

A FORTUNE-TELLER TOLD ME

Earthbound Travels in the Far East

Tiziano Terzani





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FOR ANGELA, ALWAYS

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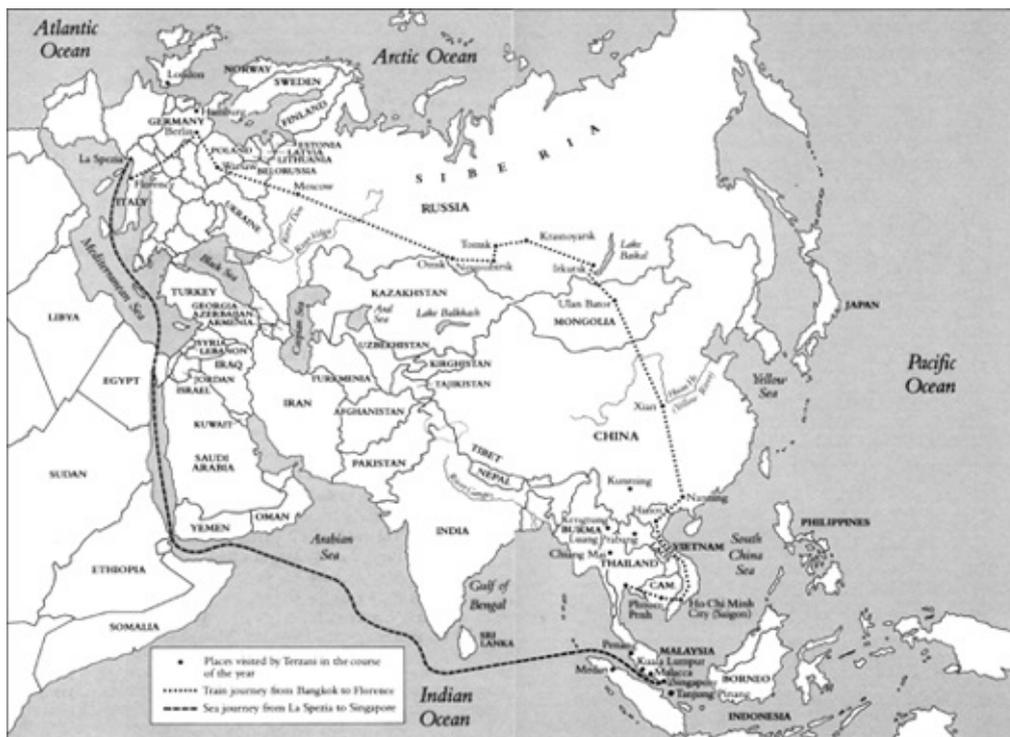
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CONTENTS

Map

- 1 A Blessed Curse
- 2 A Death That Failed
- 3 On Which Shore Lies Happiness?
- 4 The Body Snatchers of Bangkok
- 5 Farewell, Burma
- 6 Widows and Broken Pots
- 7 Dreams of a Monk
- 8 Against AIDS? Raw Garlic and Red Peppers
- 9 The Rainbow Gone Mad
- 10 Sores Under the Veil
- 11 The Murmurs of Malacca
- 12 An Air-Conditioned Island
- 13 A Voice from Two Thousand Years Ago
- 14 Never Against the Sun
- 15 The Missionary and the Magician
- 16 Hurray for Ships!
- 17 The Nagarose
- 18 Buddha's Eyelash
- 19 The Destiny of Dogs
- 20 A Ship in the Desert
- 21 With My Friend the Ghost
- 22 The Peddlers of the Trans-Siberian Railway
- 23 Better than Working in a Bank
- 24 The Rhymeless Astrologer
- 25 TV for the Headhunters
- 26 New Year's Eve with the Devil
- 27 The Spy Who Meditates

Epilogue: And Now What?



1/A BLESSED CURSE

Life is full of opportunities. The problem is to recognize them when they present themselves, and that isn't always easy. Mine, for instance, had all the marks of a curse: *"Beware! You run a grave risk of dying in 1993. You mustn't fly that year. Don't fly, not even once,"* a fortune-teller told me.

It happened in Hong Kong. I had come across that old Chinese man by sheer chance. When I heard his dire words I was momentarily taken aback, but not deeply disturbed. It was the spring of 1976, and 1993 seemed a long way off. I did not forget the date, however; it lingered at the back of my mind, rather like an appointment one hasn't yet decided whether to keep or not.

