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Appreciating Poipet

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POIPET, Cambodia—An ICWA Trustee told me that there ought to be times in the course of a Fellowship when a Fellow asks, "What am I doing here?" I asked myself that question about an hour after I arrived in Poipet for the first time.

I stood alone on a broad street that forms the spine of a sliver of no-man's land tucked against Cambodia's border with Thailand. Seven casinos have been built in this little stretch of land since 1999. To the west a small ravine marks the border. To the east, beyond the gated casino enclave, stand the slums of Poipet. Less than a mile long north to south, perhaps a quarter of a mile wide, this strip of casinos seems to belong neither to Thailand nor Cambodia alone, but perhaps to both at once.

It was dark and drizzling. Streetlights hummed and the neon signs of the casinos pulsed and steamed in the rain, on this, my last night in Cambodia. I was making my way from Phnom Penh back to Bangkok; my visa would expire the next day. I had been in Cambodia for a month and I was exhausted. In those four weeks I'd tried to absorb the recent history of auto-genocide as well as the stupendous splendor of Angkor Wat, the contrasting yet equally indigestible motifs of the Cambodian narrative. I had glimpsed the lurching progress of representative politics in Phnom Penh, and had cycled for hours among the flooded fields of Battambang, pausing to enact wordless commerce with farmers dumbstruck by my unaccountable presence. Now in Poipet, known as much for its poverty, drugs, prostitution, human trafficking and HIV / AIDS as for its casinos, I discovered a flock of ostriches.

I counted fourteen of the giant birds crowded together on a little causeway running through a bog from which rose half-finished pilings and tall weeds. "What are they doing here?" I thought. I imagined they belonged to an eccentric casino owner with plans for a ranch or a zoo. I recalled hearing that ostrich meat was delicious. I realized how hungry I was, and how tired. Then I thought, "What I am doing here?"

An answer came to me immediately in the form of a line from David Lean's 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*. I suppose it was the casinos that prompted me to recall the words of a song that Peter O'Toole's Lawrence sang as he

Early morning traffic on Route 5 in Poipet, heading for the Thai border.

rode his camel to Prince Faisal's camp for the first time ("*I'm the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo!*"). Soon after singing these words, Lawrence is queried by a superior officer, the incumbent British liaison with the Arab army, who asks about Lawrence's mission. Lawrence replies, "Well, sir, it's rather vague. I'm to 'appreciate the situation.'"

* * *

Mention of my desire to visit Poipet had elicited tooth sucking and head shaking from people in Phnom Penh, always a prelude to their admonitions. It's dirty and dangerous, I was told. It's populated by prostitutes and pickpockets. Cholera breaks out there. Don't get stuck there overnight. Don't go at all if you can help it.

In Phnom Penh I came across an article in the *Cambodia Daily* titled, "As Bad as it Gets: Poipet: The Embodiment of All of Cambodia's Social Ills?" Even my out-of-date guidebook states flatly, "There is absolutely no reason to spend any time here."

Still, I was attracted to Poipet as a site of interchange between Thailand and Cambodia. From a distance, Poipet seemed certain to encapsulate the relationship between Thailand and Cambodia. The problems in this relationship had been thrown into relief by the January riot in Phnom Penh during which the Thai Embassy was looted and burned and many Thai-owned businesses attacked. That casinos had sprung up in Poipet, across from the Thai town of Aranyaprathet, was certainly a symbol of the changes that had come to the region since the end of the Cold War. During the 1980s Aranyaprathet became a boomtown, built with money of international-aid organizations caring for hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees. The border had been the scene of sporadic fighting for 20 years, ending finally in 1998. Aranyaprathet, once again a modest border town, was now a waypoint for gamblers headed across the border to Poipet, the new boomtown. One wonders if the late Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, who called in 1988 for Indochina's battlefields to become marketplaces, could have imagined those marketplaces spawning casinos for Thai gamblers.

The morning after my encounter with the ostriches I made for the border, trudg-

ing from the guesthouse to the casino enclave. It rained again. The road was covered by a film of grey mud. It was crowded with wooden carts, pulled by shoeless children and hung with scraps of sodden rags and sagging plastic bags. Most of the carts were piled with bundles of old clothes; some carried traders huddled beneath umbrellas. The carts merged with monstrous tractor trailers and children, some of them very small, carrying their weight in old clothes slung over their shoulders. A triple amputee in tattered fatigues rolled past, rocking back and forth as he worked the crank of his tricycle with his arm. This motley traffic surged toward the bottleneck of the Immigration checkpoint. The scene was medieval. The casinos loomed beyond the checkpoint, dreary in daylight and drizzle. Beyond the casinos lay Thailand and the market called Rong Kleua, where the trucks, cart pullers, beggars, traders and I were heading.

