

# Dušan Čater: Jahannam

translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh

## Holiday in Cambodia

Darja had already decided she would join *Médecins Sans Frontières* whilst still writing her dissertation at the Faculty of Medicine in Ljubljana. These are the doctors who go abroad to countries where medical care is very poorly developed and, with only their most essential expenses covered, selflessly volunteer to help with treatment. In the spirit of the song *We are the World, We are the Children* she mentioned this to Sergej at the very start of their living together in Ljubljana. He supported her and became quite enthusiastic about the idea, suggesting he came along and wrote an extensive article about it for the magazine *Telex*. But after his mother died in April he became far more hesitant. His greatest excuse was his father – how he couldn't leave him alone, how all the old man did since being widowed was sit in front of the box sipping his Merlot. Darja told him this was a decision she had thought through thoroughly, one in light of which she had had to stand up to her parents down in Grosuplje, and especially her ex who wanted to set up home there, more or less across the road from her parents. Sergej then tried a different line – how they had just found their cheap and comfortable flat not far from the town centre, and how it wouldn't make sense to let go of such a flat at a time when the entire country was moving to Ljubljana, how difficult it would be to find another one like it etc., etc. Darja snapped at him that this rented flat of theirs was just walls and nothing else.

“OK,” he said.

Darja sat on the sofa they had bought a short while ago. It still had the sticker saying: *Reserved for Štupnik!* stuck on the right armrest. They had bought it in a local furniture store and brought it down to their rented apartment to replace the one smelling stuffy and much worse for wear under the window of their one and a half bedroom flat. Darja was convinced it smelt of death itself ever since, signing the rent agreement, they found out that the landlady's mother, some woman called Ida, died right in that very flat, sitting watching some TV show with the popular Dutch entertainer Rudi Carrell fulfilling viewers' almost impossible wishes.

“When are we off?” Sergej asked and sat down beside her.

Darja ruffled his hair and said: "You have enough time to arrange things at the paper." Then she rolled him over onto his back and sat astride on top of him. "But it's a shame about this sofa," she said as she started unzipping his jeans.

"Fuck the sofa," Sergej said.

Less than a month later, to be exact on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 1986, on a hot and humid summer's day, Sergej Kosmač and Darja Štupnik, a young couple without children who had been living together for the past half a year, handed in the keys to their landlady, packed their bags and took a taxi to Ljubljana airport. From this small international airport they took a small plane to Frankfurt where they transferred to a larger plane that flew them to Bangkok, Thailand. Their final destination was actually a place on the border with the People's Republic of Kampuchea where Darja had volunteered as a doctor in a shelter run by *Médecins Sans Frontières*, helping children who had lost parents, limbs and probably other things as well in a civil war lasting nearly three decades. Sergej went with her to write an extensive report about all this for *Telex*. The sofa was left behind, forgotten.

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Van Ath was woken up by screaming from the room next door. Judging by the cries he assumed they were women. He closed his eyes and tried to think of something else. He couldn't. He listened to such screaming for days on end. There were thousands of detainees in the Tuol Sleng prison right in the centre of Phnom Penh, a city that was once called the Paris of the Orient, but was now mostly burnt to the ground, but no-one really knew what they had done to be there. Van Ath, a teacher of French, barely twenty four years old, had been lying on his bed for the third day in a row, listening to agonising sounds of suffering human flesh. The noise kept growing louder which meant it was getting closer to him ... yesterday he had heard a woman, probably in the next room down, crying out just a couple of times before she was silenced forever. Overhearing the torturers he gathered she was beaten to death with their spades. Now it was his turn.

They had come to his home in middle of the night. Knocking him over with the butts of their rifles, they handcuffed him and brought him to this cell without giving a word of explanation. He could see through the glassless window that he was in Tuol Sleng, the notorious Khmer Rouge security prison. For three days they ignored him. Not a word, not a single blow, nothing at all.