Nineteen seventy-seven ... 1987 ... 1990 ... 1991. Sixteen years seem an eternity, especially when viewed from the perspective of Day One. But, like all our years (except those of adolescence), they passed very quickly, and in no time at all I found myself at the end of 1992. Well, then, what was I to do? Take that old Chinese man's warning seriously and reorganize my life? Or pretend it had never happened and carry on regardless, telling myself, "To hell with fortune-tellers and all their rubbish"?

By that time I had been living in Asia solidly for over twenty years—first in Singapore, then in Hong Kong, Peking, Tokyo, and finally in Bangkok—and I felt that the best way of confronting the prophecy was the Asian one: not to fight against it, but to submit.

"You believe in it, then?" teased my fellow journalists—especially the Western ones, the sort of people who are used to demanding a clear-cut yes or no to every question, even to such an ill-framed one as this. But we do not have to believe the weather forecast to carry an umbrella on a cloudy day. Rain is a possibility, the umbrella a precaution. Why tempt fate if fate itself gives you a sign, a hint? When the roulette ball lands on the black three or four times in a row, some gamblers count on statistical probability and bet all their money on the red. Not me: I bet on the black again. Has the ball itself not winked at me?

And then, the idea of not flying for a whole year was an attraction in itself. A challenge, first and foremost. It really tickled me to pretend an old Chinese in Hong Kong might hold the key to my future. It felt like taking the first step into an unknown world. I was curious to see where more steps in the same direction would lead. If nothing else, they would introduce me, for a while, to a different life from the one I normally led.

For years I have traveled by plane, my profession taking me to the craziest places on earth, places where wars are being waged, where revolutions break out or terrible disasters occur. Obviously I had held my breath on more than one occasion—landing with an engine in flames, or with a mechanic squeezed in a trapdoor between the seats, hammering away at the undercarriage that was refusing to descend.

If I had dismissed the prophecy and carried on flying in 1993, I would certainly have done so with more than the usual pinch of anxiety that sooner or later strikes all those—including pilots—who spend much of their lives in the air; but I would have carried on with my normal routine: planes, taxis, hotels, taxis, planes. That divine warning (yes: “divination,” “divine,” so alike!) gave me a chance—in a way obliged me—to inject a variant into my days.

The prophecy was a pretext. The truth is that at fifty-five one has a strong urge to give one’s life a touch of poetry, to take a fresh look at the world, reread the classics, rediscover that the sun rises, that there is a moon in the sky and that there is more to time than the clock’s tick can tell us. This was my chance, and I could not let it slip.

But there was a practical problem. Should I stop working for a year? Take leave of absence? Or carry on working despite this limitation? Journalism, like many other professions, is now dominated by electronics. Computers, modems, fax play a paramount role. Snappy, instantaneous television images transmitted by satellite have set new standards, and print journalism, rather than concentrating on reflection and the personal, limps after them in the effort to match the invincible immediacy (and with it the superficiality) of TV.

During the days of the Tiananmen massacre, CNN was broadcasting live from the square in the center of Peking, and many of my colleagues preferred to stay in their hotel rooms and watch television rather than go out and see what was happening a few hundred yards away. That was the quickest way of keeping up to date, of following events. Moreover, their editors were seeing—thousands of miles away—the same images on their screens; and those images became the truth, the only truth. No need to look for another.

How would my editors react to the idea of having an Asia correspondent who, on a whim, took into his head not to fly for a whole year? What would they think of a man who in 1993 suddenly became a journalist from the beginning of the twentieth century, one of those who would set off at the outbreak of a war and would often arrive when it was already over?

My chance to find out came in October 1992, when one of the two editors-in-chief of *Der Spiegel* passed through Bangkok. One evening after dinner, without much beating about the bush, I told him the story of the Hong Kong fortune-teller and announced my intention of not traveling by plane in 1993.

“After what you’ve told me, how can I ask you to fly to Manila and cover the next coup d’état, or to Bangladesh for the next typhoon? Do as you think best,” was his reply. Magnificent as usual, my faraway masters! They saw that

this caprice of mine might give rise to a different kind of story, one that might offer the reader something the others lacked.

Der Spiegel's reaction obviously took a load off my mind, but still I did not finally commit myself to the plan. The prophecy would take effect at the beginning of the new year, and I intended to make my decision at the very last moment, the stroke of midnight on December 31, wherever I might find myself.

