



A Short Story by Santel PHIN

Author's Note

The original story was written in Khmer over a year ago. It was limited to twenty-five pages and I was advised not to write about the subject of love. It was also the first time I had written a story so I wasn't really sure what to write about. I wrote a story longer than twenty-five pages so the one I sent to the Nou Hach Literary competition was a shorter version. It actually won the second-place prize for short fiction, making me a little nervous.

“The Revolver” comes closer than the original story to what I have been facing from the first day that I started to write about my country. It's more about me and my difficulties than the real story itself. The real story is about a countryside woman, her rice field, a pump machine and a revolver.

Forget about me ...follow the woman's steps. I hope that you will like her as much as I do.

The Revolver

The fact that you came back to Cambodia didn't surprise anybody much. They already knew, since you decided to begin your studies of Khmer literature in Paris, that one day for sure you would return to Cambodia.

You asked your parents since you are not able to help them in the restaurant anymore. However Smey and Deth, your youngest sister and brother, promised that they would replace you.

Except Caroline, you didn't know how you could say goodbye to her. Having gone through all these years, you could not imagine how much you would be lost without her.

"Are you leaving now?" she asked in front of the boarding gate at Charles De Gaulle Airport.

"Yes," you answered spontaneously.

"Without me?" she asked.

"Because you cannot go!" you said.

"How do you know I cannot go? You didn't ask me yet?" she insisted.

"Because I know the answer," you replied.

Don't cry, Caroline. You already cried once when you were born. You are not going to cry again and again for your whole life. You might cry again when you die but not this time. At least not in front of me ...

"Write to me when you arrive in Cambodia?" she asked after releasing you from her arms.

"I think it is better if we forget each other," you told her instead of answering her question.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

You turn your back and leave. You let her cry in your mother's arms.

It was not true. You would never forget her. How could you forget someone you'd made love to a thousand times? But Paris was too cold. It was difficult to live alone. She would have a lot of chances to find someone else. It was sad to live with the promises. With time, promises could be forgotten and betrayed. Time passes; nothing remains the same. Eternity is nothing but a lie. We should not believe in it. Sometimes saying goodbye to someone doesn't always mean goodbye. Caroline would understand about all this one day.

You were very curious to know the true Cambodia. You had been watching Cambodia from far away, in every detail through all its history and literature. You believed that it was not enough to know a country from reading the newspapers or listening to the radio or watching television. There were a lot of things remaining hidden. It was for this reason that you left Paris.

You had already informed Vincent who was currently in Cambodia. Vincent was an old friend of yours. Your parents could escape to France in 1975 because of the help from Monsieur Nicolae, Vincent's father. Monsieur Nicolae and your father had worked together in the French Embassy before the war began. The two families had remained close to each other since then.

Vincent picked you up at the airport as you wished. You were very exhausted, due to fifteen hours on the plane and six hours of time difference between Paris and Phnom Penh. Vincent brought you to his own apartment on Sisowath Quay.

You woke up late the next morning. Suddenly you felt the heat of the sun. It was something you had been dreaming about for the last twenty years. You hurried to get out

of bed. You stepped out on the balcony to bask in the sunshine. You could not express how excited you were to be back again in your home country.

Vincent had been in Cambodia for four years. His mission for the French Embassy was finished, but he didn't want to return to France. He, after all, had fallen in love with a Cambodian woman. This did not surprise you because you knew your friend very well. Vincent had a great deal of knowledge about Khmer culture. He, at the moment, worked at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh.

They got married three months later, after your arrival in Cambodia. They celebrated with a traditional Khmer wedding. Thida, his wife, is very beautiful. She has dark shiny skin. She looks like a little girl but not quite as small. You found her very cute. The two of them seemed made for each other. Your parents and Vincent's parents flew a long way from Paris to Phnom Penh to join their wedding. Your father wanted to introduce you to some good daughters of his old friends. But you told him you were just twenty-five years old and that you were too young to get married. You wanted to remain like a wild man for some more time.

