

Untouchable

By MARK GILCHRIST
On This Planet Earth

Surrounded by police officers and clerks, a woman is crying, all because of me. Why me? Because I am the dumbest man in the Far East.

Inside a small, concrete building in Krong Kampot, a city in western Cambodia, the woman is dressed in jeans, a white shirt and conservative jewelry – well, conservative on one of the richest, most successful Hollywood actresses ever, for the woman is Angelina Jolie, and even without studio lighting, professional makeup and a wardrobe crew, she looks stunning – elegant, beautiful, and tall, even while sitting down. Everyone in the room stands around this woman, admiring the sight before them.

Jolie, who has Cambodian citizenship and an adopted Cambodian son, can speak the native language of Khmer, but in the state she's in, what comes out right now is mostly English. A teenage Cambodian girl, Tevy, speaks English well and translates for the officers.

"I... I just don't understand why he would ...?" Angelina says, wiping her eyes with every word. "He seemed to be fine – we seemed to be fine. I... I just..." and she breaks down again, burying her head in her hands and crying openly. The room is quiet as everyone watches the fallen goddess who had just landed before them.

Yeah, right, the "He" that Angelina is referring to is, well, me, and though I am fine, really, "We" are not. Well, yeah, maybe it's me who isn't fine ... anyway, I left her, damn it. In my whole, stupid life, she was the only thing right, and I just left.

We'd been traveling together for a few weeks, and everything was great, except, I think, well, the best way to explain it is that maybe it was just meant to end. You know, all stories, all songs, all bad jokes have a beginning and an end, and this was our end, I guess. Yeah, I am that stupid.

We had stopped on our way to the coast for some water and to just take a stretch. So, she went into the store, which was re-

ally just the front of someone's house, which is what they all are around here, and I just hung out by the motorbike.

Anyway, she was taking some time – she always does, talking with the family or something, playing with children, I guess, and I was just ... waiting, and then, a long-haul gravel truck just stopped right in the road.

I can't explain why or how, but a wave of feelings overwhelmed me. The wildman wizard hiding in me wanted out and I guess I panicked.

One moment, I was just waiting for this gorgeous woman to walk back out of the store and back into my life, and the next, I had this incredible urge to go,

to just be any place but this place, to cut the one beautiful connection I had left in my life and run away. Freedom, I guess it was, took me by the hand and she wanted to dance, and I... I followed the music.

So yeah, I walked over to the truck,

me, and I got in. We shook hands as I got settled, and we didn't say a word – I didn't even try – as he put the truck in gear and stepped on the gas, and we rolled on out of there, into the wild, and out of the best thing that was ever in my life.

** Every single word of this story is absolutely true, except for the part about meeting Angelina Jolie.*

Back inside the police station, the translator – Tevy is her name – has quickly become a confidante, a close friend for Angelina, and right now, Angelina needs comforting as she pours her heart out, mostly in English, reliving the past two weeks we shared.

"Ma'am, how did you meet him?" Tevy says.

"Oh, the fool barged onto the set, taking photos like a tourist!" Angelina says. "We thought he was Netflix's stills photographer. The PA chewed him out for getting in frame – he didn't even have a blimp, the fool."

"A, a what?..."

"I met him later, at the craft trailer." Angelina says. "He had bags of chips in his arms and was stuffing his pockets full of cookies and trail mix. I offered him a passion fruit. 'These won't kill you,' I told him. Ha ha, I... I don't know what I saw in him. There was just something in his eyes that was so... interesting! A wild but innocent kind of... eagerness, I guess, a vapid curiosity, all framed by some pathetic helplessness." She hands Tevy her phone, with a selfie of us on the home screen.

"Hmm," Tevy says. "Kinda cute ... I think..."

"Yeah, isn't he though?" Angelina says. "And after a few days, we just got to talking between scenes, and well, we, got along, I mean, he's kinda nice, like a lost-puppy nice, and I liked to watch him wag his tail."