Every morning the door was opened and five spoonfuls of some watery swill was placed on the floor. That was all he had eaten. He was hungry, exhausted and scared ... and he couldn't even remember whether he had had today's ration or whether it was yesterday's he remembered. He lay down on the bed, covered his ears with his hands and turned towards the wall. Gathering his last remnants of strength he would try and think about something nice. About ... about ... about Koh Rong Island ... yes, he would think about Koh Rong Island where he spent his holidays last year, about the crystal clear waters, the coconut palms that provide shade on the long sandy beach at all times of the day. Koh Rong ... the hut on stilts where he spent one of the most wonderful nights of his life with some American woman, a photographer for the National Geographic ... she was called Edith and kept promising him she would get him out of the country where things were about to boil over, where everything was gearing up for a hellish revolution, for the rule of the Khmer Rouge and for Year Zero ... With a smile on his lips he had explained that he had no intention of leaving his homeland, that he'd get by somehow, just like he had always done. Edith warned him of the red danger, the plague she was afraid of more than anything else in the world. Koh Rong ... and Edith from National Geographic ... wow, those were the days, he thought.

The door to his cell opened and Van Ath flinched. First he assumed he was about to get his daily ration ... five spoons of watered down slop. But that's not what happened ... instead of the ration of gunk in a tin bowl, three men entered his cell ... Khmer Rouge with red scarves round their heads. One of them came up to his bed and kicked it. The bed shook ... the second man came up and kicked his body ... the third towered above him and laughed. All three laughed for a while, then the third guy nodded at the other two and they pulled him up and sat him on a chair. Tying his hands round the back with a thin string, they bound his legs to the legs of the chair, giving a few more punches to his head and stomach. One opened the door and beckoned someone to enter. A boy no older than ten entered the cell. He held some sort of bag in his hand and was, unlike the others, absolutely straight-faced. He kicked the chair making Van Ath fall backwards. The boy started to pull him by the nose and one of the older men stuffed a red scarf into his mouth. The French teacher, frightened, looked at the ceiling and noticed through the small window that it was raining outside ... The monsoon, he thought, but it is still awfully stuffy! Then he received a few kicks in the head and was lifted up together with the chair. They all laughed when the boy pushed his head into the bag, full of some kind of powder ... Cement, Van Ath thought and tried not to breathe it in ... It was impossible not to. The three men held his head in the bag of cement and Van Ath could no longer hold his breath. He had to breathe in through his nose and felt how the dusty particles of the cement were invading his nostrils,

blocking up his nasal canals, filling up his respiratory tract and penetrating into his gullet. A sticky, irritating, burning feeling ...

Then they pulled his head out of the bag, kicked the chair so he fell backwards and left, laughing. Van Ath lay on the damp floor of the cell in Tuol Sleng, looking at the gathering monsoon through the small window. This is it, he thought ... just as the monsoon is starting ... it's your turn now, Ath. Just as the monsoon is starting ... He lay on the floor trying to breathe in through a nose full of cement. The screaming had stopped ... how strange, he couldn't hear any screaming, Van Ath thought in surprise. He could hear the rain, but no screaming ... And the concrete floor isn't that cold after all ... He closed his eyes ... Koh Rong, Koh Rong ... He probably fell asleep. The next thing he knew the three men were pouring water into his nose through a small plastic funnel ... He felt the water gushing into his nose, down his throat and his gullet. Then they threw him back on the floor, allowing the mucous lining of his respiratory tract to completely harden into concrete.

Van Ath, a twenty-four year old French teacher died in indescribable pain. Without screaming since his mouth was stuffed with a red scarf, preventing his words from reverberating in the walls of Tuol Sleng. With a monsoon raging outside.

"Wot? You sayin' that ... that you saw with your own eyes 'ow they cemented 'im?" Tomič asked.

"No," Marcel smiled. "That was thirty years ago, during the civil war ..."

"Really?"

Marcel nodded. He sat on the bench next to Frenki who was straightening out an unruly tuft of hair.

