CHAPTER 1 MIRROR MIRROR

One person at our table had lived through the twentieth century's second most efficient genocide; the other one had not.

On the surface there were dozens of obvious differences between us, but my childhood lived as a child and Sophea's lived under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime – that would be the one to notice on deeper acquaintance. So why had Sophea just said: "It's interesting Annie. I have realised that we are very alike."

She said this and returned to picking daintily through the dishes on our table, as if her words were so clearly true there was no need for discussion.

Let's start with those surface differences. Lithe as a willow wand, up, down and sideways, Sophea was about half my size. She was always perfectly groomed, from her manicured toes to the white magnolia flower she'd absent-mindedly tucked into the braid of her long black hair. If I'd picked up a wind-fallen flower to try any such casual self-adornment I'd have ended up with a bee-stung head. Or would look as though the flower had just been thrown down on me by a spiteful tree lizard, because to tree lizards there was just something about my face...

Even without trying any ambitious flower-on-head manoeuvres, I looked like a giant, sunburnt, comical beast Sophea was leading around the streets to show her friends and ask: should she keep it, or would it break the furniture?

Sophea put a flower in her hair with the same confident carelessness she showed in explaining how something had happened to her "… because I'm very beautiful." In the matter-of-fact way someone else might say: "…because I'm very tall."

Sophea was never just dressed; every day, a fetching outfit and accessories had been assembled. Sophea didn't walk into a room, she presented herself to it. A professional performer, she was used to being watched and admired. In turn, the performing had polished her compelling appearance. The rigours of what she did meant that food just disappeared into her fine bones and gravity hadn't yet dared to make grabs at her face.

Sophea was a dancer. She'd achieved this against all personal odds. And the style of dance she performed, Khmer Classical Ballet, had almost, at several points in history, vanished from the face of the earth.

Sophea's involvement with dancing, and indeed the face of the earth, had nearly been cut short in 1975 by the Khmer Rouge regime. During the regime's killing of people deemed enemies of the state, 190 ballet dancers were put to death.

Sophea was seven years old when the slaughter of dancers happened. She'd been hoping to begin training. Seven was the ideal age, as her bones would still have a malleable softness to achieve perfect form. The dance school was for rich and royal children, but she was pleading with her very ordinary parents, she'd do anything… Her father was a chef and her mother a clerk in a tobacco factory – they just managed. Very bright Sophea was already at a costly primary school; now her dream of ballet-dancing was breaking their hearts.

If they'd had more money and influence, Sophea might have been among the privileged, dressed in a silk costume, refining a hand gesture, when Pol Pot's troops came through the dance studio door,

full of homicidal rage. But here she was, decades later, having survived and achieved astonishing things.

How could she think we were “very alike”?

Little hands darting around the table, Sophea was urging me to help her finish the lunch. It was hot and airless in the storefront restaurant; I didn’t really feel like eating, couldn’t eat as much as Sophea at the best of times.

We were the same age, there was that, both fifty, but then... I had nagged at my parents for ballet lessons when I was seven years old, but it had been a whim, not a passion. The moment I realised the process didn’t go from naught to twirling in a swan costume on pointed toes, I was bored. I went home in tears, and anyway, my friend Susan Fogden had a new pink bicycle, a bicycle would really be much better for me… Our lower-middle-class home had a contentment, occasionally strained financially by children full of whims, but so much of what we needed was free – education, health care, school lunches…. Outside our house the most dangerous thing was the North Circular Road.

There was also contentment in Sophea’s family home, with her gentle, creative father and efficient, ambitious mother; her younger brother and sister. Their Buddhist faith centred the household. Respectable, minding their own business, they were only strained by the cost of Sophea’s schooling and the perfect blue and white uniforms the school required. Their house was in a quiet side street, safe to play in, safe for walking to school. But then.

The chic, corrupt ruling class of Cambodia had been very greedy with what they’d acquired from France post-independence, while the countryside peasants were struggling hard. The peasants to the North were under escalating threat from the war in Vietnam. American planes hunting Vietnamese Communist fighters incinerated Cambodian homes, crops and families. In the forests, grief-stricken, destitute, angry and susceptible to the worst of promise-makers, Cambodia’s peasantry became Communist fighters. These black-shirted Khmer Rouge, half-starved, half-crazy with hate, were taking Cambodia for themselves. In Phnom Penh, American-backed government troops fought to hold the city.