"Then, one day near the end of production, he took me for a ride into town on his



Girls ride a bicycle through Wat Sonya Ram in Kampot, Cambodia. Over the past two decades, bicycles have been replaced by motorbikes, cars, and recently, electric scooters. But are they as much fun?



Buddhist students cross a bridge to school in Kampong Khleang, Cambodia. Shaving heads is a Buddhist ritual and rite-of-passage, and attending a Buddhist school for a year can be compulsory, not just to become a monk.

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A young girl collects scraps of paper in the streets of her fishing village near Battambang, Cambodia.

plained about our suite the whole day, about how it was soooo big and empty. Empty? Heck, it was filled with antiques! He calmed down, though. I made him happy. Sigh, he's so... proud."

Funny, but these people thought they were in the company of just another beautiful actress, and they didn't even know that Angelina has been a United Nations Good will Ambassador and Special Envoy for more than a decade, visiting and helping developing countries around the world, or that she has advocated internationally for children's safety and education, or that, right here in Cambodia, she has built at least a dozen schools and a health clinic.

They pamper her like she's a fragile goddess, but this woman has slept in shacks and she has earned her stripes.

"One day, we got caught in the rain," Angelina says. "It hit us hard and we were way out in the open. Well, we got soaked, so we just kept going, and he started singing, and we sang. Ha! We sang our hearts out in the pouring rain, so carefree on that winding back road. We were still singing when we found a shelter, and the people there thought we were crazy — heck, we were crazy..."

"Beautiful..." Tevy says. "In a way." A woman walks in the room carrying a tray of food, and Tevy notices her.

"Ma'am, are you hungry?" Tevy says. "Would you like something to eat?"

"Oh, dear, I'm famished, thank you," Angelina says. "We saddled up early today — oh, but please bring more bowls. Is anyone hungry? Oh yes, let's all eat!" The woman empties the tray on the table and

motorbike and I was hooked. I... I don't... I can't explain it, but sitting on that little seat, holding onto... nothing. I was care free, the wind... the whine of that little motor. I just knew I wanted more of that."

"You sure took a risk," Tevy says. Angelina laughs.

"Oh, my co-producer blew a fuse! Mark isn't union, or safety-certified even, and the insurance, and oh, whatever..."

"And then, I was so exhausted by the time we wrapped. I just wanted to get away — escape," Angelina says. "I texted Sarah to clear my calendar, and I asked Mark if he felt like taking a little trip."

"You ... you just ... left?" Tevy says.

"Yeah! Crazy, but yeah, what fun!" Angelina says. "I just said; 'Mark, let's go somewhere,' and he said; 'Uhh, okay,' and I filled a backpack with clothes, and we just took off. Crazy — oh, we had fun! Such fun ..."

"Ma'am?" Tevy says as Angelina starts crying again.

"Yes?"

"Well, everyone here is wondering ... I mean, the photo on your phone, of you and him ..." This makes Angelina smile.

"Well," Tevy says. "You are such a beautiful, accomplished woman, and he ... well ... Ma'am, what did you see in him?"

Somehow this causes Angelina to break out crying, almost uncontrollably. She weeps out loud, clenching her hands, sobbing, wiping her eyes and she just outright bawls for several minutes, until someone in the room thinks quickly, someone who perhaps had been on the set of; "*First They Killed my Father*," the movie that she is talking about, which she cowrote, produced and directed. It was filmed entirely in Cambodia, with all Cambodian actors.

"Cut!" that person says, and Angelina stops crying and sits up straight.

"Seriously," Tevy says. "I mean ..."

"Well, I ... I mean, he ... he was just so fun," Angelina says. "Kind of like a pet turtle; you know; you put it on its back and rub

its belly and watch all the legs wiggle?"

"What will my little pet turtle do out there all by himself?" Angelina says. "Who will navigate for him? He can't see the GPS without his reading glasses. Who will remind him to turn his blinker off? Or to get down into first gear at stop lights? Or put his kickstand down when he parks? Who will be his gas gauge?"