"Cruel people, them Asians," Frenki said and nodded at his own comment.

Marcel, still slightly absorbed in his own thoughts, was also nodding as he wiped the corners of his mouth with a napkin. He placed the napkin on the plate in front of him, where only moments ago had lain a huge bread roll with a thick juicy burger, relish and onions, all squirting out over the plate. He picked at his teeth and Frenki filled the shot glass standing in front of him. He poured one out for Marcel as well and said:

"So long as you're back 'live and well, innit Tomič?"

Tomič, staring somewhere into the distance, into the emptiness, flinched and said: "But 'ow? I don't get it ... they poured cement into his nose and then poured water over it ten minutes later ... so they basically set his nose in concrete, innit?"

"Yes, the Khmer Rouge, during the revolution, in the seventies," Marcel said as he raised his glass with Frenki. "That's how they tortured them, yes ... I mean," he said as he downed his

shot in one, then waited for a while, "... in fact, what I am trying to say is that worse things were going on than me not bringing this guy here," he pointed at Frenki, "his frangipani!"

"Forget about the plants," Frenki said downing his own glass. "You're right, Marcel ... much worse things happen, yep ..."

He looked thoughtful for a while.

They were sitting in the back room of the pub. Frenki had been sleeping on the bench for the past hour or so and Tomič served Marcel a burger. Frenki had to be poked quite a few times before he woke up ... the fête in Veliko Mlačevo was apparently briiiiiiiilant, as Frenki put it as he laughed, still a little drunk. But when he saw Marcel and found out the bad news that his luggage with the hidden frangipani he was supposed to be smuggling out of Cambodia was lost at the airport, he instantly stopped laughing. Frenki, a local man in his mid fifties with relatively youthful looks and of late also an enthusiastic biker, had given Marcel money to get him the plants after his wife saw a programme on cable TV that claimed the flowers were so strongly fragranced that women who have them growing in their houses don't ever need to use perfume. Taking the plants out of the country is prohibited. The cuttings, wrapped up and hidden in the dirty laundry at the bottom of his suitcase, were most probably flown from the main Cambodian airport in Phnom Pen to some place the other side of the world. The ever pessimistic Frenki was sure that even if the luggage did turn up, the damn frangipani would long have wilted and died. Marcel tried to console him by saying that he was probably in much deeper shit; if they found the plants hidden in his luggage he could have big problems.

"And we are going on and on like this," said Frenki.

"Yep, you're right," Tomič added.

"Yes," Marcel nodded.

For a while they all nodded in silence, then Tomič patted Marcel on his shoulder.

"C'mon, you can relax now," he said. "Now you're back home ... none of 'em, what you call 'em, Merooges 'ere, is there ha, ha ..." he laughed.

"Khmer Rouge," Frenki said.

"Yeah, those ... ha, ha, if anyone's goin' to do any cementing round 'ere, ha, ha, it'll be me, ha, ha ..." he grinned again. "As far as that goes I'm your man!"

"I'd say so, yep," Frenki said.

"Of course," Tomič added.

Marcel just looked at them for a while and felt like all the exhaustion from the trip had caught up with him ... Crowds at airports, the time difference, turbulence, transfers, the train journey from Zagreb, the mad ticket inspector on the last leg of his journey, waiting around in Ljubljana ... In

an instance he felt the entire trip in his bones, in his head and his stomach.

"I'll be going slowly," he said quietly and took his wallet out of his pocket to settle the bill.

"What's the hurry?"

"It'll be time for mass soon," Marcel said.

"Baaah," Tomič waved his hand. "No worries if you're a little late for that ..."

Marcel opened his wallet.

"Marcel," Frenki interrupted. "Leave it ... it's on me."

Marcel stared at Frenki, who nodded at him as if to say it's alright.

"Thank you," said Marcel.

"And what's their home brew like?" Tomič asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Booze ... What's their booze like?"

"I wouldn't know," Marcel said.

