

Things to Do Before You Die

I wasn't going to let myself feel embarrassed by Col today but here we are, before sunrise, and I've already broken that resolution. It's just as I feared, this thing he's doing with Ben's photos. I watch him pacing around clutching that bloody brag book and I just cringe inside.

It's the dry season and the grass on the hillside is straw-coloured and spiky. Everyone around me is sitting on sarongs or those cheap woven mats they sell in the markets in Siem Reap. Col and I stand out from the crowd on our smart tartan picnic rug provided by the Embassy, but we would stand out anyway on this part of the hill. Most people our age are down by the pond with the tour groups, clustered behind a bristle of tripods and fancy camera equipment, hoping to catch the famous reflection. Up here, it's the backpackers with their mobile phones, a mass of tiny screens glowing in the half-dark.

Strange to think that this happens every day. Every dawn, the cavalcade of tuk-tuks and minibuses charging out of town, the steam and sizzle of the food stalls serving up breakfast in the darkness, women and children tossing woks, their brown faces shining in the light of their gas burners. Every day, but for each us, it is just this once.

Once in a lifetime. One for the bucket list...

The temple spans the space in front of us like a stage curtain waiting to be raised. I can see now exactly where the sun will appear, not directly behind the towers as it does in the tourist brochures, but just to the right, above the serrated silhouette of what looks like a cabbage palm.

I catch Col's eye and pat the space on the rug beside me. He gives a quick flick of his hand and walks in the other direction, stumbling over someone's bag and kicking dirt onto their mat. I feel a reluctant pang of fondness for him. What we are doing here today has nothing to do with other people; it doesn't even have that much to do with Angkor Wat. And this thing with Ben's photos is just a distraction for Col. He's like a child being given a treasure hunt to do, a little pad and pencil, to get him through an arduous excursion.

I just wish he'd keep it to himself. Gerlinde's parents reacted so badly outside the courthouse yesterday when Col explained what we planned to do and invited them along. They turned us down, of course, made some weak excuse. Col was surprised but I wasn't. The mother—Anna—was visibly distressed. Her hand flew to her mouth too late to catch the whimper. I can understand that. I flinched too when Col first told me that he'd had Ben's photos printed with the time stamp in the corner; that he planned to retrace his steps, our son's last day on earth, minute by minute, monument by monument, until the final photograph taken at 16.43.

I've accepted it now, more or less. My position is that I'll follow along but I can't be enthusiastic. I'll view it as an act of devotion, like the stations of the Cross. Col wants to find the exact spot where each picture was taken, to feel Ben standing there, to sit where he was sitting, to feel some kind of communion with his son. Maudlin, perhaps, but at least it's sincere, not like half the New Age clap-trap going down around us. It could well be that Col, this bumbling middle-aged man from Nunawading, is the only person here experiencing something genuinely spiritual.

If it were up to me, of course, we wouldn't have come. I was happy to spend the two-day recess lying in our hotel room with the blinds down and the ceiling fan on full. I have no energy for the hectic tourist whirl of Siem Reap. It pulsates around our hotel, runs through the streets at night like an electric river. It's all I can do to wade through it on our way to the courthouse and back, waist deep against the current. I can barely face going out for dinner, preferring to eat in our room or at the family-run restaurant downstairs that doesn't attract much custom.

This seems reasonable to me, given our circumstances, yet people find it surprising. Two trips to Siem Reap in a year and you haven't seen Angkor Wat? I got comments like that the first time, right after the accident. Did you get out to Angkor while you were there? I never knew to respond. No, I thought bitterly, just to the morgue this time.

We did get halfway here, in fact. Someone from the Tourist Police drove us out to the crash site. I thought about that this morning, on the road coming in, how little I remember of that day. The road is so featureless after you leave the town. The only marker I recall was a huddle of monkeys. Horrible,

they seemed to me, with their pinched lips and cranky eyebrows moving up and down. I could imagine them all descending on the shattered tuk-tuk, picking through the wreckage with their little thieving hands.

I saw monkeys again this morning. Our headlights found them running beside the road, a mother on all fours with a baby clinging to her chest. I'm not sure if it was the same place and, thankfully, Col said nothing. We just drove on by and we'll drive straight back if I've got any say in the matter. I don't care what his plans are. I'm not stopping there again.

He's beckoning me over. It's the second time I've had to move our stuff. Rug, daypack, thermos flask; I traipse across the slope, apologising to people as I go.

Col thrusts a photo in my face.

'He was here, look, that tree there.'

I adjust my glasses. Angkor Wat, black against a mackerel sky, the rising sun scorching the edges of a cloud.

