The King's Last Song

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Extract

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Awakening

You could very easily meet William.

Maybe you've just got off the boat from Phnom Penh and nobody from your hotel is there to meet you. It's miles from the dock to Siem Reap.

William strides up and pretends to be the free driver to your hotel. Not only that but he organizes a second motorbike to wobble its way round the ruts with your suitcases.

Many Cambodians would try to take you to their brother's guesthouse instead. William not only gets you to the right hotel, but just as though he really does work for it, he charges you nothing.

He also points out that you might need someone to drive you to the baray reservoir or to the monuments. When you step back out into the street after your shower, he's waiting for you, big for a Cambodian, looking happy and friendly.

During the trip, William buys fruit and offers you some, relying on your goodness to pay him back. When you do, he looks not only pleased, but also justified. He has been right to trust you.

If you ask him what his real name is in Cambodian, he might sound urgent and threatened. He doesn't want you to think he has not told the truth. Out comes the identity card: Ly William.

He'll tell you the story. His family were killed during the Pol Pot era. His aunty plucked him out of his mother's arms. He has never been told more than that. His uncle and aunt do not want to distress him. His uncle re-named him after a kindly English aid worker in a Thai camp. His personal name really is William. He almost can't pronounce it.

William starts to ask you questions, about everything you know. Some of the questions are odd. Is Israel in Europe? Who was Henry Kissinger? What is the relationship between people in England and people in America?

Then he asks if you know what artificial aperture radar is.

'Are you a student?' you might ask.

William can't go to university. His family backed the wrong faction in the civil war. The high school diplomas given by his side in their border schools are not recognized in Cambodia.

William might tell you he lived a year in Phnom Penh, just so that he could talk to students at the Royal University, to find out what they had learned, what they read. You may have an image of him in your mind, shut out, desperate to learn, sitting on the lawn.

'My uncle want to be monk,' he says. 'My uncle say to me, you suffer now because you lead bad life in the past. You work now and earn better life. My uncle does not want me to be unhappy.'

This is how William lives.

He sleeps in his uncle's house. It's on stilts, built of spare timber. His eldest cousin goes to bed late in a hammock under the house, and the candle he carries sends rays of light fanning up through the floorboards. The floorboards don't meet so that crumbs can be swept through them.

There is a ladder down to the ground. There are outbuildings and sheds in which even poorer relatives sleep. There is a flowerbed, out of which sprouts the spirit house, a tiny dwelling for the animistic spirit of the place.

William and two male cousins sleep on one mattress in a

room that is partitioned from the others with plywood and hanging clothes.

William is always the first awake.

He lies in the dark for a few moments listening to the roosters crow. The cries cascade across the whole floodplain, all the way to the mountains, marking how densely populated the landscape is. William is himself in those moments. At every other time of the day he is working.

William looks at the moon through the open shutters. The moonlight on the mosquito net breaks apart into a silver arch. This is his favourite moment; he uses it to think of nothing at all, but just to look.

Then he rolls to his feet.

The house is a clock. Its shivering tells people who has got up and who will be next.

One of his cousins turns over. In the main room, William steps over the girls asleep in a row on the floor. He swings down the ladder into his waiting flip-flops and pads to the kitchen shed. Embers glow in moulded rings that are part of the concrete table-top. William leans over, blows on the fire, feeds it twigs, and then goes outside to the water pump.

Candles move silently through the trees, people going to check their palm-wine stills or to relieve themselves. A motorcycle putters past; William says hi. He boils water and studies by candlelight.

He has taught himself English and French and enough German to get by. Now he is teaching himself Japanese. He needs these languages to talk to people.

On the same shelf as the pans is an old ring binder. It is stuffed full with different kinds of paper, old school notebooks or napkins taken from restaurants. Each page is about someone: their name, address, email, notes about their family, their work, what they know.

William has learned in his bones that survival takes the form of other people. They must know you, and for that to happen

you must know them. Speak with them, charm them, and remember them.

A neighbour turns on her cassette player. Sin Sisimuth purrs a gentle yearning pillow of a song. The working day has begun in earnest. William snaps on the kitchen's fluorescent light, attached to a car battery.

Sometimes at this quiet hour, William is seized by a vision. A vision in which Cambodia is a top country. Like Singapore, it is a place of wealth and discipline. To be that, Cambodia will need different leaders, people who are not corrupt, and who do things well. Who remember other people.

William is possessed of a thought that is common among the poor, but seldom expressed: I know who I am.

And I am as good as anyone.

He discovered that as he hung around the university students. He had one pair of shoes, but they were spotlessly white. He'd sit down with a group and smile and get their names and give them his own. What do you study? they'd ask. Politics, he'd reply. He would find out what books they had to read for their courses.

