Anarchy and Old Dogs

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Extract

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1

A NOTE TO A BLIND DENTIST

The post office box was eighteen across, twelve down, and it had a loop of wool wound around the door so Dr Buagaew wouldn't miss it. He traced the keyhole with his left hand and inserted the key with his right. From inside the wooden chamber came the scent of bygone correspondence: of brown-paper parcels and glue, of old parchment and secrets. His hand fell upon a thin envelope. He knew it would be there and he knew what it contained because only one other person was aware of the post office box address.

He relocked the door, folded the envelope, and, having put it in the inside pocket of his jacket, turned back in the direction of the exit. The Bureau de Poste was crowded. It always seemed to be so. He could hear the unruly scrum of ignorant villagers fighting their way to the counters. There were the sounds of pencils tapping urgent messages on postcards and the crinkle of the thirty-*kip* wrapping service. On the far side of the room, people shouted loudly into the long-distance telephones, sharing their most intimate stories with half of Vientiane.

It was all part of the hubbub of the city that Dr Buagaew disliked so much. If it hadn't been for the letters he wouldn't have travelled there at all. It was his habit to get off the bus

beside the morning market, cross over Khu Vieng Avenue, collect his mail, and return on the same bus. He had no other business. In the capital of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos in August of 1977, traffic wasn't a fitting word to describe the infrequent passings of motor vehicles. Only those with familial or professional connections with the socialist government could afford to tantalize their tanks with petroleum. Two cars passing at the same time would be considered a traffic jam. Even midmorning, dogs stretched out on the warm asphalt and motorists had no qualms about going around them.

That might be the reason Dr Buagaew had never considered the road to be a potential danger. It could explain why he didn't stop at the broken stone kerb or take a great deal of notice of the engine sound. Once his bamboo cane had negotiated the cracks and potholes of the pavement, all that remained was to find the wire-mesh fence on the far side and follow it to his bus stop. The onlookers later concurred. They'd never seen anyone hit by a truck before, and it was such an unlikely event a man would almost have to throw himself beneath the front wheels for it to happen. Even then, the vehicle would probably be travelling slowly enough to slam on the brakes and avoid any embarrassment.

It was therefore agreed the old blind man must have been in deep karmic debt to have stepped in front of the runaway logging truck. What were the odds? A large Chinese vehicle? A stuck accelerator? A young driver bailing out in panic some twenty yards earlier? The truck had careened past the post office and crushed Dr Buagaew before slamming into the wooden public-address-system pole at the corner of Lan Xang Avenue. The latter stood

defiantly for several seconds before swaying and crashing down onto the empty street.

This tragedy was a talking point that afternoon but very few tears were shed for the anonymous blind man. The locals didn't have room in their souls for someone else's misfortune. Vientiane had a certain mood about it these days. The government was starting to look like a depressingly unloved relative who'd come to visit for the weekend and stayed for two years. These were uncomfortable times in a country not unused to discomfort. The drought had wrung every last tear of moisture from the sad earth. The seasonal monsoons had held off, and a few brief mango flower showers were quickly sucked into the ground and forgotten. The World Bank was donating rice, but with few trucks and little petrol, most of it hadn't found its way beyond the cities.

It would be a good time, one would imagine, for a novice socialist government to ease up and give its downtrodden population a break from petty regulations. The Pathet Lao had come to power in 1975 and even the prime minister admitted they hadn't achieved too much since then. But the jungle-trained administration adopted a policy of disguising its lack of ability by baffling the populace with red tape. No fewer than six signatures were needed for permission to ride a bicycle from one prefecture to another. The death of livestock, even from natural causes, had to be accounted for in writing. And heaven help a family intent on adding an extension to its hovel. A small copse of trees' worth of paper and an entire octopus of ink would be used up by the ensuing paperwork.

Some fifty thousand former Royalist officials were now

in re-education camps, and the positions they once occupied had been either left empty or filled with Party cadres unqualified for the work. They all did their best, but best doesn't always amount to competent.

2

THE FOOTPATH FORTUNE-TELLER

Dr Siri Paiboun, the country's one and only coroner, was in the morgue rolling a testicle between his thumb and forefinger. It was a peculiar sensation. He held it up to the light to catch its opaqueness and took a photograph of it. He then placed it beside its comrade on the table in front of him and took one more snap of the couple together.

'You know? They're marvels, really they are,' he said.

'How so?'

