

## As the Buddha Lies

The night before our trip to the enigmatic, reclining Buddha atop remote Mount Phnom Kulen, I dreamt that I was standing before a slaughterhouse, watching a steady stream of lambs being eviscerated and stripped to the bones. In the morning, I said nothing about the nightmare to Melody, as I did not want to poison what promised to be an uplifting visit to the little-known Cambodian shrine. But my own experience threatened to be tainted, as the residues of terror hung before my eyes like a jaundiced veil. Over breakfast, I was silent, pushing the white pulp and red rinds of the dragon fruit around my plate, seeing only the sinewy leg joints of the sheep in my mind's eye.

Reluctantly, I sensed that there was more to the dream, and—though I tried to suppress the images—the narrative unfolded itself before me with persistent malice. I saw, again, the lambs scramble up the livestock chute. I watched for a second time the butcher lift the chin and slit the throat, opening a seam of white fat before striking a crimson geyser. And as my review of the nightmare continued, I realized that the sheep were actually people. The carcasses of the lambs—piled up in mounds about the stockyard—were transformed into fleshy torsos with arms and fingers and legs stacked like firewood. Most disturbing, the eyes of the beasts awaiting the knife were fixed directly on me with the hollow, desperate terror of genocide victims.

“What’s the matter,” interrupted Melody.

“Oh, nothing,” I lied, lifting the corners of my mouth in what I hope passed for a smile.

“Psssh,” laughed Mel, shaking her head. “You look like you swallowed a nail.”

“It’s nothing,” I reassured her. “A bad dream.”

“About what?” she asked, searching my eyes. Her concern bothered me.

“Oh, just some weird images. Nonsense, really, about dead animals or something.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go out today,” she suggested. “You know, just hang out here by the pool. Yesterday’s tour of the War Museum really put me in a dark mood.”

“No,” I objected, refusing to give credence to vague intuition. “It was just a dream. Forgotten already.”

I gave her hand a squeeze and looked at my watch.

“It’s time we got going to Phnom Kulen,” I continued. “It will be a welcome relief from the aggressive vendors and the chaotic traffic of Siem Reap.”

Mel looked unconvinced and glanced between the gritty street visible through the hotel’s glass doors and the serene pool in the interior courtyard.

“No oppressors or victims today,” I promised. “Just a smiling Buddha, a sacred mountain, and unjaded country folk.”

Gathering a camera and day pack, we stepped out of the lobby and crossed the street to a park that fronted a trash-choked stream. An amputee wheeling himself around in a converted produce cart held out his hand for alms. Several touts assailed us with offers for temple tours. Among them, a tuk-tuk driver ran down an itinerary that included the distant park we had favored. I asked him for a price and—after some haggling—Mr.

Loi agreed to take us the forty-five kilometers from Siem Reap to the Phnom Kulen along a tree-lined, rural route.

The scenic ride out to the edge of the mountain park provided a distraction from my brooding. The views were exotically bucolic. Bumping along in the motorcycle-powered rickshaw, we saw women planting rice in the paddies and men working the fields with oxen and wooden plows. The sky was blue, and the leafy palms thrust their tousled green heads towards the bright sun. From time to time, barefoot children by the roadside interrupted their play with sticks or with their ribby dogs to run beside our tuk-tuk, yelling “hello! bye-bye!”

Under the influence of the exuberant sunlight and smiling faces, the nightmare had less hold on me now. The faces of death slowly retreated into the shadows of my mind, replaced by the vitality and solidity of the people before me. Between stretches of flooded paddies, we passed a few villages where families sat before their stilt shacks, tending small clay ovens or chopping firewood for fuel. Seeing their lives of tranquil domesticity reassured me that the people here were recovering from their tragic recent history.

As we approached a bend in the road, I saw traffic slowing to a crawl in either direction. Mr. Loi cut back on the throttle and we rolled up behind the last truck in the line.

“Rural rush hour?” I joked.

“Perhaps a water buffalo crossing?” speculated Mel.