"Wot? Didn't ya get pissed at all?"

"Not really," said Marcel and smiled.

"How's that?"

Marcel just shook his head and raised his hands.

"But I did drink bat's blood," he said with a faint smile. "With bat soup you are always served a drink of bat's blood ..."

Tomič stared at him, mouth open, eyes bulging.

"Yes," Marcel said. "Really, it's true."

"That's why they're so bloodthirsty ... them Asians," said Frenki. "Tomič, how much do I owe you?"

"Eight euros ninety," Tomič answered instantly.

Frenki took a twenty euro banknote from his wallet and placed it on the table.

"Make it nine," he said.

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The Lufthansa plane, an Airbus with three hundred passengers on board, landed safely at the old Don Mueang International Airport in Bangkok. It was Darja's first journey by airplane and she was shaking more or less the entire trip ... At the slightest turbulence she squeezed

Sergej's hand, something he didn't really notice since, though claiming he was used to air travel (he had once been to Belgrade and back on a business trip and once flew to London – one way), he had equipped himself with a rich variety of sleeping pills. He dozed off just after take-off in Frankfurt and woke up just as the huge plane touched down on Thai tarmac.

Still slightly disconcerted, Sergej stepped into the Asian morning and took a deep breath.

Mmmmmhmmm -aaaaaah!

A rich mixture of smells filled his nostrils and blood rushed to his groggy head.

"I adore planes," Darja said once her usual healthy red glow returned to her cheeks.

"I tend to sleep on airplanes," Sergej said, realising instantly that he did not really have to explain this to her.

Darja happily said: "I know," as they kissed, before sitting in the first available taxi that took them to the cheap Ramada D'ma hotel where they stayed for three nights, having a look at Krung Thep, as the locals call Bangkok,

A week later they were in Surin, in a refugee camp on the border between Thailand and the People's Republic of Kampuchea. For the first couple of days, Darja was getting to know the run of things with her work, familiarising herself with her duties and finding out about her rights.

Together they tried out the bed she was allocated. It was an old army camp-bed. On the second day Sergej visited the temple complex just north of Surin known as Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung. He took some excellent photos and made a few notes after inquiring about the history of the park and its temples. Then, suddenly overcome by his restless journalist spirit, he found Darja as soon as he returned to the camp and said: "I'm going to go around a little! To Kampuchea!"

Darja did express some concern about his decision. Everyone at the camp warned them about Khmer Rouge guerrilla groups that refused to surrender and kept engaging in action, about the mines the neighbouring country was full of, about diseases rampant there, about all sorts of epidemics and pandemics etc. Darja had to give in, since the purpose of Sergej joining her on the trip was for him to report on this wild, dangerous and little visited country, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, now ruled by Heng Samrin, imposed by the Vietnamese liberators. It was hard to get to Phnom Penh. There were no flights. One could only get there along dirt track roads in a vehicle one could just about call a bus. Using his journalist ID, he attempted to get to see chairman Samrin and ask him a few questions, but armed guards refused to let him through with the excuse that the chairman was away. He had gone to Kampot, a colonial town on the Preak Thom River near the so-called Elephant Mountains, one of the major strongholds the Khmer Rouge had recently been driven out of.

“Alright,” said Sergej, “that’s where I’ll go.” He stayed in Phnom Penh for a few more days and visited a few sites, talked to local dignitaries, scoundrels, profiteers and others in his broken French, drank a lot of the local rice and palm wine, getting lots of ideas for T-shirt designs to use back home. He meticulously jotted them all down in his notebook so as not to forget them when he returned.

He somehow managed to arrange with government officials to get a lift and was thrown about on the back seat of a military vehicle for part of the way to the small town of Trabek. From there he got a bus and got off at the Bokor residence, determined to find chairman Samrin there. He was sure that this is where he would be. The resort was built by the French in 1912 as a retreat from the exhausting business of colonialism. At one point they even used to get jazz ensembles in for dances. Later on, mostly probably out of boredom, they converted the palace into a casino. In the 1950’s Bokor became the residence of the elite. It goes without saying that the Khmer Rouge took it over during the revolution in the 1970’s and, predictably, to a great extent destroyed the place.