'Yes, I think you're right. We'll sit here then, shall we?'

'I wonder where Anh's got to?'

'I'd say he's asleep in the car. He must've seen this a thousand times, growing up near here.'

'He's nice, don't you think?'

'They've all been nice this time, the embassy people. Not like last time, that Rottweiler woman they sent to the airport to meet us.'

When we're settled, I steal a look at the travellers sitting around us. The young woman next to me has a checked Khmer sarong draped around her shoulders. I found one of those in Ben's backpack when we got it home. He mustn't have taken it with him that day. None of the things he had with him at the time of the crash came home, except his phone, of course, miraculously undamaged.

'So where are we going next?'

Col flips the plastic sleeves of the little blue album. *Brag Book* it says on the cover. We should've bought a new one, they only cost a few dollars, but Col found this one, never used, in a drawer in the study at home. He couldn't see what was wrong with it, why I got upset.

Brag book. Baby blue. Baby boy.

He shows me a photo of a stone head with Ben smiling below. It's the famous temple, the one with all the faces.

'The Bayon,' Col reads from the pamphlet we were given at the gate. 'It was also in Tomb Raider, it says here.'

'It's a nice shot of Ben. Someone else has taken that.'

'Her, probably—Gerlinde.'

'Gerlinda,' I correct him. He keeps on saying it wrong.

'I wonder what her folks are doing today. Hanging out in Pub Street?'

I smirk, imagining that ponderous German couple carousing in a bar. 'I hate that part of town, all those kids off their faces, drinking out of those massive cups.'

'Buckets,' Col says.

Buckets. Bucket list. Thing to do before you die.

'They *are* buckets, they're dreadful. I hope Ben wasn't doing stuff like that.'

'I hope he was. I hope he was having fun.'

'He never mentioned the girl.'

Col shrugs. They might have just been friends although she's in a lot of his photos, going all the way back to Laos. I flick to the next picture, also taken at the Bayon. It's of Gerlinde on her own, sitting pensively in a stone doorway. I think of her mother, Anna Schreiber, and her hangdog face. She's three years younger than me, I found out yesterday, but slumped in her chair in the courtroom, she looks shrunken and diminished, as if she's been dealt a blow from which she will never recover. All day she stares at the back of the chair in front of her, now and then raising her face to the proceedings, emotions passing over her brow like the shadows of clouds.

A hush descends upon the crowd. A finger of sunlight has pushed above the horizon, washing the landscape in a watery light. There's an intake of breath and a rapturous raising of phones. For a short while, the stone buildings around us glow like honey but the magic quickly fades to reveal a crowd of dishevelled travellers on another ordinary day. People begin to shift about and talk in normal

voices. Most are heading down to the pond and on to Angkor Wat. I feel a spasm of regret that we won't see it ourselves. We are only going where Ben went and he never made it there.

We walk back to the car, skirting around the swarm of tuk-tuks outside the gates. I can't help but look for that bastard as we hurry past, even though I know he isn't here. As we heard in court on Tuesday, he can no longer drive. 'Deprived of his livelihood', said his lawyer. I bristled with anger at that, but all the same, the sight of him was confronting. The pink burn scars on his arms, the sound of his elbow crutches—*thump scream, thump scream*—as he made his way down the aisle to his seat at the front of the room, the empty leg of his trouser rolled and pinned above the knee.

Our driver, Anh, is friendly but guarded. He never mentions the court case. I think he knows the defendant, that he worked with him in the past. We know that he used to drive tuk-tuks—he let that slip by mistake one day and there was an awkward pause. I see the same reserve in many people here: as if, by pursuing justice for our dead, white, privileged children, we are threatening the town's small tourist operators. That's ridiculous, of course. Nothing will change. I don't think we can even win with no breath or blood tests, with only the testimony of a young British man via video-link who buckled under cross examination. They seemed to be racing but he couldn't be sure. They were swerving all over the road. One disappeared into the ditch and that was all he saw.

At the Bayon, Chinese tourists jostle for space beside the more accessible stone faces. The lumpy pyramids of stone remind me of the drip castles I used to build with Ben in the silty sand among the mangroves in Port Philip Bay. How the water drained like magic from the plopping slurry. His nutbrown body, his white blonde hair, how he shrieked with delight as the blobs of sand stacked up and up and then came tumbling down.

These towers too are surrounded by a tumble of broken stone. I look at the huge faces with their beneficent smiles, rising serenely above the shove and babble of the crowd. They look almost blissful, their eyes closed against the sun, their thick lips curling at the corners like the ends of a waxed moustache.

Col calls out to me. He has found the spot. I walk around to the eastern side of the tower.

