Disco for the Departed

Colin Cotterill

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Extract

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GUESTHOUSE NUMBER ONE

Dr Siri lay beneath the grimy mesh of the mosquito net watching the lizard's third attempt. Twice, the small grey creature had scurried up the wall and ventured out across the ceiling. On both occasions the unthinkable had happened. The animal had lost its grip and come plummeting down with a splat onto the bare concrete of the guesthouse floor. For a house lizard this is the equivalent of a man coming unstuck from the ground and falling up with a crash onto the ceiling. Siri could see the stunned confusion on its little puckered face. It looked around to get its bearings then headed once more for the wall.

For over a month, Dr Siri Paiboun, the national coroner, had started to wonder whether his new incarnation might be disruptive to the natural laws of animal behaviour. The peculiarities could have started before, but it wasn't until the mongrel from the ice works began to build a nest in his front yard that he took any notice. She somehow managed to drag old car seats and cement sacks through his front gate and mould them into a very uncomfortable-looking roost. And there she sat patiently, day after day, as if waiting for an unlikely egg. A week later, the paddy mice at the back of the compound formed what could only be described as a gang and started terrorising his neighbour's

cat. This morning, as he was leaving his house in Vientiane for the trip up country, he'd looked back to see a hen on his roof. As there was no sign of a ladder, he had to assume the thing had flown up there. And now the lizard. Even if these were coincidences, it was still very odd.

Ever since Siri had discovered his shaman ancestry a lot of strange things had happened in his life. He worked the nail of his pinky finger around the inside of his mouth, counting off his teeth. It was a habit he'd started a few months earlier when he found out he was different. All there – all thirty-three of them. The same number of teeth as old Prince Phetsarat the magician; the same number as some of the most respected shamans in the region; the same number as the Lord Buddha himself. Siri was in hallowed company. But even though he had the right number of teeth, he hadn't yet taken control of his abilities.

It was little more than a year ago that Siri had learned he hosted the spirit of an ancient Hmong shaman – Yeh Ming. Until then, he'd always thought his contact with departed souls in his dreams was some kind of mental illness. He hadn't bothered to try to interpret messages, hadn't even realised the spirits in his dreams were leaving clues to the manner of their deaths. But, all that had changed the previous year. Yeh Ming had become more active, woken up you could say, and had drawn the attention of the malevolent spirits of the forest. These evil spirits, these *phibob*, were gunning for Siri's ancestor, and, as Siri was the host, he was suddenly in the line of fire. All those supernatural fireworks were spilling over into Siri's life.

Very little could really shock the old surgeon any more, but he never ceased to be amused by the mysterious events happening around him. His own life seemed to grow more

fascinating every day. While others his age began to wind down the clock into a frail twilight, Siri had become reborn to a period where fantasy and reality were interchangeable. Every day was a kick. He felt more alive than ever. If this were truly some kind of senile insanity, it was one he was secretly enjoying: one he was in no hurry to recover from.

That May, Siri had arrived at his seventy-third birthday and was still as sturdy as a jungle boar. His lungs let him down from time to time but his muscles and his mind were as taut as they'd been in his thirties. His head boasted a shock of thick white hair and his likeable face still drew flirtatious smiles from women half his age. None of his friends could imagine Dr Siri Paiboun running out of steam, not for a long while yet.

Now here he was in Party Guesthouse Number One in the cool north-east of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos and the year was 1977. 'Guesthouse' was hardly an appropriate name for the two-storey building designed by Vietnamese rectangulists a few years earlier. It looked nothing like a house and its inmates were certainly not guests. It was mostly inhabited by those who had sinned, ideologically, against Party lines. Here, the village heads, government officials and army officers of the old royalist regime were lulled into believing they had come for a holiday in the mountains of Huaphan province. Invited to visit the revolutionary headquarters, they were soon moved along to the work camps around Sop Hao on the Vietnamese border. Despite its lack of facilities, the guesthouse was as good as life would get for them for quite some time.

