

The Shadow Master

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In 2005, I found myself in a remote village outside Siem Reap, Cambodia, with a stranger aiming a needle on my back. The man, a retired kickboxing champ, dipped the needle in ink, a mixture of sugarcane juice and crushed charcoal. It took the entire day to complete the tattoo ritual, which ran from my shoulders down to my lower back. I've had pictures of it taken, looked at it from time to time, but mostly I'd forgotten that it's there, that I've been marked with enigmatic symbols and ancient scripts that marked my journey into strange beliefs and a dark past.

I backpacked around Cambodia for a month. My guide was a former soldier and drug dealer from Phnom Penh who immediately sensed the kind of journey I was predisposed to. I was not unique; he had met my kind before. So after six days of exploring Angkor Wat, he introduced me to his friend, an old farmer and former Khmer Rouge leader hiding under a false name. We spent a week together drinking with the old man's comrades. We ate duck meat fried with overripe jackfruit and slept on wooden boats in the middle of Tonle Sap, Southeast Asia's largest lake. The old man's wife did not approve of him going out in public. In 2005, people were talking about an international tribunal that would try former Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for the Cambodian genocide that killed two million. But the old man insisted in going out with me. He had an excuse – I was a traveler. He wanted me to try the fermented palm juice, to go hunting with him at night in the forest. Besides, I never asked about the past (the only condition my guide asked). When I look back at those days, I sometimes wonder if he could sense the end coming, either due to old age or his capture. We drove around in an old truck and he showed me his vast tracks of land and orchards. He said all he wanted was for his children to finish school.

I also met two loggers who worked for the old man. I wouldn't have known that they were transvestites because their faces were covered with the traditional krama garment. I spent time with them, cutting and hauling logs in the forest, and only then did I notice that both wore mascaras, lipstick and bright nail polish. My guide told me that the old man met the transvestites when he first went into hiding for three years. Smart move, I thought. No one would have suspected. I didn't tell them that I'm gay. We all hid our deepest secrets from each other.

One morning the old man and his comrades invited me to have lunch outdoors on a raised bed of bamboo slats. We sat in a circle, shirtless with



checkered kramas wrapped around our waist. The old man noticed how I sat with my legs folded to one side. He tapped my knee and said I sat like a girl. He wasn't smiling. He motioned how I should sit like them, with legs crossed in front. I changed my sitting position, heart pounding. They noticed that I was looking at their sacred tattoos. One of them handed me a butcher knife and asked me to strike him. I didn't take the challenge. I smiled and told them I believe their stories, how those marks helped them survive the war. The oldest became pensive. He said all his life he did not even have to farm; all he had to do was kill people. He killed for the king, the Khmer Rouge, the government, and all he wanted in old age was to die peacefully. Inside, no matter how fatherly they all treated me, I knew that there had to be some reckoning, accountability and justice for the two million who died and disappeared. The old man pointed at the tattoo in his chest and asked me, "Would you like to have this mark?"

I didn't want to walk around with the mark of a mass murderer but I figured common folks in the region had it too, including travelers and celebrities. So I thought why not, a tiny one would do.

It took my guide a couple of days to find the Tattoo Master, the keeper of the symbols and spells. A young Khmer who had recently returned home after years of working illegally abroad led us to the village. He showed me his tattoo, which he got before crossing the border to Thailand. He said he it helped him dodge the border patrol's bullets. He seemed moved that I was getting a traditional tattoo so he gave me his personal amulets. He dug it from his pocket, wrapped in faded saffron cloth filled with cryptic drawings and script, an assortment of old coins, Buddha pendants, and animal teeth. He didn't ask for money. He said he was done with it. I guess what he meant was that he has returned home. Anyone can lay claim to an emblem, especially those who have fallen into cracks, who are neither here nor there, or those caught between a terrible past and an uncertain future. We need emblems as anchors, hooks to find connections.

I had my tattoo done inside a wooden house on stilts. A bald old woman prepared an offering to the spirits: five small yellow candles, five rolled bodhi leaves and five incense sticks. Her youngest son prepared the ink while the eldest did the actual tattooing. He learned it from his father, a half-blind old man who performed the final prayer rites. Some of their friends also helped gather materials and prepare lunch.

