleaming in the slanting afternoon sunlight, rise higher than the towering palm trees.

Phnom Penh is very much a ground-floor city, the side streets muddy and potholed from years of neglect, and the spacious tree-lined avenues laid out by French colonial planners are teeming with bicycles, rickshaws, ponies and traps, people

pushing water barrels or food trolleys, and sometimes even a herd of cows crossing from the riverside docks to market.

The reason I stayed at the Capitol was that when I climbed aboard a motorbike taxi outside the airport, the Capitol was where the driver took me. The name sounded better than the place, but once I had unpacked in a dingy double room deafened by the noisy racket rising from the street below, I was too idle to move. Like the Royal, twenty years before, the Capitol was where everyone gathered.

The UN Command had fortified itself in a compound opposite Wat Phnom, an ancient ruined stupa on a wooded mound near the river, but nowhere in the city was more than five minutes away by motorbike taxi. Usually old green 50cc Hondas, these workhorses of Cambodia hauled everything from passengers to trailers of timber. The Hondas clustered around the Capitol Cafe almost as thickly as the flies that swarmed on the lunchtime tables,

It was not just the flies that welcomed me when I came down from my room. The cafe was busy with the crowd of foreigners one instantly recognized as freelance journalists, or those pretending to be. To one side, at a table looking into the video-game parlour next door, lounged a familiar figure from Pattaya. Sandy Balmer greeted me with his usual indulgent and mildly mischievous grin. "What brings you to Phnom Penh?" he said, keeping a watchful eye on the kids in the video parlour, Sandy liked kids. He was only a big kid himself. He played and fought with them between his wheeler-dealing. Kids didn't compete with his schemes.

"The same as everyone else, I expect," he answered for me, before I had a chance to reply. Sandy stroked his bald head softly. He was still in his thirties, but success had come early. "Even when I was a small kid I always won,"

he informed me once. I know why he felt at home here. Phnom Penh was full of small boys like him grown rich quick—those kids who won on the horse races in the video parlour, or at the national youth game of hurling flip-flops like a game of boules gone berserk. All too soon they would be the ones riding around in white Mercedes. It was the others I felt sorry for; the small barefoot brigade clutching armfuls of newspapers—Le Mekhong or Phnom Penh Post—for sale; the blinded and the maimed hobbling about begging. The new entrepreneurial spirit of Phnom Penh passed them by.

"Money," announced Sandy. "That's why I'm here. I've just bought three rai of idyllic beachside property out at Kompong Son for a million baht. Except I see it already at ten million. "And what's more," he added, "because foreigners can't buy land, part of the deal is they are giving me a Cambodian passport." He paused, waiting to see if I could trump that. I couldn't. He selected a hand-rolled cigarette. "Do you smoke marijuana?" he invited, offering me one. As he leaned back in his chair he continued his eulogy. "You can do anything you like here. There's no law. There were five hundred judges when the Khmer Rouge took control. Only four survived. There are no courts. Only yesterday a man was shot dead here on the street." He pointed dramatically at the

pavement. "Stealing a motorbike or something. It's gun law." He leaned forward across the table. "I wouldn't advise going out after dark." And then on a lighter note, "Oh, by the way, that friend of yours from Pattaya was staying here. What was his name?"

"From Pattaya?" The only friend I had made in Pattaya was Marvin the Californian psychiatrist and I'd since heard that he'd been killed—run over, in Albania.

"Yes, it's a shame about Marvin," Sandy agreed. "I liked Marvin. Though do you really believe it was a road accident? I think it was more likely a rock on the back of his head. No, not him. That fanatical bloke writing a book."

"Tully," I said curiously. "He's dead."

Sandy snapped back his head and glared at me in a very authoritarian manner. "If he's dead then so am I. He was here a couple of weeks ago. Sitting where you are now."

"Tully," I repeated incredulously.

"He was sitting here drinking a Tiger beer and smoking my joints. You can't be very dead to do that. Check with the hotel register if you don't believe me."

I didn't and I did. When I came back down to the cafe he challenged me.

"Well?"

"His name wasn't there." Then I added, "But the owner admitted that not everyone uses their real name."

"He was alive two weeks ago. He may have been shot by the Khmer Rouge since then. Or crashed in one of those ancient Dakotas he flies about in." Sandy strolled across to one of the video screens. "Do you gamble?" he enquired, squeezing in among the horde of small boys and tapping out his bet. Computer images of horses galloped around a track. "Number three's to win," he declared. "There. What did I tell you!" A rattle of coins fell into a box. He held up a handful of one-baht pieces. "They have to use Thai baht. Aren't any coins here. And the largest note is five hundred riels—-that's only twenty cents." The boys pestered him to bet on the next race. "Check with Morris Caterers," he called over his shoulder. "Out near the airport. That's who he's working for. An outpost up river—Stung Treng. He described himself as a sort of glorified quartermaster."

I left him to his gaming and took a motorbike taxi to Wat Phnom. At the heavily fortified UNTAC headquarters I presented my ID and went through the compound searching among the prefabricated huts for the press office. Miss Mesti, an unsmiling Ghanaian lady, examined my press card and my credentials, and requested two photographs. She told me to return next morning. I asked her about Morris Caterers. There was something a bit frosty about her I didn't understand until I bought a copy of the Phnom Penh Post and read an article about the number of pretend reporters using fake press cards bought in Bangkok in order to get free flights around Cambodia.

Later on I rented a bicycle. It seemed the best way to travel as long as the brakes worked, and using the centre-page map in the newspaper I got myself acquainted with the city. This wasn't hard to do. There is one main traffic artery—Achar Mean Street. Across this on one side you are bound to reach the river, on the other you get lost until you find yourself eventually in open country. I was trying to get back from being lost when I reached the Tuol Tom Pong market, the 'Russian Market' as the rickshaw drivers called it. The stuffy covered labyrinths were crowded with UN troops buying fake antiques. The afternoon monsoon downpour cooled the temperature, and I waited for the rain to pass sipping iced China tea. Kids came up selling fistfuls of supposedly old banknotes, eager to practise their rudimentary English. In a far corner I noticed Sandy sipping a beer, surrounded by a fan club of eager youthful supporters. Outside the roads were under water. I cycled through a temple compound offering English courses. All over the city, pinned or painted on any old buildings, were notices announcing "Essential English Book 1, 2 or 3" along with study times. Only the Alliance Fran^aaise seemed to offer any competition. Signs in Russian were rare. A broad boulevard with gardens between the avenues led to the river. In the late afternoon people were gathering on benches, food trolleys were being wheeled into position, rush mats laid out, lanterns lit.

The main early evening rendezvous seemed to be the river bank opposite the Royal Pavilion. Kids swam, rickshaw drivers

rinsed their clothes, and Phnom Penh's idle strollers—and there seemed to be no shortage of these— gathered to watch. I sat on a mat, struggled with chopsticks over a bowl of noodles, and watched the river. Overcrowded wooden ferries were criss-crossing or heading upstream. Somewhere upriver lay Stung Treng.

I laid out the map I had bought from a vendor and traced the loops of the Mekong River meandering north. Stung Treng lay less than a hundred kilometres from the Laos border. I wondered what Tully was doing. What was he watching now, over the same river? How had he ever escaped from the May riots, and why hadn't I heard?

A sampan paddled slowly out into mid-stream. It might have been a gondola. The oarsman, erect on the stern, was applying the same Venetian stroke: the long oar resting on the raised support, the same characteristic gondolier's stance, the same push of the back, twist and thrust of the paddle. Instead of a sampan it could have been a gondola that day in my youth long ago when Tully and I had crossed from Torcello to Burano as the sun sank slowly over the lagoon. Like the turbulent currents of the stream, my past and his were inextricably linked. And now this great muddy river once again joined us like some giant umbilical cord, claiming a call on the present.

