

## **"Searching for Innocence: Phnom Penh, 1996."**

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GUY: African-American child of the sixties, whose reaction to the difficulty of implementing the period's idealism in the real world has leaned more toward cynicism and the workings of the free market economy. Still, he has not yet joined the sales department of IBM, and for reasons perhaps unknown to himself, he continues showing up in places like Cambodia, to do good work.

GIRL: Also a child of the sixties, she likely grew up in a fairly well-to-do, white, suburban neighborhood. Being one-step removed from the issues she screamed about, she has managed to maintain more of an issues-oriented approach to the world, despite having also had her idealism "stripped naked and laughed at." She is not without cynicism, sarcasm, and all the other survival techniques of idealists in the third world. The couple live together, but they have never married.

NOTES ON THE GUY AND GIRL: Their interactions on paper may appear odd: Their supposed jokes should not seem funny to anyone but them, while the implications of seemingly slight things cause them to fall into deep despair. These are all signs of people too far from home, who are living a life without context. They create games to distract themselves from the emptiness that is always a quiet moment away. Inevitably, their interactions are a bizarre, emotional roller coaster.

STEVEN: He is from a different generation, an idealist of the 90's, which couches his actions less in terms of a broad social movement, as much as an individual career choice. His is also a far more naive, and perhaps then, more honest in his approach to Cambodia.

WOMAN ONE: Cambodian prostitute, she grew up in a small village and came to Phnom Penh after being sold by her family to be a prostitute. Her reaction to this has been to become hard and bitter. There is rarely a place for emotion in her life. She hustles all the time so as to keep from realizing where life has taken her. Both hers and WOMAN TWO's character were developed from interviews of actual Cambodian prostitutes provided by UNICEF in Phnom Penh. Both are underage.

WOMAN TWO: To help her family, she left her village for Phnom Penh to work as a beer girl, and she was caught in a whirl of events that led to her being sold as a prostitute. She is not as bitter as WOMAN ONE, and perhaps she is still a bit naive. She is so very far from any world she knew so that things still seem like a dream.

MAN TWO: Plays a variety of Cambodian or Asian characters in the drama, including: Cambodian MILITARY MAN, first fighting for the Lon Nol government, and later for the Khmer Rouge; OWNER of the bar in Phnom Penh; and finally, as a villager playing in the game, "Chjom."

## THE PARTICIPANTS:

CHATH PIERSATH: Performs in the play, both his story as "CHATH," as well as various Cambodian characters in the drama, including WAITER at the bar, CAMBODIAN BUSINESSMAN at the bar, and the MILITARY MAN at the bar. Mr. Piersath was born in a village in Cambodia near the city of Batdambang, and as a young boy, survived the Khmer Rouge period. He was taken to a refuge camp in Thailand, and then was forever separated from his mother when he was airlifted to the United States. He returned to Cambodia in 1994, as a worker for the non-governmental agency, CANDO. He currently lives in Lowell, Massachusetts, where he attends school and writes.

## VOICE-OVER PARTICIPANTS:

The following Cambodian survivors of the Khmer Rouge were interviewed for this production, and their stories are told in the play through voice-overs and projections.

ARN CHARN POND: He grew up in Batdambang Province in Cambodia, and was separated from his parents at the age of nine through the occupation of the Khmer Rouge. His particular forced labor camp was where the Khmer Rouge executed many of their alleged traitors of the revolution, and he, like the other children at the camp, were forced to watch the executions as often as five times a day. At the age of 13, he was forced to fight for the Khmer Rouge and was separated from his unit when they were overrun by the Vietnamese. He spent months in the jungles of Cambodia surviving off roots and berries, and he was eventually found laying unconscious, and was brought to a refugee camp on the Thai Border. Mr. CHARN POND lives in Lowell, Massachusetts, where he works with Cambodian street gangs and other groups through the Center for Khmer in Lowell.

SENG TI: Was also living in Phnom Penh when he and his family were forced to evacuate the city by the Khmer Rouge. He was the only person in his family to have survived the occupation. His story has been told by New York Times reporter, Roger Rosenblatt. Mr. TI currently works as a guidance counselor in Lowell Public Schools.

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(The house opens with Goreki's Third Symphony, second movement, with a program note as to its origin. This piece was based on the writings of a child to her mother scratched on to the wall of a concentration camp.)