Some of the buildings were now being repaired but Samrin wasn’t there. Sergej was a little surprised and, since he was sure he wouldn’t find him in Kampot either, he headed north along the Vietnam border. He ate sweet caramelised beetles on wooden skewers that in shape and taste reminded him of lollipops. Again he drank lots of rice wine. After two days of travelling he stopped in the middle of nowhere after a mine clearance team working in the area prevented him going any further.

The team was involved in removing landmines that were placed along the border with Vietnam in quantities that would suffice for blowing up all of Southeast Asia. One of their officials told him, and Sergej immediately jotted it down in his notebook, that there were between eight and ten million unexploded mines scattered through the People’s Republic. They were used vehemently by everyone, the Khmer Rouge, the Kampuchean government and during the war with Vietnam by the United States. For four days he observed the mine clearance efforts from a safe distance and was, based on what he saw, sure that Darja in Surin would not be short of work. He saw some impressive explosions, saw how one member of the team lost both his arms, another his fingers. Then he headed off towards Mondulhiri Province, towards Senmonorom town where the ancient Pnong tribe live and where he came across one of the many Killing Fields. He was surprised to learn that there were around 450 sites known as Killing Fields in the country, sites where the Khmer Rouge killed and buried en mass. He had a look at a few of them, took a few photographs, got a few more ideas for his T-shirts and then headed inland towards Lake Tonlé Sap where he was so impressed with the beauty of the landscape he

couldn't make himself move on for six days. There was also plenty of palm wine, plenty of rice and he pottered around the area without really thinking about the report he was supposed to be writing. He also spent a few days in Angkor Wat, the famous ancient city of temples, some so old they were held up only by the trees that had grown over them. This was necessary if he wanted to see the entire site as it extended for eleven kilometres in one direction and twenty four in the other. He took a few more pictures, again more for his own record rather than anything he might use for the report for *Telex*. Then he suddenly realised that he had been on the road for over a month and that he missed Darja. He set off back across the border to Thailand, where Darja was waiting for him with the news:

"I'm going to adopt this little boy," she said, pointing at a three-year-old sitting next to her in his underwear while she was fixing a plastic prosthetic limb in place of the leg of a slightly older girl. "His name is Long Vabal!"

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He pushed his hands deep into his pockets again. Though it was now already getting light, it was still freezing cold, no less than before when he was coming the other way. Again he jumped across the puddles and avoided cars coming in the opposite direction. Occasionally a driver would beep his horn at him, not to make him move onto the side of the roadway, but as a greeting. One even stopped and offered to give him a ride for part of the way saying it was no bother as this was his route anyway. Marcel politely refused the offer, despite feeling as if his legs were softened by the alcohol and his head was spinning.

*And he's worried about some stupid plants!*

He was thinking of Frenki of course, and his frangipani. People killing each other down there; some houses are even to this day right in the middle of mine fields and you risk your life by just stepping out to the loo, a few metres away from the house ... And he's going on about frangipani, pah!, he snorted.

Yes, he had seen a great deal on his trip. This story about Van Ath he had told in the pub was only a small stone in the mosaic of horrors that happened in Cambodia in the mid seventies. He had heard it from someone who was Van Ath's acquaintance and fellow inmate. He survived Tuol Sleng by sheer miracle. And all about what happened at Phnom Da ... the oldest Buddhist temple in the country that was used as a shelter by thousands of monks as early as the sixth

century ... and then ... fourteen centuries later the bloodthirsty Khmers come to power and what did they do? They converted the temple into a prison and exterminated around sixty thousand monks there! Quite a lot of work if you think about it, Marcel shook his head.