Well, I was in the Laotian forest. My celebratory feast was an omelette of red ants' eggs. There was no champagne to see the New Year in; instead I raised a glass of fresh water, and solemnly resolved not to yield for any reason, at any cost, to the temptation of flying. I would travel the world by any possible means as long as it was not a plane, a helicopter or a glider.

It was an excellent decision, and 1993 turned out to be one of the most extraordinary years I have ever spent: I was marked for death, and instead I was reborn. What looked like a curse proved to be a blessing. Moving between Asia and Europe by train, by ship, by car, sometimes even on foot, the rhythm of my days changed completely. Distances became real again, and I reacquired the taste of discovery and adventure.

Suddenly, no longer able to rush off to an airport, pay by credit card and be swept off in a flash to literally anywhere, I was obliged once again to see the world as a complex network of countries divided by rivers and seas that required crossing and by frontiers that invariably spelled "visa"—a special visa, what is more, saying "surface travel," as if this were so unusual as to cast suspicion on anyone who insisted on it. Getting from place to place was no longer a matter of hours, but of days or weeks. I had to avoid making mistakes, so before starting out I pored over maps. No longer were mountains beautiful, irrelevant frills seen from a porthole, but potential obstacles on my way.

Covering great distances by train or boat restored my sense of the earth's immensity. And above all it led me to rediscover the majority of humanity whose very existence we well-nigh forget by dint of flying: the humanity that moves about burdened with bundles and children while the world of the airplane passes in every sense over their heads.

My undertaking not to fly turned into a game full of surprises. If you pretend to be blind for a while, you find that the other senses grow sharper to compensate for the lack of sight. Avoiding planes has a similar effect: the train journey, with its ample time and cramped space, reanimates an atrophied curiosity about details. You give keener attention to what lies around you, to what hurtles past the window. In a plane you soon learn not to look, not to listen: the people you meet, the conversations you have, are always the same. After thirty years of flying I can recall precisely no one. On trains, on Asian ones at least, things are different: you share your days, your meals and your boredom with people you would otherwise never meet, and some of them remain unforgettable.

As soon as you decide to do without planes, you realize how they impose their limited way of looking at things on you. Oh, they diminish distances, which is handy enough, but they end up diminishing everything, including your understanding of the world. You leave Rome at sunset, have dinner, sleep awhile, and at dawn you are in India. But in reality each country has its own special character. We need time if we are to prepare ourselves for the encounter; we must make an effort if we are to enjoy the conquest. Everything has become so easy that we no longer take pleasure in anything. To understand is a joy, but only if it comes with effort, and nowhere is this more true than in the experience of other countries. Reading a guidebook while hopping from one airport to another is not the same as the slow, laborious absorption—as if by osmosis—of the humors of the earth to which one remains bound when traveling by train.

Reached by plane, all places become alike—destinations separated from one another by nothing more than a few hours' flight. Frontiers, created by nature and history and rooted in the consciousness of the people who live within them, lose their meaning and cease to exist for those who travel to and from the air-conditioned bubbles of airports, where the border is a policeman in front of a computer screen, where the first encounter with the new place is the baggage carousel, where the emotion of leave-taking is dissipated in the rush to get to the duty-free shop—now the same everywhere.

Ships approach countries by slowly and politely entering the mouths of their rivers; and distant ports become long-awaited goals, each with its own face, each with its own smell. What used to be called airfields were once a little like that. No more. Nowadays airports have the false allure of advertisements—*islands of relative perfection even amid the wreckage of the countries in which they are situated.* They all look alike, all speak the same international language that makes you feel you have come home. But in fact you have only landed at the outskirts of a city, from which you must leave again by bus or taxi for a center which is always far away. A railway station, on the other hand, is a true mirror of the city in whose heart it lies. Stations are close to the cathedrals, mosques, pagodas or mausoleums. On reaching them you have well and truly arrived.



Despite the limitation of not flying, I did not stop doing my job, and I always managed to arrive in time where I needed to be: for the first democratic elections in Cambodia, for the opening of the first line of communication—by land!—between Thailand and China via Burma.

And that summer I did not forgo my annual visit to my mother in Italy. I traveled the historic route by train from Bangkok to Florence: over thirteen thousand miles, passing through Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Mongolia, Siberia and so on—a journey which in itself was not exceptional in the slightest, only that nobody had done it for a long time. It took a month,

accompanied by the clickety-clack of the wheels and the varied whistles of different countries' locomotives, to cross what still looks on the map like a small fraction of the earth.