"His what?" Tevy says.

"His, well, c'mon, the gauge is right on the handlebar in front of him — I don't know why he won't look at it — and he will just run right out of gas if I don't warn him. Honestly, he's so... focused."

"Hmmm," Tevy says.

"We just would ride around all day, exploring this beautiful, beautiful country," Angelina says. "I can still feel him between my legs." Tevy gasps.

"On the motorbike," Angelina says. "Sitting behind him, you know? I would squeeze my legs together when things got scary, like when people would pull out in front of us — which is all the time around here — or when they ride right toward us in our lane — which is all the time around here — or potholes, or crazy curves. Or just to wake him up, you know?"

"We would stay in whatever guest house or homestay he could find. He insisted on paying, so yeah, no real hotels. He was so proud of the rooms he rented for us. Like one, where he said; 'Look, It actually has a private bathroom!' Yeah, no, he wouldn't let me book the rooms — are you kidding?"

"But Ma'am, you are used to such, um, luxury," Tevy says. "How did you cope?"

"Right, sister, exactly," Angelina says. "Well, I am used to roughing it too, really. But a lady just needs some space some times, you know? So, one morning in Phnom Penh, I just couldn't take it. This place he rented was... ugghh! So, guess what? He steps out of the shower and finds our room empty — no clothes, no cameras...nothing, and no me! Just a note; 'We're at the Rosewood tonight, Love, A.J.'"

"Nothing?" Tevy says. "You took everything?"

"Well, yeah!" Angelina says. "Every thing except for a pair of his tattered, old

shorts and a matching shirt."

"Matching?"

"Dirty..."

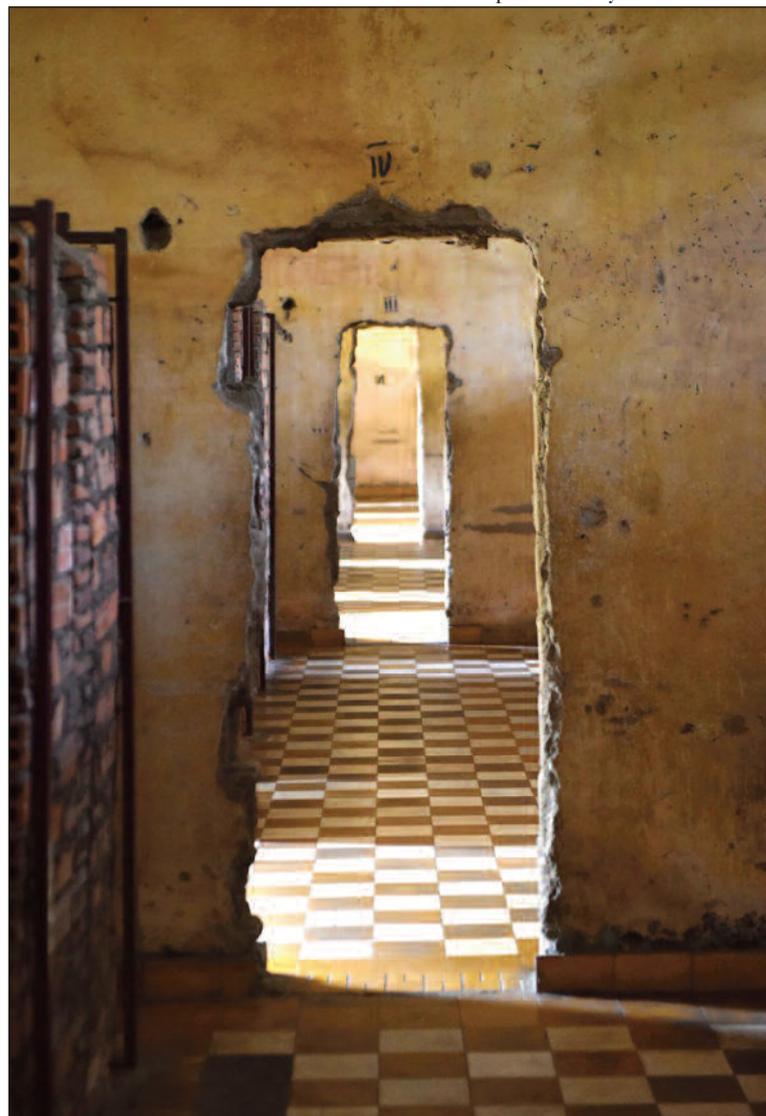
"You just left him there with only...?"