Every day, fewer children came to school. Sophea, so delighted with her lessons and smart uniform, insisted on crossing the city as normal, despite parental anxiety about the bombs and shells beginning to fall.

“I lied to my parents. I said everyone was still attending, I mustn’t get behind or they’d have wasted their money. Then one morning I went and the whole school was shelled. I went to my teacher’s home. I said she could still teach us in her house but she started crying. She said I mustn’t cross the city any more until the shelling stopped.”

The shelling did stop. The government troops seemed to vanish overnight. Many simply burnt their uniforms and disappeared into the general population, knowing that the moment was close when the Khmer Rouge would strut through Phnom Penh.

The arrival of the young Khmer Rouge soldiers was greeted with ambivalence. For a few hours, the city people thought they could relax, the war was over; life would get back to normal. But then, along with most of the bewildered population of Phnom Penh, Sophea’s family was told they had to leave the city immediately. The Americans were going to bomb it and everyone was in mortal

danger. People had to grab enough supplies for three days and head into the countryside. In three days they could come home, safe to celebrate the Khmer Rouge triumph.

Sophea's father bought a handcart to transport their belongings. They'd head along the Tonle Sap lake to a fishing village where he had cousins, only half a day's distance but far enough for safety. Sophea wanted to take her books and the school uniforms that she kept so proudly spick and span. Her father said it was silly to take them; they'd be back in three days. They needed to carry food, bedding, cooking pots, mosquito nets, medicines…. Besides, her six-year-old brother and three-year-old sister were too small to walk all the way out of the city; the handcart was for them. Enraged, Sophea hid her uniforms inside her bedding.

Brother and sister perched on the handcart while Sophea walked behind with her mother, pushing a little, but mostly still sulking that pots and these candy-sucking infants had taken priority over her belongings. Then Sophea grew curious about the young men in black with guns who were watching them all the way. She thought they could offer to help people like her father, pulling the cart like an ox – but they weren't offering to help anyone. Not even the very old people struggling with bundles, or the families with no cart and too many small children to carry.

On the edge of the city her mother said; "Don't look."

But Sophea was already looking at a burnt-out service taxi, swollen bodies spilling out of it. A rear wheel of the taxi was in the air, pushed upward by the bloat of a body on the ground beneath. From side roads more and more people joined the stumbling procession from the city.

"When we stopped for a moment's rest my father would talk to these strangers, asking them questions. This wasn't like him; he was a very shy man."

There was an expression in her father's face that Sophea didn't recognise when a gang of soldiers on the road told him the family couldn't go to his relatives. They had to follow everyone else to a camp by the lakeside.

The new expression disappeared quickly. Sophea's father forced a cheeriness with his family, urging them onward as he hauled his cart where he was told.

"I was going to say, looking back, that it was the first time I'd seen him frightened, but I can see it now and it was more as if he felt stupid. As if he was realising these soldiers were lying, that everything was a big lie and we were tricked. You know, the kind of shocked face when you realise you've been really stupid?"

At the crowded camp, Sophea helped her parents to arrange the bedding and make a fire. Her baby sister slept. Sophea's brother, six-year-old Sann, went with some of his friends to wash at the lake's edge. Sophea grumbled; Sann wouldn't be washing, he'd be splashing and playing and in her opinion he was quite old enough to help with the work as well…

An hour later the boys came back, Sann wasn't with them. The boys said a woman in Khmer Rouge uniform had introduced herself as Sann's aunt, his mother's sister, and taken him to collect a gift for the family.

Sophea looked at her mother for confirmation. Yes, it was true, she didn't have a sister.

They searched the camp and the riverbanks. They begged every Khmer Rouge they saw for information. Halfway through the following day they still hadn't found Sann, and the soldiers were telling them they had to move on, further away from Phnom Penh.

"I started shouting at my father. He should tell the soldiers it had been four days now; couldn't they count? They should let us go home, maybe Sann was already home… That was when my father spotted the school uniforms hidden inside my bedding. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me; 'You idiot, what did I tell you?'

"He snatched the uniforms and threw them into the ditch behind us. He told me never to talk about my uniforms or my fancy school again. I didn't know his face. He never hurt me or spoke like that. Even when I started crying he spoke roughly to me and told me to help my mother pack up."

