The Coroner's Lunch

Colin Cotterill

Published by Quercus

Extract

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by

Quercus
21 Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1A 2NS

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB) 1 84724 069 0
ISBN-13 978 1 84724 069 9
ISBN (TPB) 1 84724 070 4
ISBN-13 978 1 84724 070 5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by e-type, Liverpool

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF LAOS, OCTOBER 1976

Tran, Tran, and Hok broke through the heavy end-of-wet-season clouds. The warm night air rushed against their reluctant smiles and yanked their hair vertical. They fell in a neat formation, like sleet. There was no time for elegant floating or fancy aerobatics; they just followed the rusty bombshells that were tied to their feet with pink nylon string.

Tran the elder led the charge. He was the heaviest of the three. By the time he reached the surface of Nam Ngum reservoir, he was already ahead by two seconds. If this had been the Olympics, he would have scored a 9.98 or thereabouts. There was barely a splash. Tran the younger and Hok-the-twice-dead pierced the water without so much as a pulse-beat between them.

A quarter of a ton of unarmed ordnance dragged all three men quickly to the smooth muddy bottom of the lake and anchored them there. For two weeks, Tran, Tran, and Hok swayed gently back and forth in the current and entertained the fish and algae that fed on them like diners at a slow-moving noodle stall.

1

VIENTIANE, TWO WEEKS LATER

It was a depressing audience, and there were going to be a lot more like it. Now that Haeng, the spotty-faced magistrate, was back, Siri would have to explain himself every damn Friday, and kowtow to a man young enough to be his grandson.

In the jargon of the Marxist–Leninists, the sessions were known as 'burden-sharing tutorials'. But after the first hour in front of Judge Haeng's warped plywood desk, Dr Siri's burden had become *more* weighty. The judge, fresh off the production line, had taken great delight in casting un-expert doubts on Siri's reports and correcting his spelling.

'And what do you put the loss of blood down to?' Judge Haeng asked.

Siri wondered more than once whether he was deliberately being asked trick questions to establish the state of his mind. 'Well.' He considered it for a moment. 'The body's inability to keep it in?' The little judge h'mmed and looked back down at the report. He wasn't even bright enough for sarcasm. 'Of course, the fact that the poor man's legs had been cut off above the knees might have had something to do with it. It's all there in the report.'

'You may believe it's all here in the report, Comrade Siri, but you seem to be very selective as to what information you share with your readers. I'd like to see much more detail in the future, if you don't mind. And to be honest, I don't see

how you can be so sure it was the loss of blood that killed him, rather than, say…'

'Heart failure?'

'Exactly. It would have been a terrible shock when his legs were severed. How do you know he didn't have a heart attack? He wasn't a young man.'

With each of the previous three cases they'd debated, Haeng had somehow twisted the facts around to the possibility of a natural death, but this was his most creative suggestion. It struck Siri that the judge would be delighted if all the case reports that came through his office were headed 'cardiac arrest'.

True, the fisherman's heart had stopped beating, but it was the signal announcing his death rather than the cause of it. The newly armour-plated military launch had crashed into the concrete dock at Tar Deua. With all the extra weight, it lay low in the water. Fortunately for the crew, the collision was cushioned by the longboat man standing in his little wooden craft against the wall, with no way to escape. Like a surprising number of fishermen on the Mekhong, he'd never learned to swim.

The overlapping metal deck sliced him apart like a scythe cutting through rice stalks, and the railing pinned him upright where he had been standing. The embarrassed captain and his crew pulled him – his torso – up onto the deck, where he lay in numb confusion, chattering and laughing as if he didn't know he was missing a couple of limbs.

The boat reversed and people on the bank watched the legs topple into the water and sink. They likely swelled up in a few hours and returned to the surface. They had worn odd flip-flops, so the chances of them being re-united in time for the funeral were poor.

'If you intend to cite a heart attack for every cause of death, I don't really see why we need a coroner at all,

Comrade.' Siri had reached his limit, and it was a limit that floated in a vast distant atmosphere. After seventy-two years, he'd seen so many hardships that he'd reached the calmness of an astronaut bobbing about in space. Although he wasn't much better at Buddhism than he was at communism, he seemed able to meditate himself away from anger. Nobody could recall him losing his temper.