I received a more cordial reception from the press officer next morning. Together with my UNTAC press card Miss Mesti handed me a 'Request for Air Support' form, entitling me to transport on UN flights. I proceeded to 'MovCon'

(Movement Control) where a notice scrawled over the hatch declared: "Use of UN flights is a privilege, not a right."

Needless to say the office was manned by no-nonsense Dutch soldiers. I was told to return at 4 p.m. In the meantime I set off for the airport. Fortunately Phnom Penh is flat, and it took less than half an hour to reach Morris Caterers, sited near a communications compound manned by an Australian Signals unit. The only motorized traffic were white UN police jeeps roaring past, driven by bulky Ghanaians. I was beginning to wonder if the UN was really here to help the Cambodians, or as a training lesson in World Government.

The Morris yard was crowded with trailers being loaded or unloaded. In a cramped office sandwiched between trucks a pair of pretty and helpful Australian girls somehow managed to remain unharassed despite the ringing telephones, clacking fax machine and a constant stream of enquirers demanding this or that.

"Tully? That's right. He's at Stung Treng. There's a Dakota going up on Monday. You want to be here by six. That's quite all right." She smiled as I thanked her, then added, "I don't suppose you've got an UNTAC pass? Oh, you have. Good. That'll get you into the airfield."

As I left, wondering how Tully had ever managed to get into this organization, a short, stocky man, busy at a filing cabinet, introduced himself. "Dave Morris," he announced. "Seen this?" He indicated a large newspaper clipping pinned on the wall along with dozens of other overlapping notices. "New

Zealand Herald. Your pal Tully wrote it. Did us no harm at all with the UN. I now expect to get the contract for Somalia."

I ventured, "How do I get back from Stung ... ?"

"Stung Treng. Don't worry. Jim Tully'll get you on a UN flight. He's a good bloke. By the way, you'd better check here tomorrow. Just to be certain of the flight. It all depends if the barge has reached Kra Chay." He led me over to a wall map, adding, "If we could supply Stung Treng by barge we would, but the Khmer Rouge control the river above Kra Chay. Threaten to blow us up. The DC3 will be ferrying supplies from Kra Chay to Stung Treng. But only if the barge gets there. I expect it will, but there's no way of knowing."

Agreeing to check the next day, Sunday, I left and cycled slowly back into Phnom Penh. I didn't mind waiting. I spent the time finding my way around and finding out what I could. At the railway station, despite the grand facade, trains were few. Two a week only to Battambang, the second city, and that depended on the Khmer Rouge who controlled much of the territory. Sometimes they blew up the track, sometimes they attacked the train, shooting a dozen passengers and using the rest to porter away any supplies they could loot. The carriages, third class only, were pocked with bullet holes. At night the station forecourt was home and shelter to hundreds, while out in the open flickered the lanterns of innumerable foodstalls, and the hooded shadows of dozens of rickshaws gathered there in the hope that sometime a train might actually pull in.

Sunday had survived even the Khmer Rouge and Communism as a day off. Not at Morris's, however, where it was busy as usual. Yes, I was assured, the barge had reached Kra Chay. The Dakota would leave as usual. I was to be there by six.

If I had followed these instructions to the letter I would never have reached Stung Treng. I set my alarm for 4.45 a.m. and managed to wake the sleeping watchman to unlock the gate, to be out by 5.00. Although it was still pitch dark, the city was coming to life fast, and the streets were flooded with the phantom shapes of weaving rickshaws.

Dawn was streaking the sky as my motorbike taxi headed out of the city. I reached Morris's by 5.24, only to be told that the plane crew and the truckload of supplies had already left. I jumped back on the motorbike. Someone shouted out, "Chinese military airfield." A mile further up the road there was enough daylight to read the sign at the entrance to a muddy track. By the time I had fished out my UN pass for the security guards and driven another kilometre towards the airport buildings, I could hear an aircraft warming up on the runway.

Hefting my shoulder bag I ran past a line of Russian helicopters. The rusting hangars housing the Cambodian air force had collapsed in a recent storm, destroying more MiG fighters in a moment than the Khmer Rouge had managed in years. A company of Ghanaian troops jogged

past singing lustily. A hundred yards ahead one of a pair of DC3 Dakotas was starting to move out from its parking slot. The pilot must have seen me for it stopped. I ran around the

whirling propellers and dived under the wing. A rear door opened and a ladder dropped down. Scrambling in I landed amid a cargo of wicker baskets full of fish. The stench was overpowering.

The rattle and roar from the engines made talk impossible. The Cambodian interpreter who helped pull me on board directed me up front to the cockpit where the two New Zealand pilots were getting ready to taxi off. Against the din I shouted apologies if I had held them up.

"Had to leave early," the older one called back, "The tarmac at Stung Treng gets sticky in the sun."

The old Dakota thundered down the runway, rattling to a frenzy fit to tear itself apart, and rose lumbering, slow and graceful, into the dawn sky. Below lay a patina of drowned rice-fields glittering in the sunshine; palm trees, thatched huts. I watched our shadow moving across the fields and was reminded of the lines by Flecker, "I have seen old ships sailing like swans asleep". It felt like that, beating our way slowly aloft.

Warwick, the pilot, later told me that he had flown this very same Dakota thirty years before in New Zealand, and what a 'ghastly' shock it was to come back to her. The other pilots kidded that he treated her more affectionately than his own wife. Now he screwed the altimeter up to two thousand feet and pumped the hydraulics. The great Mekong unwound below us, a geographer's dream of meanders and ox-bow lakes, a navigator's nightmare of shoals and currents. Ahead

jungle, beyond that, a white bank of cloud with a distant far-off peak rising above.

"Be about an hour," Warwick shouted. "Cruising at five thousand feet." He replaced his headphones and got out his map. I noticed he used the same road map to navigate with as the one I had bought in the Russian Market.

Squatting behind me the Cambodian interpreter was studying a week-old Bangkok Post with the aid of a dictionary. I pencilled in explanations to the words he underlined. The time was only 6.30. Below there was only forest and the river. I wondered how Tully liked it, what he thought about when he was alone—if he was alone.

Low cloud masked our descent. The old Dakota banked steeply. Through a gap I glimpsed a brown river until whirling shreds of mist blanked it out. Bouncing in the turbulence we dived this way and that, corkscrewing our way down to earth. Suddenly we roared under the cloud, almost brushing the treetops. Tully later told me that on his first trip the weather was so bad that they had followed the Mekong the whole way under the cloud at less than three hundred feet. I saw the airstrip carved out of the jungle directly ahead. We pounced down onto it, landed with a bounce and a roar, and taxied towards a cluster of white tents and prefabricated huts.

"Sorry about the landing," Warwick apologized, taking off his headphones. "About the worst we've had. When the weather closes in it can get a bit tricky."

The Cambodian opened a hatch in the cockpit and lowered a rope ladder. Tully was strolling across towards us. He seemed unconcerned to see me. Warwick climbed down and waved to him.

"I'll have the truck up in a moment," Tully said. "I didn't expect to see you so early."

Warwick poked his shoe critically at the surface. A thin uneven coating of tarmac had been laid over the laterite dirt. "Last trip it snowballed round the wheels. Better to have left it dirt."

Joined by the co-pilot we made our way past a huge Russian helicopter. "Biggest helicopter in the world," Tully announced knowledgeably, waving to the pilots. Since I last saw him he had acquired a fresh confidence. The airfield might have been his own domain. "I like it here," he told me after we had shaken hands with countless representatives from every nation I could think of.