A few days after the wedding, Vincent and Thida went to Europe for their honeymoon. They let you live alone in their apartment on Sisowath Quay. Your parents also went back to France because they were concerned about their restaurant. You had to live alone with your solitude. It is said that solitude is good for a writer. He can imagine so many things from his solitude. But for you nothing went well. For three months you had stayed in this city; still you didn't have anything to write about seriously.

You had dreamt of being able to write a love story about Cambodia. You had been ashamed when you searched in all the libraries around the world and could only find books of genocide, of blood, and of survival. You wanted the world to find a new book about Cambodia. It was for this reason that you came here. You came to this country to write a book.

“What kind of book are you writing?” asked a woman one day. “A love story,” you replied.

“A love story? What kind of love story? Do you think that love exists in this country?”

“Yes, love does exist in the heart of every human being. Wherever there is a human being, there is a heart. And when there is a heart, there is love. Is this not enough to make you believe that there is also love in Cambodia?” you asked her back.

“Can I read your story?”

“I haven't written it yet. I don't know what kind of love story to write about...”

What kind of love story can you write about? Every day, for three months, you only found the records of accidents and the police reports about murders and crimes. The country was still suffering with her poverty. People needed to survive. They didn't have time to think about love or any other emotional activities. There were only some teenagers and some people who could close their eyes and continue to ignore all the events occurring in society.

It was said that you could get what you want coming to Cambodia. You could make love with all kinds of women. You could invite the beer girls or Karaoke girls for a “night soup,” a secret code of invitation if you didn't dare to ask her directly. You could also have a waitress from a restaurant in your bed if you had contacts. You could even

ask a high school student or a seller in the market to go to your room if you had contacts. You could also have a singer or movie star illuminate your night if you had contacts. It depended on how much you had in your pocket. This country was mad about money.

You tried to escape and move yourself away from all those things. It was hard, after all, to imagine something else. The surrounding environment made you feel completely lost. When you got lost, only women could tell you who you were and what to do. Women were the mothers of everything. A woman could give you thousands of reasons to live, especially when she moves her hands and caresses your hair. Women could make you feel your existence and make you mad. You didn't wait for the big thing from her. You just waited until she put her finger in her mouth. It was very simple. Without women, you were hopeless. You were zero. You found nothing to write about this country, but from women's naked bodies, you found thousands of mysteries to discover. At least you could find a story from every woman that you made love with.

You began to present yourself frequently at the bar down town, especially at the Heart of Darkness, a very small, pleasant bar at the corner of Pasteur street.

"Would you like to buy me a drink?" a young, lovely woman asked.

"Sorry? What did you just say?" you asked in surprise.

You didn't believe what you had just heard. It was rare to hear a real Cambodian woman asking a guy to buy her a drink. She didn't even look like any of the prostitutes that you knew here.

"Buy me a drink!" she repeated. "OK."

You ordered a whisky for her. "Is it your place?"

"Hmm... Not really... but it could be your place if you would like to sit down." "Oh, I see. Would you like to dance?"

"With you?"

"Yes, with me. Would you like to dance with me?"

How could you refuse a pretty woman's request? She came from nowhere and appeared in front of you like an angel. She treated you like someone whom she had known for a hundred years. You felt very passionate about making love to her. She was like a starving wild animal without food for three months.

However, there was something she didn't tell you. She didn't tell you that she was the mistress of a Taiwanese gangster. She didn't tell you that she went out at night to get vengeance on her man. It was because he had abandoned her for one week to visit his wife in China. She was sad and had an emergency need. You never thought that she would be able to put you in danger. It was as people say: women are dangerous. The most beautiful woman was the most dangerous.

It started from there, in the Heart Darkness, that you got to know Sam. He let you live. If it had not been him, probably you would have been killed without being able to say a word. It was not good to deceive the woman who belonged to someone else. A woman, whether here or there, could not be shared. If you wanted to try, you would be killed without being able to say a word.

It is the night when the gangster came back to see his mistress. This woman, she did not love you at all, or at least she was not willing to protect you. She left with her master without telling you anything. You never believed that this woman could leave you without saying a word. Sam received his boss's order to eliminate you from this world. He brought you to a place far from the city. He waited for the right moment to shoot you with his revolver. You already believed that you were going to die without being able to say a word. But we die only once; why not resist, at least with words before then?