I returned to the East from La Spezia, this time with my wife, Angela, in a battered ship of the Lloyd Triestino line, by the great classical route through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca to Singapore. We were the only two passengers on board. The rest was a cargo of two thousand containers and a very Italian crew of eighteen men.

If I had not invented the excuse of the fortune-teller, I would have done nothing of all this, and 1993 would have been a year like so many others, without one of the events that signal the passage of time.



How many great stories can there be in the life of a journalist? One or two, if he is lucky. I have already had my share of such luck: I was in Saigon in the spring of 1975 when the Communists arrived and ended the Vietnam War, which for my generation was what the Spanish Civil War had been for the generation of Hemingway and Orwell; and in the summer of 1991 I was in the bowels of the USSR when the Soviet empire fell to pieces and Communism died. Perhaps one day, if I am really lucky, I may have a chance to witness another great event, but until then I have to sharpen my curiosity on things that are less obvious, less striking.

With the decision not to fly I also took another, a logical extension of the game. I decided that wherever I might go that year I would seek out the most eminent local fortune-teller, the most powerful sorcerer, the most revered oracle or seer or visionary or madman of the place, ask him to look into my future, and try to learn something of my fate.

They came in all shapes and sizes. Every meeting was a new adventure, and along the way I collected dozens of warnings and much wise advice about how to live, as well as oils, amulets, pills, powders and prescriptions guaranteed to protect me from various dangers. I carried them all with me, and at the end of the year I was weighed down with gadgets, little bottles and paper packets. The power of each was linked with some taboo that had to be observed on my part: in every system, religious or otherwise, the dispensation of a benefit is always indissolubly connected with some effort to be made, some merit to be gained. An excellent principle, I believe, though in practice I was forced to limit my performance of these "duties."

If I had obeyed all the warnings and prohibitions, my life would have been much more complicated than I had already made it by renouncing flight. On an Indonesian island I met a *bomoh*, an expert in black magic, who told me I must never, never, piss against the sun. Another said not to piss against the moon. In Singapore a shaman, a woman who spoke in rhyme in ancient Chinese, counseled me never again to eat dog or snake. Another seer told me

never to eat beef, another to remain strictly vegetarian for the rest of my life. An old lama in Ulan Bator read my whole destiny in the cracks in a sheep's shoulder blade burnt in a slow fire of dried cow dung, and then handed me a little packet of dried, perfumed grasses from the Mongolian plain, to be used like smelling salts in the event of danger. A Buddhist monk outside Phnom Penh splashed me, fully dressed as I was, with the same water he used to treat local epileptics.

Many of the fortune-tellers were just colorful characters, at times out-and-out charlatans just trying to make a living. Some, however, were truly remarkable, with a rare understanding of the human condition, an unusual psychic gift that enabled them to read other people's minds or to see "scars" undetectable by the normal eye. Some left me wondering if indeed they had an extra sense. Is it possible? Is it possible that over the millennia man has lost through disuse certain capacities which were once natural to him, and which survive today in only a few individuals?

The history of the world is full of prophecies and portents, but we tend to feel, especially in the West, that all this belongs to the past. In Asia, however, the occult is still invoked to explain current events at least as often as economics or, until recently, ideology. In China, in India, in Indonesia, what we call superstition is still very much part of everyday life. Astrology, chiromancy, the art of reading the future in a person's face or the soles of his feet or the tea leaves in his cup, play a very substantial role in the life of the people and in public affairs, as do the practices of healers, shamans and the masters of *feng shui*, the cosmic geometry. The name to give a child, the purchase of a field, the sale of a portfolio of shares, the repair of a roof, the date of a departure or a declaration of war, are governed by criteria that have nothing to do with our logic. Those criteria determine how millions of marriages are arranged, how thousands of buildings are planned and constructed. Political decisions which affect whole populations are based on the advice of individuals expert in consulting the occult.

People have always searched for the meaning of life, trying to comprehend its mystery and find a key to the future, and to influence their fate. Chinese, as a written language, was born not as a means of communication between men, but as a way of consulting the gods. "Should I make war on the neighboring state or not?" "Will I win the battle or not?" A king wrote these questions on a flat bone which was then pierced with a red-hot needle. The divine answer appeared in the cracks caused by the heat—one had to know how to read them. Those bones, with those ideograms of 3,500 years ago, are the first known Chinese "manuscripts."