Tully's office was a table with a fan inside his store-room. A tarpaulin bulging with rain hung over the door. Freezer containers blocked either end. Sacks of rotting potatoes stank in puddles. Inside, cartons, crates and drums filled the stuffy space. A big pot-bellied Pole came up, embraced Tully, and whispered something in his ear.

"Later," chuckled Tully. "Wine," he told me. "He wants wine."

Everybody, it seemed, wanted something. And here was Tully handing it out. His team consisted of an interpreter and four or five kids for porters. A moustachioed Sikh approached and

saluted smartly, handing Tully a list. Tully gave it to his interpreter. Two Uruguayans drove up in a jeep, jumped out and shook hands. More supplies. So it went on. The truck returned from the Dakota with its cargo of fish. "Give the Indians fish," Tully announced. "Any they don't want, wash, bag and put in the freezer."

Out on the airstrip the Dakota was taxiing off. It would be back from Kra Chay in two hours with more supplies. Tully took me on a tour of the airfield, ringed by coils of razor wire.

He chuckled. "I've seen kids crawl through that in a minute." Beyond lay scrub and jungle. Cambodians were sitting outside the wire watching. "They take everything they can get, and can you blame them?" said Tully as we moved on. The tour included the Russian helicopters, a Canadian medical helicopter on skids, the Malaysian traffic control tower, the Ausco huts that contained the camp toilets, and finally the Dutch MovCon—two taciturn soldiers with the authority to decide who should fly and when.

Tully breezed in and helped himself to coffee. He introduced me, mocking my pink press pass. "We call you lot 'pinkies'," he said.

"You were once a journalist," I replied indignantly.

"They weren't pink then. White." He fished his out squinting at the number. "Only 140."

"Yes," I agreed. "Now we're as thick as the flies at the Capitol."

"So that's where you're staying." He nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose you met Sandy. Is he still buying up the whole country? Bit of a risk, if you ask me. It could still go either way."

Coffee finished, we strolled back to the storehouse. Tully proudly pointed out his white UN jeep. "Dutch loaned me this," he explained. "I help them out with food and they feed me."

"You're everyone's friend here," I said.

He grinned. "Goes with the job. Last fellow' used to get a bit tetchy. Counted every bloody banana. He didn't last long." We reached the storehouse. The reek of mouldering potatoes and far-from-fresh fish did not seem to concern Tully. The interpreter conferred with him, and Tully pointed this way and that, his instructions more gesture than word. "Indians don't like the fish," he informed me. "They want chicken." He selected two large river fish and told a porter to take them to the Dutch MovCon. "Supper," he grinned, wiping his hands.

Later in the morning the DC3 flew in again with more supplies. Tully watched it take off bound for Phnom Penh. He waved. He might have been waving off the outside world. He carried some tins of beans and luncheon meat, a huge slab of New Zealand cheddar, and a bag of French loaves over to his jeep, and we set off for the town a few kilometres away. I was surprised he didn't bother to lock up. "My crew look after all that," he said. "I trust them."

It was as simple as that. He trusted them. "Oh, they take a bit home with them, but so do I." The Uruguayan security guard saluted. Tully saluted back, and we bumped down a dirt track. "Sometimes the Khmer Rouge mount an ambush," he said, clearly amused by my look of alarm. He didn't explain how he dealt with that. Perhaps he kept them happy too, like everyone else, with a few supplies.

"I assumed you were killed in Bangkok," I said. "Your name was on the missing list."

"Body dumped over the Burmese mountains," he inused. "Or fed to the crocodiles. No, 1 was all right. I had to be with Dee around. She managed to sneak us both away. Afterwards 1 decided it wasn't such a bad thing, being officially missing." He turned to me.

I thought he was going to ask what happened to the book. 1 said quickly, "What became of Dee?"

He shrugged. "Shacked up with some other farang." He grinned. "Actually, she doped this rich American in Pattaya. David Something-or-other. Poured powder into his coffee. Knocked him out flat. She made off with thirty thousand baht. Brought it to Phnom Penh. Quite enterprising." He seemed genuinely proud of her.

"It could have happened to you."

"No," he replied, staring ahead through the dusty windscreen. "I trusted her."

"She's been up here once or twice," he continued, studying the road in a way that made me wonder if the Khmer Rouge

often left their calling cards. "Flew up care of Morris in the Dakota. All the pilots asked her was, could she 'massage'? He swerved to avoid something I couldn't see. "Stung Treng doesn't quite give her scope for her talents." He didn't elaborate, leaving me to wonder. Drugging the UN Sector Commander? Stealing Russian helicopters? Spying for the Khmer Rouge?

As we reached the river, the town began—a few scattered houses along the road, a temple compound, foodstalls beside the river bank, raft houses moored on heaps of floating bamboo. A row of dilapidated houses fronted a muddy open market. A restaurant sign hung above a deserted room. "Sometimes we eat there," Tully said. "Fish and chips." He pulled into the forecourt of a single-storey hotel, the Sekong. The rooms opened onto a common verandah. "My Russian neighbours can get a bit boisterous," Tully warned me.

Just now his neighbours appeared anything but. We solemnly shook hands and greeted each other in Russian and English. Tully dumped the supplies in his room and led me in search of Madame. "You can speak French, can't you? You might get a cheap rate. Morris pays for me."

We found Madame and I surprised myself with my halting French. As Tully forecast, it gained me a cheaper room—with only a fan and a bathroom full of mosquitoes. "Malaria's quite bad," Tully remarked. "The Poles are pulling out early as so many have gone sick,"

I noticed something else. He spoke in staccato sentences, as if he was speaking to a foreigner. In his room we made

submarine sandwiches from his supplies. The room was quite bare—bed, table, chairs, refrigerator. He had made no attempt at comfort or decoration. Apart from a framed citation and medal from General Sanderson, the UN Commander. Tully looked embarrassed. "We all got one," he said.

Perhaps he didn't need anything else; he had enough, the river, the restaurant, the warehouse. "I like it here," he repeated as I left him to his siesta. "I'll pick you up at three," he said. "The Indians always come in for supplies in the afternoon." The way it sounded he might have been on a trading settlement in the Amazon.

We drove back to feed the Indians. It was dusk before we returned. We strolled along the river bank in the twilight. Flickering oil lamps glimmered from foodstalls selling bread, noodles, cans of beer. Voices greeted Tully. Shadowy figures in the half dark. Beyond lay the river. "Reminds me of the Amazon," Tully said, adding, "There's something about rivers, isn't there? Especially this one. Another hundred miles, Laos; another thousand, China. A source somewhere among the frozen passes of Tibet." He turned in a slow circle as if he was inspecting his world; the lights from the cluster of colonial buildings, the faint throb of generators, the river bank, and below it a sampan like a black water beetle oaring slowly upstream. All around us the warm scented darkness pressed in with an unexpected intimacy. I thought of Arnold's lines, "Soon will the musk carnations break and swell, and the full moon and the white evening star."

Tully nodded thoughtfully. "Strung Teng will do," he muttered briskly.

"You really are Lord Jim," I told him. He grunted impatiently. "Just a quartermaster."

Supper was rather a cheerless affair in the Dutch MovCon hut. Not that it wasn't comfortable, nor the food good—the river fish tasted delicious after all. But the Dutch talked nostalgically about Holland. Nearby we could hear the Uruguayans with guitars singing about Montevideo. I suppose over their vodka the Russians were getting sentimental about Mother Russia. They all wanted to go back to places that ceased to exist once they arrived. Tully just wanted to stay, but the irony was that when the UN mandate was completed, the foreign battalions pulled out, the Russian helicopters flown away, when the Australian demolition squad tore up the airstrip and Morris moved off with the Dakotas to Somalia, Tully would have to go. But where? I couldn't see him running an evangelical NGO for training local health workers. He had finally found where he wanted to be, but the timer was already ticking. His time was running out.