Dr Siri Paiboun was often described as a short-arsed man. He had a peculiar build, like a lightweight wrestler with a stoop. When he walked, it was as if his bottom half was doing its best to keep up with his top half. His hair, clipped short, was a dazzling white. Where a lot of Lao men had awakened late in life to find, by some miracle of the Lord above, their hair returned to its youthful blackness, Siri had more sensible uses for his allowance than Yu Dum Chinese dye. There was nothing fake or added or subtracted about him. He was all himself.

He'd never had much success with whiskers, unless you counted eyebrows as whiskers. Siri's had become so overgrown, it took strangers a while to make out his peculiar eyes. Even those who'd travelled ten times around the world had never seen such eyes. They were the bright green of well-lighted snooker-table felt, and they never failed to amuse him when they stared back from his mirror. He didn't know much about his real parents, but there had been no rumours of aliens in his blood. How he'd ended up with eyes like these, he couldn't explain to anyone.

Forty minutes into the 'shared burden tutorial', Judge Haeng still hadn't been able to look into those eyes. He'd watched his pencil wagging. He'd looked at the button dangling from the cuff of the doctor's white shirt. He'd stared up through the broken louvre window as if the red star were sparkling in the evening sky outside the walls of the Department of Justice. But he hadn't once looked into Siri's brilliant green eyes.

'Of course, Comrade Siri, we have to have a coroner because, as you well know, any organised socialist system must be accountable to its brothers and sisters. Revolutionary consciousness is maintained beneath the brilliance of the beam from the socialist lighthouse. But the people have a right to see the lighthouse keeper's clean underwear drying on the rocks.'

Hell, the boy was good at that: he was a master at coming up with exactly the wrong motto for the right situation. Everyone went home and analysed their mottoes, and realised too late that they had no bearing on . . . anything. Siri stared at the sun-starved boy and felt kind of sorry for him.

His only claim to respect was a Soviet law degree on paper so thin, you could see the wall behind it. He'd been trained, rapidly, to fill one of the many gaps left by the fleeing upper classes. He'd studied in a language he didn't really understand and been handed a degree he didn't really deserve. The Soviets added his name to the roster of Asian communists successfully educated by the great and gloriously enlightened socialist Motherland.

Siri believed a judge should be someone who acquired wisdom layer by layer over a long life, like tree rings of knowledge; believed you couldn't just walk into the position by guessing the right answers to multiple choice tests in Russian.

'Can I go?' Siri stood and walked towards the door without waiting for permission.

Haeng looked at him like he was lower than dirt. 'I think we'll need to discuss attitude at our next tutorial. Don't you?'

Siri smiled and resisted making a comment.

'And, Doctor,' the coroner stood with his nose to the door, 'why do you suppose the Democratic Republic issues quality black shoes to its government officials free of charge?'

Siri looked down at his ragged brown sandals. 'To keep Chinese factories open?'

Judge Haeng lowered his head and moved it from side to side in slow motion. It was a gesture he'd learned from older men, and it didn't quite suit him.

'We have left the jungle, Comrade. We have escaped from the caves. We now command respect from the masses, and our attire reflects our standing in the new society. Civilised people wear shoes. Our comrades expect it of us. Do you understand what I'm telling you?' He was speaking slowly now, like a nurse to a senile patient.

Siri turned back to him with no sign that he'd been humiliated. 'I believe I do, Comrade. But I think if the proletariat are going to kiss my feet, the least I can do is give them a few toes to wrap their lips around.'

He yanked open the sticky door and left.

Siri walked home through the dusty Vientiane streets at the end of a long Friday. He usually kept a cheery smile on his face for anyone who wanted it. But he'd noticed that fewer people returned it these days. The merchants along his route who knew him always had a friendly comment, but strangers were starting to misread his expression. '*What does he know, this little man? What does he have to smile about?*'

He passed government women at the end of their day jobs. They wore khaki blouses and traditional black *phasin* that hung stiffly to their ankles. Each managed to make her uniform unique in some way: a brooch, a different collar, a fold in the skirt that was their own.

He passed schoolchildren in scrubbed white shirts and itchy red scarves. They seemed baffled by their day, too confused to giggle or mess around. Siri felt the same.

He passed dark, half-empty shops that all seemed to sell the same things. He passed the fountain whose spouts had

become cave dwellings for insects, and unfinished buildings whose bamboo scaffolding was green with ivy.