Today the Chinese, especially those in the Southeast Asian diaspora, still constantly interrogate their gods, for example, by tossing up two pieces of wood shaped like large beans, in order to receive counsel from heaven. If both pieces fall faceup, the answer is yes, facedown means no, one up and one down means try again.

The old fortune-teller's prophecy offered me a chance to learn about the different ways in which people seek this kind of advice, to explore new paths of knowledge, to look into the mysterious world of intuition and suggestion that so often beckons to us but is seldom taken seriously. My study of superstition was also a response to a changing Asia: I wanted to see what remained of that "mysterious East" which has for centuries attracted so many Westerners. The newspapers say Asia is going through a period of boom, that the next century will be Asia's. This excites the bankers and financiers who see the world through the graphics on their highly sophisticated computers. But in reality Asia is not only a continent experiencing joyous economic growth: it is also killing itself by pursuing a model of development which it has not itself chosen, a model imposed upon it by the logic of profit which today seems inexorably to dominate all human behavior.

Ancient cities are being bulldozed to make room for anonymous "modern" developments; a whole popular culture is being pushed aside by the irresistible force of new models from abroad, spreading by satellite to the remotest hut in the Burmese jungle or on the Mongolian plain. A fearful wave of materialism is engulfing everything and everyone. Yet even among the young in Asia, as a reaction against this tendency and the immense disorientation it has produced, there is a revival of interest in the old beliefs, in the occult, in phenomena that have their roots in tradition.

Perhaps this is happening all over the world. Now that social groups are becoming increasingly fragmented and the natural world is ever more receding from people's daily lives, now that all problems are supposed to be solved by science alone, now that death is no longer lived chorally as it still was when I was a boy, but has become a taboo more and more excluded from life, people are more perplexed than ever about their destiny, and look for solace, understanding, friendship and hope wherever they can find it. That is why the East, with its aura of exoticism, has again become a source of inspiration for many young Western people, who look to Eastern religions and practices for the answers they no longer seem to find in schools or churches at home. More than the great philosophers of the homegrown variety, Oriental mysticism, Buddhism and Asian gurus seem to be able to help those who want to escape the prison of consumerism, the bombardments of advertising, the dictatorship of television. Western youth, coming from a superorganized world, where everything is guaranteed, where even their desires seem dictated by an interest which is not their own, is more and more interested in exploring Oriental paths of spirituality.

On various occasions while traveling in Asia I have seen European figures cloaked in the orange or purple robes of Buddhist monks, but I had never taken much interest in their stories. This year I had a reason to stop and listen; and thus I met, for example, a former journalist, like me a Florentine, who had taken the vows of a Tibetan monk, and a young Dutch poet who had chosen an austere life of meditation in a temple south of Bangkok. Both, in different ways, were victims of the disorientation of our time. It is certainly

because of this disorientation that in European telephone directories the pages listing chiromancers, astrologers and seers are growing thicker and thicker. Their clientele is no longer limited to credulous ladies, to the gullible, the lonely or the ignorant; this was another discovery I made. In the course of the year I realized that my curiosity about this twilight world was shared by a huge number of people; people you would never suspect, people who would open up and tell their stories only when I admitted that I meant to take my prophecy seriously. It may be a platitude, but the problem of destiny, of good or evil fate and how to deal with it, sooner or later arises in everyone's mind.



The pages that follow are the story of this strange journey, of my year with my feet on the ground ... or should I say less than ever on the ground? That would be nearer the mark, for never have I flown without wings as I did in those thirteen months. A year of thirteen months? Yes, but that will be the easiest of my explanations.

The conclusion? "I never go to fortune-tellers. I like to be surprised by life," was the sibylline reply of an elderly lady in Bangkok when I asked her how many times a month she consulted them.

In my case the surprises came precisely because I *did* go to a fortune-teller. His prophecy lent me a sort of third eye with which I saw things, people and places I would not otherwise have seen. It gave me an unforgettable year, which I began by sitting in a basket on an elephant's back in Laos and ended by sitting on a meditation cushion in a Buddhist retreat run by an ex-CIA agent.

His prophecy also—saved me from an air crash. On March 20, 1993 a UN helicopter in Cambodia went down, with fifteen journalists on board. Among them was the German colleague who had taken my place.