But the reality shattered our fragile happiness. As we neared the impasse, I saw the accorded chassis of an expensive, black Toyota wrapped around a tree. A small

body lay on the road, covered with one of the colorful headscarves common to the women in this region. Two dusty feet protruded out of one end of the shroud. A child-sized sandal lay amid shards of glass, and a black skid mark leading up to it served as testimony of reckless disregard.

“Oh! Don’t look!” cried Melody, averting her eyes. But I knew she has seen the child. “It was the driver,” she asserted.

“It was . . . the driver.” I repeated unconvincingly.

We drove on in silence for what seemed like an hour. The same exotic pastoral scenes rolled by on either side of the road, but I took no comfort in them now. Reviewing the passing landscape in gloomy silence, I saw a boy picking a scab, a woman lifting the skirts of her toddler for a pee, an old man repairing a bicycle tire. These gestures struck me now as trivial and absurd when juxtaposed with the youngster cut down on the country lane a few kilometers back.

It was Melody who finally spoke.

“I told you,” she whispered.

“A coincidence,” I protested, stung by some implied accusation.

We rode on without speaking. Then my wife reached over and took my hand.

“That could be us, you know. Today. This tuk-tuk could go off the road.”

“It could,” I agreed. “It could be any day. But today is not our day.”

“How do you know?”

I shrugged and patted her hand reassuringly. Sensing her doubtful gaze, I looked away—focusing on Mount Phnom Kulen rising out of the green valley.

When we arrived at the edge of the park, Mr. Loi stopped before a large signpost indicating the way to the reclining Buddha and cut the motor. We climbed down from the little carriage and looked down a deserted red-dirt intersection.

“Something wrong with the tuk-tuk?” I ask.

“I stop here. No more.”

“I don’t understand,” said Mel.

“The mountain is too big. Too up for tuk-tuk,” he explained in his improvised English. He made a steep ramp in the air with his arm to illustrate. “My friends with motos will take you.”

“But I thought we agreed that you would take us,” I said, confused.

“This tuk-tuk is too slow. The motos are faster for you. More time for your to tour!” he grinned and patted me on the shoulder.

“Oh, I see,” I said. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Getting on his cell, Mr. Loi stepped away from us to make a few calls, scuffing up the red dust with his black hoof-like shoes.

“What’s going on?” asked Mel.

“I don’t know for sure,” I replied, “but I think he’s dumping us off on another driver.”

“I thought Mr. Loi was going to drive us. I thought that was what we had agreed on.”

“Maybe it was a breakdown in communication,” I offered. “His English is not too great.”

I was on the verge of asking Mr. Loi to clarify, when two motorcycles came buzzing towards us from the western cross of our intersection. It was now obvious that we were to climb on the back of the bikes to be driven—separately—up the winding roads. The two riders parked near the tuk-tuk and conferred with Mr. Loi for several minutes in lowered voices.

“Oh, I don’t know,” balked Mel. “We don’t know these guys.

“We don’t know Mr. Loi, either,” I pointed out.

“Do you have helmets?” she said to one of the young drivers. He looked at Mr. Loi and shrugged.

“No English,” explained the tuk-tuk driver.

“Do these motos cost extra?” I hesitated.

“Forty thousand. Two,” Loi nodded. “Not pay to him. You pay me.”

“On top of what we pay you?” I asked.

“Come on, Sean. Let’s not quibble over it now,” advised Mel, not wanting to offend. “I’m sure Mr. Loi is looking out for us.”

One of the young riders gestured at Mel and said something to Mr. Loi, who indicated that she was to go with the long-haired driver and I with the man in torn jeans. I climbed on the back of a red motorcycle and Mel on the other, a battered black Honda. My driver laughed a little as I fumbled to find my foot pegs. Irritated, I asked him to wait for me to find my balance, but he set off with a jolt that nearly toppled me off backwards.