Next day he got a message over his telephone link-up with Phnom Penh. I wasn't at the airfield. I took the morning off to see what there was of the town and to stroll along the river. I saw Tully when he returned at lunch. "I've got to go to Siem Reap," he said. "The bloke there has gone walkabout."

"What?"

Tully tapped his skull. "Brainstorm. Ran out. Vanished. French marines just arrived, need feeding." He waved his French roll and grinned. I could see at a glance that Tully relished the emergency. "We'll fly over tomorrow." He took it for granted I'd be going. I didn't object. The ruins of Angkor Wat were close by. "Morris is sending someone up here to hold the fort while we're gone. We'll fly across in the Dakota." Outside a roll of thunder presaged the afternoon monsoon. Tully peered out at the darkening sky. "Should be fun."

We had supper with two very disgruntled Australians. "You have to be a cynic to survive here," one declared. Tully said nothing. I was sure he disagreed. During our meal of fish and chips the heavens opened and a prolonged deluge flooded our way back to the Sekong.

"Weeping," Tully remarked.

"I could bloody well weep," said the Australian, but I didn't think Tully meant that.

As we parted he said suddenly, "Thanks for delivering the book." He watched me carefully. "I assumed it was you who collected it from the Lumpini?"

"Yes," I admitted, "I took it."

Tully grinned. "It's not your fault Deng didn't like it. I'd have heard by now if he had. I guessed it all along. Too near the truth. Anyway, it doesn't matter now. I never was much of a writer."

Khmer Rouge

The downpour cleared the sky. Next morning was cloudless. The DC3 arrived later than expected. It had flown up via Kra Chay to fetch supplies, and got shot at in the process. The pilots were examining the left wing-flaps. A couple of bullet holes in the canvas.

"Nothing we can't fix with glue and a pocket handkerchief," chuckled Warwick.

After the supplies were unloaded and Tully's stand-by treated to quick introductions all round, we were off, the DC3 lumbering aloft and Stung Treng with all its neat white lines of tents and huts and razor wire vanishing in minutes as if it never had existed at all.

"Got to put down at TVY," Tully shouted in my ear. "Outside our sector." He stabbed his finger at the map.

There seemed to be just this one all-purpose Cambodian map. I couldn't see any 'TVY', but Tully's finger pointed due west. I nodded. Uninterrupted forest spread out below us. We droned on. The outpost TVY lay just east of a range of hills controlled by the Khmer Rouge. We gave these a wide berth coming in. As we approached the airstrip it seemed deserted. No tents, no huts. Just a brown runway carved out of the jungle and a wrecked plane to one side. I assumed we would land. Instead we flew just a few feet above, while the co-pilot leaned out studying the dirt. As we soared up he took off his headphones.

"Landmines," he shouted, "Seems okay though." He made a thumbs-up sign to Warwick who banked the plane steeply for the next run-in. We came in over the treetops and landed without a bump. The only apparent activity at TVY was a group of French engineers working on the wrecked undercarriage of the huge transport plane.

A muddy track led into the scrub. I followed it and came upon some camouflaged tents in a clearing. The soldiers, who didn't seem to be doing much wore Bangladeshi armtags. Tully enlisted them to unload a cargo of frozen beef. "Got to keep the French happy," Tully winked. He pointed to the wrecked transport plane. "Embarrassing for the French. Blocked the runway for a month."

The beef unloaded, we left the French engineers to their task and flew off, rising as steeply as we could. The co-pilot flew this leg of the route. I watched Warwick adjust the altimeter to eight thousand feet—the top of the scale. He saw me watching and grinned. "Khmer Rouge," he said. Below, the dense jungle lay apparently deserted and beyond reproach.

Half an hour later we started our descent into Siem Reap. The forest below was scattered with clearings and patches of rice-fields; beyond this, across immense flatlands lay the gleaming surface of the Tonle Sap Lake. Tully pointed urgently below. We were above the ruins of Angkor Wat.

The airfield at Siem Reap had been developed for tourism, with a concrete runway and a control tower. Nowadays there was little commercial traffic and fewer tourists. Morris had their own depot a few hundred yards from the UNTAC base

and the terminal building. A rather harassed English girl came out to greet us. Tully seemed surprised. I think he had expected someone else. A conference took place between Tully, the girl, the pilots. I waited at a distance. They entered the warehouse and fifteen minutes later Tully emerged. He seemed quite cheerful.

"Nothing that can't be taken care of," he announced breezily. "Let's get into town. There's a guest house Morris uses." He peered at a name he'd been given, and hailed a couple of motorbike drivers waiting in the shade. "Siem Reap, one dollar. Each," he called.

The road into the town lay between flooded rice-fields. The traffic was ponytraps and big-wheeled carts drawn by lumbering water buffalo. UN jeeps roared past. The town itself was a sleepy, rambling affair: a shallow river with little jetties for bathing and washing clothes, a colonial hotel—Le Grand Hotel d'Angkor—being restored, fronted by a small park, some riverside temples with monks lazing in the shade, a bustling market, restaurants catering to the UN troops, and a muddy street of guest houses. The rooms were basic, but Tully bargained for bicycles.

"Don't you need to go to the depot?" I enquired.

Tully shrugged. "Not really. The girl seems able to take care. Apparently the bloke just upped and vanished. I daresay the girl was running the show anyway. I'll just stick around for a few days to make sure."

"She seemed harassed," I suggested.

Tully dismissed this. "I wouldn't say that. If you ask me it was something personal. She'll get over it," he added loftily. "I thought we might visit the ruins."

"Something to eat first," I insisted.

He agreed reluctantly. "I don't suppose a couple of rolls to take with us would do?"

"No, they wouldn't."

We found the restaurant fronting the river. Close by French marines were digging sandbagged positions. Even as they worked they had automatic rifles strapped across their backs, very different altogether from the local Cambodian soldiers who cycled slowly past with outdated rifles across their handlebars.

We rode past the UNTAC provincial HO and a bar called The Minefield. Coming the other way was a steady stream, of bicycles stacked high with chopped wood for fuel. The scrubland thickened to forest. Tracks bore off left and right. Signs depicted exploding landmines, but the locals seemed to come and go undeterred, plunging into the scrub to hack out firewood.

At a check-point we showed our UNTAC passes and were waved on. "That saves us each twenty-six dollars," Tully remarked prudently. A mile later the road divided. We turned left along a broad reed-choked moat with an ancient wall on the far side. A stone causeway crossed to a ruined facade of gateways, colonnades and crumbling towers. We left our bikes with a soldier beneath a shady tree and walked over.

The scale of it impressed me most. The moat was the width of the Mekong River. Beyond the huge gateway lay another moat even wider, with the familiar triple-towered ruins of Angkor rising beyond. It was a magnificent sight. There seemed no one else except sightless mine-victims begging. They were only children. The mines must have exploded in their faces. They sat motionless as statues. Blood tears slowly oozing from their unhealed eye-sockets. Nearby three monks were busy cutting rushes. Another boy came from a nearby temple hauling a container of soft drinks almost as big as himself.

Angkor itself is symmetrical and square, platforms, arches and stairways rising skywards as if to duplicate the mythical Tower of Babel. Although many of the shrines and heads were missing, the walls were embossed with intricate designs of dancing girls. The nearest comparison I could make were the great Mayan ruins in Central America at Palenque and Tikal. But those were deserted, the religion and the culture that created them long vanished.