2/A DEATH THAT FAILED

The occult and I had always had a cold and distant relationship. The reasons, as for so many other things, are rooted in my childhood. In fact the estrangement began very early.

They placed a small photograph of a soldier at the bottom of a bowl of water, then covered my head with a big towel and made me sit there in the dark, bent over the bowl, with my eyes fixed on the quivering half-length image under the water. All around me the women sat silently, waiting.

It was my grandmother's idea. She said an innocent soul had to be used, and apparently I fitted the bill. The séance took place in 1943 at our home in Monticelli, a working-class quarter of Florence. We had a neighbor called Palmira whose son had disappeared that winter in Russia during the retreat, and I was to discover if he was alive or dead, and try to see what he was doing at that moment.

I would have been glad to say I saw him eating at a table in a wooden hut with snow all around, but all I could make out was that sober, unsmiling face that fluttered with my every breath. The little black-and-white photo reminded me of others that I had seen on marble crosses in the Soffiano cemetery, but I didn't want to say that. The episode is one of the clearest images I retain from my childhood, and I well remember the disappointment when they took the towel off my head and poured the water away. Palmira retrieved her photo and dried it with a handkerchief. One of the women said that if the attempt had failed it might be because I had somehow lost my innocence—unlikely, as I was barely five years old at the time. But then, who knows? Perhaps it had succeeded after all: Palmira's son never did return from Russia.

Since that first experience, in the course of my life I have had no more than a normal, skeptical curiosity about the uncertain world beyond appearances; and instinctively I have always found some rational way to explain inexplicable things that sometimes took place before my eyes. Later, when I had children, I had more and more need of such explanations, because children constantly demand to "understand."

Once in Delhi, where I had brought the family to celebrate my fortieth birthday (being keen to plant a symbolic seed in India, and thereby announce, formally, my intention of going to live there one day), an old Sikh came up to Saskia and Folco. They were eight and nine years old at the time. "If you like," he said, "I'll guess your grandfather's name." Incredulous, they handed him a few rupees, whereupon he asked them several questions and, to their

amazement, wrote the letter G on a piece of paper: my father's initial, his name being Gerardo. I was hard put to convince them that behind this, like so many other Indian "miracles," from people buried alive to ropes standing on end, there must be a trick: they had probably suggested the letter somehow in their answers to his questions. But no! They were certain that at the very least the man had read their minds. Then a couple of years later, while we were on holiday in Thailand, we were all witnesses to an event where there was no question of a trick.

We were staying on the island of Phi Phi with Seni, a Thai journalist who was an old friend of ours, and his girlfriend Yin. Phi Phi was a tropical paradise with blue sea, white sand, and huts of bamboo and straw, until it too was invaded by electricity, fax machines and concrete hotels with swimming pools. We were about to get into a boat to go and see the great, mysterious caves where for centuries the local people have gathered one of the foods most prized by the Chinese, swallows' nests. Suddenly Yin realized that she had left her camera in their hut. "Wait," she said, "I'll telephone Seni." Telephone? There was no such thing on the island! Yin moved away, her head in her hands and her eyes closed, as if she were making a great effort of concentration. A few seconds later, Seni appeared in the far distance, like a little black dot running across the white sand. "The camera! Yin, you forgot the camera!" Coincidence? Of course it was. No shadow of doubt crossed my mind.

Folco, on the other hand, was highly excited. The boat, the sea, the mysterious caves with towering bamboo poles which the local boys climbed to collect the precious nests, no longer interested him now that there was the possibility—for him proven—of telepathic communication. He spent the day "doing exercises," and in the evening, before dinner, he told us he would direct his thoughts to his mother, who had had to go to Florence. "What's she doing at this moment?" Saskia asked him. "Sleeping," he said. "I see her sleeping, with a blue light all around her." In Italy it was then early afternoon, there is no blue light in our house, and his mother never sleeps after lunch.

A week later, however, Angela came back from Florence and told us that on that particular day she had gone to Il Contadino, our country retreat in a village called Orsigna in the Tuscan Apennines. For once, right after lunch, she had taken a short nap in the children's room, the one with blue curtains. A paranormal son? More likely just a successful game.