Deep in thought he didn't notice one of the frozen puddles, stepped on it and slipped. Thump! He fell flat on his backside onto the cold asphalt. He felt great pain in his lower back, but still tried to get up quickly in case anyone saw him lying in the road ... His feet were too weak and he couldn't control his body. He got on his knees and stood up, catching his balance with his hands ... He looked around ... Hm, he snorted again. I urgently need another shot.

He cleaned the dirt from his back and rear, checking to see whether anyone noticed his disgrace. Fortunately there was no one around and he continued along the road, much more carefully this time. He no longer had his hands in his pockets so he would be ready to break his fall if he slipped again. There seemed to be more and more cars driving past him, so he turned off the main road into a side street where he hoped there would be fewer people. More and more kept appearing, beeping their horns and waving at him. Feeling light-headed from all the alcohol, Marcel smiled and thought it must be some kind of wedding celebration.

A wedding, of course!

He remembered a wedding he witnessed in the village of Patang, somewhere on the plains in the heartland of Cambodia. Patang ... you reach the ancient village built entirely of wood via a serpentine road through rice fields. He had arrived just as the wedding started. The bride was from Patang and the groom from a neighbouring village. To prove his wealth he had brought six animals along with him. A dog, a buffalo, a duck, a cow, a pig and a chicken. As local custom prescribes, the bride and groom first planted a tree each, and then the heads started to roll. Literally! The animals were tied to a poll and their heads were chopped off, just like that... with an axe! The heads were presented to the spirits, all the rest was cooked and the meat distributed to the entire village. The bride took the blood and applied it to the soles of the wedding guests' feet. Just as the custom dictates. Puff, he snorted again. Bloodthirsty people! His thoughts were interrupted by tapping on the window coming from the Palace of Relaxation as Mrs Mili called her massage and beauty parlour.

Marcel flinched and looked towards the window with the red light coming from it. There he noticed Mili, a blonde with bountiful hair and at least three facelifts, widowed three years ago. She was tapping the glass, waving at him to come inside.

"Mili," Marcel said out loud.

The drink had really taken its toll.

He waved back. Mili pointed at the door and waved her hand.

He nodded shyly. Trying to hold his balance he stepped over the patch of snow into her drive. She opened the door and waved him in: "Do come in, sir, and warm up," she called out to him. Marcel pointed to his wrist where there would normally be a watch, though he wasn't wearing one, to show that he didn't have the time. I'd like to, but, no time, you know ... no time.

"Come on, you can spare a minute, we haven't seen you in a while," Mili said pacing about at the open door. "Come in for a quick drink, so you warm up a little, come ..."

"What a winter, isn't it, real winter," Marcel said and stepped towards the open door.

As soon as he stepped in, Mili closed the door behind him.

"What's up with you, mister?" she asked. "Walking around half naked?"

"Oh," Marcel sighed. "It's a long story."

Still, he repeated the story of his coming home. Mili listened to him with interest, both feigned and at the same time real. She was surprised, asking him things every so often like: "But why didn't you get a taxi?" Well I just didn't. I probably should have done ... but at the time it was so and so and anyway, you know ... it's a long journey ... and then there's the time difference, and the weather ... well, you know, what can I say ... Marcel tried to explain and put great effort into trying not to get his tongue twisted.

"Come on, sit down on this chair and I'll give you a short massage," Mili said, pushing him down to sit on the chair. "You seem very stiff."

Stiff, yes, you're tensed up; Marcel said to himself and sat down comfortably, pushed back his head and closed his eyes. He could feel her fingers gripping his shoulders and beginning to knead his tense muscles. He let out a loud sigh and felt like he had in the same breath relieved himself of part of some great burden he couldn't quite fathom. Then Mili lifted his head slightly and began to massage his neck. Now, that's where he was really tense, she told him. She worked away on his skin and the muscles beneath. At some points it hurt him, but Mili insisted that in the long term this would do him the world of good. He explored the Palace of Relaxation in the mirror opposite where he was sitting ... It was decorated in a kind of Chinese style. Everything was red and black with Chinese characters hanging around the walls and lanterns suspended from the ceiling. There was a large, colourful dragon hanging over the door he had just entered through and hundreds of small daggers decorated with little red tassels hung on the wall to the right.