It took him twenty minutes to walk home: just enough time to get the annoying image of Judge Haeng out of his mind. Siri was staying in an old French two-storey house with a small front garden crammed with vegetables. The building needed just about everything: paint, mortar, uncracked glass, tiles, you name it; but it wasn't likely to get any of them for some time.

Saloop lurched out from the cabbages like a crocodile, as was its way, and, even in semi-consciousness, started to howl at Siri. The dog had howled at him and him alone for the entire ten months he'd been there. Nobody could explain what motivated the slovenly creature to pick on the doctor as it did, but there were things going on in that dog's mind that no human could fathom.

As it did every day, Saloop's eerie wail inspired a chorus of barks and howls the length of the street and beyond and, as usual, Siri creaked open the front door to the accompaniment of dogs. He could never sneak home unnoticed. Even the staircase betrayed him. Under his footsteps, its groans echoed in the bare hallway and the loose floorboards announced his arrival on the balcony.

Neither the front door nor the door to his room was locked. There was no need. Crime had stopped. His apartment was at the rear overlooking the little Hay Sok temple. He reversed out of his sandals and stepped inside. There was a desk with books waiting for him by the window. A thin mattress was rolled up against one wall under the skirt of a mosquito net. Three peeling vinyl chairs gathered around a tin coffee table, and a small stained sink perched on a thick metal pipe.

The bathroom downstairs was shared with two couples, three kids, and a lady who was the acting head of the teacher training division at the Department of Education. Such were the spoils of a communist victory. But as condi-

tions were no worse than before, nobody complained. He lit the gas on the one-ring range and boiled his kettle for coffee. In a way it felt good to be home.

But this was to be a weekend of strange awakenings. On Friday night he sat at his desk reading by oil lamp until the fussing of the moths got too much for him. His bedroll was placed so he could see the moon emerging from behind one cloud, and the next, and the next, until he was hypnotised into a peaceful sleep.

Siri's dream world had always been bizarre. In his childhood, the images that lurked there constantly interrupted his sleep. The sane woman who raised him would come to his bed and remind him that these were *his* dreams inside *his* head, and nobody had more right to be in there than he. He learned how to walk tall through his nightmares and not to be afraid of what happened there.

Although he stopped being scared, he never did gain control of them. He couldn't keep out unwanted visitors, for one thing. There were a lot of strangers loitering in his dreams with little or no intention of entertaining him. They lurked, laid about, idled, as if Siri's head was a waiting room. He often felt as if his dreams were a backstage to someone else's.

The most peculiar visitors to his subconscious were the dead. Since that first mortality, the first bullet-ridden man to die on his operating table, all those who'd passed from here to there in front of him had taken the trouble to pay him a visit.

When he was a young doctor, he'd wondered whether he was being punished for not saving them. None of his colleagues shared these hauntings, and a psychologist he once worked with in Vietnam suggested they were merely manifestations of his own guilt. All doctors wonder whether they could have done more for their patients. In Siri's case,

the learned man believed, these doubts came in visual form. Siri was calmed by the fact that in the dreams the departed didn't seem to blame him; they were just bystanders, watching events with him. He was never threatened by them. The psychologist assured him this was a good sign.

Since Siri had started working as a coroner, coming into contact with the bodies of people he hadn't known when alive, these visitations had become more profound. He was somehow able to know the feelings and personalities of the departed. It didn't seem to matter how long it had been since life had drained from the body; his dream world could spiritually reassemble the person. He could have conversations with the completed whole, and get a feeling of the essence of what that person had been in real life.

Of course, Siri hadn't been able to mention these reconstructions to his friends or colleagues. He didn't see it would be to anyone's advantage to admit that he turned into a raving lunatic after dark. His condition did no harm, and it did encourage him to show more respect to cadavers, once he knew the former owners would be back.

With such mysteries going on in Siri's sleep, it was hardly surprising he often awoke confused. On this particular Saturday morning, he found himself in one of those neither-one-nor-the-other dimensions. He was aware he was in his room and that two of his fingers had been bitten by midges. He heard the dripping of the tap. He could smell the smoke of leaves burning in the temple yard. But he was still dreaming.

On one of the vinyl chairs there was a man. The morning light filtered through the cloth curtain immediately behind his head. From inside the mosquito net, Siri couldn't make out his face, but there was no mistaking who he was. He had no shirt and his frail torso was blue with old tattooed mantras. He wore a chequered loincloth, below which two leg stubs rested on the seat. The congealed blood matched the vinyl.