Like everyone else, I had heard and read about prophecies that had come true, about people who could do incredible things—fly, levitate, see into the past or the future—but I had never given them much weight. If even one of them were true, I asked myself, how could we go on living normally? If fate is written in our palms, or in the stars, how can we go on catching buses, turning up at the office and paying the electricity bills? Should we not chuck the life we lead and devote ourselves utterly to the study of these

phenomena? But people go about their business, trains run, the post arrives, newspapers appear daily. I told myself that the paranormal world is the invention of a few, that it is the product of the distorted imagination, an expression, like others, of man's need to believe in something beyond appearances; I need not bother about it. Thus for years I had lived in Asia without paying much attention to the occult side of things. I had visited temples and anchorites, I had heard all sorts of stories, but I had never allowed myself to be too impressed. Then, too, whenever I had occasion to check on one of those odd stories I always found something that seemed not to fit. Reality never quite squared with what I had been told.

In all my years in Asia I had never had my horoscope cast or consulted any of the numerous fortune-tellers, for whom I had always felt an instinctive distaste. When I was a boy, just after the war, Gypsies would often stop at our house and ask to read my mother's palm. She would refuse and bolt the door, saying they were all thieves who would hypnotize us and carry off the little we had. Her outbursts obviously had an effect on me.

Nor had I wanted to go to that fateful fortune-teller in Hong Kong. We had just moved there from Singapore, and in the British colony we had found a very old Chinese friend from Shanghai, a fellow student in the 1960s at Columbia University in New York. His wife, a well-known cinema director, was a granddaughter of the last warlord of Yunnan. Like all good Chinese she loved to gamble and was extremely superstitious. Once in a while she used to go to Macao and—like me—spend entire days playing blackjack, baccarat, and especially fan tan, that very simple but addictive game in which the croupier empties a bowlful of buttons onto the table and then slowly divides them into groups of four with an ivory chopstick. One has to guess the number of buttons that are left over at the end: none, one, two or three? The charm of the game is that you can follow it from on high, standing at a railing, and you place bets and collect your winnings by lowering and raising a little wicker basket on a string.

Every time she went to Macao, before taking the hovercraft my Chinese friend would go and consult her fortune-teller to find out whether those were auspicious days or not. "He's one of the best in Hong Kong. He's someone you should get to know. Come along with me," she said, finally overcoming my resistance.

The man lived in one of the many old tumbledown beehive-tenements of Wanchai. The doors of the flats were left wide open even at night to let in air, but they had big padlocked grilles to keep thieves out. We climbed several flights of stairs before arriving at a grille like all the others. I saw the red glow of a little altar on the floor, with a bowl of rice and some tangerines offered to the tutelary deities and ancestors. I recall a pleasant smell of incense. Behind an old iron desk sat a Chinese man of about seventy. He wore a sleeveless vest and his head was shaven like a monk's. His bony hands were resting on some old books and an abacus.

I stood to one side as the old man gave my friend the advice she sought. Then, pointing in my direction, he said in Cantonese, a dialect I did not understand, “He’s the one I’m interested in.” And I gave in.

First he measured the length of my forearm with a string, then he felt the bones of my forehead, asked me when I was born and at what time of day, made a few calculations on his abacus, looked into my eyes and began to speak. I was expecting the typical vague formulae used by fortune-tellers, which one can interpret at will, pull this way and that like a rubber band, and if one so desires always succeed (more or less) in squaring with reality. Had he said, “You are married but there’s another woman in your life,” I might have thought, “Ah, perhaps that’s the one he means.” Had he said, “You have three children,” I could have enjoyed playing with the idea that besides Folco and Saskia I might have sown another somewhere in the world. But when my Chinese friend began translating I could not believe my ears: “*About a year ago you were about to die a violent death, and you saved yourself by smiling ...*” Yes, that was true enough, but how could this old man I had never seen describe so exactly an episode which only I knew about, which even my Chinese friend had never heard mentioned before?

It had happened in Cambodia, exactly a year before. I had left the country a few days before the fall of Phnom Penh on April 17, and in Bangkok, in that haven of peace and luxury that is the Oriental Hotel on the Chao Paya River, I was grinding my teeth at the thought of those friends and colleagues who had stayed put to see what was happening in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge moved in. My not being there with them struck me as a terrible personal defeat, which I was not prepared to accept. I rented a car, drove to the Thai city of Aranyaprathet on the Cambodian border, and on the morning of April 18 I walked across the iron bridge that spans the frontier. What I had in mind was the crazy, stupid, reckless notion—proof of how little I then knew about the Khmer Rouge—that from there I would find a way of getting as far as Phnom Penh. And off I set along the road on foot.