Soon the two motorcycles were zipping along side by side up a mountainous dirt road pocked with potholes and strewn with gravel. Our drivers seemed to know the route well. Perhaps too well, for they accelerated as the road became more winding. On one

long straightaway, my driver opened up his throttle and leapt ahead of his partner. Looking behind me, I saw Mel's driver slow his bike until he and my wife were out of sight.

At the next blind corner, the road narrowed to a single track and my driver slowed down to almost a crawl. Huge boulders loomed over the road and--in the shadowy recesses of a cave obscured by a curtain of vines--I caught a glimpse, brief but clear, of a man leaning out to watch us pass. A person in the woods in such a remote area is enough to excite suspicion, but, even more unaccountable, he held in his hand a radio or phone, talking into it while fixing his eyes upon me.

Suddenly, a feeling of unease came over me. Melody had no ID and carried a thousand dollar digital camera. I had a hundred or so in cash, a necessity of traveling in areas without banks, and I had neglected to take note of our hotel address or phone. A dark storm of images swept over the horizon of my mind, and I had a terrible vision of Melody in a slaughterhouse, of the red rind and white meat of dragon fruit.

"Stop! Stop," I cried, tapping the driver on the back. He glanced over his shoulder with a vague disregard, failing to understand me or failing to care.

I swung round anxiously in the hopes of seeing Mel, but saw only the man obscured by a tree. Was he hiding from me? Turning my eyes forward I prepared to tear the key from the ignition when I saw a pile of concrete sacks beside the road and a man on a small trencher, watching us pass from a narrow apron. In a flash of understanding, my dark premonitions were dispelled and I felt ridiculous for allowing paranoia to cloud my judgment.

“Oh! Construction,” I laughed aloud. That explains the need to ride single file and the man with the radio.

Soon Mel’s driver caught up with us and the bikers returned to riding side by side. I could see Mel’s wide-eyed relief.

“I thought they were going to rob us!” she shouted, smiling and shaking her head at her suspicions.

“Me too! Seems like we’re a bit jumpy,” I shrugged back. “Maybe we should lighten up and enjoy the ride!”

The bikes raced on, climbing the mountain along switchbacks. When the road reached a plateau in the jungle, I looked up and noticed that we were now gliding under massive trees with trunks like temple pillars. Through clearings, we had a lofty butte vantage of the tangled jungle valleys and green plains beyond. The sky blazed blue through the chinks in the high forest canopy and flowering bromeliads clung to the branches.

Why had I not noticed this before? I chided myself. What a shame that my anxiety had prevented me from recognizing such beauty! Ahead on the track a painted signpost announced the entrance to the Buddhist shrine. The drivers were doing just as Mr. Loi had promised. I breathed easier and turned around to gesture at the placard for Mel. From her seat on the back of the bike, she gave me a thumbs up.

Arriving at the entrance to the shrine, we were hailed by what looked like a police officer who motioned the two bikes to stop beside a control booth. The uniformed man demanded to see our tickets, which we produced, and then he indicated that we were to get off and proceed on foot while the motorcycles were directed down another road.

Neither Mel nor I dismounted, however, as we had no idea where we were or how we would be reunited with our return ride.

As I was trying to explain to the officer that we wanted the drivers to wait at the control booth for our return, a semi-circle of men had formed around us, some wearing ID badges that conferred upon them the status of “official” guides. My driver looked between me and the policeman with a wry smile. The long-haired rider shared a knowing glance with a guide carrying a tattered satchel and, with a jerk of his head, invited him to step up and offer his services.

“Let’s stick with our drivers,” I protested to Mel in a lowered voice.

“I don’t know if we have a choice,” she whispered, noting the officer who stood firmly planted before the motorcycles.

Resigned, we got off the bikes and were immediately accosted by the guides. The man with the satchel—an agitated Khmer with a stutter—introduced himself as Saloth, “fluent in English and a student of history.”

“My guidebook says that the park trails are well marked,” I observed, producing the folded page. “So, thank you, but I think we will go it alone.”