Here the opposite was the case. Many of the defaced shrines were garlanded. Incense sticks smoked, candles flickered in the gloom. Sometimes at the end of a long colonnade, I glimpsed the bright dash of colour as a monk

passed. On our way back we climbed into the boggy moat, to a large rectangular pool. The monks were resting at one end. Tully enquired with gestures if we might swim. I didn't join him. Just as well as he emerged covered with small slimy leeches. We all laughed while he danced about frantically

trying to dash them off. Overhead the monsoon clouds were massing. Suddenly from quite close came the sound of gunfire. The monks showed no alarm. "Khmer Rouge," they grinned.

"Come on!" Tully cried. "There's a lot more to see."

We retrieved our bicycles and rode along a deserted track to a moated gateway flanked by a row of squat statues holding a stone rope in the form of a serpent's body. Above the gateway towered four ravaged faces, each facing in a different direction. Inside smoked the remains of a hastily abandoned fire, mats, army caps and a rifle. We cycled on towards the great ruin of Angkor Thom. Close to it a big cement Buddha had recently been consecrated, decked with flags and ornamental prayer-poles, but here too everyone seemed to have vanished.

As we climbed up into the ruins the rain came down. An old man emerged from a dark chamber, gripped our wrists, and led us into the shrine. He pressed incense sticks into our hands and a candle to hold while he crouched muttering incantations. Outside the rain swept down and thunder cracked across the sky. It was not the monsoon that alarmed me, for that would pass in an hour, but the persistent gunfire, closer than before and impossible to tell where it was coming from. It sounded all around us, just outside the ruin. As we made our way back to the gateway and peered out, a shell or a mortar, I couldn't tell which, exploded not far from our bikes.

Tully groaned. "I hope they don't hit them. We'll have to pay."

"Do you think we ought to get out now?" I suggested, uncertain whether it was better to risk it and run, or risk it and wait. My watch said 5.00 p.m. In another hour it would be getting dusk. A volley of gunfire erupted from the forest close by.

Tully raced ahead of me down the steps and into the open. We reached the bikes only to find mine had a splinter of shrapnel embedded in the back tyre. I rode off rather bumpily following Tully who pointed to a track through the trees. "Looks like a short cut," he panted.

A short cut it may well have been, and who can blame him in the circumstances for trying it? Unfortunately after rather less than a mile it took us straight into a Khmer Rouge position.

The soldiers who blocked the path regarded us with sullen hostility. Their rifles were ominously pointed in our direction.

"Hide your press card," hissed Tully, beaming optimistically around.

I dismounted and pointed disgustedly at my flat tyre. It was touch and go. Any moment we would have been arrested. We were saved by an old lady hobbling along the path. Her straw hat blew off in a gust of rain and sailed past us to land in the mud. Tully dived forward, retrieved it and handed it back. She smiled. "Ar koon (thank you)," she said, dusting her hat and going on her way. The Khmer Rouge expressions

mellowed. I aimed a pretend kick at my back tyre. A grin broke out here and there. Someone else's misfortune is always funny. "Siem Reap?" Tully innocently enquired.

One of the soldiers held up his hand. "Seven kilometres," he announced in English. Tully regarded my bicycle, and me, and shook his head sadly.

"Cigarettes," he suggested, puffing at his fingers, fished in his pocket and produced a handful of notes.

"Thank you," said one of the soldiers. The rifles lowered. Tully waved. Nobody stopped us. We pushed our bicycles down the path. I could feel them watching us from the small of my back. When we turned again they had vanished. The forest had swallowed them up. There was more gunfire, but it was from behind. Ahead the sky lightened, but the rain never let up. I was more than a little relieved when our path joined the road again, about a mile out of the town. I never knew at the time how difficult it had been for Tully to act as naturally as he did.

That evening Tully had a long talk with the Morris girl. They conferred together on the upstairs verandah of the guest houses where the red Morris sign was hung. When I returned from a stroll along the river they were still at it.

Later Tully joined me at the restaurant. "I was right," he said. "Two people. Both English. Cooped up together." He reached for the menu.

"You wouldn't make the same mistake?" I said.

He frowned at the table. "Not with bossy, demanding Western girls."

"Is that what she is?" I asked. "It's a slave you want, not a wife, Tully."

He looked up, grinning sheepishly. "In Thailand until 1961 there were three legal grades of wife," he said. "Wife number one, then the minor wives—the 'mia noy'—and then the slave wives. No," he concluded airily, beckoning the girl who was serving. "I'm beyond wives. I don't even need to write any more." He peered out towards the river. "Just give me the river and something useful to do." It seemed little enough he was asking.

I spent two more days at Siem Reap. The next day Tully was busy and I hired a motorbike back out to the ruins, sticking to the main tracks. There was plenty to see, and I didn't get back until the evening. At the restaurant we were invaded by three truckloads of uniformed, orderly French marines. Fortunately we had already eaten. If we hadn't we would have been waiting there all night. Which was just as well since the Khmer Rouge launched an attack on the town.

Afterwards the opinion was that this was a political act—Angkor Wat symbolized the Khmer civilization. For the Khmer Rouge to have held it just for a day at the elections would have emphasized their power.

They penetrated into the centre of town. The Bangladeshi regiment offered no resistance, nor I gather did the Cambodians, but the French marines in their sandbagged

dug-outs weren't about to allow a repeat of Dien Bien Phu. The gun battle continued all night. We kept a look-out, lying flat on the upper verandah. Below in the muddy street there was confusion and shouting and firing— shadowy figures running this way and that, gunfire from all directions.

Tully seemed rather pleased. "It's interesting to be in the thick of things once in a while," he remarked. "A real theatre of war."

I was less convinced. But I couldn't help thinking it would make a good story—if my paper ever devoted more than half a column on the inside pages to Cambodia.

By morning it was all over. The Khmer Rouge had gone, taking their wounded with them. The dead they left. One of the fiercest gun battles had taken place in the park fronting Le Grand Hotel d'Angkor. By the time we arrived there were small groups of people around each of the victims. The sight of death seemed to cheer everyone up. I must admit that after a sleepless night I had a good appetite for breakfast.

I rented a motorbike and rode the other way, along the river towards the open flatlands and the Tonle Sap. After a few miles a solitary hill rose above the marshes. A Cambodian soldier lounging in a hammock waved me on up a rocky path zig-zagging towards the top. Half way up I came on another post—a ruined gun emplacement, and soldiers sleeping under a thatch hut. The track was too bad to ride further, but from here I could see the lake far ahead where the marshes ended. I climbed down and followed a

muddy track along a dike that broadened into a canal. At the end of the track there were boats moored, and huts floating on bamboo rafts. Some children were playing marbles on the dried mud. A large dilapidated wooden ferry with hammocks slung under the open-sided deck was leaving next afternoon for Phnom Penh. The journey would take two nights unless it was attacked. Whilst I was there a British UN boat patrol cruised up at speed, moored, and soldiers drove off in a jeep. I couldn't see them as much of a deterrent to attack—nor the shrouded gun emplacement in the middle of the road.

I rode back to Siem Reap and on out to the airfield. The DC3 wasn't due up for days, Tully told me. I went to MovCon to be greeted by a big but non-committal Dutch soldier. "Come here at 7.00 tomorrow morning. I cannot promise but there should be a flight."