Later that day, on the bus to Bangkok, a young Cambodian trader struck up a conversation with me. He said, "You've been to Poipet."

"How did you know?"

He pointed to the mud on my boots.

* * *

A few weeks later I returned to better appreciate Poipet. After a night in Aranyaprathet I took a short motorcycle ride to Rong Kleua market. The market is huge, with some 2,000 stalls, mostly selling second-hand clothes and shoes, furniture, food and cheap consumer goods. I arrived in time to see the first horde of Poipet-bound cart pullers from Rong Kleua released by a Thai official. It was like the start of a race, with the cart pullers on their marks, the young ones in front grinning and waiting for the green flag. They strained to pull their loads up a slight incline and past the black-clad Thai Rangers before making a left where the main road leads across the border.

I spoke to a Thai police officer who was watching the Cambodian arrivals course over the bridge. He said seven or eight thousand Cambodians cross every day. We stood together near the Victory Arch, erected by the Thai government in 1939. Today it is more like the Victory Pillar, having been partially destroyed in battle with French troops in 1940. The "Arch" would soon be moved, he said, so that the border crossing could be widened. The humble bridge cannot comfortably accommodate the growing traffic between the two countries.

Thai authorities had posted a number of signs and billboards on the short stretch between the market and the border. One read: "WARNING: Leaving the Kingdom for gambling purposes may not be safe for personal life and property. Thai authority cannot be responsibility." I joined a long queue of Thais waiting to risk their lives and property to live a little and maybe win some money in Cambodia. The officials at passport control sat in glass cubicles decorated with photocopied pictures of wanted men, including Riduan Isamuddin, alias Hambali, the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist who had been captured in central Thailand in August.

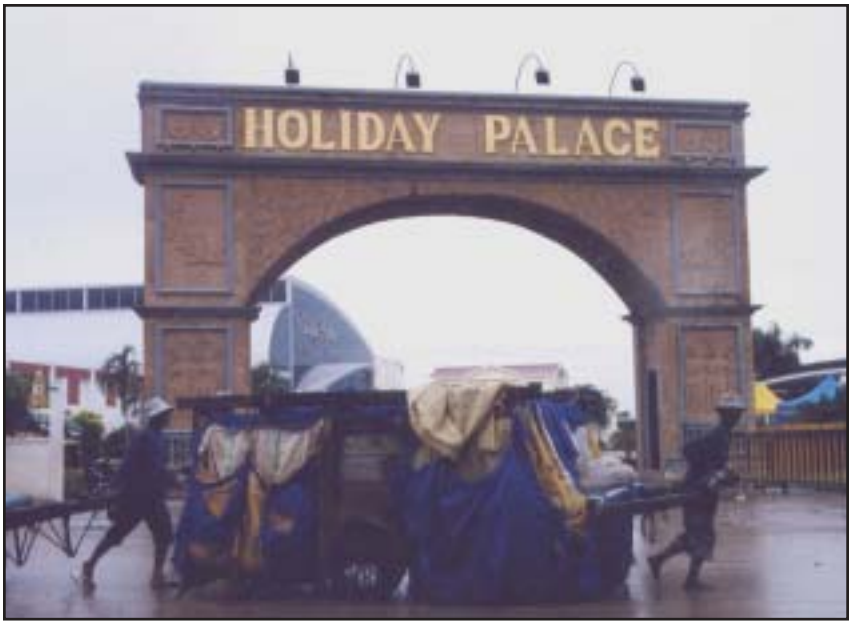
Once through Departure, I walked across the bridge linking Thailand to Cambodia. This bridge had once been the only link between Cambodia and the "free world." Now it was crowded with child beggars, soliciting dollars with a monotone murmuring that made their pleas sound like a quiet, mournful song. After securing my visa I boarded an open-sided bus with metal seats that dropped me at the Star Vegas International Resort and Casino.

I spent the day with three women from Nakorn Ratchasima (commonly called "Khorat"). Boom, Lek and Noi had rescued me as I stood hungry and confused in front of an electronic turnstile leading to the Star Vegas buffet. I hadn't bought any chips and so hadn't been issued the yellow coupon I needed to get to the food. The Khorat trio had coupons to spare.

They had driven two and a half hours from Khorat to Aranyaprathet. It was their second visit to Poipet but the first time they'd be staying overnight. Poipet was closer than the beach resort of Pattaya, and relatively inexpensive. Of the three women, only Noi was really interested in gambling. For Boom and Lek, Poipet was a change of scene. They were middle-aged, independent and out for some laughs.

I rode with the Khorat trio in the free taxis that car-

The Thai-Cambodian Friendship Bridge, seen from the Cambodian side. The people under the bridge are preparing to smuggle second-hand clothes.