(The set is comprised of a bar area upstage left, which is a single unit which can be rotated for the second act to become a wall unit of an apartment. It is the sort of mahogany bar with mirror and Christmas lights typical of third world, southeast Asian discos. But initially it remains unlit and unobtrusive, as does a single small table from this bar set downstage left.)

(A few moments before the play begins, the house and stage lights go dark. MAN and WOMAN enter and are seated at the table in the bar, where they will remain in darkness, smoking and slowly sipping their drinks, as though a world apart from each other or from anyone else. A single spotlight comes on center stage, along with a general low lighting cue.) As the music changes to traditional Cambodian flute, CHATH enters the light and addresses the audience.)

CHATH:

My mother was a very strong woman. She raised nine children. She struggled to keep the family together through all of it. Through all of it, she kept her dignity as a woman.

(Pause.)

My sister and I were the two youngest. In the end, we were the age where we were still clinging to her. We always felt safe around mother.

(Cross fade music cue from flute to a more up-tempo traditional village tune. Enter WOMAN ONE and WOMAN TWO from upstage left and right, dancing towards each other with traditional Cambodian movements. They are wearing the traditional, brightly colored sarongs of the village.)

(CHATH moves downstage to new spotlight, and continues addressing the audience.)

CHATH:

(Continuing)

My father, he gave up everything to marry my mother! You see, he was aristocrat from the capital city -Phnom Penh. In Cambodia, aristocrats don't marry peasants; they don't leave their life of privilege and move to the village. But my father left everything behind to have me and my eight brothers and sisters, and to have a happy life in the village. Because at one time, there was happiness in Cambodia. At one time, there was peace.

(WOMAN ONE and TWO have come together and, with backs to the audience, they are continuing traditional dance movements. Their lines are accenting CHATH's dialogue.)

WOMAN ONE:

Ma! Tell us you love us, Ma!

WOMAN TWO:

Ma! Tell us you'll never go, Ma!

CHATH:

When I was a little boy, they called me the river rat because I would spend all day in the water. I could catch a fish with my bare hands! Here, I'll show you how: First, I get in deep water -up to my neck - and then I put my hands down like this, see, careful to be very quiet, very still. Then, as the fish swims over my hand, I suddenly grab it -chapvi-a-mag!

WOMAN ONE:

Look Ma! Look what I do!

WOMAN TWO:

Look Ma! Look at this fish!

CHATH:

Every time, I always bring a fish to mother. Maybe a big Tre-ra or a tren -dong -that is a catfish. She would always be so happy, she'd tell me what a good son I was. You know, I was her favorite child.

(Cross fade sound cue of traditional music for sound cue of lullaby. This is a traditional song recorded in Lowell, Massachusetts by Khmer Rouge survivor, Sinan Ung.)

WOMAN ONE:

Ma! Sing me a song to sleep. Ma!

WOMAN TWO:

Ma! Sing me a lullaby to sleep!

CHATH:

Sing a lullaby, Ma. Sing a lullaby for sleep.

(Light up on GUY and GIRL, who have been sitting at the table all along. They remain in reflexive, self-absorbed mood.)

(Concurrently, WOMAN ONE and WOMAN TWO begin slow, sweeping, classical dance movement downstage.)

GUY:

I was born in California, but as a kid, I lived in Albuquerque...Ohio, New Jersey, North Carolina...The hospital where I was born was in Riverside. I went to visit it once -I think it was after Berlin and before South Africa. (Pause) It was cool.

GIRL:

My sister talks a lot about a sycamore tree at a house we had in Iowa. Wherever she had moved to -wherever we had moved to- she always came back to Iowa to see how much bigger the tree had grown, right on through the second marriage, then a third - another line through the address book. After awhile, we all learned to use a pencil. And through all of it, somewhere in the Midwest, a tree was growing taller.

*Play continues.*

*While the play is set in Cambodia and the story embraces the dramatic history of this country, it also explores the cultural alienation of the American NGO workers, here talking to each other in a bar, hoping that no one else will hear.*

GIRL:

(To GUY)

And it's to be just us -alone?

GUY:

It has to be.

GIRL:

That's why we're here?

GUY:

They wouldn't come to a place like this, now would they?

(Beat)

GIRL:

So what do we do then?

GUY:

We just sit.

(Beat)

GIRL:

And talk?

GUY:

We talk, yes.

GIRL:

I saw that same woman on the street today.

GUY:

We talk and talk and talk...

GIRL:

It changed my life you know. What she said, it is with me even now.