Next morning I drove out with Tully and the English girl. Even now she looked pale and haggard. I had yet to glimpse the ghost of a smile. Tully said nothing. At MovCon my name and UNTAC pass number was penned on the list. But the helicopter never came. An hour later the Dutch soldier informed me that the flight had been cancelled. "Come back at 2.00," he said. Fortunately I was there at noon. A huge Russian helicopter came in and in five minutes had taken off again. I was on board. It was so unexpected that there was not even time to say farewell to Tully. I leaned out of the open porthole but he was not on the tarmac. There were few passengers. One of the Russians invited me into the cockpit, where the noise was deafening. He offered me headphones

and a plastic cup of vodka and orange. He fed this to the pilots like a wet nurse. We swooped low over the ruins and headed back to TVY where we landed, waiting for sixty Bangladeshi soldiers who never showed up. Instead a Cambodian was rushed in on a hammock, both his hands blown off by a landmine half an hour before while he was cutting bamboo shoots.

His wife crouched beside him holding the bloodied stumps of his arms. He would have bled to death in the time it took to reach Phnom Penh. We diverted to Stung Treng. His life seemed already to have drained out of him as they carried him away. I couldn't believe a five mile bumpy ride to the Indian field hospital would help his chances.

We took off again. This time I sat in the back beside an open porthole. I wanted to watch the river, Tully's river as I thought of it, snaking its way through the vast untouched tropical forests. As we neared Phnom Penh, all along the horizon rose wisps of smoke like scout fires above the trees, and every wisp meant more logging. I thought of Tully. It was almost as if they were smoking him out, driving him from cover like a fugitive.

The Killing Fields

Three months later after the elections had been held I returned to Phnom Penh. Prince Sihanouk was now King. The two main political rivals—Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen had joined forces as co-prime ministers to form a Government of National Unity.

When I visited UNTAC headquarters it was largely deserted, the prefabricated huts empty, the press office locked, and a notice above MovCon saying all flights for journalists had been suspended. The UN troops were pulling out.

I cycled out to Morris's two days later only to be informed that Tully had been transferred south to Sihanoukville, Kompon Son as it used to be. Kompon Son, I knew*, was one of Cambodia's main ports, 200 kilometres south-west of Phnom Penh. The French had been guarding it but they were being withdrawn. "We are a bit short-staffed there," the girl explained amid the usual pandemonium of ringing telephones and people shouting instructions. "I think there's a message for you. Yes, here it is." I thanked her and turned to go. She called back, "There'll be a flight in a few days. Not sure when though."

Tully's note, when I read it over a beer outside the Capitol, was brief enough. "I'm managing the Mess Hall. Feeding a French battalion. They'll be gone in a week. If you want to come ..." He gave some instructions how to find him.

There are no buses to Kompon Son, but at a dusty intersection a few blocks from the Capitol taxis left soon after dawn, as and when they filled up. The fare was five dollars. When I arrived at 7 a.m. next morning there were already six passengers jammed across the back seat. I opted to pay double just to get the front seat to myself. It didn't quite work out like that as the driver squashed an extra passenger on his own seat, reaching around him to change gears.

Once past the airport the traffic thinned until we seemed to be the only car on the road. The road ran straight— pitted with shell craters, most of which we missed. The one we were forced into by an oncoming truck shredded our rear tyre. The pit change was speedier than I would have believed. The driver kept glancing anxiously about as he sweated with the jack and the wheelbrace. One of the passengers made a gesture of slitting his throat and grinned. I had heard the road was infested by bandits but it had never occurred to me that they would attack in broad daylight.

After the plains we climbed through a range of low wooded hills. Beyond these, we reached the sea. The driver stopped outside a deserted railway station near an equally deserted port and collected our money. A motorbike taxi offered to ferry me to UNTAC. We drove uphill into a busy, dusty and half-demolished town, and down again on the far side. The road became a sand track. Along the shore stood the white tell-tale army tents of the UNTAC battalion. The French marines were camped at one end of the shore, the mess tent and Morris's store stood at the other, half a mile away. A

French truck ferried me there. I found Tully outside giving orders to his crew of porters, some mere kids. His appearance had changed slightly. I noticed a pistol tucked in the red-check Khmer scarf tied round his waist. He seemed neither pleased nor displeased to see me. "You can borrow my motorbike," he offered. "I'm staying at a hotel in the town. They've got spare rooms. Come back for lunch."

The hotel was friendly enough. The price of the room reduced when I mentioned Tully. I unpacked and rode back to the camp. Tully was waiting inside the mess tent— the biggest tent I had ever seen. Ceiling fans whirred, while hundreds of French marines lined up at the canteen with their tin trays. The food was rather good, pork, string beans, rice, potatoes.

Tully claimed no credit. "There was a Cambodian cook here already. I just let him get on with it." We sat at a table near the entrance. Some Australian signallers joined us. Tully didn't bother to introduce me.

"Why the pistol?" I enquired.

He nodded outside. "Last night the Khmer Rouge cut a hole in the perimeter fence. Stole half the supplies. Cambodians will take anything." He turned to the signallers. "Even use minefield signs to roof their huts."

Someone laughed.

Tully placed a hand on his holster and affected a military swagger. "May need it to keep the mob at bay. It's going to be like the last days of Saigon in '75," he joked.

In the afternoon after the canteen emptied Tully took me on a tour of the area. Once it had been a coastal resort but the esplanade was a grassed-over ruin, and the hotels burned-out shells. We sat under a lone beach umbrella near a stream where two enterprising women had set up a foodstall.

"It'll be the next Pattaya," Tully commented, pulling off his shirt for a swim.

"Hardly Pattaya," I said.

Tully placed his pistol on the table.

"Is it dangerous here?" I glanced around. Apart from a cluster of stranded fishing boats beside a low headland the place was utterly deserted. There wasn't anyone else in sight.

Tully sat on the edge of his deckchair sipping a beer. His back was criss-crossed with weals, old scars long overgrown.

"You have to make an ally of death," he remarked casually.

"Not a friend. An ally. Otherwise he's your enemy."

I let that pass. I said, "Tully, you're the only person I know who lives out his own fiction."

"Is that what I do?" He stared out to sea. "I've written enough crap, haven't I? I should be good at it." He fished in his wallet out of his shorts to pay for the beer before he realized the food vendors had already left. A photograph fell out. I picked it up from the sand. Tully with his arm round an

Oriental girl—not Dee. Both of them smiling. An old black and white photo. I had seen it before somewhere. Tully slipped it back without a word and went off to have his swim.

I told him later that I planned to go south to Kampot and Kep.

He looked disapproving. "That's Khmer Rouge country. The French patrols go in, but no one else. And they're pulling back. Kep was the big resort in colonial days, now it's three miles of gutted houses."

Supper in the mess hall was less inviting than lunch. The slabs of meat were too tough to chew. Tully was busy explaining something to a group of French officers. The Australian signallers were less than friendly. Later Tully told me he'd been asked to go down to the Ausco signalling unit for a drink. I declined to join him. I caught a motorbike taxi back to the hotel.

Next morning he had already left by the time I got up. I realized that despite his note asking me to come, he didn't really want me there. Anyway I had nothing to gain by staying. Despite his warning I decided to try to reach Kampot. At the market all the taxis were going the other way. "No," they refused. "Khmer Rouge. Bang, Bang!" Just when I was on the point of giving up a man came up on an old motorbike and offered to take me there for ten dollars.

"How long?" I asked.

He held up five fingers. He was dressed raggedly but unlike the other drivers he didn't try to persuade me either way. I

wondered if the motorbike would get there, but we slung my bag over the gas tank and I climbed on the back. There were no footrests, and uphill the engine misfired but we kept going and after an hour turned off the Phnom Penh road onto a track that headed south across an empty plain, shadowed by a high wooded ridge.