'How are you feeling?' Siri asked him. It was an odd question to pose to a dead man, but this was a dream after all. He became aware of the high-pitched howling of the dogs from the lane out front. All the signs of consciousness were gathering, but the longboat man still refused to leave.

He was sitting, looking back at Siri with a toothless smile smeared across the bottom of his face. Then he glanced away and pointed his long bony finger in front of him. Siri had to sit up against his pillow to see. On the tin coffee table there was a bottle of Mekhong whisky. At least it was a Mekhong bottle, but it contained something darker and denser. It could have been blood, but was that just Siri's morbid fancy at work?

He lay back on his pillow and wondered how much more aware of his environment he needed to be before the old man would leave. Then the curtain fluttered slightly and more temple smoke puffed in on the breeze. And in the second he was distracted, a doubt was cast. The fisherman's head could have been a fold in the curtain, his body the indentation made by countless backs that had slumped in the chair before him.

As if some conductor had swiped his baton through the air, the dog chorus fell silent and Siri was left with the dripping of the tap. There was no doubt now that he was awake. He marvelled again at the magic of dreams, *his* dreams, and chuckled to think that one of his inmates might have been trying to escape.

Suddenly refreshed, and mysteriously elated, he pulled back his mosquito net and got up. He saw the midge that had been trapped inside with him and feasted gloriously on his finger's blood. It flew to the window and out to boast of its coup.

Siri put the kettle on, drew the ill-fitting curtain, and carried his small transistor radio to the coffee table. It was a sin, but one he delighted in.

Lao radio broadcasts boomed from public address speakers all over the city from 5 am on. Some lucky citizens had the honour of being blasted from their beds by statistics of the People's National Rice Harvest coming directly through their window. Others' houses vibrated to reminders that salt borders would keep slugs off their vegetables.

But Siri was in a blissful black hole, far enough from the PAs for their messages to be no more than a distant hum. He listened instead to his beloved transistor. By keeping the volume down, he could tune into world news on the Thai military channel. The world had receded somewhat on Lao radio recently.

Naturally, Thai radio and television were banned in the People's Democratic Republic. You wouldn't be arrested for listening, but your District Security Council member would knock loudly on your door and shout for all the neighbours to hear: *'Comrade, don't you realise that listening to decadent foreign propaganda will only distort your mind? Aren't we all content here with what we have? Why do we need to give satisfaction to the capitalist pigs by listening to their pollution?'*

Your name would be added to a list of grade-four subversives and, theoretically, your co-workers would cease to have complete trust in you. But as far as Siri was concerned, the edict only succeeded in depriving the Lao people of some jolly entertainment.

The Thais were devastated that evil communists had moved in next door. Their paranoid military could never be accused of subtlety. Siri loved to listen to their broadcasts. He honestly believed that if the politburo allowed free access to Thai radio, people would decide for themselves which regime they'd prefer to live under.

He'd listened to 'expert' commentaries on the Reds' inborn taste for wife-sharing, an infirmity that caused such confusion in their society that 'incest was inevitable'. How

communism had led to a dramatic increase in two-headed births he was uncertain, but Thai radio had the figures to prove it.

Saturday morning was his favourite because they assumed the Lao would be gathered by their radios on the weekend, desperate for propaganda. But today Siri was distracted. He didn't even get around to turning on the radio. He brought his thick brown Vietnamese coffee to the table, sat in his favourite chair, and inhaled the delicious aroma. It smelled a lot better than it tasted.

He was about to take a sip when the light from the window reflected something on the surface of the tin coffee table. It was a circle of water, the kind you get from a damp glass. This was nothing incredible, except that he hadn't put anything on the table that morning. His cup was dry and it hadn't left his hand. And in Vientiane's climate, this moisture could not have been left over from the previous evening.

He drank some coffee and looked at the ring of water calmly, waiting for an answer to come to mind. He looked up at the chair where the morning shadows had played tricks on him. If he wanted to be perverse, he could admit that the ring was in the spot where the longboat man's whisky bottle had sat. He turned to the shelf on the wall behind him and ripped a sheet of paper from the roll there.

But when he turned back to the table there was no ring of water.