GUY

...but neither of us listen. That's what will make this such a special night.

GIRL:

So I can continue, then?

GUY:

Of course. Say whatever you like.

*Later, the GUY and GIRL are joined by a more naïve version of themselves, STEVEN, who has not yet fallen into what the two of them have become. Amidst the cynicism within and the prostitutes that surround them at the bar, a song from the sixties is heard which reminds them of the idealism that first brought them abroad. Besides providing his own story, CHATH becomes several characters in the play as well, in this section transitioning from the wealthy Cambodian businessman to the Cambodian military man. At this moment, the GUY and GIRL have just finished dancing to the song from the sixties, and are basking in the afterglow. The song was by Procal Harem: "The Whiter Shade of Pale."*

(Dance ends. GUY and GIRL have come back to table.)

(WOMAN remains transfixed -looking up at mirror ball. GUY notices)

GUY

What is it?

GIRL:

Ice, frozen. Reflecting. Cold, hard, still. Absolutely still.

GUY:

And for a moment, there was no place; there was no time.

GIRL:

No suffering; nobody had fallen off their swing set.

CHATH:

(Scolding WOMEN in CAMBODIAN)

You think the foreigners will be here for you very long? You women need to treat us with more respect! We need more respect! Now sit here and pretend that you like me.

STEVEN:

(Trying to insert himself)

I love that song, myself.

GUY:

I'm glad.

STEVEN:

Who did that? Bob Dylan wasn't it?

GUY:

(Purposefully avoiding comment, holding up glass)

And I, too, remember a train into a new damned place. And there were friends, and the air was cool and crisp, and we'd never been there. And there was progress. And the progress was good. God looked out over the progress and said, "it is good." In the beginning there were good intentions: "education to empower," "resources to renew."

GIRL:

And upon leaving?

GUY:

Upon leaving they would never be the same. Their idealism would be stripped naked and laughed at. But they could never admit this, and so they went again...and again.

GIRL:

And what did God think?

GUY:

God thought that was good, too. Or perhaps he thought it was funny.

GIRL:

"In nome de patro, de spirito sante."

GUY:

Amen.

(Pause)

(Concurrently, WOMAN ONE and TWO make quick exit from CHATH as BUSINESSMAN.)

WOMAN ONE:

(In Cambodian; snatching up money)

We go now! We go!

CHATH AS BUSINESSMAN:  
(In CAMBODIAN)  
Hey! Get back here!

WOMAN ONE:  
  
Your time up! Your time up!

CHATH:  
(To audience)  
Ah, the hell with them. I've got something even stronger than money.

(CHATH walks towards the props table and begins to don the cloths of the MILITARY MAN.)

STEVEN:  
  
It seems like you guys are a little, well, burned out maybe?

GIRL:  
  
'Burned out'?

GUY:  
  
'Maybe'?

GIRL:  
  
'A little'?

STEVEN:  
  
But, you know, when you look at the options, you could've just stayed home like everybody else and done nothing. Taken the first good job that came along, and where would you be now? But instead, you stepped out of what was easy, and now, you're out there making a difference.

GUY:  
  
Like you -for example.

STEVEN:  
  
Well, Yeah, like me, I guess.

GUY:

Painting your rainbows on the roofs their thatched huts. It's the dry season now, and so it all looks great. But what you don't know is that the rainy season will come -it always does -and then all of the colors will run together, and you will stand there for the longest time, trying to figure out what you had done.

(CHATH has made transition to MILITARY MAN, donning rifle and combat jacket.)

CHATH as MILITARY:

(Yelling in CAMBODIAN)

Hey you girls! Get over here now!

(Causes everyone to jump.)

WOMAN ONE/TWO:

Ohhhh....

GUY:

Damned military!

WOMAN TWO:

(Whisper/aside)

Oh no!

WOMAN ONE:

(Whisper/aside in CAMBODIAN)

He's got a gun.

CHATH as MILITARY:

(To audience)

If I am military man, maybe if I have been paid by my general to keep me loyal to his side, so I have money to prostitutes. If not, maybe I have been threatening people at checkpoints for bribes, and so, again I have money to go to prostitutes. I will come into a place like this to show that I can. I have my gun with me at all times. Everyone else has a gun too, but they have to obey the sign, "Please check guns in at the door," except me. I get to keep mine. I mean, there are two presidents out there in the same country, right? Everybody knows that can't last. So you listen to every 'bang bang' on the street; every 'pop, pop,' between the buildings. It could all start at any minute: bang, bang. Pop, pop. Bang-bang...