It hurt like hell. The needle felt like a vibrating sewing machine. Seven fucking hours.

I suppose you could get a tattoo the modern way anywhere nowadays. But perhaps not with these hidden symbols. The last time the family did it was the year before. It took us two days to find the Tattoo Master, the one



who could do the ritual properly, the keeper of the spells.

Below are my answers to frequently asked questions about my back:

YOUR TATTOO WAS BELIEVED TO HOLD POWER?

I was told it could give me protection in times of danger. But it wasn't enough that you have them in your back. You need to know the spells too.

DO YOU BELIEVE IT?

I'm not sure. I believe in the experience. But I always raise questions. My faith thrives in doubt and tension.

WHAT SCARED YOU THE MOST?

It wasn't the pain. On the way to the village we met a tattooed soldier who warned me. He said a big man like him cried like a child. That didn't discourage me. That just got the adrenaline going. When they unfolded the cloth (the size of a small table) of signs and symbols and showed me what they were going to put on my back, the thought of backing out did not even occur to me. I was surprised, yes. Only because I had earlier thought that I could just choose one tiny drawing out of that entire huge map. Apparently it didn't work that way. You either get the whole package or nothing. The design depended on your purpose – why you wanted it. Perhaps what scared me most was myself. That I had totally lost control at that point. I had already given in. They showed me the sterilized needle they just bought. I knew that could have killed me. That or the mosquito bites. I was thinking dengue and malaria the whole time. Part of me kept asking myself, what am I doing here? Who are these people? Why am I doing this? And those questions and worries just flowed and ran through me like water. THAT was scary.



WHAT DID YOU TELL THEM?

That I'm just a traveler. That was fine with them.

HOW DID YOU BEAR THE PAIN?

At first, I grabbed my guide's hand. I told him I needed to hold on to somebody. But the bastard pulled away. He said I had to take it like a man. So I bit on the strap of my Swiss sportswatch, a birthday gift from my brother. When it became unbearable, I asked for my iPod. I never listened to Byzantine music, Philip Glass and Michael Nyman the same way again after that. There was also a lunch break. We had chicken broth, boiled with leafy stalks of marijuana. That did not help. It was that painful.

WHERE DID IT HURT THE MOST?

When they did the human figure on my lower spine, the most sensitive part. I was thinking instant paralysis. I just bit the watch strap hard. I tasted my tears. They were very concerned but they did not stop.

WHAT WERE YOU THINKING THE WHOLE TIME?

There's a passage in Graham Greene's novel, *The End of the Affair*, where Sarah, played by Julian Moore in the movie, writes to God in her diary, "I believe the legend. I believe you were born. I believe you died for us. I believe you are God. Teach me to love. I don't mind my pain. It's their pain I can't stand. Let my pain go on and on, but stop theirs. Dear God, if only you could come down from your cross and let me go up there instead. If I could suffer like you, I could heal like you." I had similar thoughts. I was talking to God. I was thinking of my family, my friends, everyone I love and hold dear. My country. My people. Faces in deep suffering floated in front of me. The hurt I have caused, including those brought on by this world and those they inflicted on to themselves. I kept bargaining with God, I'll take all this pain, just take away theirs. This whole denial of the self -- very Catholic, really.

WHAT DID THE SYMBOLS MEAN?

Hard to say. Even my guide had difficulty explaining. I have a feeling the signs and symbols were meant to be indecipherable the way ancient spells were meant to be. You probably need a philologist to decipher all that weird cabbalistic jumble of ancient text and signs. At the same time, I know indecipherability could also serve as a tool of power and abuse. Anyone could claim it. They said I could dodge bullets, be invincible against any bladed weapon. I'm not interested in finding out if that was true. One thing intrigued me though -- the power to disappear. Only because I had been doing that all my life. All my restless wanderings, I have relied on it. Permeability.





IN THE END, WHAT DID YOU BELIEVE IN?