"If only I had your skin colour," Mili said.

"Ah, colour ..." Marcel said tiredly.

"I spend a fortune on various sun beds, and look ..." their eyes met in the mirror, "I still look like an albino, ha, ha ..." she laughed.

Marcel stared at her face in the mirror ... the taut face of a fifty year old, dyed hair and manicured hands with long red nails that were now moving from his neck onto his scalp and started ruffling his hair. "And you have such thick hair," she said.

Marcel closed his eyes and surrendered himself to her hands. She moved to his temples, gently massaging away.

"Mhmmm," he sighed.

"You are tense ... you have had a long trip, mister" Mili said.

"Ahaaa," Marcel uttered without opening his eyes and he could easily have fallen asleep on that chair in the Palace of Relaxation had Mili not pushed him forward a little and started massaging his back. She bent over him to use her fists to soften his body and Marcel could smell her perfume, a sweet smell that reminded him of the distant land. He sighed and said tiredly:

"Unfortunately I didn't manage to smuggle the frangipani either."

Mili stopped massaging him for a moment.

"Does Frenki know?" she asked.

"He does."

"He must have been angry, huh?"

"Well ..." Marcel began. "He was to start with ... then he ..."

"He bragged all month how his home would smell really nice," she laughed and continued with the massage. "And Milena, his wife, went on about it too," she smiled and Marcel couldn't help sensing a touch of smugness in her laughter.

"People at this end of the world, Mili ... it's just that sometimes you need to be very assertive to really convince them that someone else just might be in much deeper shit than they are and that things are much worse elsewhere ... That's the only way to console them!" Marcel explained and puffed. "Not by reassuring them that things will be alright, no, not at all ... all you can tell them to make them feel better is that someone else is in a much worse situation!"

"Yes, that's quite true," Mili said seriously. "Well, you seem to be quite popular," she smiled again. "People kept asking me whether I knew when you were returning."

"Yes," Marcel nodded. "But it wasn't always like that. Far from it!"

"I know," Mili said. "It's difficult for foreigners here ... I've been here for fifteen years now and they still see me as a foreigner. What are people like down there? Are they kind?" she asked.

"Violent," Marcel said.

"How do you mean violent?"

"They're into violence! They like kick-boxing and karaoke. Fuck 'em!"

"Now that's not very nice!"

“Fuck ‘em,” Marcel said again.

They stayed silent for a while. Mila’s fingers moved back to gently massaging Marcel’s neck.

“Any chance of a shot?” he then asked.

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Just over half a year later their charity mission was over. Darja began to pack their bags and Sergej, looking quite confused, held Long Vabal in his lap. In the five months he spent with Darja and the child, he grew fond of Long Vabal. He didn’t create any problems with the adoption. Neither did the Kampuchean or Thai government, since the boy was on a long list of orphans they didn’t really know what to do with. The paperwork was arranged without delay and that’s when Sergej did get a little nervous. He even got a stomach bug, but the doctors led by Darja soon made him well again. The diarrhoea and stomach pain went away, but he was left with a heavy feeling in his chest, one that Darja ascribed to his fear of the unknown, parenthood to be precise, albeit as a foster parent.

“It’ll be alright, darling, believe me ... Vabal will get used to it. He won’t be any trouble. He is a good and polite little boy,” she reassured him

Sergej wasn’t worried about this at all. He was concerned with how the boy would react to things back home and especially how people and the authorities there would treat him ... Would the adoption papers issued in Kampuchea even be accepted back there?

Doctors from the MSF reassured him that there was usually no problem with paperwork, that they had had similar cases and that Kampuchea was, just like Yugoslavia, a member of the Non-Aligned Movement and Vabal would be accepted back home as a brother. There you have it!