"Well," Angelina says, "I had a Rosewood driver there, waiting for him."

"So, was he upset?"

"Oh, yes," Angelina says. "And he com-

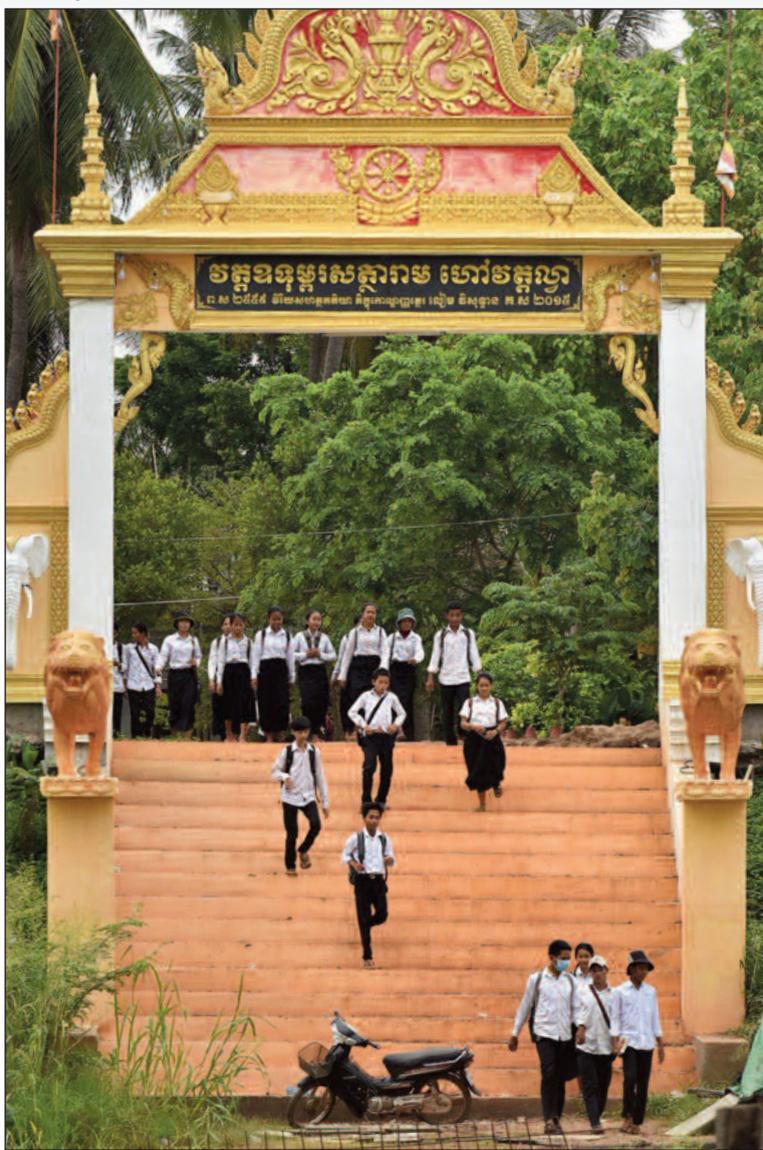
For more photographs of Cambodia, click [HERE](#) or on any photograph.



Doorways cut into former classroom walls accommodated guards at the S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. S-21 was the largest of hundreds of prisons used by the Khmer Rouge throughout the country in the late 1970s.

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Getting out of class for lunch break in Kampong Khleang, Cambodia.

leaves, returning minutes later with more food, and a few more times until everyone is eating, and talking, and talking and eating.