*Play continues.*

*To bring in the history of the story, the play uses oral histories from survivors of the Khmer Rouge which were recorded in the Cambodian community of Lowell, Massachusetts. Here, Chath's live memories are peppered by the images and voices of others who shared this experience.*

## ACT TWO

(CHATH enters a spot on a mostly dark stage and addresses audience.)

CHATH:

I live in Lowell, Massachusetts now, along with a lot of Cambodians. It's a lot colder in Lowell than it is in Cambodia. It snows all the time. In Cambodia, it never snowed once. (Beat) Lowell was a big mill town during the industrial revolution, and for a long time, the mills were still working. Which is why so many Cambodians came there. I mean, who else are you going to get to do that kind of work? (He walks over to karaoke machine) Have you seen one of these? They are very popular in the Cambodian households. Here, watch:

(He puts in a Cambodian video tape, which begins playing. There is music, and words to a song in Khmer placed over a Khmer pop-video -people in long evening gowns dancing, men in suits looking into the eyes of a vastly overly-made up woman, tremendous overuse of fade-in and fade out techniques -etc. The songs chosen should be familiar, western songs, sung in the Khmer language.)

(CHATH is holding a microphone)

The tapes come from Cambodia, and they have a bunch of songs in Khmer, along with a book, so you can pick out the song you want to sing just like ordering food in a Chinese restaurant.(CHATH holds up microphone) Sitting in your own living room in this place where it snows, 10,000 miles away from home, you can be the next Sin Sisamouth.

(As he is speaking, the image on the screen cross-fades to a picture of a man, ARN, and the music cross fades to his voice-over)

ARN:

(Voice-over and projection)

...and lucky us, we were young. I was about -I don't know -I was ten, nine, around there.

CHATH:

That is Arn, my friend in Lowell.

(Picture fades to SENG. We hear his voice over)

SENG:

(Voice-over and projection)

I was about seven or eight years old, at the time.

CHATH:

And that is my friend, Seng. Seng is a guidance counselor at Lowell Middle School, so he makes enough money to buy one of these machines. When we go to do Karaoke, we usually go to Seng's house. Arn and Seng are from Cambodia, too. Before we all lived in Lowell, we all lived together in Cambodia.

(Images on karaoke machine return to pop-Cambodian, but the voice-overs continue. In between the pop-images, we also have images of the Khmer Rouge and other appropriate projections working in and out)

SENG:

(Voice-over)

We saw, I saw, the Khmer Rough come in with the white flags. (Projection, men marching in) The first group came in and they were very happy, they were cheering. They said they came to save everybody -there's no more fighting. They were very friendly, this first group.

(Enter MAN TWO, in Khmer Rouge military garb. Shift in nature of videos on karaoke machine.)

MAN TWO:

We, the Democratic Kampuchea, are your mother and father. We will build and defend Cambodia from the enemies, both outside and within. There will be no more exploitation and enslavement of Cambodia's poor. We are all the same! All of us!

(MAN TWO remains in bright, overhead light. At times he moves in slow, exaggerated motions, as though acting out various aspects of the text.)

CHATH:

You see, Cambodian doesn't like to go out to bars in Lowell. They just kind of feel silly, like they don't belong. The only time they get to dress up and go out is when they are invited to a wedding. But that doesn't happen so much. So the rest of the time the women cook chicken feet salad while the men drink Heineken beer and take turns singing all the world's songs, but sung in the language that only we know.

SENG:

(Voice-over)

Well, about an hour later, the first group left the city and the second group came with tanks, guns, and they looked so very mean -and they came into the cities and shout to the people: "Get out! Get out! You have to move out from the city in three days and you need to get out as soon as possible," -and they shoot up in the air.

(CHATH works to remain occupied with the description of karaoke, occasionally singing along with the song in bits and pieces, and not very good)

CHATH:

Me, I really can't sing too good.

MAN TWO:

There will be no more family units. No more books. No private property. No diverse clothing styles. No markets. No formal education. No religion...(Pause) There will be no more freedom of movement.

(WOMAN ONE and TWO have entered)

WOMAN ONE/TWO:

Che yo! Che yo! Kampuchea!

CHATH:

(Pointing to words in Khmer on projections screen)

First of all, you have to be able to read the words on the screen, and they are all in Khmer.