‘Well done,’ I say. ‘Here, give me your camera.’

‘If we get someone else to take it, you can be in it too.’

‘No!’

‘Why not?’

‘I look a fright.’

‘You don’t.’

‘No, Col, I don’t want to. I’ll take one of you, okay?’

He smiles awkwardly. It doesn’t feel quite right. He could be posing for any old holiday snap, standing next to Mickey Mouse or in front of the Eifel Tower. I step up to the giant face. I look down at the ground. His feet right here, his presence, I give it everything I’ve got. The roar of a bus engine, people chattering in Chinese. I reach up and press my palm against the unyielding stone.

We move quickly after that—the Elephant Terrace, the Royal Palace, the temple of Bapuon. By midday, we are passing monuments without a second glance, nameless towers crumbling away like ant mounds in the rain.

After lunch, Anh takes us to the edge of the baray, to some ancient steps where we can paddle. I take off my shoes and socks and immerse my feet. In the swirl of soft brown algae, my toenails gleam like pearls. I had them done on Tuesday at a nail parlour near the courthouse. We rose early that day and it seemed like the perfect thing to do.

There was only one other woman in the chairs with me. At our feet, teenage girls perched on tiny stools, hard at work with nailfiles and clippers. The rest of the girls sat idly, chatting in Khmer. They all wore the uniform, a grimy pink polo shirt and stone-washed jeans. My girl tapped my ankle and the towel, folded above the basin. Another girl came across the room with a box of polishes. This one looked more hard-bitten, with purple acne scars on her cheeks and fingernails painted a lurid shade of green. I pointed to them and nodded. The girls both giggled, covering their mouths with their hands.

Suddenly, into the parlour, came an older woman with lacquered hair who I took to be their boss. She spoke sharply to the idle girls and cast a brisk and critical eye around the room. When she looked at me, I saw something register on her face. She whispered to the acne girl who glanced in my direction. Whatever was said was soon conveyed to the others in hushed Khmer. My girl turned slowly on her stool, nail file hovering in her hand.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked her.

She leaned back into her work, a hank of black hair falling over her face. They seemed to know who I was and it meant something to them. Someone’s father, uncle, brother—they knew the tuk-tuk driver. I studied the impervious features of the woman at the desk and tried to recall if I had seen her in court.

Anh drops us off at the northern gates of Preah Khan and we arrange to meet him at six o’clock on the other side. This temple is lesser known and, for the first time today, we feel like we’re alone. Like children, we clamber over the mouldering ruins. The dreaded 4.43 comes and goes but Col doesn’t bring out the Brag Book. Instead we sit, side by side, on a tilting pillar of stone, listening to the cicada noise rise and dissolve into the trees. The light is dusky. The air is warm and still. In front of us, a strangler fig pours over a wall, its fibrous fingers digging into the ancient brickwork. I can hear music, the feeble notes of a bamboo flute drifting towards us.

Col squints and listens. ‘Prob’ly landmine victims, like the other ones.’

There was a band at Bapuon this morning but they were on a break. All we saw was their instruments lying on a wooden platform next to an honesty box and a basket of dusty CDs. Unfamiliar versions of drums, fiddles and horns. There was a sign with a blurry photo of the group taken with Prince Sihanouk. I wanted to leave some money in the box but Col wasn’t keen. He is resistant to the issue of the genocide as if we have enough grief of our own to deal with while we’re here. You do feel it though. You feel it in the people. I look at old women in the street and wonder what horrors they have lived through. Neither should we think of it in the past tense. Farmers ploughing, children playing—people are still being blown to bits out there in the killing fields.

Col is right about this second band. They are landmine survivors. There's another printout a cloudy plastic sleeve. They are led by an old, toothless man with skin like crackled leather. He smiles and nods when I step forward and pick up a CD.

Looking around the motley array of musicians, my eyes are drawn to a prosthetic leg lying on the platform. It's not that it looks real—there's nothing even vaguely real about the doll pink plastic—but I drop the CD with a clatter as if it's burnt my hand. *Thump scream, thump scream*. The man bangs sullenly on his barrel drum as the music buzzes in my head like an angry hornet. How do I even know it's him? I don't know what he looks like. I've never looked closely at his face, only at his wounds. Still, I turn and run, heading for the gate. Anh's car is parked outside and Col is waiting with him. Behind them, a fiery sun is sliding down the sky.

The sun. The son. The sun.

We have followed it all day. From far away, comes the two-stroke throb of a tuk-tuk heading back to town. I take a deep juddering breath and, shielding my eyes from the glare, walk unsteadily to the car.