Earlier that evening, Siri and Nurse Dtui had sat

drinking coffee with a group of men from the south who had once held senior ranks in the royalist police force. They still assumed they were merely attending a seminar and would soon return to Vientiane with a new enlightened understanding of the Marxist-Leninist system. The mood had been jolly as they sat on the ground-floor veranda on uncomfortable red vinyl chairs. The men had spent their first afternoon doing 'getting to know you' activities and still wore their paper name tags stapled to their top shirt pockets. Each man's name was followed by the word 'officer' then a number. As if unwilling to break rank, they sat in numerical order around their small circle of chairs.

Siri listened to them tell of their good fortune to be seeing a part of the country that was as alien to the urbanites as any foreign land. They talked of the locals as a tourist would of Africans or peculiar Europeans. Little did they know their brief excursion to the provinces would likely extend to months, in some cases, years. Little did they know they were to be trucked from the comparative luxury of the guesthouse to a site some eighty kilometres away. There they would be assigned to work gangs to rebuild roads, repair bombed bridges and help the local peasants till a booby-trapped land littered with unexploded ordnance. In the evenings they would sit around blackboards in study groups beneath the yellow light of beeswax lamps. They would learn the dates of the most famous battles, the numbers of casualties, and the names of the great leaders of the revolution. This, and often much much worse, was Lao re-education.

Eventually, either by sincere personal choice or through desperation, they would swear undying devotion to the

cause. If they were convincing enough, they might one day be returned to their families. If not, the families would be invited to travel north to join them. Only the women who truly loved their husbands and were prepared to forgo the luxuries of city life would accept such an offer. The majority fled across the Mekhong to take their chances on the Thai side.

But these jolly men on the guesthouse patio knew nothing of this. They still saw the trip as a simple conversion, like switching a motor's consumption from petrol to diesel. They imagined they'd learn a little about communism, have a guided tour of the caves, and go home with snapshots to put in an album. They'd said as much during their chat with Siri and Dtui.

'So, what's a pretty thing like you doing so far from home?' Officer Three had asked of the solidly built young nurse. He was a portly red-faced man who'd learned how to talk to women in dark nightclubs. He'd been staring at her chest since they arrived.

'I'm with my boss,' she said, nodding in Siri's direction.

'Dirty weekend by the looks of it,' said Officer Four, nudging his neighbour in the ribs. Dtui and Siri blushed in unison bringing great howls from the men.

'That would be nice,' Dtui countered with a typical Lao Band-Aid smile that covered no end of emotional cuts and bruises. 'But it's work, I'm afraid.'

'Work, eh? That's what I always told my missus when I was going off for a little weekend R and R,' Officer One confessed proudly. 'What *work* is it you do exactly?' Dtui frowned but didn't snap. Siri was impressed by her composure.

'I'm a nurse. My boss is a surgeon.' She decided nothing

would be gained by telling them she was Siri's trainee at the morgue.

'So they're here playing doctors and nurses,' said Officer Two, producing even more exaggerated laughter from his mates.

It occurred to Siri these men were trying too hard, being too blokey, and the reason was obvious to him. They were afraid. Despite their bravado and their unreasonable expectations, they were in enemy territory and all they had as a weapon was this false camaraderie.

Siri was concerned about their families. He wondered how their wives and children might survive with their breadwinners breaking rocks on a charity road gang. 'Is the Justice Department taking care of your kin while you're up here?' he asked.

Officer Two thought that was a very funny question. 'They haven't paid us a brass *kip* since they took over.' There were no coins in Laos so a brass *kip* would have been worth even less than a paper one. That, in turn, presently stood at six to the US cent. On the occasions there was money available, a policeman under the new system would have received seven thousand *kip* a month plus a small rice ration.

'Then how do you live?'

'Oh, we have resources. Some of us managed to put small nest-eggs together under the old regime. We sent money out of the country. We anticipated the damned Reds coming in and messing things up.'

'Look, I don't want to throw you gentlemen into some hysterical panic here but I'm one of those nasty Reds who spoiled your party,' Siri said.

Officer Two blushed. 'Really? Sorry. You didn't look like … Then, what are you doing here? I mean …'

To undo the damage, Officer One hurriedly asked Dtui where she and the doctor were based.

'Mahosot hospital.'