“That b-book is wrong,” said Saloth, shaking his head as if regretting my gullibility. “It’s easy to get l-lost here. But I know the w-way.” He smiled accommodatingly. “I can show you things only l-locals know,” he said, bowing a little in mock civility.

While my attention was turned to extricating myself from being accompanied by a guide, our motorcycles began speeding away.

“Wait!” I call after them, fearing they’d abandoned us.

“The r-ranger,” said Saloth, indicating the uniformed man, “sent them to the waterfall. Don’t worry. They’ll meet you there. I do this all the t-time.”

Without waiting for us to come to an agreement about price, Saloth started off down the trail, insisting that we follow him. We stood stubbornly in our tracks for a minute. The other guides observed us closely, talking among themselves.

“We’ll follow him for a while,” I relented. “If we don’t like him, we can give him a tip and continue on our own.” Mel nodded with weary resignation and we started out after Saloth.

We walked for about twenty minutes along a riverbed lined with ancient carvings of lingas. Our guide skirted by these curiosities with barely a word of explanation. Mel rushed to take a photo or two, but Saloth marched steadily up the path, his small satchel bouncing on his back on its threadbare shoulder strap. I can see Mel’s frustration rising at not being allowed a moment for contemplation or reflection.

“There must be some greater attraction ahead,” I offered as consolation.

Soon we left the river to ascend a wide footpath leading up to a group of massive black stones. The largest monolith was topped with a temple containing the famous reclining Buddha. Lining the route were several stalls selling souvenirs and made-yesterday antiques.

“You wanna b-b-buy something?” asked Saloth, stopping at a booth selling bronze Buddha heads and trinkets.

“No,” I apologized. “We’re mainly interested in seeing the temple.”

“Where are you from?” asked the guide.

“Seattle,” answered Melody.

“America,” nodded Saloth knowingly. “A rich c-country! Why don’t you b-buy something?” The vendor shot Saloth a pregnant glance. The guide thrust a small wooden elephant into Melody’s hand. “Very nice quality. Heavy,” cajoled Saloth.

“No, thank you,” smiled Melody, trying to put the item back. But before she could, Saloth had pulled out a bill from his pocket and handed it to the vendor.

“I w-will buy it for you!” he grinned. “A p-present.”

“No. No, you don’t have to do that,” I protested, suspecting he would use it later as leverage to increase his fee. He waves me off, returning the souvenir to Mel’s hand. “It is our custom to welcome guests with a gift. Now to the B-Buddha,” he said, striding up the path towards the temple.

“I don’t think he’s a guide,” said Mel confidentially, taking me by the arm.

I nod in agreement and resolved to make our way to the Buddha alone. “Saloth!” I called to him. He waited on the trail and we approached, hand in hand.

“Look, Saloth,” I began, “We appreciate all you’ve done so far, but I think we can find our way from here.”

He laughed as if it is a ridiculous notion. “This area is all land mines,” he said with a sweep of his arm. Considering the discussion over, he turned and continued on the well trod path. “My grandmother d-died from a landmine,” he called over his shoulder as we walked. “My f-father lost both legs. S-so I take care of my f-family.”

I made no response. I could feel Melody clenching her heart against this litany of suffering.

“But this is a park,” I objected, holding out my arms to indicate the rutted trail, the tranquil woods, the smiling sky.

“Yes,” he agreed. “But you step off the trail and, *Boom!*” He threw his hands up, laughing sadistically. I felt my blood rising at this obvious attempt to intimidate.

“This way!” he called.

Mel and I conferred again. She, even more than I, resented being bullied. “Well . . . I *did* read that there are old, unexploded mines in some places in Cambodia,” she whispered, “but *here?*”

“After the Buddha, I’ll ask him for directions to the waterfall and we can go to meet our drivers on our own,” I resolved.

We continued up a steeply rising path and arrived at the base of a set of stone steps that led up to the shrine. A young woman in a Hello Kitty t-shirt sidled up to Saloth as we approached and said something into his ear. They parted. Then our guide told us the dimensions and age of the monument. The details were rattled off like the attributes of a used car, and then we were marched up the stairs to the temple.