I believed in what the experience had to offer to me. An internal journey. The ritual ended with the old man's prayer rites. Rules were given. Mostly things I wouldn't find myself in a position of breaking anyway. Like I was forbidden to eat monkey meat. Apparently, monkeys are favored delicacies in the jungles of Cambodia. The old man also added that the shadow master on my back is normally always asleep. It would wake up when prompted by a spell that I'm supposed to recite. And only in times of danger. And since there was no way I could master Khmer, a foreign language, and the lilting tones of the lengthy spell, the old man would have to keep him awake the whole time with another spell. But I will have to practice extra caution in showing my back to other people indiscriminately. There are people out there, he further warned, who are familiar with the image and who know of its power. These people could cast spells. The shadow master could leave my back and move to theirs. All I'd be left with would be meaningless scars on my back. I would have to be extra careful. The shadow master is on my back to protect me. It looks out for me and sees people and if they are perceived as enemies, it could cause them harm. I listened to the old man and nodded, wondering what that all truly meant for me. I asked how much I should pay them. They said it was up to me. I gave them thirty dollars.

There was one last warning. He said I should be prepared when I reach home. Something would take place the first night. A great battle. I should muster all my strength and willpower to fight it. Fight what, I asked. Just remain steadfast, he said. I took that all in with a grain of salt and went



home. I was feeling okay, relieved that it was all over. I totally forgot what the old man had said and decided to spend the evening in a coffee shop at the central market of Siem Reap. I remember I was looking through the glass window at the street. There was an Indian restaurant across from the coffee shop and on a table outside, a tourist was having dinner. Seated on the pavement next to him was a little Cambodian girl, watching him eat. And then another tourist came by with a camera and he started taking pictures of the child. The child ignored this other tourist. I remember how moved I was by this linked sight, the trail of attention flowing from the camera to the child to the food on the table and how all three were oblivious of, or perhaps trying to ignore, each other. That's when it happened. Everything blurred in an instant. I blinked my eye and all I could see was a haze of colors. I felt this sensation, like vertigo, of being lifted up, so high I could not feel the ground anymore. I could not feel anything. Everything disappeared and then reappeared again but in a form I could hardly recognize. It was then that I remembered what the old man had said. It happened so fast. I felt nauseated. I was falling in a dark hole, hurtling down fast. I looked at the cashier and the other customers and I could tell from their expression, that they knew something terrible was happening to me. I tried to ask for help, but my mouth went numb. I couldn't move it. I remember thinking, this is it Willi, this is how you are going to die.

I stood up. Staggered. I managed to get out on the street. I saw a parked motorbike for hire and thought of going to the hospital. But it was all happening so fast. Life was being sucked out of me. My inn was just a block away. Right next to it was the computer shop where I made long distance calls. I crossed the street, walking unsteadily, all the way to the shop to make a call.

I sat on the floor inside the phone booth. I checked the phone numbers in my wallet but my vision liquefied everything. All the names and numbers turned to water. The first memorized number that came to mind was that of a friend I had just met a few months before, an expat who came from New Zealand to teach English in Bangkok. I dialed the number and she answered the phone. I told her I was feeling really sick, that something was happening to me. I wanted to tell her what had happened that day but my thoughts were all incoherent. I remember her saying that I should have been more careful in visiting the temples of Angkor. Spirits guarded the place. She asked me to go to the hospital. But I was too weak. She stayed on the line and frantically prayed over me, calling on Jesus to save me from this dark, terrible spirit that was claiming me.

The first sign of deliverance was the slowing of my heartbeat. And then air. I was conscious that I was breathing air. And just as quickly as it had happened, it was all over. I remember feeling very exhausted.



Drenched in sweat. A strange calm washed over me. As if nothing happened. I returned to my room. My younger brother, a nurse, later explained that it was my body reacting to the toxins from the ink.

AFTER WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH, WOULD YOU ENCOURAGE OTHERS WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED TO GET A SIMILAR TATTOO?

I'm not sure. I would recommend extra caution though. A few friends who have seen it did not find the final result especially appealing, especially when it's compared to the aesthetically more sophisticated designs from modern tattoo salons. Mine are crude and faint. I had my personal reasons why I did it. I believe that it's an important art form. Very few people do it nowadays. Perhaps it's losing its meaning. But I believe it will remain intrinsically linked to the many lives it has bound, through times of dominion, danger, and deliverance. I find it a comforting thought to have that history on my back. It was the beginning of my journey in Cambodia, my initiation to my forays in the heart of darkness. And light.