'Then you're a long way from home, too.'

'You aren't kidding,' Dtui said. 'I haven't been outside Vientiane for twenty years. It's so exotic up here.' She cast a sideways glance at Siri. 'I'm looking forward to seeing my first pog.'

'Your first what?'

'Pog. My ma used to tell me about them when I was little.'

Siri looked away so the policemen wouldn't notice his smile.

'Can't say I've ever heard of them,' the officer confessed. 'What are they?'

'You can't be serious. You haven't heard of a pog? I admit they're rare, but up here in the north-east the animals are never penned up. They all roam around together, the chickens, the dogs, the goats, the pigs. With animals being the way they are, there's a fair amount of experimentation that goes on, if you know what I mean.'

Siri could control his face no longer. He got to his feet and walked over to the front steps to look at the full moon reflected hazily on the surface of the pond. It was a beautiful setting for such a dishonest political racket. He chuckled under his breath but made it sound like a cough. Dtui continued at her most convincing best.

'… and here in Huaphan, probably due to the altitude, or, some say, the sulphur in the water, on occasions, the union of a randy male dog and a sow, produces …'

'You cannot be serious.'

'I swear on my brother's life. I've seen the photos. They

have the face of a pig and the paws and tail of a dog. I can't believe you don't know about them.'

'Yeah, I've heard of 'em,' said Officer Four.

'You haven't,' said Officer Two.

'Now you mention it, I might have seen one on a farm just outside Tha Reua. Didn't know what it was, though. Odd-looking thing,' recalled Officer One.

'That's right,' said Dtui, 'and up here they're everywhere. If you see one around perhaps you could grab it for me. I'd love to take one back for my ma.'

'No problem,' said Officer Four, 'I imagine they're really easy to catch.'

'Well, I'm afraid we have to get up early,' said Officer Two, who obviously knew his curly tail was being tweaked. He stood and stretched painfully like a first-time jogger. The others stood also. 'We have an hour of tilling to do from six in the morning.'

He still sounded like a tourist on an adventure holiday. Siri walked back to the group. 'You be careful where you dig. There are unexploded bombs all over this area.'

The officer chuckled. 'I very much doubt they'd send us into a minefield, Doctor.'

'You just be careful. I don't want to spend tomorrow sewing legs back onto foolhardy policemen.' Although he said nothing more, Siri could think of few more effective mine-clearance techniques than sending a chorus line of corrupt royalist policemen with shovels across a field.

'Have a good night's sleep, you two,' said Officer One with a wink. The others laughed and walked off to their dorm room leaving Siri and Dtui alone on the patio. Dtui poked out her tongue when they were out of sight.

'Creeps,' she said.

'Just victims of the money culture,' Siri said. 'They'll change. Taking away a man's comfort strips him down to basics – lets him see what he really is. Suddenly finding himself with nothing can add a dimension. If they survive the cold and the hunger and diseases up here they'll be more real than they are now, more humble.'

'Ah, you'd find primroses in a pile of poop, Dr Siri. I'm sure you would. But they won't change.'

'Have a little faith, Dtui.'

'Once a pig, always a pig.'

Siri raised his bushy eyebrows. 'Unless it's a pog.'

Once their laughter had died down, they sat looking up at the crags that blended into the night sky.

'Do you think we'll get a chance to do some sightseeing?' Dtui asked.

'Who knows? We don't even know why we're here. They might have us bumbling around all over the north-east. Why, where do you want to go?'

'Mum says there's a temple up near Xieng Khaw with a relic of the Lord Buddha.' Siri gave a wry smile. 'What?'

'Which particular relic is it this time, Nurse Dtui? A tooth? A severed toe? An eyeball?'

'You're an old cynic,' she huffed. 'I'm not telling you.'

'Cynicism has nothing to do with it, dear. It all comes down to mathematics and physiology. Just count the temples around Asia that claim to have an actual bit of the Lord Buddha or his footprint. If all their boasts were true, his holiness would indeed have been a sight to behold. There he'd be plodding around the countryside with feet the size of water urn covers, a couple of thousand teeth crammed into his mouth, and toe and fingernails shedding like the hair on a rabid dog. It doesn't bear thinking about. No wonder people followed him.'