They moved on along the lake, on beyond any world that seemed familiar or sane. The city was weeks behind them, then months, then years behind them. They moved from lake fishing for the Khmer Rouge, to growing an endless rotation of crops in remote districts, where food was rationed, medical care was non-existent and they couldn't wash properly, or sleep enough to think straight.

"You know how time is long when you are a child? So when I say 'a year' now, it was a longer time for me then. It was forever. At first I tried to make myself dream about good things when I fell asleep. After that I think there were no dreams, asleep or awake, my thinking was just black."

It was four years before they could go home again, the shreds of themselves, still looking for Sann.

This had happened to Sophea between the ages of seven and eleven. This woman sitting opposite me in her favourite Siem Reap restaurant -'cheap but high quality'- refining the cutlery shine with a paper napkin, claiming we had things in common.

There was only our age in common, and we each had one younger brother and sister. Neither of mine had disappeared. When my brother was six he'd shaved all my dolls and I'd very much wanted him to disappear. I kept pushing him into wardrobes hoping he'd accidentally go to Narnia and never come back. He was always still there, spitting in the bottom of the wardrobe, plotting his next crime against me.

There wasn't simply a vast difference in experience between Sophea and me; we perceived the whole of life in different ways.

Sophea believed in gods, spirits and reincarnation. She had a Buddhist altar taking up half her living room. When she meditated, she told me, she could take her mind and soul away from the earth. She could look down from far above.

I could imagine what her real life had been like. But I knew I wouldn't catch even a fleeting heel of her beliefs. This magical, flying-soul Sophea left me staring blankly at her. Not wanting to give offence, I'd ask questions but the answers too would flit past me like elves. Sophea could leave her troubles for another plane. I knew I'd be fixed in my plodding scepticism whatever befell me.

At some long-ago rock festival, I'd avoided the inevitable rain by ducking into the tent of a hippy fortune-teller. She gave me a small crystal to hold; then she grasped it, eyes closed. She opened them, shook her head and gave me my money back. She said she couldn't see anything about me in her crystal because I had no spiritual life. Good, I'd thought as I indignantly pocketed my money and went out into the rain again, I'm glad the crystal can see that I'm no fool…

Possibly because I did get tangled into thinking that a crystal could see I didn't believe in it, there might be a tiny opening in my mind for an unearthly thought to squeeze through – but not a whole religious system. And certainly not anything involving sitting still for so long I hallucinated, choking on incense, waiting for spirit lift-off. I wasn't interested in dragging around behind Sophea hoping she'd provide Eastern enlightenment. I was curious about her complicated matrix of beliefs because I was curious about her and her tangled, still tangling, life. Growing out of the Khmer Rouge horror, her life suggested remarkable things, good things, about mere human beings.

Sophea was interested in me because she had a story she wanted to tell and she was on a mission that she hoped would change her life, possibly several lives.

We'd been pottering around Siem Reap province together for about ten days now, getting to know each other, wondering if the whole bizarre expedition could work out.

Sophea wasn't easy to know. Never mind her life on other spiritual planes; just on the plain ordinary earth where I grunted around, she lived on several planes, in shifting shapes of her character.

Some holidaying friends, able to afford the trillion-star hotel where Sophea gave performances for a select, respectful audience, had spent time with her and passed on her story. She wanted it told; she hoped we'd make a little money to help her set up a dance school for poor children at her local pagoda.

"I must teach because soon I'll be too old. If I teach the dance to ordinary children, then they can teach it too, then it lives for people who are not royal people or rich people. It's the good I can put into the world, or what is the point of me?"

I first arrived to meet her at the hotel, my notebook in hand, thinking she'd be delighted, but she looked at me coldly, notebook in her hand.

"Your friends say you are good, but we must make a decision about how the money will be divided. And if you can write down some names of things you have written. I will ask the manager here who I trust, she can check on you so I know you are suitable. This is my life, you understand. I must be sure about you."

I started writing in her notebook. She was right, of course, who the hell was I to march in and take her past to market?

Then she said; "I remember you emailed me in French, perhaps we should speak French?"

Proud of myself, I switched languages; of course, French was fine.

She stared a moment. "Speak English. Please, write the name of where you are staying and I will call on you on Wednesday morning."

Wednesday was two days away. I lay awake that night in my cheap guesthouse, alternately annoyed and anxious. I'd economised wisely, by not taking an air-conditioned room, in Cambodia's hot, humid off-season. Still, people from all over the world poured through Siem Reap; there was plenty to see and do.