Outside the shrine, I noticed the girl in the Hello Kitty shirt sitting on a bench surrounded by shoes. Saloth stopped us and instructed us to remove our sandals to show our respect upon entering the holy site.

“Sadly, people s-steal shoes here,” he apologized. “I can ask this woman to watch them for you. I know her,” he explained.

“How much?” I asked, growing weary of one sales pitch after another.

“I will pay,” replied Saloth, as if surprised I would ask. He produced a rolled up bank note of unknown denomination and handed it to the woman.

“Please, I’ll pay,” I insisted. “I can’t let you pay for any more expenses,” I explained, fumbling to retrieve some bills from a money belt hidden under my shirt. Saloth made a pretense to look away. “I need to keep track of my own spending,” I added diplomatically.

“It’s nothing,” said Saloth. “Our m-money is nothing compared to y-yours,” he smiled, arms spread wide as if to appeal to some court of reason. Arguing accomplished nothing, as neither the woman nor the guide would hear me out.

We ascended the final steps to the temple barefoot, both regretting that we had not refused a guide from the outset. The shrine itself was a disappointment. After reading of its significance to the Khmer people, it seemed small and forgotten. Wilted flowers and the cold ash of burnt incense littered the altar by the sleeping head. The floor was dotted with cigarette butts, and the few locals who shared the space with us ignored the carving, taking more interest in the view looking down upon the vendors’ stalls.

“It is c-cut from one stone,” observed Saloth mechanically. “This is an image of Buddha s-sleeping.” Preferring my own quiet observations to these obvious details, I don’t ask any questions.

I look at the closed eyes and the upturned lips, but—from my viewpoint near the feet—the Buddha appeared to be painfully awake. The foreshortened features gave me the impression that the Enlightened One’s jaw was locked in a grimace, his eyes clenched against the miseries of this life. Changing my vantage point, He smiled again, seeming to have escaped—in blissful sleep—the suffering brought on by desire.

Exiting the temple, I watched the great stone face for some final and definitive meaning. As I turned for one last look, the Buddha grimaced at me, sending such a chill through my soul that I actually shuddered.

At the bottom of the steps we began looking for our shoes. The girl was nowhere to be seen, nor were the sandals. Seeing Mel and I grow concerned, Saloth assured us that he had made arrangements.

“I had my f-friend keep your shoes in a special place. Such expensive sh-shoes!” he explained.

“We would like our shoes back. Now,” I said, my frustration rising. “And then we’ll meet our drivers at the falls on our own.”

“The sh-shoes are this way. They are on the way to the f-falls. I will take you there,” insisted Saloth. Without waiting for an answer, he was off again, descending an unfamiliar set of stairs that led away from the direction we had come.

“I need my sandals,” called Mel at his back, restrained anger crackling in her voice.

“Yes! Down here,” called Saloth over his shoulder.

At the bottom of the stairway, the path bent into the undergrowth. A stall marked the boundary between the temple grounds and the trail to the falls. There was the woman in the Hello Kitty shirt again, seated before a table of beads and earrings.

“See,” smiled Saloth. “Your shoes!” He pointed to the sandals on a plank behind the woman. “You want to b-buy something?” The woman gestured at the beads, anticipation glinting in her eye.

“Ow! Damn ants!” cried Mel, slapping at her toes.

“Give me the shoes,” I fumed. “Those sandals,” I pointed, handing the woman two thousand riels.

“Thank you,” she frowned, relinquishing the shoes. Was she being sarcastic? Or had I detected her regret for having been ungracious to me after I had doubled her fee?

Turning to Saloth, I shook his hand, offered our thanks for his guiding services, and pressed a wad of notes into his hand.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Enough to cover the present you bought for Mel,” I explained, “plus the going rate for an hour-long tour and a generous tip on top.”

“We’ll be alright from here,” Mel assured him. “Which way to meet our motos?”

Saloth raised a reluctant finger to indicate a narrow forest trail.