Dtui shifted to the far side of the table. 'Where are you off to?' he asked.

'Nowhere. Just don't want to be sitting beside you when the lightning hits you.'

Siri laughed. 'You obviously haven't been paying attention at your political briefings, comrade. Unless you count the politburo there are no gods. Even if a real one were able to sneak under the Party barbed wire, he'd be a grounded god. They've decommissioned fire and brimstone.'

'No God? I bet your old Karl Marx didn't make this scenery.'

'Heretic.'

'It is lovely up here though, Doc.'

'It certainly is, when you have time to enjoy it.'

'When you aren't dodging bombs, you mean?'

'That's all I did for ten years. That and put back together people who hadn't been so lucky.'

'When do you think they'll tell us why we're here?'

As always they'd been given short notice to get to Wattay Airport with their equipment. Judge Haeng had told them nothing of the mission, just the name of the person who'd contact them the next day.

'Comrade Lit should be here by nine tomorrow.'

'And who's he again?'

'Regional commander – security division.'

'Right. Did you know him when you were based here?'

'I don't recall the name. But when all the senior comrades and the ranking army officers moved down to Vientiane, a lot of young bucks were promoted at a rate of knots up here. Cadres were flying up through the ranks at such young ages I heard the regional quartermaster was still in

diapers when he arrived at his office. They had to confiscate his rattle before they could get any work out of him.' Dtui chuckled. 'I don't know. I might have seen this Lit fellow around.'

'Does he know you've brought your cuddly and gorgeous assistant?'

'I'm sure he'll be delighted. Who wouldn't be, after all?'

Again, the calm around them lulled the two into a peaceful silence. An amateur fisherman cast his mushroom-shaped net out into the inky black pond. The squirrels chirped like sparrows with sore throats. Dtui looked towards the staircase behind Siri.

'Doc.'

'Yes?'

'At the top of the stairs …'

'I don't know.'

'How do you know what I'm going to ask?'

'You're going to ask why there's a partition up there with an armed guard sitting in front of it.'

'Ooh, you're good. Did your spirits tell you what I was thinking?'

'No need. I read your mind myself. You're insatiably curious, so it was only a matter of time before you asked. I also heard you flirting with the guard.'

'He wasn't very sociable.'

'You mean he wouldn't tell you what's behind the partition?'

'Not a word. I hate mysteries.'

'No doubt we'll work it out before we go.'

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But now, in his lumpy kapok bunk, drowsily watching the moths fly clockwise around the bulb, Siri too was contemplating the mystery behind the plywood partition. Access to a small upper wing of the building was blocked. From the grounds he was able to estimate there were three or four rooms up there. He wondered what was so special about them. He clawed his fingers through his thick white hair and sighed. It was some time after 11PM and he feared he'd be unable to find any sleep at all. There was too much on his mind. If he didn't think himself awake all night, *they* would certainly keep him up. He reached for the ancient white amulet that hung on a tightly woven white plait of woman's hair around his neck. As his fingers made contact, a surge of energy ran in a current the length of his body. He could suddenly hear them even more clearly chattering in the distance. His feelings and instincts of a few months hence had begun to take on tangible forms. Spirits he once encountered only in his sleep had become bold. Some even appeared in daylight, often at the most inopportune moments. Even before the old Russian Mi-14 helicopter had come in to land that afternoon, he could feel the souls of the thousands killed during the war. They passed through him like sightseers at an historical palace, deciding whether he was a shaman they could trust.

All around Guesthouse Number One, their voices could be heard: mothers calling their children in from the open fields, old women crying for the old men they'd left behind, toddlers giggling – too innocent to realise they'd been dead for many years. How could Siri sleep to such an accompaniment? Then, as if things weren't already bad enough, at about midnight the awful disco music started up. It destroyed any hope of sleep. He wondered what

type of people would start dancing in the middle of the night, how anyone could enjoy such an ugly Western din. Or, perhaps this was one of the Party's torture techniques to punish the officials from Vientiane. He could think of few things more cruel.