On Wednesday morning, Sophea was almost an hour late. Was she not coming? Was this gamesmanship? When she appeared I half-expected her to be brandishing legal documents But she just said, charming and bashful:

“I am very sorry to be difficult. I am nervous. This could be my only chance. I am of course very pleased you have come so far to meet me.”

The wary aggression seldom re-appeared. I saw her chatty, funny, always a little regal but very trusting with her memories, ideas, dreams, regrets and, sometimes, I was trusted to be around when she kicked off her strappy shoes and relaxed at home.

Sophea lived two or three miles from the ancient forests and ruins of Angkor, past Siem Reap town, with its hub of luxury hotels. The luxury could be modern – glass-walled, feng shiu-ed minimalism, a lotus blossom on every pillow. Or there was a liveried recapturing of the colonial era in refurbished palaces, with vintage Rolls-Royces parked beside manicured grounds, to transport visitors in an amusing style. Among these grand hotels were cute terraced cafes, with views of magnolia trees, bougainvillea and gilded pagodas, flashed with the orange comings and goings of Buddhist monks.

Then there were red dirt side streets full of tumble-down shops, hostels, and meandering backpackers. The air was dense with traffic fumes, but suddenly there’d be a waft of perfume from the creamy jasmine growing over a garden wall. Down the dirt tracks the buildings changed from concrete and stone to weather-beaten wood. There were farmyard animals milling around, gaunt-faced men on bicycles and children sitting listlessly, while thin women pounded washing in tubs.

Out beyond this, in the clean air at the edges of the countryside, Sophea had a patch of land and a small rectangular house.

The two-roomed house was surprisingly untidy, apart from the very large, carefully maintained area where Sophea had her Buddhist altar. There were clothes everywhere, there were suitcases, boxed kitchen appliances, magazines, musical instruments, a tool kit, lengths of silk, a bicycle… So we did have that in common – housekeeping by the maelstrom technique.

Sophea spent a good deal of her time outside, working in the large garden that was tellingly full of food plants and fruit trees. This was another Sophea, the one who took a machete to her long hedge of lemon grass to donate some to a neighbour, while giving advice on the best plants to cure a child’s toothache. Out here she was one of the rural women, barefoot and laughing loud at some local gossip. A kind, helpful woman, without an air or a grace.

Then I found the sum of Sophea. She had a dozen hens in a run behind the house. The hens all had glitter painted toenails.

“I was bored with them.” She laughed when I spotted it. “A hen is not pretty to look at like a peacock.”

Yes, there was some part of her that should have had peacocks on a lawn, not hens in scrub grass. But she didn’t mind. Life was life. She slipped between worlds.

I could see I amused her and we’d progressed a long way from that spiky first encounter. But I couldn’t fathom what she was seeing to make her announce over lunch that we were alike. Perhaps she was picking up impressions of me from some dimension I couldn’t access or believe in.

Our quiet lunch was disturbed. We both glanced across and flickered a scowl as a clump of Asian tourists installed themselves at the next table, making the small hot restaurant feel startled. They moved furnishings, shouted between themselves and were soon noisily destroying a table full of food.

“Typical.” Sophea continued scowling.

“Typical Chinese?” As soon as I said it I knew I’d guessed wrong – the sounds weren’t right, the faces weren’t Chinese.

“Vietnamese.” Sophea confirmed. “Typical behaviour. My father calls these people ‘born on a boat’. They shout like that between fish boats, you see?”

I was sure, despite their loud boatiness, that they could hear her.

Sophea loathed the Chinese and Vietnamese in equal measure. Thais and Koreans formed a sort of second tier of enemies, with Europeans in swimsuits forming a rear-guard of humanity that Sophea couldn’t tolerate.

We often met for coffee on the terrace of a little hotel near her home. It was quiet in the mornings, cool and pretty beside the oval swimming pool. Unlike the hotel where Sophea danced, non-resident customers didn’t need to have any special permission to broach the grounds and drinks were not the price of a small car. We’d chat peacefully but if we didn’t watch the time it would be the hour for pre-lunch swimming; hotel guests would amble to the pool beside us, remove bathrobes and sarongs, revealing thighs, chests – great walls of naked hairy flesh towering around Sophea.

“Let’s go, let’s go, I don’t know where to look.” She’d hiss, and we’d have to flee the flesh.