His second strange awakening that weekend wasn't so occult. Miss Vong from the Department of Education had a habit of not knocking on the door until she'd walked through it. She'd often caught Siri putting clothes on or taking them off, but she always looked at him as if it was his fault. If he'd done the same at her apartment, he'd be facing a court summons for certain.

But on this Sunday morning, he was still fast asleep when

she arrived, so he knew it had to be early. The scent of temple incense had already filled the room, but the roosters were still dreaming of magical flights over mountains and lakes.

'Come on, sleepy. Time to get up.'

As she had no children of her own, this annoying woman had taken to mothering everybody. She went to the single curtain and yanked it open. The light didn't stream in, it oozed. It was an early hour indeed. She stood by the window with her hands on her hips. 'We have an irrigation canal to dig.'

His mind groaned. What had happened to weekends, to free time, to days off? His Saturday mornings at work invariably became days, and here they were, stealing his Sunday too. He pried open one eye.

Miss Vong was dressed in corduroy working trousers and a sensible long-sleeved shirt buttoned at neck and wrist. She wore her thinning hair in pigtails and reminded Siri of the Chinese peasant eternalised in Mao posters. Chinese propaganda skimped on facial features, as nature had done with Miss Vong. She was somewhere between thirty and sixty, with the build of an underfed teenaged boy.

'What torture is this? Leave me alone.'

'I will not. You deliberately missed the community painting of the youth centre last month. I'm certainly not going to let you miss out on the chance to dig the overflow canal.'

Community service in the city of Vientiane wasn't a punishment; it was a reward for being a good citizen. It was the authorities' gift to the people. They didn't want a single man, woman, or child to miss out on the heart-swelling pride that comes from resurfacing a road or dredging a stream. The government knew the people would gladly give up their only day off for such a treat.

'I've got a cold,' he said, pulling the sheet over his head. He heard the tinkle of water filling a kettle and the pop of the gas. He felt the tickle and heard the rustle of his

mosquito net being tethered to the hook on the wall. He heard the swish of a straw brush across his floor.

'That's why I'm fixing you a nutritious cup of tea with a twist of—'

'I hate tea.'

'No you don't.'

He laughed. 'I thought after seventy-two years, I might know what I hate and what I don't.'

'You need to build up your strength for the digging.'

'What happened to all the prison inmates? They used to do all this. Dig ditches, unplug sewers.'

'Dr Siri, I'm surprised at you. Sometimes I wonder if you really did fight for the revolution. There's no longer any excuse for the uneducated and ignorant to be doing all our dirty work. We're all perfectly capable of lifting a hoe and swinging an axe.'

'…and dissecting a cancerous liver,' he mumbled under the cover.

'All our ill-advised criminal types are undergoing re-education at the islands. You know that. Now. Are you getting up, or do I have to drag you out of there?'

He decided to punish her for her unsolicited familiarity.

'No. I'll get up. But I have to warn you, I'm naked and I have a morning erection. It's nothing sexual, you understand. It's a result of pressure on the…'

There was a slight click and the battering of loose boards on the verandah. He peeled down the sheet and looked triumphantly around the empty room.

When he went downstairs, he found two trucks loaded with drowsy silent neighbours, obviously overcome with delight. Area 29C was providing the labour for Irrigation Canal Section 189. It would take the better part of the day, but a sticky rice, salt fish, and *tamnin* ivy lunch would be provided.

He shook off Saloop's lethargic charge and climbed onto

the rear truck. He'd spotted Miss Vong on the front one, lecturing the young couple from the room opposite his. He nodded and joked with his neighbours as the convoy set off. They nodded and joked back. But none of these good moods could be described as sincere.

Despite having joined the Communist Party for entirely inappropriate reasons, Siri had been a paid-up member for forty-seven years. If the truth were to be told, he was a heathen of a communist. He'd come to believe two conflicting ideas with equal conviction: that communism was the only way man could be truly content; and that man, given his selfish ways, could never practise communism with any success. The natural product of these two views was that man could never be content. History, with its procession of disgruntled political idealists, tended to prove him right.

After clawing his way through a French education system dense and overgrown with restrictions against the poor, he had finally proved that a country boy could make something of himself. He found a rare, benevolent French sponsor, who sent him to Paris. There he became a competent but not brilliant medical student. France wasn't renowned for making life easier for those poor souls born outside its borders. It was every *homme* for himself.