"Oh, this reminds me; Mark didn't eat, today," Angelina says, "and he took a malaria pill, so if you want to find him, just follow the barf."



The room fills with aromas of barbecued pork and chicken and sizzling sauces, all eventually heaped onto piles of white rice. Fruits like rambutan and pineapple, durian and dragon fruit fill in gaps between plates on every table in the place. Voices ebb as chopsticks and spoons heave food into mouths, and then flow for moments into choruses of chatter.



"Is that tamarind sauce?" Angelina says, reaching for a small bowl. "May I?" On her plate is rice covered with a few pieces of fish, slices of cucumber and tomatoes. Someone drops a barbecued frog leg on top. "Thank you!" she says smiling. But the smile doesn't last.



"Oh dear," Angelina says. "Who is going to order food for Mark now? I mean, the man knows English, but nothing else. He orders food by walking around a restaurant staring at other people's dishes, and pointing to one he likes. Sigh, he's so... monolingual."

"He loves to talk," Angelina says. "He told me this beautiful story once, about when he drove a cab in San Francisco - 'Cisco,' he called it - a woman flagged him down one night, and got in at a stoplight. It was raining, so, well, isn't that romantic? Turns out, she was an old girlfriend! Beautiful story, made me cry..."

The chief approaches with a notebook in his hands, and speaks through Tevy.

"Ma'am, we are very pleased to have you as our guest, and are so sorry about your friend," he says. "I am in contact with police around the district, and I will ask them to help you." He then asks her to describe me, and after the usual height and weight, clothing, etc., he gets to the personal part. "Ma'am, does he have any piercings or

identifying body marks?" The chief asks.

"You mean? ..."

"Tattoos. Does he have any?"

"Of course he has a tattoo," Angelina says. "What kind of lady do you think I am?"

"Oh, good, where is it and what does it look like?" Tevy says.

"Oh, it's a snake bite."

"A what? A..."

"Snake bite," Angelina says. "Haven't you seen one?"

"Well, I have been bitten, and so has..."

Angelina retrieves her cell phone and taps it a few times, looking for a photo.

"Here, on his upper arm - left one, I think," she says, showing the phone to the chief, who passes it around the room so everyone can see the three small marks.

"It's so cute," Angelina says as everyone discusses the photo and they squint at the tiny tattoo. "Sigh..." she says, holding her fore and index fingers with her thumb out to look like biting teeth. "So... fierce."

"I guess it looks scary," Tevy says.

"You know, he loved to just talk," Angelina says. "Share with me all his vast knowledge. I... I didn't have the heart to tell him about my aviation instrument rating - sometimes a woman just has to play dumb and let a man be all smart.

"Okay... Say, what did you guys do for fun? Play tourist?" Tevy asks. "I mean, when you weren't riding, or..."

"Oh, no, he doesn't like touristy things," Angelina says. "We had so much fun, just going around, getting lost and getting found, and making his little videos. He's doing really well - he even has **53 subscribers!** Isn't that wonderful?"

His videos are so cute... and he does everything himself! He always does the narration - won't let me do it - says he needs me to hold the camera. He said I was a really good tripod. Well, I guess so."

"Mind blowing..."

"I know, really!" Angelina says. "And some of our best times were the quietest ones; We would solve puzzles. Crossword or Sudoku - the hard ones, of course - and sometimes we would get stuck, and we would just sit and cuddle, and stare at the paper, oh, for hours! Sigh, so... romantic."

"Sigh..." said Tevy.

"Oh, this was funny. Yesterday, we heard an excited little girl on a playground let out a wild shriek, and he said; 'Well, that was a shriek of ecstasy if I ever heard one,' and I said; 'That's a big if!' He didn't talk

to me for the rest of the day."

"Sounds like he could have been a little troubled," the chief says through Tevy. "Did you notice anything else of concern?"