“But this is for life,” Sergej was still concerned.

“Yes, this is for life,” Darja agreed.

And this ‘for life’ began soon after their return home. Their first task was to find a flat for the young family ... a slightly larger one than the one they had before. This in itself was already a small problem.

To tide them over they moved in with the Štupniks in Grosuplje, to the south of Ljubljana. They were met by loads of snow. It was so cold you could hear the trees snapping with the frost in the nearby forest. Older people even today remember that cold February in 1987... To Vabal this

was all new and strange. In the nearly four years of his life he obviously never witnessed anything remotely like it. He did enjoy the snow ... and the cold didn't seem to bother him particularly ... he loved rolling around in it, making snowballs, throwing them about and stuffing snow into his mouth. He was a happy boy, smiley and playful but still fairly serene. Quite unlike Silva and Lojze Štupnik, Darja's mother and father. Not only in the instant they saw what their daughter had brought back from Kampuchea instead of her specialisation certificate ... They never smiled, they were not at all calm-natured, never playful and in fact never happy. Lojze was a trained carpenter and was originally successful in maintaining the family trade, but he later took a course in labour organisation and got a job with the town hall as the person in charge of the water supply ... What exactly he did there no one, not even his wife Silva, was ever really sure about. She was the headmaster's secretary in a local primary and inspired fear and terror in the school. Without any authorisation to intervene in school discipline, she would pull the children by their hair and was known occasionally to launch a bunch of keys at their heads. That's what Silva was like. She ruled with an iron hand at home too and you could say that she was the head of the family. She was very religious and went to mass every evening. She was sure that all the worst things in the world were happening to her just so she could be redeemed after death. She had made Darja go to church ever since she was a young girl. Catechism lessons, Holy Communion, Confirmation; by the tender age of fourteen Darja had already had the sacrament conferred three times. Sergej didn't agree to a religious wedding so Darja soon dropped her evening prayers in Ljubljana. As a believer in the afterlife, Lojze didn't like this either. There was a lot of ill feeling, especially when Darja broke off her long-term relationship with Mirč, the neighbour's son who was known throughout Grosuplje as a nice pious lad.

In light of this their arrival was far from brilliant ... Darja and Sergej knew that they would not exactly be welcomed there, but where else could they go? To live with Sergej's old man Polde, sitting in front of the box, sipping on his bottle of Merlot? Relatives told them that he no longer went out of the house, just sat on the sofa. Apparently he didn't even complain anymore. Nothing. *Niente*.

Of course they couldn't turn up there ... It was far from the capital anyway ... And finding a flat in Ljubljana ... What they needed was at least three bedrooms and with their budget it was very difficult to get one ... On Sergej's initiative they stayed in Hotel Park for a week since a colleague from *Telex* knew the manager there. They bought loads of newspapers advertising properties for rent, called all the numbers, but without any luck. Life in a small hotel room with a young child and fifteen degrees below zero outside was rather depressing. So they decided, or

rather Darja took things into her own hands, to knock on the door of the two storey Štupnik house in Grosuplje.

“Oh my God!?” were the first words Silva could come up with.

“Aren’t you a bit too old for tricks like this?” Lojze said.

But this wasn’t a trick, quite the opposite ... It was all rather sad.

They occupied a room on the second floor where there was also a small bathroom. They also had the use of a small balcony, one metre wide by two point three metres long where Sergej would most often retreat for a cigarette.

The worst thing was lunch ... in the downstairs kitchen. Darja was at home with the child, teaching him Slovene and cooking for the whole family. The Štupniks used lunch as a time for discussion. That’s where things were said and words used that need not be repeated here. Safe to say that as soon as the snow melted in spring and the first yellow primroses started to flower on the local hillsides, Sergej sold his old Citroen Diane, bought a faster and more reliable purple VW Golf. He was determined to work dawn till dusk, in the field and in the office, just to save up enough money for the young family to be able to move to Ljubljana.

Grosuplje was truly unbearable.