But Siri was used to struggling. In his first two years at Ancienne, without distractions, he was in the top 30 per cent of his class. His tutors agreed he had great promise, 'for an Asian'. But like many a good man before him, he soon discovered that all the potential in the world was no match for a nice pair of breasts. He found himself in third-year pathology concentrating not on the huge blackboard crammed with its neat diagrams, but on the slow-breathing sweater of Boua. She was a red-faced Lao nursing student who sat by the window whatever the weather. He could generally tell from the sweater just how cold it was outside.

In the summer, it became a slow-breathing blouse with more buttons undone than was absolutely necessary. He barely scraped through pathology and plummeted into the bottom 20 per cent bracket overall.

By the fourth year, he and Boua were engaged and sharing a room so small, the bed had been sawn short so the door could open. She was a healthy, well-curved girl from Laos' ancient royal capital of Luang Prabang. Her family was blue-blooded royalist from generations back. But while her parents knelt and bowed at the feet of the passing king and tossed orchid petals before him, she was in her room plotting his demise.

She had learned of the French Communist Party from her first lover, a skinny young tutor from Lyons. At the first opportunity, she set off for her Mecca. Whereas Siri had come to Paris to become a doctor, Boua was studying nursing as a pretext: she was actually in Paris to become the best communist she could be, in order to return to elevate the downtrodden masses in her homeland.

She made it clear to Siri that if he wanted her hand, he had to embrace the red flag also. He did want her hand, and the rest of her, and considered four evenings a week, the odd Sunday, and five francs a month, cheap at half the price. At first, the thought of attending meetings that espoused the fall of the great capitalist empire made him uneasy. He was quite fond of the music of capitalism and fully expected to dance to it as soon as the chance presented itself. He'd been poor all his life, a state he was hoping to recover from as a doctor. But guilt at having such thoughts eventually overtook him.

So it was that communism and Boua conspired to damage his hopes and dreams. By embracing his fiancée and her red flag, he was slowly tearing himself from the grasp of medicine. In order to pass his fifth year, he had to take several make-up exams. By the time he reached his practicum, he had two black stars on the front of his personal file. They

indicated that the student therein had to be an exceptional intern if he didn't want to be loaded on an early Airopostale flight and forfeit his sponsor's fees.

Fortunately, Siri was a natural doctor. The patients adored him, and the staff at the Hôtel Dieu Hospital thought so highly of him that the administration offered him the chance to stay on in France and work there full-time. But his heart was with Boua, and when she returned to further The Cause in her homeland, he was at her side.

On Monday, Siri walked down to the Mekhong River and stood for a while. The rains had held on stubbornly that year, but he was sure they were now gone for another five months. It was a brisk November morning and the sun hadn't yet found the strength to dry the grasses on the bank. He let the cool dew soak his feet and wondered how long the Party's shiny vinyl shoes would survive the next rains.

He walked along the embankment and kicked up scents from the crow shit blossoms that grew there. On the far bank, Thailand stared rudely back at him, its boats floating close to its waterfront. The river that was once a channel between two countries had now become a barrier.

In front of Mahosot Hospital, he sat on a wobbly stool beside the road and ate stale *foi* noodles purchased from a cart. Nothing really tasted fresh any more. But with all the diseases he'd been exposed to over the years, it wouldn't make a bit of difference to his health. He could probably inject himself with salmonella and it would pass straight through him.

With no other excuses to delay his arrival at work, he walked between the shoebox buildings towards his office. The hospital had been put together without style or grace by the French and was basically a village of concrete bunkers. He hesitated in front of his own building before stepping inside. The sign over the door said morgue in French. The mat beneath it, his own personal touch, said 'Welcome' in English.

Only two of the rooms in the blockhouse had natural light. One of these was his office. He shared it with his staff of two, a staff that Judge Haeng rudely referred to as one and a half.

'Good morning, Comrades.' He walked into the grey cement room and went over to his desk.

Dtui looked up from her Thai fan magazine.

'Good health, doctor.' She was a solid young nurse with a well-washed but rather craggy face and a happy mouth. Her first reaction to everything was to smile, and goodness knows, she didn't have a lot to smile about.

'I doubt whether the Department of Information and Culture would be happy to see you reading such bourgeois perversions.'