"I cannot die!!!" you shouted with all your strength.

"Why? Why can't you die? You are playing around with someone else's woman. You must die. Isn't it justifiable, no?" Sam asked you with a smile.

"It's because I haven't done what I want to do yet."

"What do you want to do, precisely?"

"To write a story!!!"

"What kind of story do you think you can write about this country?" he asked you.

"A love story."

"Love story? What kind of a love story? Do you think that love exists in this country? Do you believe that deceiving someone else's woman is a love story? Is that what you think?"

"No, no... It was a mistake. I made a mistake. It is true that I am going to die. To die today or tomorrow, it is nothing important. But before I die, I want to at least finish one story."

"Do you believe indeed that you can finish one?" "I've already got some ideas."

"When can I read it?"

"If you kill me now, how can I write it?"

You didn't know if Sam could wait to read your love story. You didn't know if one day you would finish your story, or if you would ever be able to finish it. The important thing was that he didn't kill you. He let you live. This good man later became a very sincere friend. He had worked for the Taiwanese gangster for a few months. You asked him why he chose this job. He told you that he didn't have a choice. He had a lot of debts to pay after having lost so many soccer bets. The boss lent him a sum of money to pay them off.

It was also for this reason that his wife Sim came to look for him. He hadn't sent money, nor sent any news back home for the past three months. His wife was worried about him. Sam and Sim grew up together in the same family. Sam was an orphan. His parents were killed during the Khmer Rouge regime. Sim's family found Sam on the street while they were returning to the village after 1979. Sam had lived with Sim's family since then.

Sam could do everything an ordinary man could usually do. He was a serious man. It was because of his qualities that Sim's family married him to their daughter when he reached twenty. Sim, with the arrangement from her parents and also with her will, got married so young. She was only eighteen years old. She didn't know anything about love. She didn't know what she should do after the marriage. Sam could not get close to Sim for the first three months. Sam fell from the bed every night after trying to get close to his wife. You didn't know how Sam could make love with his wife. You

didn't know what he did so that Sim finally agreed to make love with him. You heard they said it could happen to some of the country women. It was because they didn't know anything about love.

Sim knew how to grow rice. She knew how to raise cows. She knew how to clean the house. She knew how to cook. Moreover she was a good cook. She would wake up early in the morning at four a.m. to cook. She knew how to make other things. But there were some things that she didn't know. She didn't know why she was sad since her husband left her to work in the city. She didn't know why she was sad when her husband didn't return home. She didn't realize that she was sad.

“Do you love him at least, your husband?”

“I don't know... I don't know what to say. I don't know about love... I don't know how to speak... how to love...”

“But why did you come to look for him?” “I worry about him.”

“So then, that means you think about him a little I imagine.”

“Yes, I think about him all the time, all night long. I want him to come back home. I want him close to me to help grow rice, to raise cows and to do other work.”

“But it doesn't have anything to do with your wanting to kiss him, for example? Rather to reassure yourself that he still loves you? Or to tell you that in words of love?”

“I don't know about all those things. He never spoke to me the words of love. Me either, I don't know how to say big things. I don't know...”

“I see that you love him a lot, this man. I can see it in you, this love. Why can't you feel anything? It exists in you ... I am sure about it.”

“I don't know. I want him to be back home with me. And a pump machine is also necessary to pump the water.”

“Why is a pump machine necessary?”

“It's because the rain doesn't fall anymore from the sky. There is not enough water in the rice field. A machine is necessary to pump the water. Otherwise, the rice will die.”

Sam left the house because the rice field didn't yield enough rice to support his family. He started working in the city two years ago, in a car garage. He sent all the money that he earned to his wife every month. He was a great man. It was his mistake to bet on soccer matches. You believed that he did it to come home with a little money in his pocket. He didn't know that the game was only a bad choice for losing all his money.

There were a lot of people in this country and others who were obsessed with the games. It was because they were poor and would like to have a little more money.

Sam left his wife with you without telling you what and where he was going? You only knew that he had a very important task to finish tonight. He said that it would be the last job, his last payback for his boss. If he were successful, he would be returning to the countryside with his wife.