Sophea had little dresses with short skirts she’d wear once in a while and her dance costumes had tight and revealing moments, but there was something about the daylight brazenness of a western swimming costume that made her flutter from her perch like a startled papal dove.

There was less strange comedy in her feelings about the Chinese and Vietnamese.

During the late days of the Khmer Rouge regime, propaganda urged the Cambodians to fear the invading Vietnamese as capable of anything – rape, torture, even cannibalism. But as the Vietnamese defeated the Khmer Rouge, it became clear that they were a lot less prone to this kind of thing than the Cambodians had been led to believe. Although a threat throughout history, in 1979 the Vietnamese had rescued the Cambodians from their own leaders.

The Vietnamese withdrew their military forces in 1989 but they retained enormous economic power and political influence in Cambodia. Opposition leaders accused the Cambodian government of being Vietnamese puppets, of heading up an occupation in disguise. The government called the opposition dangerous racists….

Then there were the Chinese. Chinese Cambodians, populous and prosperous in Phnom Penh in the Seventies, had been targets for genocide. Long established as merchants and civil servants, intermarrying and intermingling, they were denounced as impure Cambodians. Yet Pol Pot was one of several Khmer Rouge leaders with a mixed Cambodian-Chinese ancestry. Not to mention his educated upper-class origins, seemingly forgotten as he purged the country of the privileged, the educated…. To add to the double-think of all this – Chinese communists had backed the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot’s regime traded the tonnage of rice produced by Khmer children, like young Sophea, for Chinese armaments.

Sophea was haunted by many things, one being that when she was eleven, she’d been put on a list of attractive, virgin girls who were going to be sent to brothels for the Chinese military, to be traded along with the rice.

“Some officers came and looked at me, wrote something down. I was told later it was for this list. I don’t know for sure but I can believe it. It was the kind of thing they did.”

Her innocence had been the saving of her a few months after this list rumour, when her family was able to make its way back to the battered wreck of Phnom Penh, a city with no power, running with sewage, rats and stray dogs. They had to live in what had once been a suburban office block, while Vietnamese soldiers kept them out of the city centre. The soldiers told all the returning Phnom Penh citizens this was for their own safety; they were clearing the city of landmines, unexploded bombs and suspected booby traps. They also wanted to prevent looting. Not being allowed into their own city infuriated the Cambodians. Especially as they suspected the Vietnamese were themselves looting anything the Khmer Rouge hadn't already run away with.

Children, however, could sneak into the guarded sectors. The soldiers would shout, threaten and even take aim at them but seldom fired. Getting in wasn't difficult; the children were more concerned not to be caught coming out and have their looted goods confiscated. Nimble and smart, Sophea would scramble through the city in search of something useful for her ragged, empty-handed family.

On one raid, she was overjoyed to find a store of prahok, the fermented fish paste that flavours Cambodian food, making dishes something of an acquired taste if too liberally applied. prahok smells as if a kipper, stuffed with stilton, has been left under a dead dog in the sun for at least eight years. Eleven-year-old Sophea piled the batch of sealed prahok jars into a cloth bundle and carried it on her head, using one hand to balance the pile. As she clambered out of the rubble, she slipped and dropped her bundle. It wasn't until she put the bundle back on her head that she realised a jar had broken, seeping stink through the cloth, into her hair and skin. When a Vietnamese soldier shouted at her, telling her to give him the bundle, she saw his face change as she approached. He waved her and her stink to go away, quickly.

On other forays she found cooking pots, bowls and spoons and once a store of make-up.

"My sister and me put on lipstick, nail varnish and eye shadow. My mother found us and shouted at us that we were still children, it wasn't for us and couldn't we see how silly we looked, like some kind of monsters in our dirty clothes, our hair cut with knives? My mother took the make-up away and sold it for rice to some soldiers who wanted it for their girlfriends."

About a week later, feeling every building in walking distance had been picked clean, Sophea ventured far beyond the other kids. She walked for several hours. In a bomb-blasted tailor's shop she discovered a bale of beautiful blue canvas fabric. As the fabric was too heavy to carry, Sophea used some broken crockery to cut off lengths that she wound round herself, or piled on her head. She was hurrying, anxious that she was so far away from everyone else and wouldn't be able to get home before dark. As she was walking out of the doorway a big scruffy soldier stood in the way and pushed her back inside. The material on her head fell. The soldier looked at her. He pulled at her clothes.