Cart pullers at work in the casino enclave. These workers earn less than a dollar a day hauling goods back and forth across the border.

ried patrons from one casino or hotel to another. They were all the same, allowing for differences in color scheme and a relatively greater degree of extravagance at one or two of the more ambitious casinos. The Holiday Palace, for example, had an enormous atrium lobby, with restaurants, a travel agent, a dry cleaner's and a *faux*-Starbucks coffee shop. It looked like a Bangkok shopping mall, which seemed to be the idea.

The gaming floors were inevitably crowded. The gamblers at the baccarat tables were grim-faced or impassive. The atmosphere by the slots was more carefree. There one tended to find parents with their bored children slumped against the one-armed bandits or asleep in their mothers' arms. Lek, who didn't gamble, disapproved of these parents.

Each casino lobby had a few glass counters holding collections of watches, cell phones, pens, rings and other jewelry that had been hocked by luckless punters. There were always several Buddha-image amulets among the jewelry, apparently drained of power and as useless as spent batteries.

Boom seemed always to be running into people she knew, or looking for people she knew, and trying to make business contacts. Noi bought a bucket of ten-baht coins and played a slot machine for four and half hours. I bought 500 baht worth of coins and sat beside her. After ten minutes I was up a little. Lek counted out 500 baht and cashed it out for me so that I'd at least come out even. In the next half hour I squandered 300 baht of winnings.

The trio was unusual among Thai visitors too, in that they had actually ventured outside the casino enclave into Poipet proper. "It's so poor there," said Boom. "I feel sorry for them."

"We're lucky to be Thai," added Lek. Her friends nodded agreement.

* * *

The first of Poipet's casinos opened in December 1999, exactly a year after Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen outlawed casinos in the capital. Gambling, Hun Sen argued, contributed to lawlessness. This didn't stop the Prime Minister from encouraging casinos to open in distant Poipet.

Building casinos here, half a day's drive from Bangkok, makes good sense. Except for the government-sponsored lottery and bets on horse racing, gambling is illegal in Thailand. Still, it is widely enjoyed. Pasuk Pongpaichit, a professor at Chulalongkorn University who has studied Thailand's underground economy, estimates that 70 percent of Thai adults gamble regularly. Illegal gambling is a major source of illicit income for Thailand's underpaid police.

As legal entities, the Poipet casinos offer Thais the intoxicating *frisson* of losing money without the fusty atmosphere of the illegal gambling den and the inconvenience and added expense of police payoffs and crackdowns. The Poipet casinos are bland monuments to a bourgeois conception of affluence and leisure. They're fun for the whole family, open 24 hours a day.

This doesn't mean that Poipet's casinos have entirely sloughed off gambling's underworld associations. When the youngest son of a powerful Thai politician was being

Cart pullers heading into Cambodia from Thailand.

hunted by police for having shot a Thai police officer to death in a Bangkok nightclub, reports had the fugitive killing time in Poipet's casinos. The suspected murderer was said to be the honored guest of a Cambodian admiral with links to the young man's father. The politician's frequent family visits to Poipet seemed to lend credence to those reports, though the fugitive eventually turned himself in to Thai authorities in Malaysia. In January 2002, two bombs exploded at one of the casinos, causing hundreds of panicked Thais, including the fugitive's parents, to flee across the border.

Poipet returned to media attention after the Phnom Penh riot in January when Thailand closed the border. Bangkok demanded payment of restitution for its burned-out embassy before the border would re-open. Less than a week later, six of the seven casinos had temporarily closed. Staff were sent home or fired. Although the Thais later allowed Cambodians to cross into Thailand on day passes, Hun Sen retaliated against perceived Thai high-handedness by closing the border from the Cambodian side on March 5. Hun Sen said he feared that Cambodians crossing the border would become victims of Thailand's murderous drug crackdown.

The closure of the border to Cambodians ignored the reality of Poipet's dependence on Thailand. Not only were the casinos shuttered, but the town began to run low on food.

It is perhaps indicative of the relationship between the wealth of the casinos and political power on both sides of the border that the cross-border traffic didn't cease altogether. Thai and Cambodian authorities allowed several trucks carrying building supplies for one of the expanding casinos to cross from Thailand into Poipet. These trucks came and went for several days in March, even as the Poipet commune chief warned the World Food Programme of the threat of starvation. It is also telling that the $5.5 million paid as compensation to Bangkok on March 17 was reportedly financed by Cambodian casino operators with close ties to the ruling Cambodian People's Party. If the reports are true, then it was money lost by Thai gamblers that paid the compensation for Thailand's destroyed Embassy so that Thai gamblers could once again lose money in Poipet. Considering that the Poipet casinos were losing $12 million dollars each week that the border remained closed, it wasn't a high price to pay.

The border reopened on March 21, 2003. Thai and Cambodian officials now seem equally anxious to forget about the riot and the border closure. These days it's as if nothing happened.