SENG:

(Voice-over)

See, the Khmer Rouge always, ah, hate me, because I look like Chinese and I look like I'm from a wealthy family. They treat me so bad, they always beat me up because I grew up in the city lifestyles and when I didn't know how to harvest the rice, they just beat me up.

MAN ONE:

(Call and response)

You must work harder for your mother. You must work harder for your father. If we work hard, now, everybody will enjoy dessert on a daily basis -by 1980!

CHATH:

Funny thing, isn't it: even though I am Cambodian, I can't read or write my own language.

ARN:

(Voice-over)

Also, at the same time, we were lucky if they let us rest for two hours after six o'clock. We would come back -walk an hour -come back to our place in the center, and again, we would go inside the center, trying to rest, and kids were groaning and moaning, smell, shit, kids shit now all over the place -they are sick. Then the Khmer Rouge would rush us out, they say, "Come! Come!" like it was an emergency. Then they let us come and watch -they make us watch -them punishing the older people...They kill.

CHATH:

Arn is the one who makes me go to karaoke. His father was an opera singer (Beat) who was killed by the Khmer Rouge.

MAN TWO:

There is a sickness in the party that is developing daily. We cannot locate it precisely. The illness must emerge to be examined. Those who defend us must be truly adept at observing these evil microbes. They should have practice in observing. They must observe everything, but not so that those being observed are aware.

(The voice overs begin to get to CHATH)

CHATH:

(Breaking down)

Ma...

WOMAN ONE/TWO:

Hail! Hail! Hail! We will work harder for our father! We will work selflessly into tomorrow! We will all enjoy dessert on a daily basis! Hail!

CHATH:

Ma!

(CHATH Suddenly darts across the stage and acts as though he has scooped up something)

Look -a mouse! Oh, little mouse, I am so sorry. But I have not eaten, and I am weak. I will have to eat you!

(CHATH puts hand around mouth and feigns swallow.)

SENG:

(Voice-over and projection)

The most sad thing is, I witness a lot of killings and a lot of people die of starvation - especially my mother. My father was executed, and my mother die of starvation. Some of my brothers and sisters die of sickness and some of them, the Khmer Rouge took them away and they never returned back.

CHATH:

I don't really like to sing karaoke.

CHATH:

(Voice over from machine, picture of CHATH, too)

I remember being hungry all the time.

CHATH:

I only do it because Arn makes me go with him. Then he hogs the mike all the time.

CHATH:

(Voice over)

My stomach swelled up so that it clicked when I walked.

CHATH:

In fact, it kills my brain to sing karaoke.

CHATH:

(Voice over)

One day, I found a mouse hole, and I dug down and found a nest of baby mice.

CHATH:

I think Cambodians do this because we don't know how to talk to each other.

CHATH

(Voice-over)

I grabbed one of the baby mice before it got away, and swallowed it all at once -live - before anyone could find out what I had done.

CHATH:

Karaoke is the best way to avoid any real conversation.

CHATH

If someone saw me do it. I would have been punished. I would have had my head cracked open like a coconut.

(CHATH begins to sing: "Somewhere over the Rainbow," in Khmer. Struggles with it -not very good -mouthing some of the words, as WOMAN ONE enters, calling out:)

WOMAN ONE:

(Progression from searching to angry)

Ma? (Beat) Ma? Ma. Ma! (Pause) MA!

(CHATH stops mid phrase of song; just sort of gives up.)

WOMAN ONE:

(Suddenly resolute)

Five dolla..Five dolla..Five dolla...(continues)

(Active scene transition all around WOMAN ONE to STEVEN's apartment -single set piece for the wall of the apartment -and a papa-san chair. STEVEN enters in the scene transition, lights still dim)

STEVEN:

No, you're not listening.

WOMAN ONE:

Five dolla...

STEVEN:

No, you're not paying attention.

WOMAN ONE:

Five dolla...

STEVEN:

No you see, what you need is...

(Scene transition complete. Sudden light transition up on  
STEVEN and WOMAN ONE in his apartment)

...a belief in yourself; the knowledge that you have the power to change things, that you make the decision to live the way that you decide to live -we all do. Which means that you, me, all of us, have the power to change. That's the whole point of it: We're here to help you realize that you have the power to change things yourself. Do you understand?

(Pause)

WOMAN ONE:

(Rote)

...Five dolla, no shirt; ten dolla, no shirt, no clothes. You pay five dolla...

STEVEN:

No, you're not listening.

*Play continues.*