“That way. You will f-find your drivers in fifteen m-minutes.”

Mel gave him a thumbs up and I bid him a curt goodbye. He watched as we proceed down the path.

We walked along the winding trail over fallen logs for a while, letting out a torrent of pent up complaints about being deceived. Our frustration vented, we began to take note of the trail. A dense layer of untrodden leaves lined the meager tracings of the path. In a few places, flattened vegetation or indentations in the earth seemed to indicate detours or alternative routes. We continued in silence for a while, neither one of us wanting to admit that we may be lost. As the shadows of the day began to lengthen about the trunks of the trees, we approached what looks like a clearing in the woods.

“Wait,” huffed Mel, “I need to fix my shoe.”

As Mel bent to buckle her sandal, I continued on for several paces, looking up at the sky for some indication of east and west. Finding none, I stopped and turned to engage Mel in a discussion about the feasibility of doubling back.

It was then that I realized that I had strayed from the path.

Melody stood about thirty yards away on the fine outlines of trail, and I, distracted by my efforts to regain my bearings, had wandered into the little clearing.

She stared at me, standing there like a skater who has just heard the ice crack, and the blood drained from her face.

“What have you done?” she gasped, looking at the gulf between us. The ground was uncharacteristically clear of trees, and dead leaf husks lay strewn about like so many unfortunate shipwrecks.

I held my hands before me, lowering them slowly in a gesture meant to diminish her panic. “Wait there,” I said. “I’ll just retrace--”

“Stop!” she cried, stepping forward, hand outstretched towards me.

“OK! OK! I’ll stop and you stop!”

We stood there, paralyzed, as terror opened an insurmountable distance between us.

I don’t know how long we remained in that position, but it felt like an eternity. Then, in the waning hours of the afternoon, we heard the rustle of leaves and saw the silhouette of a man approach.

“Oh, thank God!” sighed Melody.

But her relief was short-lived, as the figure soon revealed itself to be Saloth.

“You are l-lost!” he said. “When you did not arrive at the w-waterfall, I came to find you.”

“Saloth!” breathed Melody. “You don’t know how worried we’ve been. All those stories you told about--.” Her voice was strangled by conflicting feelings of rage and gratitude. “Please. Lead Sean back to me. Show him how to return to the path!”

The guide stepped up to Mel and placed an arm around her shoulders, speaking in wounded tones, “But I have been t-trying to help you all day, and you have sh-shown me only c-contempt. You you t-told me to go away. I only d-did what you told me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Mel pleaded, silent tears running in tracks down her cheeks. “Will you help us now?”

Saloth released her and came to the edge of the trail and looked at me standing motionless in the clearing.

“As a guide I m-must know these trails. It can be life or death. Boom!” he laughed, thumping his foot on the imaginary trip-pin of a landmine. Melody flinched.

“What do you want?” I called to him.

“Have I asked you f-for anyth-thing?” sneered Saloth.

“No!” replied Melody, eager to placate him. “You have tried to be helpful.”

“And wh-what do I g-get for that?” he retorted. “I t-take you to our holy places and you don’t w-want to hear about them. My w-w-wife guards your stinking sh-shoes, and you spit on h-her kindness. I tell you it is d-dangerous to walk alone and you want to k-kill yourself to s-save a dollar!”

“Look, Saloth. I apologize,” I pleaded. “I didn’t realize. And now I’d like to pay you for your . . . expertise,” I reached under my shirt and unhooked my money belt.

Rolling it into a compact ball, I threw it to him, teetering unsteadily in my tracks. Mel gasped again.

Saloth left the belt where it landed near his feet. Making no attempt to retrieve it, he sat down and pulled a water bottle from his small satchel.

“You ins-s-sult me again?” he said, shaking his head.

“Oh!” cried Melody in desperation. “I don’t have much, but I’ll give you everything!” she offered, interpreting his intransigence as an effort to extort more cash. Reaching into her camera bag, she produced a sheath of notes. This gesture he also ignored.