The track deteriorated to little more than jagged stones or loose sand and our speed reduced to walking pace. Several times we came close to a rail track. I knew this was the single line from Kompon Son to Phnom Penh. Two trains a week. I hoped to get back to town on one of them.

The plain became wetter. Mangrove swampland and tidal channels which we crossed on the remains of plank bridges. At the second or third river crossing we were confronted by an armed group squatting in the shade. Two of them got up and flagged us down, pointing an assortment of weapons including something that resembled a Tommy gun from the First World War. It was hard to tell if they were renegade soldiers or Khmer Rouge. I had taken some trouble to hide my money. Either in a zipped trouser belt or under an elastic leg bandage. Despite enough armament to blow up an entire army all they demanded was 500 riels.

From then on we were held up every couple of kilometres, usually at river crossings. Sometimes the soldiers were friendly, at other times sullen and angry, jabbing their rifles into us. They were serious all right, and mean enough, and would have shot me dead in a second had I hesitated. It was the realization that my life was worth no more to them than

25 cents that sobered me. After all they could have demanded a thousand dollars and I would have obliged. In this country a life was worth literally nothing.

Once we glimpsed the sea to our west and finally the ridge curved away and we crossed over a broad river on a long rattling wooden bridge and rode into Kampot. I paid off my driver and he turned around and headed back the way we had come. He didn't even wait for a drink.

Old guide books describe Kampot as a pretty riverside town. The war had scarred but not destroyed it. There were still villas along the river bank and tall shady trees, but most of the houses seemed deserted, and those that might have been hotels, judging by the remains of peeling signs, were boarded up or broken open. I finally came on a simple notice 'Room to rent'—a sort of stable with rain water collected into a great drum. To my surprise a generator thudded into life and the ceiling fan whirred into action. I hoped it would keep the mosquitoes at bay, as the net over the bed was too torn to be of any use.

I borrowed a bicycle and set off to find someone prepared to ferry me the few kilometres to Kep. Not even my dollars persuaded them. There was no road, they told me. The town was completely destroyed and the Khmer Rouge would shoot anyone on sight. Instead I went for a swim in the river where I was joined by a boy and a horse. The boy possessed few more clothes than the horse and was happy enough with my spare shirt even though it hung round his ankles. In the evening I found a woman selling hot bread rolls from a sack.

I kept the bread for breakfast and ate a bowl of noodles by the river.

Next morning the boy arrived, his horse hitched up to a cart. He ferried me to the railway station a couple of miles outside the town. The station was a tall tent-like structure—clearly the product of some avant-garde French architect's fantasy. Now it was crowded and filthy. The train from Kompon Son to Phnom Penh was due at 11 a.m. There were two prices of tickets. Cheaper for the coach in front of the engine—the one that would set off the landmines.

By 2 p.m. no train had arrived. Word spread that the track had been landmined. There wouldn't be a train for days. Everyone seemed to accept the news calmly. Food sellers arrived. Then a bicycle carrying a car battery. A man unpadlocked the waiting-room and set up a video film. The crowd seemed prepared to camp out for the next train.

My horse-boy had disappeared but a motorbike driver offered to take me back into Kampot. For some reason he took me to a house near the river that had been taken over by Medecins Sans Frontieres. It was deserted apart from one French doctor who advised me to get back to Kompon Son while I could. I sat down on the only chair in an otherwise bare room. He shrugged. "Here they steal everything. Everything. Jeep, my cameras, now even the medicines."

As I sat there I could feel a weariness stealing over me. My head felt fuzzy and my body ached. The thought of riding back to Kompon Son was not an appealing one.

The French doctor went out. I heard him calling instructions. When he returned he carried a backpack. "Ici est dangereuse. Dangereuse reste ici."

I followed him outside. My driver from the station seemed to have anticipated events. There were now two motorbikes parked outside. We rattled back across the long bridge over the river. "Eh bien sur we'll get robbed," the doctor called across. "Mais j'espere we don't get shot."

I spent most of the next three hours just hanging on. The fever was taking hold and I felt too awful to care what happened. The French doctor was in front and the dust stirred up blinded like a fog. In fact we were hardly held up. Perhaps they were all too busy plundering the train. We never saw it, but I heard sporadic firing from the direction of the track. What it meant I neither knew nor cared.

We got to the main road from Phnom Penh to Kompon Son in the late afternoon and reached the town by dusk. The French doctor went his own way. I directed my driver to the hotel. I was too weary to go down to the UNTAC base or even to eat. An hour later Tully banged on my door. I could tell he was angry.

He tossed me a can of beer and a hand gun. "Bloody French are pulling out. You may need it. Orders from God." He sat down on the edge of my bed. "You all right?"

"Yes," I said. "Why are they going now?"

"God only knows! If you telephone UNTAC in Phnom Penh they don't answer. They say they have to telephone New

York. And the UN office in New York is staffed by a cashiered Colonel from Africa who spends the day fiddling his accounts or humping his secretary. Some chain of command! Welcome to World Government." He got up. "I'd better get back. There's no one guarding the place. A crew of Australians have come in to demolish the base and ship out what they can. When the locals see them they won't wait. You want to have a last meal? I've got to pay off the cooks."

"You make it sound like Death Row," 1 joked.

Tully merely patted his pistol securely. I tucked mine in my belt. Downstairs 1 climbed on the back of his motorbike. There was a kid waiting who scrambled up behind me. "One of my porters," Tully acknowledged. The boy clutched an armful of empty plastic bags.

We reached the shore and ploughed along the sand track to the base. A single black French UN guard was shouting at a crowd of Cambodians which was growing by the minute. They were all clutching bags and sacks. A lot were in uniforms of one sort or another, and armed. Tully weaved straight through the crowd past a row of deserted prefabricated huts and the half empty rubber water tanks. A light blazed from the open door of Morris's stores.

Tully swore softly, "1 think they've taken their pay already."

The stores had been ransacked. The freezer container told the same story. As we walked round to the open doors of the mess hall the lights dimmed and went out.

The white mess tent rose around us like a ghostly shroud. Where there had been tables I could see figures moving and crouching. We heard a heavy truck draw up and then pull away. It was followed by bursts of shooting that grew louder and closer.

I moved back to the doorway. Across the mud yard people were squeezing through the hole in the perimeter fence. I was about to shout a warning to Tully when a shot rang out. Followed by a sharp cry. Tully was on his knees. His white shirt was stained dark with blood.

"Are you hit?"

"It's the kid," said Tully, mopping desperately at a gaping wound in the boy's chest. The boy writhed and moaned. His eyes wide open. He gripped Tully's arm.

"Get out!" Tully shouted. "Shoot in the air!"

More shots cracked in the distance. I could see the perimeter fence bulging under the crush of people trying to force a way through. I tugged Tully's arm. "You can't help him," I shouted.

Tully tried to pull out his pistol but the boy was clutching him too tight.

"Tully," I pleaded. "Come on. He's not your ..."

Tully glanced down at the boy. "Go on. Get out," he urged me.

[didn't argue any longer. I turned and ran. There were more shots and screams. The mob had reached the tent. I pulled

out my pistol to fire but nothing happened. There were more shots and screams. I dropped the pistol and ran for the entrance. Hands grabbed at me. A fist smashed into my face. I managed not to fall. Bursts of firing sounded. Ahead stood the half empty water tanks. I ran past them onto the deserted beach. A half moon gleamed over the dark sea. I paused, breathless. I could taste blood on my mouth. I started running towards the French camp.

Under some giant trees a laden army truck was churning up the sand. The cab opened and a driver peered out.

"Aidez moi," I called. "Aidez, mon ami, Tully." I pointed up the beach.