She grinned at the doctor's comment. 'I'm just reminding myself how repulsive the capitalist system can be, Comrade.' She held up a badly registered three-colour print of a television star wearing a miniskirt. 'I mean, can you see me in something like that?'

Siri smiled to himself and raised his eyebrows. A man rocking in the corner of the office attracted his attention. 'Ah, good morning, Mr Geung.'

The man smiled when he heard his name and looked up. 'Good morning, Dr Comrade. It's … it's going to be a hot one.' He nodded his agreement with his own comment.

'Yes, Mr Geung. I believe you're correct. Do we have any customers today?'

Geung laughed as he always did at Siri's permanent joke. 'No customers today, Dr Comrade.'

This was it. This was the team he'd inherited, the job he didn't want, the life he didn't expect to be leading. For almost a year, he'd been the country's head and only coroner. He was the first to confess to his lack of qualifications and enthusiasm for the job.

The first month of his on-the-job training had been

ridiculous. The only Lao doctor with a background in performing autopsies had crossed the river, allegedly in a rubber inner tube, long before Siri's arrival. So, apart from Mr Geung, who had acquired a massive but well-concealed body of information as that doctor's assistant, there was nobody to teach Siri how to do his new job.

Once he'd agreed to postpone his retirement, he set about learning his trade from a couple of slightly charred French textbooks. He brought an old music stand from the abandoned American school and used it to hold the books open while he cut and sliced away at his first cases. With one eye on the music stand, he performed like a concert coroner playing away on the innards of the corpses. 'Turn,' he would say, and Dtui turned the page. He worked through the numbers as recommended by French pathologists of 1948.

He'd performed a good deal of battlefield surgery over the years, but maintenance of the living was a very different science from the investigation of the departed. There were procedures that needed to be followed, observations that needed to be made. He hadn't expected, at seventy-two, to be learning a new career. When he had arrived in Vientiane for the first time with the victorious Pathet Lao on 23 November 1975, there had been something far more pleasurable on his mind.

After the landmark party conference of 5 December, the mood had been higher than a rocket. The celebrations were awash in vat after vat of freshly made Lao rice spirits. Cheeks were bruised from manly kisses.

The crown prince, sombre from suit to countenance, had read aloud his father's notice of abdication and, naturally, declined an invitation to join the festivities. The Pathet Lao, after decades of cave-based insurgency, had become the rulers of Laos. The kingdom was now a republic. It was a dream many of the old soldiers, in their heart of hearts, had believed would never come true.

In the spirit of jungle fighters, they moved the trestle tables out of the banquet room and put down straw mats. There they sat in circles relishing their victory. Food and drink were replenished throughout the evening by pretty young cadres in thick lipstick and green uniforms.

Siri figured he'd probably spent more of his life cross-legged on the ground than he had in chairs. He, too, was in a buoyant mood that day, if not for the same reasons as his comrades. He would have returned to his guesthouse and slept the sleep of the victors if it hadn't been for Senior Comrade Kham.

The tall, gaunt senior party member took advantage of a vacant spot in the circle beside Siri and sat himself down.

'So, Comrade Siri, we've actually done it.'

'So it would seem.' Siri was unused to rice whisky in such volume, and he wasn't completely in control of his mouth or the tongue inside it. 'But I have the feeling we're here to celebrate the end of something rather than the beginning.'

'Marx tells us that all beginnings are difficult.'

'Nothing you or Marx have ever known could prepare you for the problems you've got coming. But, hell, Kham, you certainly shut the doubters up.' He raised his glass and chinked it against Kham's, but quaffed alone. The comrade's eyes were couched deep in their sockets, like snakes looking out at the world.

'You say "you" as if you don't plan to be helping us with our problems.'

Siri laughed. 'Comrade Kham, I'm almost as old as the century. I'm tired. I think I've earned my small garden and my slow coffee mornings, afternoons of reading for pleasure, and early nights with a sweet cognac to ease me into sleep.' Kham raised his glass to the prime minister who sat red-faced and blissfully happy in a far circle. They both drained their glasses and called for another.

'That's odd. As I recall, you don't have any family living.

How exactly were you planning to support this decadent lifestyle?'

'I assumed that forty-six years of membership of the party would entitle me…'

'To a pension?' Kham laughed rudely.

'Why not?'