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The Star Vegas Resort and Casino dominates the north end of the casino enclave. The resort includes the casino and main hotel, a massage parlor and lounge, an attached and unused auxiliary casino, a golf course, two

Construction at the Star Vegas. Several of the Poipet casinos are expanding.

large hotel annexes with hundreds of rooms, the Freeway discotheque, the Seafood Restaurant, a beer garden, a mini-mart, and a small open-air Korean barbeque restaurant. The resort even has its own fire engines, parked in metal sheds near the square, man-made pond where several swan-shaped peddle boats float. Nearby, behind the Korean barbeque, are several rows of low, one-story employee dormitories. It is a company town.

One evening I surveyed the casino compound from the steps of the Venus Executive Club and Massage. Casino employees strolled together to or from work, arms entwined, some holding hands. A few pedaled by on bicycles. A squad of security guards stood in formation, addressed by their boss. A pony cart, painted white and decorated with flowers, waited for customers in front of the seafood restaurant. The scene had an artificial quality, like a movie set, but there was real life pulsing through it. Now and then veins of lightning flickered, illuminating the gauzy clouds hovering over the horizon in the south and east.

A group of children scampered around me, squatting now and then to catch insects attracted by the purple neon lights of the Venus. An elfin woman in a blue blazer opened the door to the club and invited me inside. I demurred. Her name was Cheng. She came from Sisophon, a small town about 45 kilometers away, where the roads from Siem Reap and Battambang meet. In Khmer-ac-

The Venus Executive Club and Massage, Star Vegas, Poipet

cented Thai, Cheng told me that the kids were collecting bugs for food. She withdrew a giant grasshopper from behind a poster taped to the wall. She'd apparently placed the insect there for safe keeping. Holding it by the legs, she blew on it so that its wings fluttered. "They're called *gradop*," she explained, smoothing its wings with her free hand, as if she were petting a small bird. "They're good fried." She gave the *gradop* to one of the kids.

Cheng had been manning the front door at the Venus for three months. She liked her job. It was easy and the pay was OK. She mentioned that Thai employees earn more than Cambodians, and work fewer hours, but she wasn't complaining. I asked her about the future. She wanted to study, learn English, and maybe one day work for a foreign business. It was just a dream. She had no money for school. Her salary helped pay tuition for her little brother to study engineering.

Cheng urged me to step inside the club. The casino advertised it as a VIP club, built at a cost of one million dollars. The foyer opened into a large, semi-circular room. In the center was a stage where a bespectacled keyboardist sang, "I Started A Joke." To the left there was a small bar and several tables. On the right were carpeted bleachers where a few young masseuses, dressed in what looked like white lab coats, watched a small television. The ceiling was domed and painted to look like an early evening sky, dark and star-spattered directly overhead, pale blue fading to orange with soft pink clouds around the horizon. The place was empty of patrons.

My stay at the Star Vegas coincided with the birthday of the casino's owner. There was a celebration beneath the gargantuan, red-neon lobster that looms over the open-air Seafood restaurant. The party explained the contingent of statuesque and extravagantly feminine transsexuals I'd seen at the buffet earlier in the day; now they were performing on a stage at the far end of the restaurant in elaborate, feathery costumes. Styrofoam letters tacked to the curtains behind the band read "Happy Birthday Boss." Portraits of "Boss Somboon" were projected on a screen hung from the rafters. The employees were dressed alike in floral shirts and crowded together at tables marked with their job tiles (security, dealers, reception, cooks, etc.). They beamed at the stage, arms around each others necks, watching an MC praise Boss Somboon's generosity.

Later that night I went to the mini-mart across from Venus and bought some snacks to share with Cheng and her colleagues. I reached the steps at the same time as Boss Somboon and his entourage. He was dressed in a grey silk shirt with French cuffs, and he strode two steps ahead of his nearest follower. The manager of the Venus and several of the hostesses greeted him formally, palms pressed together. Two members of his entourage stayed outside. When they turned I saw they had assault rifles slung across their backs.

I was impressed with Boss Somboon's security until the next day when I checked out. As I was packing I heard a helicopter pass over head. On my way out of the casino enclave, I saw the helicopter strapped down in a field across from the Ho Wah Genting casino. The logo of some government ministry adorned the chopper. On the road between the helicopter and the casino were three trucks, painted in camouflage. A few dozen soldiers in flak vests and steel helmets stood around in small groups. Some had left their weapons leaning against the curb. There were also a few Cambodian policemen, an unusual sight in the casino compound. I wondered if this government VIP had come to gamble or to collect his cut.