The university students talked about fashion and mobile phones and motorbikes, just like anyone else. They looked soft and grumpy and made less effort than country people. Some of them made fun of his regional accent and didn't listen to what he said. That's OK, I learn from you, but you won't learn from me. He kept smiling.

There is a grunt and William's cousin Meak stomps into the kitchen. William calls him Rock Star. He has long hair and a torn T-shirt that says WE'RE SO FULL OF HOPE, AND WE'RE SO FULL OF SHIT.

'Hey, coz,' Rock Star murmurs.

William makes a joke and passes him his breakfast. Breakfast is a cup of boiled water. Rock Star is always smiling. He plays air guitar at parties, but he is the one family member who truly loves being a farmer. He loves his pigs. He even looks a little like them, smiling, short and bulky.

'I'm going out towards the Phnom for feed this morning. I could go and pay the families out that way for you.'

William's uncle and aunt are getting too old to work in the rice fields, so he pays other families a dollar a day to help with the harvest. But he must give them their money all at the same time, or there could be jealousy.

'Cool, cousin, thanks,' he says.

Rock Star grins sleepily. 'I know you can't wait to get to your foreign friends.'

Working for the UN dig team brings in seven dollars a day during tourist season. William has a contract with them; he shows up there first to drive one of them if they need him. That money pays for many things.

Outside, as tall and handsome as William, his cousin Ran goes to wash. He is so proud of his artificial leg. It is one of the best. He goes to wash at the pump wearing only a *kramar* round his waist so that everyone can see that he is not angry at life and very grateful to William. He waves and smiles. William sold all his ten cows to buy the leg.

William must always prove his value to the family.

Aunty comes next. Even first thing in the morning, she does not wear traditional dress. She is a modern woman, with curled hair and lipstick. She smiles at William and takes over in the kitchen. She is as kind and loving to him as if he were her son. William goes back to learning *Kanji*. Outside on a bamboo pole are his clean clothes for the day, washed by his cousin. In his baseball cap, trousers with big pockets and track shoes, he will look like a teenager in any suburb of the world.

My family, William thinks with fondness and gratitude. Where would I be without my family?

You would meet Map easily as well. Or rather, you would not be able to escape him.

He would scare you at first. Map is forty-four years old and

smells of war. His face is scarred, and his smile looks like a brown and broken saw.

But he is wearing a spotlessly clean brown police uniform, and he seems to be patrolling Angkor Wat in some official capacity. As if in passing and wanting nothing from you, he starts explaining the pools to you in good English. The four dry basins you see so high up in Angkor Wat symbolize the four great rivers flowing from Mount Meru.

The information is of better quality than you expected. You smile, say thanks and try to edge away, dreading another request for money.

'You've missed the main bas-reliefs,' he warns, again as if in an official capacity. 'Come this way.' He leads you down steps, to the bas-relief gallery. The stone is polished, the detail amazing. Map explains scenes from the Mahabarat and the Ramayana. He turns a corner and explains that the roof of this gallery is how all the galleries would have looked.

You might ask him if he is a trained tourist guide. He tells you, 'I work for Professor Luc Andrade of the United Nations dig team. I do their website.'

That throws you for a moment. Who is this guy?

He points to carved soldiers in strange uniforms. 'These are mercenaries. Nobody trust those guys,' he says. 'Like me. I used to be Khmer Rouge, but I changed sides and joined Hun Sen. They made me march in front, to step on landmines.'

Then he tells you, smiling, that he guarded a Pol Pot camp. It wasn't a camp; it was a village, in a commune; but Map knows what Westerners expect. He knows he has you hooked.

He takes you on a tour of hell, the long bas-relief of people being tortured. Map lists them all for you.

The frying pan, for people who kill embryos.

Pot baking for trusted people who steal from gurus.

Forest of palm trees for people who cut down trees unduly . . .

'We need that in Cambodia now,' he says and smiles. 'People cut down all our forest.'

He points to someone hammering nails into people's bones. 'I was that guy there,' he says.

Howling, for those who are degraded . . .

Today, 11th April, Map gets up later than William does, but then he worked all night. He's a Patrimony Policeman, protecting Angkor from art thieves. He sleeps off and on in a hammock strung across the doorway of the main building.

Then he works all day as well, anything to add to his salary of sixteen dollars a month.

This morning, he has persuaded an adventurous *barang* to sleep alongside him in another hammock. The foreigner, a German, is swathed in mosquito nets and smells of something chemical. He is pink and splotchy and still has on his glasses.