Nurse Dtui was rummaging impatiently through the drawer for a suitable bag to put them in. She was a pretty girl in her twenties with a smile that won hearts. Her ice white uniform stretched across her solid block of a body, giving her the appearance of a large standing refrigerator, albeit a very happy one.

'They don't look like much,' Siri said, 'but these little fellows are the powerhouse of every sexual event that takes place in a man's body. They pump out testosterone to advertise virility and attract the female, they stimulate an erection, and they produce sperm to fertilize the ovum. And with all that responsibility, there isn't even a place for them inside. They have to dangle there like afterthoughts. Damned inconsiderate of the Maker if you ask me.'

'I doubt these'll be making any more contributions to the procreation of the species, what with having been fried and all,' Dtui said and smiled as she held up an envelope of stapled paper that had once contained banana fritters. 'This'll do.'

'You seem to be in somewhat of a hurry, Nurse Dtui.'

'It's Wednesday. Don't want to miss my fortune-telling appointment.'

'Aren't you supposed to be tending vegetables for the republic or some such after-hours nursing duty?'

'I can do that after my reading. It doesn't take half an hour.'

'I'm disappointed in you, really I am. Surely you don't believe all that clairvoyant bunkum?'

'That's good, coming from you.'

'Meaning what?'

'Let me just make sure I've got this right. A man who hosts the spirit of a thousand-year-old Hmong shaman – a man who's being pursued by the malevolent spirits of the jungle – a man who is regularly visited by the ghosts of murder victims …'

'This sounds like one hell of a man.'

'… a man who has no fewer than thirty-three teeth crammed together in his magical mouth, which positively proves his connections to the spirit world, believes that fortune-telling is bunkum?'

'Absolutely. It's a load of rot. The future's a pimple on your nose. No matter how fast you run, you'll never catch up with it. Nor should you try to.'

'That sounds suspiciously like one of Judge Haeng's Party slogans.'

'Not at all. It's mine. Nobody can profess to know the

future. Those fortune-teller charlatans make a living out of telling gullible folks what they want to hear.'

'Well, I certainly didn't want to hear that my study tour of the Soviet Union would be cancelled.'

'He told you that? See what I mean? Rot! Nothing can prevent your going to Moscow. It's all signed and sealed. That's why fortune-tellers are so dangerous, Dtui. They plant these weed-seeds in your head that take root and gnarl and prickle. It all confuses you so much that you act in ways that make the predictions come true. You think the fortune-teller has seen the future but in fact he's altered your flight path. He's sent you off in a direction that will converge with his prediction. You actually believe yourself into his fantasy.'

'Poop!'

'Poop? Poop? That's charming. It would appear the principle of respecting one's elders has gone down the toilet with all the other niceties of this planet.'

'Sorry. But poop's poop, elder or not. Auntie Bpoo's legitimate. I'd bet my socks on it.'

'Auntie Bpoo? Now there's a name to conjure with. Where's her office?'

'Well …'

'Well?'

'The footpath in front of the Aeroflot ticket agency.'

'Oh, Dtui. You surely don't mean the transvestite?'

'Yes.'

'Then I rest my case. It's a sorrier story than I could have imagined. You can see for yourself what a successful business he's built up. Such a splendid location. If the man could actually see the future, don't you think he'd be well off by now? Do you think he'd need to daub himself in garish

makeup and sit on a straw mat? Goodness, if I were clairvoyant I'd be in Bangkok by now, drinking morning coffee and cognac with other respectable retirees.'

'She isn't allowed to use her gifts for personal gain.'

'Are you saying she … *he* doesn't charge?'

'Not one *kip*.'

Siri was only briefly bumped off the track. 'Oh, I see. They have a code of ethics. In that case, those ethics should extend to not giving out irresponsible predictions like your not going to the Soviet Bloc. I think this Auntie Bpoo chap would benefit from a good talking-to.'

'Go on then.'

'What?'

'Go chat with her.'

'This is the kind of thing you'd normally try to talk me out of.'

'No, I think the old dog might learn a few tricks.'

'I very much doubt that.'

'Then I dare you to go and see her. But be nice. Just ride out the bizarre stuff and she'll win you over. I guarantee it.'

'It appears she specializes in negatives.'

'Not always. She likes to cheer you up every now and then. She said I'd be married by the end of the month.'

Siri laughed. 'Who's the lucky man?'

'I didn't get a name.'

'Well, you'd better pull your finger out. It's already the fifteenth.'