* * *

I left the casino enclave to spend a few days in the real Poipet. I walked east with the cart pullers along the road leading into Cambodia proper, under the crosswalk mounted with a giant diamond made of mirrors. I felt a blast of cold air from the open doors of the Grand Diamond City just before reaching the Immigration checkpoint.

A pot-bellied official standing under an umbrella demanded my passport. He wore a tight khaki uniform with blue epaulets. He said, "Problem."

I said, "There's no problem." Officials in Poipet have a reputation for manufacturing irregularities, which can be ironed out for a fee.

"You don't have entry stamp. How long you been Cambodia?"

"I've been here three days. Look, I walked right

through this checkpoint yesterday and nobody stopped me." I had spent hours checking out guesthouses in Poipet.

He fingered my passport, shaking his head and making noises that suggested he and I were both in trouble. "You didn't get a stamp?" he asked.

"I got a visa when I crossed the border. What's the problem?"

"You need to go to the office."

The building behind him was marked with a sign that read "Arrival." It dawned on me that the visa-on-arrival for Poipet is not a one-stop service. The arrival office is at the opposite end of the casino enclave from the visa office. After getting the visa, I should have walked the quarter mile to the arrival office, filled out the arrival card and received an entry stamp. There was a troop of foreign backpackers on their way to Angkor Wat doing just that. No official or sign at the visa office indicated that the formalities weren't complete, but if one was merely passing through Casinoland, it wouldn't be an issue. I had broken the rules by following the Thais to the casinos, rather than the backpackers to Siem Reap.

A Cambodian Immigration official motors past a banner celebrating the International Day of Peace, September 21.

The entrance to the office was down an alley so narrow I had to move sideways. At the far end of the alley, just past the office door, a man was leaning his head against the wall and urinating. I accidentally kicked over a stack of dirty plates as I opened the door; the clatter of dishes marked my entrance. An older official sitting behind a notebook computer motioned for me to sit down. It was cramped, and I sat with my backpack on my lap. He looked through my passport and sized me up as I explained that I didn't know I needed to come all the way across the casino compound to get a stamp.

"You have been to many countries in Asia," he said. "Cambodia is the same. You need an entry stamp. You must know this. Now, you are here illegally."

"OK, but when I arrived in Phnom Penh, the last time I came to Cambodia, I got my visa and entry stamp at the same time. I didn't realize that Poipet was different." I went on, "It makes no sense to have separate visa and arrival offices. And there's no sign at the visa office that says I need to come down here. By the way, you should know that I walked right through this checkpoint yesterday and nobody checked me."

"But you don't have a stamp." He was silent after that, and in the silence I thought that this was the time I was supposed to offer a little money to straighten things out. I waited.

"You are here illegally," he repeated. The official wouldn't believe that I couldn't have known that I needed an entry stamp. "I must ask my boss about your case."

The boss entered the office a few minutes later, wearing a T-shirt and looking as if his nap had been interrupted. He nodded as his subordinate explained why I was sitting there. Then there was an exchange between them.

"My boss says you must be deported," the first official told me.

"Did you explain to him as I explained to you why I didn't get an entry stamp? And did you tell him that I walked into Poipet yesterday, right past this office, right through that checkpoint, and wasn't stopped?" He didn't reply. I thought, "I'm going to be deported from Casinoland. I'm not even in Cambodia!"

"Why do you come here?" he asked. Good question, I thought.

"I'm a tourist."

"You are going to Siem Reap?"

"No, I'm planning to spend a few days in Poipet." If I wasn't suspect already, I was now. Nobody comes to Poipet without a reason.

"What are you going to do in Poipet?"

I told him the truth.

"You are a writer?"

"Yes."

"Will you write about being deported?"

"Absolutely." I was irritated, but I realized that I wasn't holding any cards here. My papers weren't in order. "I mean, that is, if you decide to deport me."

The boss sighed, took a seat and made a phone call. The other official went back to his computer. They seemed

to be trying to forget about me. We sat together under the framed portraits of King Sihanouk and Queen Monique, flanking a clock on the wall behind us. Minutes ticked away. Again I wondered if I should try to bribe them, but decided that at worst I'd be deported and have to pay another 20 dollars for a visa later that day. After about ten minutes the officials conferred again.

Finally, the English speaking official said, "No more, I think," by which he meant, "I think you'll not make this mistake again."

I sat outside the office, filled in my arrival form and waited for it to be processed. While waiting I watched at least five foreigners pay money to the official behind the counter. Did they know they were paying bribes? The denominations were not the same. The official demanded payment on some subjective scale; 500 baht for the Japanese guy with towel around his neck, 200 for the goateed boy in the dragon T-shirt, 100 for the blonde with flushed cheeks in the denim skirt and so on. This official was raking it in. I thought, "They're going to squeeze me," but it never happened. Only the pot-bellied official came over to gloat, saying, "See! You need to get a stamp." I appeased him by nodding and rolling my eyes at my own foolishness.