Siri always believed, always assumed, that if ever the struggle was won, he would retire. It had been his dream on damp nights in the forests of the north. It was his prayer over the body of every young boy or girl he'd failed to pull back from death. He'd believed for so long that it would happen, he took it for granted that everyone else knew it too.

'My old friend,' Kham continued, 'I would have expected you to know better after forty-six years. Socialism means contributing for as long as you still have something to give. When you start to forget where your mouth is and dribble egg down your shirt, when you need to pack towels into your underpants to keep yourself dry, *that's* when the State will show its gratitude. Communism looks after its infirm.

'But look at you. You're still in sparkling health. You have a sharp mind. "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." How selfish it would be to deny your services to the country you've striven to free from tyranny.'

Siri looked across to the high circle. The president, a reformed member of the royal family, had a sweet, mascara'd soldier on either side of him and had begun to sing them a revolutionary Vietnamese song. He became the focus of attention and conversations hushed around the room. The song finished half way through the second verse when he forgot the words and the comrades erupted into cheers and applause. A small orchestra of bamboo and wood instruments started up on the stage and the conversations continued in a more dignified manner.

Siri hadn't yet been able to shed his disappointment. He waited for Kham to finish a heated conversation to his right and engaged him with more force than the man was used to.

'I take it my situation has already been discussed by the politburo.'

'It has. You've impressed us all with your quiet dedication over the years.'

'Quiet', Siri took to mean 'passive'. Over the past ten years, he'd ceased to display the revolutionary passion expected of him and had been shunted off to Party Guesthouse Number Three, away from all the policy-making and decision-taking in Xam Neua. There he tended to damaged cadres returning from the battlefields and lost touch with the zealous comrades and their politics.

Kham eased his haunches against Siri's and put his arm around him. The doctor was himself a very tactile character but this gesture, in this situation, he considered disrespectful.

'We have allotted you a role of great responsibility.'

The words left Kham as a reward but hit Siri like a splintery wooden club across the face. He needed responsibility like he needed another head.

'Why?'

'Because you are the best man we have for the job.'

'I've never been the best man for any job, ever.'

'Don't be so modest. You're an experienced surgeon. You have an inquisitive mind and you don't take things at face value. We've decided to make you the Republic's chief police coroner.' He looked into Siri's green eyes for a hint of pride, but saw only bewilderment. He might as well have told him he was to be the Republic's new balloon bender or unicyclist.

'I've never done an autopsy in my life.'

'Ah. It's all the same. Putting them together: taking them apart.'

'It certainly is not.'

He didn't say this with any aggression but Kham was still

taken aback to be contradicted so brazenly. The senior party members had become used to a level of respect. Siri had a habit of telling them when they were wrong, which was another reason for his removal to the jungle.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I wouldn't even know where to start. Of course I can't do it. It's a huge job. What do you think I am?'

Even with the glow of whisky still shining from his snake eyes, Comrade Kham was disturbed by Siri's lack of gratitude. He tightened his grip around the old man's shoulders and barked into his ear.

'I think you are a cog in this great revisionist machine which now powers our beloved country. You are a cog just as I am a cog and the president is a cog. Each cog can help our machine run smoothly. But by the same token, one broken cog can jam and stop the works completely. At this important time in our creation, we need all our cogs meshing and co-ordinated. Don't let us down. Don't stop the machine, Siri.'

He gave one last painful squeeze, nodded, and went off to insert himself into another circle. Siri, in a daze, looked around him at the revisionist mechanics. Lubricated by the alcohol, the wheels had already become misshapen. At one point, two wheels had buckled together into a figure-of-eight. There were big important cogs and little insignificant ones, some of whom had gone off to the toilet and not returned. This left large gaps in their wheels. Others were huddled together in small sub-wheels ignoring the big machine altogether.

Siri, suddenly depressed, explained to his wheel that he had to go pee. He staggered in that direction, but walked past the toilet and through the town hall entrance. Guards on either side of the door raised their rifles in salute. He saluted back and yanked his black necktie off. He walked to one of the boy guards and hooked it over the shiny bayonet, where it swung back and forth.

With a grin and thanks, he waved away the drivers of the black secondhand Russian Zil limousines that were waiting to ferry the comrades to their temporary barracks. It was a chilly December morning and there were no stars in the sky, but the way back was a straight line. He walked unsteadily along a deserted Lan Xang Avenue. Ahead of him was the Presidential Palace and a future he didn't much want.