Dtui bagged and labelled the testicles for the samples storeroom. 'Severed scrotum. Mr Tawon. Aug. 1977.' They wouldn't be joining the body on its trip to the pyre. Mr Tawon had wandered from the sanctity of marriage on regular occasions. After two decades of his infidelity, his

loyal and patient wife had reached the end of her tether and decided it was time to bring him to the end of his. Across the river in Thailand, after an appropriate period of rehabilitation, Mr Tawon might have hoped to continue his philandering. Thai wives were more inclined to slice the carrot than the onions. If the cuckold was able to find his errant member and limp off to a surgeon, there was a thirty per cent chance of the organ's being successfully reattached.

But Mr Tawon's wife had done her homework. As her husband slept off a rice-whisky binge, the smell of cheap perfume still on his skin, she'd taken a razor to his scrotum. To be sure he wouldn't be tempted to reoffend in the afterlife, she'd deep-fried the detached ovoids in sesame oil. While trying to rescue them, Mr Tawon had bled to death. As Dr Siri remarked, this was a tale to bring tears to even the most insensitive of males.

'A lesson to all of us,' he'd called it.

Dr Siri Paiboun never failed to absorb wisdom from the departed. Even at seventy-three years of age, even after a life of studying and war and politics and love, he still conceded he had a lot to learn. Many Lao half his age bragged of being experts. They could have benefited from just a smidgen of Siri's humility because a true expert was one who admitted there weren't always answers. Oh, it's certain many of the other fellows weren't as ornery as the old man, but he'd earned the right to be stubborn and argumentative just by staying alive as long as he had. He hardly ever flew into a rage or insulted anyone who didn't absolutely deserve it. And he was certainly patient. He'd been compared to the Vietnamese Thousand Year Plant, which waited its entire life for the off chance that some forest

deer might brush against its one and only spore and carry it off to more fertile ground.

And like the Thousand Year Plant, the good doctor was well preserved for a man his age. His hair was thick and white like the feathers of a newborn bantam. His peculiar green eyes still sparkled as bright as a raja's emeralds. His short frame was solid with muscle and his mind was as sharp as it had ever been. Only recently had things begun to go wrong. His lungs took longer to fill since the night his collapsing house had filled them with dust. And he had to admit that over the past few months he'd begun to lose his senses. Not those senses that prevent a man from betting on a cockfight or bedding his best friend's wife. No, the senses slowly draining away from Siri were those that gave colour and flavour and scent to the world. He could have blamed the drought for the greying of the blossoms or the dulling of their fragrances. But nature couldn't be faulted for the blandness of the spices that had once invigorated a recipe for him. The more intimate Dr Siri Paiboun became with the supernatural, the flatter became the natural world around him.

As the brothers of the postmortem eunuch once known as Mr Tawon were carrying him off to the temple, they passed the crumpled body of a truck-accident victim. It was being borne on an old Halls Menthol Cough Drop advertising billboard, used as a litter, by two young policemen. The billboard had also been a victim of the truck. The officers wore unmatching, ill-fitting uniforms. As they entered, Siri looked at their boyish faces and noted how narrow the gap was becoming between puberty and authority.

'Hey, Uncle,' one of them said, resting his end of the

placard on his knee. 'Where d'ya want this?'

Siri walked up to him and stared into his calf-like eyes. 'Seeing as I'm an only child,' he said, 'and as I haven't been sexually active for fifteen years, it's rather unlikely that you and I are related. In that case, I think you'd be safer off calling me "sir", don't you?'

'You what?'

'Sorry, Doctor,' the other policeboy interrupted. 'He's new. Just down from the country. Is there somewhere we can put this down? It's getting a bit heavy.'

Siri led them through to the cutting room and pulled open the single freezer door.

'Perhaps you could put him in here for me,' Siri said. 'What happened?'

'He got hit by a runaway truck in front of the central Bureau de Poste.'

'How unusual. I take it he didn't see it coming.'

'He didn't see anything, Comrade. He's blind. Or at least he used to be.'

Siri pulled back one of the corpse's eyelids to reveal the cataracts that had expanded the man's pupils and turned them cloudy like opals.

'Quite right. Any idea who he is?'

'Not a clue,' said the first officer, '… sir. I thought that's what you were supposed to tell us.'

'Well, boy, unless he's got his name tattooed on his backside, your guess is as good as mine. I'm a coroner, not a fortune-teller.'