* * *

The mixup with the entry stamp underscored the uncertain nationality of Poipet's casino enclave. One doesn't really arrive in Cambodia until one leaves Casinoland. Even then, dissonant signals about Poipet's national identity continue to be broadcast. Just outside the gate on the eastern side of Casinoland is a traffic circle, the grimy heart of Poipet. A billboard in the center of the traffic circle advertises "Cambodia Shinawatra". Shinawatra, of course, is the family name of Thailand's Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Shinawatra Cambodia is the name of Thaksin's telecommunications enterprise in Cambodia.

I couldn't quite escape the feeling that the sign proclaimed "Shinawatra's Cambodia." The Shinawatra sign presides over dingiest part of the town, where idle cart-pullers and truck drivers congregate. Here the smoke of mobile sausage grills mixed with diesel exhaust. Wretched adolescent glue-sniffers hunched over their plastic bags. Men raised their hands or pointed their chins at me, offering prostitutes or transport to Siem Reap.

I made my way down Route 5, past a few Islamic boarding houses and dubious hotels offering snooker and massage, to the Poi Pet Hotel, a concrete box with windows, shielded from the road by a one-room restaurant and a separate open-fronted karaoke room. The hotel clerk was a middle-aged woman with permed hair and sorrowful eyes. She introduced herself as we walked down the hall. She wished to practice her English, she said, and apologized for her poor pronunciation.

She opened the curtains to my room, turned on the air conditioner and placed the key on the table. Then she turned to me with a look of complete despair and said, "I'm so unhappy." As soon as she said it, I sensed she wished she hadn't, but she'd already made the leap from small talk to confidences. She plunged ahead. "I've been here for four years and I want to leave."

I wasn't particularly surprised by her confession, though I did feel faint unease at the prospect of being sucked into some rescue fantasy. As a foreigner in Asia, safely outside the stifling hierarchies of the family and society, I have sometimes been taken as a ready confidant by the sad and lonely. The clerk was plainly fragile and wanted to talk. She was so abject and distressed that I might have hugged her, but it just isn't done. I tamped down my apprehension and signaled that I was ready to listen. I said, "I'm so sorry."

She told me that she'd once lived in Phnom Penh, and used to work alongside foreigners at non-government organizations. She had lost a series of such jobs as the aid organizations closed down their Cambodian operations. When the last had folded, she was forced to come to Poipet. I wasn't able to follow her explanation of why she had had to come and I suspected there was something she wasn't telling me. It was clear, though, that Poipet had taken a toll on her and she was desperate to get away. "It's so difficult. There's nothing here."

She had once had a window on the wider world. That window shut when she arrived in Poipet. Tears formed in her eyes but didn't drop. I said meaningless things by way of encouragement. She composed herself, apologized and left me alone. I noticed as she left that she carried a large purse on her

arm, as if she were prepared to flee at any moment.

* * *

I knocked about the streets of Poipet. Rain alternated with searing heat. The roads made mud in the early morning rain shed dust by afternoon.

Poipet

Here was the poverty that I had been promised. North of Route 5, the concrete buildings give way to an unrelenting slum of tumbledown shacks, some nothing more than tarpaper tacked to bamboo frames. Many are decorated with color photos of screen and pop idols taken from magazines. Mountains of second-hand clothes spill from warehouses and the better residences, destined for the stalls of Rong Kleua market. The roads sink into knee-deep puddles and rise again, rutted and slick. They appear to be formed of a compound of mud, rocks and rags. Crude gutters course through the town, often still and fetid, glistening with green scum and excrement and crossed here and there by precarious plank walkways. Garbage is piled on every corner, heaped on the charred residue of yesterday's coconut husks and plastic bottles. Come evening, a haze hangs over Poipet as refuse burns in hundreds of small fires.

I dropped in to the street kid drop-in center, but there was no one there except a crying baby and mute old man. I found the central market, where the street sucked at my boots as I strode past glass cases displaying gold chains. Four card-playing women called to me, motioning to the door of their brothel. Next to them a dulled-eyed girl with scabby arms swung in a hammock, staring into space.

I heard the crackle of Vietnamese and circled back to its source, two women in a squalid shack behind a hand-painted sign offering Thai massage. The older woman held her baby boy up to me and asked me if I wanted to take him home. The younger woman, dressed in yellow pajamas and wearing thick make-up, told me she came from Saigon. She'd spent eight years in Phnom Penh and one in Poipet. She missed home. Why had she come? Money. And why did she not go back to Saigon? No money. There were many Vietnamese in Poipet, she said, motioning to the surrounding slum. They wanted to go home.

Poipet workers rest, having just finished loading their cart. The wicker ware is bound for Rong Kleua market just across the border in Thailand.