After her husband left, Sim could not remain calm. Her concern became more and more intense. She was afraid that something unfortunate would happen to her husband.

She walked from right to left, from left to right. She descended and ascended the stairs many times.

She came to you and always asked the same questions: "Where is he now? Why until this time, hasn't he come back yet?"

You didn't know how to help this woman. You didn't wish to see her cry either. Suddenly you thought of a place where you hoped she would be able to calm down. You brought her to Dangkal monastery, a place where people usually prayed for good things and blessings to happen to the people they loved.

So did Sim. She prayed for Sam. It was said that the Dangkal god is a good lord. Whatever the people asked for, it would come true because of the power of the Dangkal god. You didn't believe in god, but when you saw Sim pray, you also prayed for her. You hoped that Sam would return safely and in good health. Then he would take his wife back to the countryside.

After finishing the prayer, you took her to the old market to buy groceries for cooking. You didn't know what to do to make her happy. You thought that cooking would reduce her concern for her husband. In the kitchen, you tried asking her many things to keep her occupied. You found out that this woman didn't know at all how to speak her mind. She was very shy. Every time you asked her a question, her face turned red. She was very shy when speaking about love. You found a lot of funny things, especially when she told you that she pushed her husband off the bed every night when he wanted to touch her. Due to this conversation you could learn a lot about their youth.

But you could not fool her for long with conversation...

After the meal, she was doing nothing but walking around, going to see the people down along Sisowath Quay. Multiple times she went up and down the stairs looking for Sam. Her husband was not yet back. You drove her in the car Vincent left for you. You toured around the city to make her calm down a little. She was looking for her husband on every street. She didn't get bored looking at every corner, looking for her husband. She didn't stop even one minute to take a rest. You could see it in her eyes, the deep worry she had for her husband. You brought her to the Heart of Darkness, the place where you met Sam for the very first time. But he was not there.

Where was he?

It was a question that you could not answer. At two o'clock in the morning you finally managed to get Sim back home. She was tired, but she didn't want to go to bed. She was sleeping in the front room while waiting to open the door for her husband. You didn't want to sleep either. You wanted to write something about this woman. She touched you a lot, with her silence, her unspeakable feelings that she didn't know how to express. She kept everything inside. If you were her, at least you would be able to say something. But she didn't know how to speak.

But what could we speak about, love?

Hours have passed, you have found no words either. Could this woman's feelings be expressed in words? Did we have some words to speak that would relieve her concern?

It was too hard, you found, for her to keep everything suppressed. You kept looking for the right words until someone knocked on the door. Sim woke up and went before you to open the door. It was Sam, finally. There he was, smiling at the door.

Thank god he was still alive. Moreover he was grinning. His smile was enough to let you assume that he had successfully completed his task. Sim hugged her husband tightly

She told Sam repeatedly: “Don't leave me alone anymore... don't leave me alone anymore.”

Sam wanted to leave immediately, to take a taxi and head back to the countryside. You told him to wait for a second. Then, you went in your room to get some money. You gave him 200 dollars. He refused at first. You knew that he was going to refuse, so you told him that you were going to write a story about his wife. It was the price you would pay for her as the source of information. You believed that 200 dollars would be enough to buy the machine to pump water into the rice field. In return, Sam gave you his revolver. You didn't want to accept; but if you refused, he would not accept your money.

“What kind of story are you writing about me?” Sim asked you before leaving.

“A love story.”

“A love story? What kind of love story? Do you think that you can write a love story about me?”

“Yes, love does exist in the heart of every human being. Wherever there is a human being, there is a heart. And when there is a heart, there is love. Is this not enough to make you believe that there is also love in you?”

“Can I read your story?”

“I wrote it yesterday. It must reread it and correct some mistakes. I am going to bring it with me when I visit you in the countryside.”

“Don't forget then to bring it with you. I want to read... ,” Sim very sincerely asked you.

The next morning you went to drink coffee as usual in the restaurant down along Sisowath Quay. You find out by chance by glancing at the front page of a newspaper. It read “*A Chinese Man Murdered Last Night.*” He was shot three times by a revolver. It reminded you about something. You checked the bullets remaining in the revolver that Sam gave you. There were exactly three left.

THE END

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