"I thought he wanted the fabric I had wrapped round me under my shirt. When I was young I had a mind as stubborn as a stone. I decided I wanted this fabric and I would keep it, and if I'd decided something, that is what I would do. I stepped back, looking for a way to go past him but suddenly he gave me another big push onto the ground and made a sign with his hand across his throat. He said; 'Keep quiet or I kill you.'

"He wasn't Vietnamese. There were some Cambodians who ran away but then came back fighting for the Vietnamese. He was one of those, supposed to be saving us.

“I was lying on my back on the ground, very frightened now. He stood over me, leg on either side and started to unbuckle his pants.

“I screamed, ‘what are you doing? Why do you want make pee pee on me? Don’t make pee pee on me! That’s disgusting!’ He dropped to his knees and was going to put his hand on my mouth but I started crying out in Pali, the royal language, the language for prayers; ‘Help me, help me!’

“He was shocked. He didn’t put his hand on my mouth. He looked at me and then got to his feet and did up his pants. He told me; ‘Get out.’

“He looked so sad, so ashamed, I even knew I could pick up the fabric I dropped and he wouldn’t stop me.

“He just watched me and when I got to the door he was still looking with his face like a sad animal. He said. ‘Don’t tell anyone.’

“I didn’t understand why he had tried to do such a disgusting thing. I was a child so I said; ‘I hope you die soon.’

“I was angry about the fabric too. I knew I couldn’t get the rest of it. I couldn’t go back to that district at all now.

“My mother was pleased with the fabric but I told her I wouldn’t get more because this mad soldier had tried to make pee pee on me. She made me explain what I meant. She didn’t tell me what he’d really been doing, she just said; ‘Ah, don’t tell that story to anyone else, it’s not good.’ I didn’t understand what happened until years and years later, when I was married.”

Sophea smiled awkwardly.

“You can imagine there was a lot of confusion on my wedding night.” Her smile went as she disappeared to some steely place behind it. “If you rape a girl, you can make a girl hurt all her life. Men don’t understand, it’s over for them, but the woman feels it all her life. I was lucky. If I’d been raped I’d have never got over it. I feel Buddha protected me, to stop me having a bad mind. I’d have done something, lots of bad things, because of it, and never got over it.”

She lightened up again, laughed; “Seriously, even with my husband the first time I thought, what is this? Here’s another one wants to make pee pee on me?”

I’d been about eight or nine years old when I’d been told why men would be taking their trousers off around girls. I remembered squealing on the swings with my friend, Susan Fogden, when a teenager imparted these facts of life. I rushed home, startling my mother over the washing-up, demanding confirmation of the ridiculous facts. She’d confirmed them, but said it was something to forget about until I was grown up, as it was only for making babies when you were married – my Catholic household wasn’t such a far leap of propriety from Sophea’s. Perhaps that’s another reason why we could be alike?

I’d also experimented with make-up when I was too young. Like Sophea’s mother, mine had told me I looked silly. But she didn’t sell the make-up for food; she put it in her dressing table drawer, promising she’d keep it for me until I was older.

Actually, now I remember it, I think, probably under the malign influence of Susan Fogden, who had a bra when she was ten, so was obviously on a slippery slope, I’d acquired the collection of small make-up items on a shoplifting spree. There was a craze for shoplifting in our school and no one we knew had been caught, so we kept on.

Shoplifting eye-shadow in Hendon chemists was a very like-for-like experience with looting for survival in gun-guarded, war-shattered Phnom Penh. Yes, I could see that if I wrote my life story, Sophea would read it and reel from the pages, not knowing which of us it was about.

A pack of British teenagers lumbered into the restaurant. They looked sweaty, dirty, and weren't wearing enough of their faded, rucksack-wrinkled clothes. They were wondering loudly to each other if the place served beer, hauling two tables together without asking the waitress and generally behaving like creatures reared on watercraft.

I noticed that Sophea had devoured every grain of our food. With the Vietnamese to one side and the British bellowing to the other, hearing our own conversation was going to be impossible.

I said; "Let's have dessert somewhere else."

Sophea smiled at me.

"I knew you'd say that." She tipped her fake Prada sunglasses down onto her nose "I told you. We're very alike. We are both very bad-tempered people."

Ah. There was that.

Annie Caulfield My Cambodian Twin