As I walked along the main drag, a small girl in a school uniform jogged to keep pace with me. Tractor trailers rumbled past. The girl and I stopped and turned our backs to the road as the dust billowed around us. She peered up at me, squinting against the dust. It was a moment of solidarity, our differences diminished for an instant, wrapped as we were in the same whirling cloud of yellow grit. I had felt separate from everything around me until that moment.

One evening I was invited to drink by a group of men sitting on a platform of bamboo slats. They mixed the whiskey with soda and a block of ice in a plastic bucket. The boldest of them introduced himself as a doctor. He didn't look like a doctor, sitting cross-legged and shirtless, with faded green

tattoos of Khmer script on his forearms. I thought he might be a pharmacist. There seemed to be a pharmacy for every brothel in Poipet.

An older man, wearing only a checked sarong, poured a drink for me from the bucket. There was the customary small talk in halting Thai. When they learned I was from the US, the man in the sarong said, "Saddam." This brought forth chuckles all around. Then he said, "Bin Laden." Real laughter this time. The Doctor patted my knee and said, "Joking."

The man in the sarong said, "So, you are from America. Do you know …what's it called … Manchester Street?"

"Well, no," I said, "Do you know where it is?

"It's in America. My brother lives there. Many Cambodian people live there."

"If it's just a street, I probably won't know it. Do you know the town, or the state?"

"No."

"California?" I offered.

"Maybe," he said. "I used to think I'd like to live in California," he said, as if it had been one of several options he'd once entertained before deciding to settle in Poipet. "When I lived in Site 2, I dreamed about going there." During the 1980s, Site 2 was one of the largest Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand. It was run by Prince Sihanouk's political party and was once home to the largest concentration of Cambodians outside Phnom Penh. I realized then how much Poipet looked like a refugee camp.

Site 2 opened a foil package of crackers for me. He was concerned I'd get drunk if I didn't eat something. He asked me if I smoked. When I said I didn't, he made an elaborate display of his hospitality, holding the cigarette up to me before tossing it away.

A short time later I heard children giggling behind me. I turned around to see an angel-faced girl, perhaps 7 years old, with Site 2's discarded cigarette stuck between her lips. For some reason the image made me think of a cigarette stubbed out on a pristine, white-frosted cake. I plucked the cigarette out of her mouth and flung it into a puddle. The little cherub grinned, showing rotting teeth, while her cohort of tiny friends screamed and laughed.

Two of these children belonged to the Doctor. They wore matching pajamas and were eating boiled potatoes, stuck onto sticks like popsicles. "Some parents send their kids to beg on the bridge. It's disgusting," he said. "I'd never do that. My children will study. They'll study to the highest level possible so they can have a good future."

Night fell. The Doctor's wife set fire to the garbage pile. Smoke soon enveloped us and the party broke up.

* * *

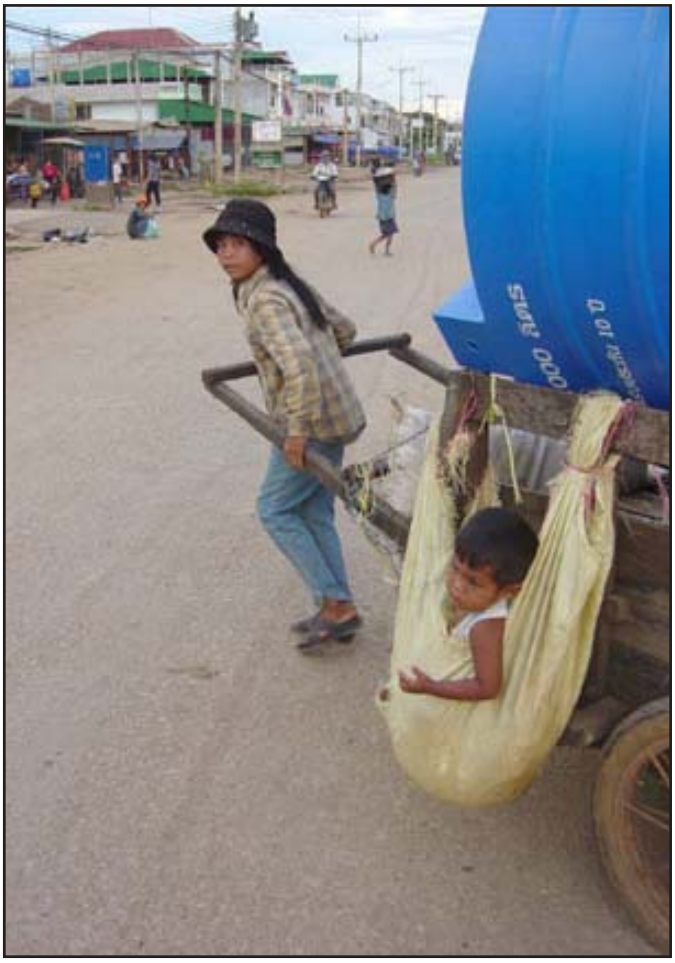
The bright paint and snapping flags of the Poipet Kunthea Progressive Knowledge Center attracted me. I was greeted by a smooth-skinned youth with neatly parted hair in a gleaming white shirt and an inch-wide tie. He looked as if he'd stepped out of a high-school yearbook, circa 1960. Somang had been teaching English and Thai at the school for a year after giving up his job as a tour guide. His English was informal and smooth. He said, "C'mon, man. Have a seat. What do you want to know?"