"No. Well..." Angelina says. "Last thing we did today was stop for gas in Phumi Chhuk. It cost, like, 25,000 Riel. Well, his wallet was buried in a saddlebag, so I gave him a 200,000 note, and I said; 'Mark, just keep the change, okay?'"

"Really, Ma'am?" Tevy says. "Do you think... well. Umm, couldn't that have made another man angry? Or... hurt?"

"Oh, I don't know," Angelina says. "The attendant gave him the change and then he just stashed the bills in his shirt."

"Ma'am?" the little girl says.

"Yes, Tevy?"

"Sometimes you love something so much..." Tevy says, "that you smooch it. You know?" This puts a sudden pause in the conversation, and Tevy thinks maybe she went too far. Angelina flutters her eyelids and looks around the small room, but all she sees is people looking back at her.

"Yes, dear," Angelina says. "Yes, indeed. Especially when a creature, sigh, is so... fragile."

"You can find another creature, Ma'am," Tevy says. "I just know you can!"

Angelina wipes more tears and gives a real stiff-upper-lip performance. "Thank you, Tevy," she says. "I'll keep looking, okay? It's just, well, it's strange how you never know, but we've both gotten what we asked for, haven't we?"

"Yes ma'am," Tevy says, "I guess so..."



And with that, Angelina gets up and walks outside, her long legs carrying her easily and elegantly, while everyone scurries behind and around her.

She walks up to the motorbike that had brought her here, its plastic body looking wilted in the afternoon sun, and she glares at it. In typical Cambodian fashion, two officers walk up, excitedly talking in Khmer as they push the small bike off its center stand and hold it for her. She just continues to glare at it, and then she looks around.

Angelina takes a half-dozen long strides



A girl combs her hair while looking over the river behind her home in Kampong Khleang, Cambodia

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Women from France, Switzerland and Cambodia with the motorcycles they rode through the Cardamom Mountains in western Cambodia last year. Timed during the monsoon season, their trip was filled with mud and guts.

across the street to where a dozen motorcycles are parked in front of a karaoke bar. She looks over the street bikes and scooters, and walks to the one off-road bike among them; a Yamaha 250cc, water-cooled, two-stroke, high-performance machine. She crouches beside it and checks its condition, running her fingers under the crankcase looking for oil leaks, and checking the lines and cables.

"I need a little more meat on the bones," she says to herself. She gets up, spins around and waves Tevy toward her. The girl sprints across the street.

"Yes, Miss – Ma'am!"
 "Do you know who owns this motorcycle?" Angelina says.

"Uh, no Ma'am," Tevy says, then she turns to the crowd that has grown to about two dozen people, and asks them something in Khmer. Their response is mostly just head shaking, but two men dash for the bar as they answer her question.

"It belongs to someone in the Karaokei," Tevy says, and in a few minutes, the men emerge with the owner of the motorcycle and a half-dozen of his drunken friends.

"Tell him I would like to buy his motorcycle," Angelina says. "I'll give him twenty million for it."

"But, I... Um." Tevy says, then she speaks to the owner, causing drunken laughter all around. He calms down, frowns and shakes his head.

"Ask him if it runs," Angelina says, and Tevy translates, bringing more laughter and a response from the owner.

"Yes," Tevy says, "Like a pissed-off water buffalo. No, no wait ... like a hungry tiger chasing a, chasing...."

"Yeah, okay," Angelina says, holding up four fingers. "Forty million." The men are quiet now, and the owner shrugs and nods, a drunken smile covering his face. "Great, tell him he will have his money this afternoon." She reaches into her jeans pocket and pulls out a Sharpie marker, (all stars

carry these.) She walks over to the man and takes his arm. With a gentle, almost seductive smile, she cradles his arm in hers, removes the marker cap with her teeth, and writes on his arm:

"I.O.U. \$10,000 U.S. Angelina Jolie"

This causes more laughter and some whooping. Everybody clamors all over the guy, wrestling to get a look at his arm autographed by a movie star. After a few minutes of this, he smiles and hands a key to Angelina, having been reassured that within a few hours he will receive enough cash to replace that old bike with four brand-new ones.

