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Phnom Penh, Cambodia
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IT was just a single day in Phnom Penh, one of many, but even now I can't get it out of my head. The genocide was over — Vietnam, the traditional enemy, had ended it by driving out the Khmer Rouge and setting up a collaborationist government. But in 1988, Cambodia was still mourning. So many people had died, and thousands of refugees, including those who had suffered from the Khmer Rouge and those loyal to it, lived in politicized border camps inside Thailand, waiting for a diplomatic settlement that never quite seemed to arrive.

“All the intelligent Cambodians either fled the Khmer Rouge or were killed by them,” my Cambodian friend and fixer, Phin Chanda, once said to me, lightly, as if joking. “We're the residue.”

I was the bureau chief for Southeast Asia at the time, and I tried to go to Vietnam and Cambodia whenever I could from my base in Bangkok. That winter day 23 years ago was a warm one, and long, because you could not enter Cambodia except through Vietnam. Getting a visa into Vietnam was hard enough, and then you had to get permission to enter Cambodia, which was still a place full of ghosts. There were few residents from capitalist countries, except a handful of Australian aid workers. There was no air service, so I hired a taxi in Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon, to drive me to Phnom Penh, through a landscape of rice fields and palms and scrawny villages to the stunning expanse of the Mekong, where it joins the Bassac and Tonle Sap Rivers.

The Vietnamese were trying to justify their occupation by memorializing the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. They had established a museum at Tuol Sleng, the Phnom Penh high school where the Khmer Rouge had interrogated and executed so many, first taking their haunting portraits, which hung on the walls. In a classroom, I stared at a now famous

metal bed, with electrodes attached, where victims were tortured. The museum remains there, grandly titled the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

The Vietnamese were also building an ossuary, a memorial to the murdered. Cambodia was full of bones and shallow graves; I remember the empty gasoline storage tanks of a looted Shell station, used for the massed bodies of the dead. Finger bones were scattered in the grass.

Near the construction site of the new memorial, at Choeung Ek, south of the city, were heaps of bones, and a skinny Cambodian worker, with a kramar, the traditional plaid cotton scarf, around his waist, sitting at a picnic table under a thatched roof. He smoked a cigarette with one hand, while the other rested on a pile of skulls.

I then went to the Central Market, a massive and beautiful Art Deco structure left by the French. The people were scraping by; the vegetables were fresh and cheap; there was a bit of expensive buffalo meat hanging in strips, coated with flies. There were small shops to have Cambodian café au lait — with cloying condensed milk, the way my grandfather liked it; and a tiny massage clinic where young men and women exercised the old medical magic of cupping.

A young woman, carefully supervised by an older woman — her mother? — heated small drinking glasses and applied them to my back; my skin was sucked up into the glasses as they cooled. I must have looked like a sort of insect, an arthropod with glass scales. It hurt, but the pain helped me, in a way, suffer a little myself.

The day finally turned cool, with a stunning sunset and dinner at a little restaurant over the Boeng Kak lake in the city. I dined on stuffed crab and amok, a curried fish steamed in a banana leaf. Mostly I remember the short cyclo ride back to my tattered hotel in central Phnom Penh, staring up at the apartments faintly illuminated by stolen electricity and weak bulbs, thinking of how the Khmer Rouge had emptied the city entirely and murdered so many of its inhabitants, and how the people living here now, however meagerly, had won an extraordinary victory over ideology and evil.

I know the city is tarted up now, with too much Thai, Chinese and Singaporean money. But I want to see it again, to feel that quiet sense of relief that madness has an end.