Somang had followed his older sister to Poipet. He said it was the best move he'd ever made.

"It's a lot better now. Poipet used to be a dangerous place. When I first arrived, there was a lot of crime, many girls were being raped. The streets were so dark. I wouldn't even go out at night. But it's getting better. Poipet is the best place."

"How so?"

"The economy is the best. A few years ago it was



A young cart puller multitasking on Route 5

Sihanoukville, but now it's Poipet." Somang spoke about Poipet as if he were president of the Chamber of Commerce. He seemed completely oblivious to the poverty around him, the trash in the street, the mud, the filth, the squalor. It was if he didn't see it.

Somang invited me to speak to his English class. The classroom was small, windowless and hot. He introduced me to the class in Khmer. I made a little speech about myself, where I'm from, and what I'm doing. I asked for questions. After some coaxing from Somang, a man in the back row rose to ask, "Have you had any difficulties in Poipet?"

"No," I said, "people here have been very kind."

The man went on, "Because the people in Poipet have many difficulties. The government does not help us. Hun Sen does not care about us."

What could I say? His lament confirmed my image of Poipet as a dissident zone, separate from Phnom Penh. I knew that the ruling party had won Poipet in the recent election, but there had been allegations of fraud and polling problems by the opposition Sam Rainsy Party. There was certainly little evidence of government services in Poipet. I thought about the construction supplies crossing the border when people in Poipet were facing a food shortage. The trucks had prompted a protest by Poipet residents, but it was broken up in short order.

It was dark when I stepped outside. Nightfall had transformed the area. The simple shack across the street was revealed as a brothel, with three young women sitting out front, backlit by a pink fluorescent light.

That night I met a young Swiss man in a Route 5 restaurant. He had been living in Poipet for two years, working for a non-government organization that helps trafficked children. Soon, he would be leaving. It was time to go, he said. He'd taken to spending his weekends in Aranyaprathet. He couldn't be in Poipet without being on the job. It was all too intense sometimes, he said.

I asked him what had changed in the two years he'd been in Poipet, and he spoke about the changes he'd seen in the local staff of his organization. They were more confident, more knowledgeable. Soon, they wouldn't need a foreign advisor. That was progress.

He told me that many people in Poipet are traumatized. "Any given man of a certain age here might have been a child soldier for the Khmer Rouge, come of age in a Thai refugee camp, and come back to Cambodia a decade ago with no education, no skills, no self-confidence. They don't even know how to plant rice."

Why do people keep coming to Poipet? He said that

A rainbow over the slum.

Poipet had gained a reputation as the place to make easy money. People come from all over Cambodia thinking they'll earn a bunch of money and go home rich. I thought about the Thais who poured into Poipet from the other side of the border, also hoping to strike it rich. They, at least, had something to lose. He said he knows many people who wish they could go home but, having failed to find work, they can't stand to lose face before the families and neighbors.

Besides the hotel clerk and the Vietnamese woman, I'd not met anyone who seemed anxious to leave. I thought about Somang, the Poipet booster. I'd also met a young man who'd come to Poipet after failing the entrance exams for university in Phnom Penh. Now he was making good money selling mobile phones. Then there was the kid just a week away from finishing his training as a dealer at one of the casinos. He was excited and proud. I thought about the money Cheng made and gave to her brother.

Poipet is a miserable place, to be sure, and for some, like the hotel clerk, it is nothing more than a setting for hopelessness. But Poipet's poverty is not exceptional in Cambodia. If social problems seem to be concentrated here, it is perhaps no accident that so is much of the country's entrepreneurial energy. Poipet is poor, but there is vitality as well. The town has squalor and verve, desperation and hope.

It's easiest to see the hopeful side of Poipet in the evening when the savage heat begins to dissipate. The slum seems to grow milder. People smile and greet each other. The fence comes down from around a dilapidated carousel near the temple and the kids swarm aboard. Young men gather to play volleyball and badminton in the temple grounds. Mothers dandle their infants, the tough guys groom their fighting cocks, the old guys smoke and drink whiskey and the fortunate go off to study English with Somang. ❑

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