“Can you tell me how to get out of here?” I appealed to him, my legs beginning to tremble in their rigid pose.

“If you think I am a thief, why n-not also a k-killer?” smiled the guide, extending his arms. “If I l-lead you and you s-step on a mine, she w-will say I k-killed you. But if she leads you, w-with my help, you only have each other to b-blame. Or thank,” he amended.

“I don’t understand,” objected Melody.

“I will t-tell you what to say,” he instructed, “and y-you, *not* me, will lead him out.” Mel looked between me and Saloth, agonized, as the burden of her task became clear.

“I won’t do this!” she cried, turning on him. “I’ll go get someone else, someone with a human heart.” Walking with determination, she started down the thin trail.

“Your husband is t-tired,” called Saloth with mock concern. “You will g-get lost. Although . . .” he paused, looking me in the eye, “I could f-follow you. Just to m-make

sure you found your w-way.” His hand slipped into the bottom of his satchel and clasped something solid.

“Melody!” I called to her. “Try. Let’s get out of this together. You can do it. We can do this,” I pleaded urgently, as reason contended with rage and fear.

Withering under the pressure, Mel’s shoulder slumped and she choked back a sob. Defeated, she walked back to Saloth and stood before him—subject to his will.

The guide rose and retrieved his hand from the bag, clutching a second bottle of water. With a crooked grin, he tossed me the drink with a soft lob. Then he waited patiently until I had drunk. Then, cupping one hand to his mouth to block my view, he spoke something into my wife’s ear. She shuddered a little and stepped back, but he caught her by the arm and bid her listen. I could see him gesturing with his toe in the earth. Mel registered, nodded, and then relayed his directions to me.

“Come this way,” she called, drawing a zigzag in the air that would bring me past a fallen tree.

“OK. OK,” I panted. My legs froze for a moment, as I debated anew whether Saloth was a murderer or a savior. I looked at him in a tormented effort to read his inscrutable eyes.

“Come!” he called, registering my hesitation as an offense.

“Do as he says, Sean!” cried Melody.

My eyes refused to find a focus, as the earth seemed to swim up to meet me. Sweat streamed off my brow, and my head began to spin.

“Do as he says!” repeated Mel. “You have to trust him!”

Gathering my resolve, I drew a deep breath and took my first tentative step. My foot settled onto the forest floor with a light tread and the ground held.

*Not today!* I thought to myself. The phrase resounded gloriously in my mind.  
*Today is not my day.*

A cry of relief escaped Mel's lips. Saloth scrutinized the ground before me and leaned over to Melody, speaking again into her ear.

"Do as I tell you," cried Melody "he has no reason to mislead us now."

"Yes," cooed Saloth. "Do as she says."

"Come two steps left, and right," instructed my wife, her voice clear and hopeful.

Moving with more confidence now, I took a long stride, parallel to the tree. *A few more steps and I will begin anew*, I promised myself. *I will be as the Buddha, re-born to a higher life.* Trembling a little from the euphoria, I lifted my foot. For a split second, I stood poised over patch of dry earth, and, in that fraction of an instant, a flash of doubt arced across my mind.

*She has made a terrible pact with him!* I thought.

Swaying slightly, I raised my eyes to glance at Mel and stepped down awkwardly, snapping the taut wire of concentration that, moments before, had measured my stride.

*Click!* went the ground under my foot.

That sound! What was it? Hard and metallic? Brittle and wooden?

In an instant, my heart exploded in my chest, my frightened spirit fleeing through its tattered chambers.

Melody drew her breath like a sheathed knife. Then our eyes met. Her expression blinded me with the stabbing mirrorglint of self reflection, and I understood everything--

the timbre of Melody's love, the color of Saloth's heart, even the nature of my fate as it would play out in the next fraction of a second.

Melody's face bore the strangest lack of recognition. Although she fixed her gaze upon my eyes, the eyes I saw reflected back in those glassy orbs were the yellow animal eyes of a lamb.

"It was a stick," she said through trembling lips.

"Yes. A stick," I said.