Angelina walks over to the Honda, takes my helmet off the seat and tosses it in the dirt. She opens the two saddlebags, pulls all of my clothes out and throws them near my helmet. She opens a backpack that was on the seat and empties her clothes into the bags. Then she takes her helmet in one hand and with the other, she drags the saddlebags off the frame.

She walks over to the Yamaha as the swarm of people around her try to help. She brushes them off and walks so confidently that they give up. She throws the saddlebags over the rear seat of the Yamaha and puts her helmet on.

The motorcycle is facing away from the street, and two men approach to turn it around for her, but she shoos them away. She grabs the back of the seat with her right hand and the handlebar with her left, leans the bike toward her on its kickstand, and spins it around like it's a bicycle.

Angelina throws a leg over the motorcycle and sits, looking just perfect on the tall, muscular machine. Then she hits the motorcycle starter button. Nothing.

Seeing this as an opportunity that they could jump to, half the men around her take a step forward to offer a hand, or a foot, for a kickstart. But she shoos them off with her right hand on its way down to the kickstarter. She swings it out and then rests it in the arch of her right boot. With just one powerful kick and a pull of the throttle, the machine fires up and she guns it just a little, to show who's boss. Everyone takes a step back.

She waves a finger at Tevy, who jumps toward her. Angelina pulls a key from her pocket. "I bet Mark wants you to have his little Honda," she says, handing the key to the girl, who responds with huge eyes and a sudden loss for language.

"Do me a favor," Angelina says, leaning down close to Tevy so she can hear her over the growl of the engine. She points behind her and winks. "When my friends show up, tell them I went that way, okay?" Angelina holds the girl's head in her hand and gives her a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, little girl," she tells her. "You are beautiful!"

Angelina looks around and gives each person their very own smile that they can take home with them forever. Then, she flips her visor down, and with a twist of the throttle and a spin of the rear wheel, she kicks up an enormous cloud of dust as she

roars away, down the dirt street.
 All that remains is a trail of dust and the roar of the engine shifting through second, third, and fourth gears, and all of that falls gently to earth as this goddess falls out of their lives as quickly as she had fallen in.

EPILOGUE

Before Angelina rode off, she texted her assistant to let her know where she was, something she had not done for two weeks, even putting her cell phone on dark-mode so no one could track her. She called her children every day, but she had made it clear that she was to be untouchable until such time when she would make it clear that she could be touched.

The text she had sent minutes ago was only three words; "divides, keyboards, prepare," and Sarah knew to type those into the website www.What3words.com to know exactly where Angelina is. Or was, actually, because, in the few hours it would take them to race 100 miles from the capital, she of course would be far away, up in the Cardamom Mountains, headed for one of her homes inside a 200-square-mile nature preserve. She just needed them to go to Kampot for a few errands.

So, yes, two hours later, a white SUV rolls into Krong Kampot, through the Durian Rotary and right to the 10x10-meter square where the three words indicated Angelina would be, or had been.

Two men and a woman get out and wait. Not long, actually, as Tevy and the IOU guy are waiting for them in the Karaoke bar. Tevy answers the big question first; that Angelina is not there – she had left hours ago – and, no, they don't know where she went. She tells them all about what had happened that day, how exciting it was, and how thrilled everyone still is.

Then, she explains the IOU. In response to that, the woman walks to the back of the SUV and opens the door. Inside, she opens a small briefcase and pulls out a sealed stack of hundred-dollar bills. She goes back to the IOU guy and counts off a hundred bills, and then makes Tevy write "Paid" on the guy's arm. "By the way," the woman says to Tevy, "do you know where Mr. Gilchrist went?"

"No," Tevy says. "I never even saw him. Why?"

"We still need to pay him for the photographs."



Many homes in Kampong Khleang, Cambodia have no electrical power service, so this boy's family rents batteries, picking them up from homes, recharging them and delivering them each day.

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