I passed crowds of panic-stricken Cambodians racing in the opposite direction, cars crammed to overflowing with people and baggage, horns blaring. They were all terrified, all trying to escape to Thailand. One of them waved to me to turn back, but I took no notice. I had just reached the center of Poipet when the Khmer Rouge, in single file, began entering the town. The government soldiers threw away their arms, took off their uniforms and fled. There was no resistance, no shooting. The first Khmer Rouge troops passed by as if they had not seen me, but a second group grabbed hold of me, turned their machine guns on me and shoved me up against a wall in the market square. Yelling something that sounded like “CIA, CIA! American, American!” they prepared to shoot me.

Until then I had seen the Cambodian guerrillas only as corpses abandoned after a battle beside a road or a rice field. These were the first that I saw alive: young, fresh from the jungle, with dry, gray, dusty-looking skin and fierce

eyes, red from malaria. “CIA! American!” they kept shouting. I was sure they were going to shoot me. I thought it would be a quick and painless death, and worried only about how the news would reach my home, what suffering it would cause my family. Instinctively I reached into my shirt pocket and took out my passport. Smiling pleasantly, and speaking for some reason in Chinese, I said: “I am Italian. Italian. Not American. Italian.”

From the cluster of spectators behind the guerrillas a man with pale, almost white skin—no doubt a local Chinese trader—stepped forward and translated into Khmer: “I am a journalist, don’t kill me ... wait till a political cadre comes, let him decide ... I’m Italian.” And I went on smiling, smiling, waving my passport. The Khmer Rouge lowered their guns and entrusted me to a very young guerrilla who scrutinized me curiously for hours. Now and then he would run the barrel of his big Chinese pistol around my face and over my nose, my eyes.

Toward sunset an older guerrilla arrived on the scene, evidently the leader. Without even looking at me he talked with his men for a few very long minutes, then turned to me and said in perfect French that I was welcome to liberated Cambodia, that these were historic days, the war was over and I was free to go.

Later that evening I was again between the beautiful cool linen sheets of the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. “If somebody aims a gun at you, smile,” I have told my children since. It seemed to me one of the few lessons in life I could give them.

But the encounter left me with something more than a “lesson in life.” The real fear, as always, came later. For months I had nightmares; I often relived the scene in slow motion, and not always with a happy ending. Obviously the experience had left its mark.

But how had the old Chinese fortune-teller, in his musty little Hong Kong flat, managed to see that mark? If I had been slashed with a knife or wounded by a bullet, my skin would have shown a scar that anybody’s eye could have seen. But with what eye had he seen the scar that the Khmer Rouge had left inside me, not even I knew where? Was it mere coincidence? This time it really was hard to believe.

After looking into my past, the old man spoke of my relations with the five natural elements, fire, water, wood, metal and earth. “You love wood,” he said. That is true: whenever I can I surround myself with wooden objects, and of all perfumes I like sandalwood best. “You are happy if you live near water.” That is true: in Hong Kong we always had a view of the sea, and in Italy, at the country retreat in Orsigna, we hear the rushing of a mountain stream.

Then came the prophecy that was to rule my life for a year: “*Beware!*” said the old man: “*You run a grave risk of dying in 1993. You mustn’t fly that year. Don’t fly, not even once.*” He added, “*If you survive an air accident in that year, you’ll live to be eighty-four.*”

There is no connection between the precise description of past events and the accurate prediction of the future, but obviously the one lends credibility to the other. For that reason, as I discovered later, almost all fortune-tellers use the same system, and thus I could not get the old man's words out of my head. His "guess" about my past could not be accounted for by statistical probability. This story of a close encounter with death could not be brushed off as equally likely to be true or false for anyone who entered his little room in Wanchai. It was not like telling a woman "You have children" or "You have no children." My experience in Poipet put me absolutely outside the range of the average.

And if in some way of his own the old man had hit on the truth, and could see backward to 1975, might he not perhaps also be able to see ahead to 1993?

Put that way, the question was not the sort that can easily be ignored; and the idea of spending a year looking for an answer attracted me immensely—especially in the few days leading up to that portentous deadline.



On December 18, 1992 I flew from Bangkok to Vientiane. On the twenty-second, on board a small, jolting Chinese-made plane, I arrived in Luang Prabang, the ancient royal capital of Laos.