Map rocks him awake. 'Come on,' Map says in German, 'it is time to see the sunrise.' The man has paid him ten dollars for the privilege but like all tourists is so scared of theft that he has hidden his tiny digital camera in his underpants. Can you imagine how it smells? Map thinks to himself. I wonder if it's taken any pictures inside there by mistake.

The German sniffs, nods.

Map chuckles. 'You never been in a war.' The German looks miffed; he thinks he's a tough guy. 'You wake up in the morning in a war, pow! Your eyes open, wide, wide, wide, and you are looking, looking, looking.' Map laughs uproariously at the once daily prospect of being shot.

In the early morning mist, the five towers of Angkor Wat look magnified, as if the air were a lens. Map leads the German up steps, past scaffolding to the empty pools. He considerately takes hold of his elbow to lead him up onto the next level.

Here are tall staircases to the top of the temple. They taper to give the illusion of even greater height, and they are practically vertical, more like ladders than staircases.

'People say these steps are narrow because Cambodians have small feet.' Map grins. 'We're not monkeys! We don't like pointing our bums at people. These steps make people turn

sideways.' He shows the German how to walk safely up the steps.

Then, as a joke, Map sends him up a staircase that has worn away at the top to a rounded hump of rock with no steps or handrails.

The German finds himself hugging the stone in panic. From here, the drop looks vertical. Map roars with laughter. The German looks back at him and his eyes seem to say: this wild man wouldn't care if I fell!

He is not wrong. There is something deranged about Map. He has been shooting people since he was twelve years old.

Map chuckles affectionately, and nips around him and up and over the stone on his thick-soled policeman's shoes. He crouches down and pulls the German up.

'You have a lot of fun! You don't want to go up the staircase with a handrail.'

'Uh,' says the German, just grateful to be alive. He turns and looks down and decides that, after all, he has just been very brave. Adventure was what he wanted. 'Not too many old ladies do that!'

Even at this hour, the pavilion around the main towers is full of people. Other Patrimony Policemen greet Map with a nod and a rueful smile at his tourist catch. A large image of the Buddha shelters in the main tower, robed in orange cloth. Black-toothed nuns try to sell the German incense sticks. He buys one and uses that as an excuse to get a series of shots of an old woman with the Buddha.

Map leads the tourist through a window out onto a ledge, high up over the courtyard, which is itself above ground level. It is what, a hundred, two hundred feet down to grass?

The ledge is wide – twenty people could easily sit down on it. The German grins and holds his camera out over the edge to take a picture. Over the top of the surrounding wall, trees billow like clouds, full of the sounds of birds and smelling like medicine.

'So,' says the German, fiddling with his automatic focus. 'There are many bas-reliefs on Hindu themes. Did Cambodians become Buddhist later?'

'There was a king,' says Map. The morning is so quiet and bright he wonders if he can be bothered trying to make this foreigner understand who Jayavarman was and what he means to Cambodia.

'When Angkor Wat City is conquered, he takes it back from the foreigners. He make many many new temples. Angkor Thom, Ta Prohm, Neak Pean, Preah Kahn, all those temples. He make Cambodia a Buddhist country. After there is Hindu revolt, but Cambodians still remember him.'

Map says the King's name, feeling many complex things: respect, amusement, love. The German asks him to repeat it.

'Jayavarman Seven.' Map can feel his smile stretch with sourness.

He thinks about the five-hundred-dollar bribe he paid a few years ago to get a job removing landmines. He bribed the wrong person and didn't get the job. He'd sold his motorbike to get the money. Originally he wanted to use it to pay for his wedding, but he thought the job would be a better investment. His fiancée left him.

He thinks of all the so-called leaders and the tangled, self-serving mess they are making of the country. 'Now we need Jayavarman.'

The gold leaves have slept for a thousand years.

Two metres down, below the range of ploughs and metal detectors, they lie wrapped in layers of orange linen and pitch.

They were carried at night, hurriedly, jostled under a bridge and plunged down into the mud by the canal to keep them safe. They were cast in imitation of a palm-leaf manuscript, inscribed and inked. The leaves still yearn to speak, though the ink has long since soaked away.

The canal overhead simmered in the heat, then silted up. The

water ceased to flow. The soil was parched and inundated by turns for centuries. Rice reached down, but never touched the leaves or their linen wrappings.

Gold does not rust. Insects and rodents do not devour it. Its only enemy is greed.

On 11th April, in a version of 2004, something fiercely invasive drives itself into the Book. A corer grinds its way down through five packets of leaves. Then it hoists part of them up and out of the ground.

For the first time in a thousand years, light shines through the soil, linen and pitch.

The Book is awake again.

Light shines on a torn circle of gold. It shines on writing. The words plainly say in Sanskrit, 'I am Jayavarman.'