The driver glanced at me and then back to the spinning wheels. A head leaned over the back of the truck and someone heaved me up. "J'ai besoin aide." I panted, but my French seemed to have deserted me. "Tully," I said. The soldier shrugged. The truck lurched forward, throwing me off balance. I clutched at air and fell heavily. My head hit something and I passed out.

We got back to Phnom Penh next morning. I went to the Capitol Hotel. I collapsed on my bed. I don't know how long the fever gripped me, but it was next day before I was able to stand, albeit wobbly. I didn't want to eat or drink anything. I got a motorbike taxi out to Morris's where they seemed to be taking the place apart.

"Tully's dead. Shot," shouted the girl, rushing around with an armful of papers. She stopped and sagged wearily against the

wall. "They're flying him back tomorrow. We need someone to identify the body. What's happened to your face? Are you all right?" Someone was shouting down a telephone at the other end of the cramped office. "I'm sorry to have to ask you," the girl was saying.

"Identify him?"

She nodded. "Yes. It would be a great help. Tomorrow about midday. Is there anyone we can let know?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure."

I don't remember much of the rest of the day. The fever came back. I lay sweating and aching on the bed in the Capitol. Later in the afternoon I went out. I remember going to the river. In front of the Royal Palace, below the steep concrete bank the kids were swimming in the current as usual. It was moving backwards. It was the only river, I thought, that flowed upstream half the year. Typical of Tully's river to move the wrong way.

Dusk came on as I sat there. The food vendors set out their rush mats. People gathered in knots along the river bank to eat. Kids came up selling trays of boiled eggs or little bags of sugar cane cubes. A barefoot boy was collecting empty plastic bags. The world's kids, Tully's kids, I thought. I got up and walked unsteadily towards the ferry that plied between the city and the island mid-stream. Some kids who were drying off stopped me. They wanted to practise their English. They introduced me to a boy hardly older than themselves. "Our teacher," they said proudly.

From what they said I gathered that he was the one who went to school and when he came back he taught the others what he'd learned. A little further on, lying side by side on the sidewalk, like two dead bodies entwined, lay a sightless beggar wearing the remnants of an army uniform and an even grimmer child clutching him. I wanted to wake them up, to give them some money, to make sure they weren't dead. I pulled some notes out of my pocket. I knew that people were watching me.

The child's head lay cradled on the man's arm, his arm lay across his chest. I tucked the notes in his fist. It felt like laying flowers on a grave. Tully and the boy's grave. I wondered if the money would stay or whether someone would snatch it.

Below the steep embankment the inky dark river flowed upstream. A sightless flow. A river of the blind and the limbless, nudging their way upstream against the flow of the world outside, sightless kids from Angkor Wat with blood oozing in their empty eye sockets, children crawling along with their stubs of limbs stuffed in old tin cans, little blinded girls clutching orphaned babies. A stream of eyes that would never again glimpse our world. Whose world? Tully's world, perhaps? Not mine. Thank God.

Next day the fever had left me. I was due to identify Tully's body and started out for the airport but something stopped me. I kept taking side turnings. Anything to delay reaching Morris's. Suddenly I found myself outside a derelict school with coils of rusting barbed wire and a sign, 'Tuol Sleng S.21'. A man waved me in and parked my bicycle. He pointed to a

building across an overgrown yard. I knew now I was meant to come here. It was all planned.

I went through the ground floor classrooms, each with a rusting bedstead, leg irons, a bundle of ragged clothes on the bed and a large faded black and white photograph of a chained-up victim lying on a bed. The faces were too smashed and bloodied to be distinguishable.

There was no doubt S. 21 had been a school. There were even lists of rules. The Security Regulations read:

Answer according to my question—don't turn them away.

Don't try to hide facts, making pretexts this and that, you are strictly prohibited to contest me.

Don't be a fool for you are a chap who dare to thwart the revolution.

While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all. Sit still and wait my orders. When I ask you to do something do it right away without protesting.

Don't make pretexts about Cambodia in order to hide your jaw of traitor.

If you don't follow all the above rules you shall get many lashes or electric wire.

If you disobey any point of regulations you shall get either ten lashes or 5 shocks of electric discharge,

Tuol Sleng had been left unchanged, unswrept since the day the Khmer Rouge retreated. The next block of

classrooms had been converted into tiny cells by crude brick or wood partitions, a metre wide, two metres long, each with leg irons, a rusting food tin, rags, stains of blood and excrement. Another row of classrooms had been turned into torture chambers complete with their own crude implements, racks, tubs and shackles for immersion, pincers for tearing off nipples, upright chairs with wires and batteries. Later in a numbed daze I mounted stairways and came on rooms with bones and discarded shoes and even a mummified corpse, but by then I had already reached the photographs.

The photographs covered every inch of the walls. Thousands of them, all the faces staring at the camera. Some children with chains round their necks, some with faces bruised beyond recognition, all of them doomed. No. 1 was a boy with a chain round his neck. No. 18 a man with his mouth torn in two. No. 460 dated 14-5-75 was a young woman with a baby in her arms strapped upright to an electric chair, a metal probe on her head, another pressing into the back of her neck. There was something familiar and haunting about the face, as if I had seen it before. At the far end of the next room of photographs were the foreigners. Even with a beard it was easy to recognize Tully. The date was 14-5-75.

Underneath the photograph was a 'confession' written in English and Khmer. Only partly legible, it began: "My name is Jim Tully. I was born in London on February 3rd 1942. My parents emigrated to Australia where I grew up before my father transferred to the Solomon Islands ..." The rest was

washed out but lower down I read, "On the 21st April 1975 I left the Royal Hotel where I had been hiding illegally, accompanied by a Khmer girl—a traitor dog of the capitalist regime. I was' to be paid 250,000 dollars by the CIA to spy ..."

In another room of photographs I came on one of Tully and the girl with the baby in her arms. In black and white they could have been a young Victorian family posing for a portrait.

The long school corridors outside had been shut in by wire netting to stop anyone throwing themselves off the upper floors before their time of torture was due.

On the way out I passed a map of Cambodia composed of skulls. Underneath was listed:

17-4-75 to 7-1-79:

3,314,768 people disappear

141,860 invalid

200,000 orphans

638,322 houses destroyed

1,200 towns completely destroyed

I asked the man who parked my bicycle the way to the Killing Fields. It wasn't a macabre interest. I wanted to follow the route Tully had been taken on that 'final' journey. It was a straight road past the derelict stadium, over a river and into open country. The road became a sandy track passing low

lying rice-fields. Finally I reached the place. There was no sign but I enquired in French for 'les champs des Assassins'.

In the centre of a series of open muddy craters stood a tall column cased in glass. Inside were layer upon layer of skulls. A solid column of skulls sixty feet high. At the base lay a huge pile of rags and shoes and above—the first layer was reserved for 'foreigners'.

This was where they had brought him. Hauled out of the truck to the edge of the crater to wait his turn to be bludgeoned or bayoneted to death. Somehow he had escaped. But no one ever escaped from Tuol Sleng alive. In the end the Killing Fields caught up with him.

I didn't return to Morris's to identify Tully's body. They could perform that ceremony without me. I didn't want

him to see me. Instead I returned to the river. I wanted to find the blind man and his boy and give them money, buy them clothes, give them a meal, anything. They weren't there. Later another blind man came past drawn by two stray dogs on string leashes, pulling him aimlessly this way and that in different directions. The crowd laughed at the spectacle.

I watched the river until the afternoon monsoon sent me ducking for cover beside a shrine. The kids were still swimming. The river was still flowing upstream. I thought of the story of Buddha when he dropped his food bowl into the river and said, "If I will find enlightenment let this bowl flow upstream." And it did.