

The Rat Catchers' Olympics (A Dr. Siri Paiboun Mystery)

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The 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow is already rife with controversy, but when a Lao athlete is accused of murder, it escalates into a full blown international incident. In the twelfth entry to the series, Dr. Siri Paiboun and his quirky team of misfits are on the case in a city and country foreign to them, yet familiar in its corruption of justice.

1980: The People's Democratic Republic of Laos is proud to be competing in its first-ever Olympics. Of course, half the world is boycotting the Moscow Summer Olympic Games to protest the Soviet Union's recent invasion of Afghanistan, but that has made room for athletes from countries that are usually too small or underfunded to be competitive-like Laos.

Ex-national coroner of Laos Dr. Siri Paiboun may be retired, but he and his wife, Madame Daeng, would do just about anything to have a chance to visit Moscow, so Siri finagles them a trip by getting them hired as medical advisers to the Olympians. Most of the athletes are young and innocent village people who have never worn running shoes, much less imagined anything as marvelous as the Moscow Olympic Village. As the competition heats up, however, Siri begins to suspect that one of the athletes is not who he says he is. Fearing a conspiracy, Siri and his friends investigate, liaising in secret with Inspector Phosy back home in Laos to see if the man might be an assassin. Siri's progress is derailed when a Lao Olympian is accused of murder. Now in the midst of a murky international incident, Dr. Siri must navigate not one but two paranoid government machines to make sure justice is done.

Colin Cotterill is the author of eleven other books in the Dr. Siri Paiboun series: The Coroner's Lunch, Thirty-Three Teeth, Disco for the Departed, Anarchy and Old Dogs, Curse of the Pogo Stick, The Merry Misogynist, Love Songs from a Shallow Grave, Slash and Burn, The Woman Who Wouldn't Die, Six and a Half Deadly Sins and I Shot the Buddha. His fiction has won a Dilys Award and a CWA Dagger in the Library. He lives in Chumphon, Thailand, with his wife and five deranged dogs. Comrade Noo looked awful but Siri's prognosis was positive.

"Everything seems to be in working order," he said. "I couldn't have done anything Dtui didn't."

The household clapped.

"So why doesn't he wake up?" asked young Mee.

The girl lived there with her mother and younger brother and several other squatters. It was hard to keep count. Siri and Daeng had turned their government allotted residence into something of a hostel for the homeless and helpless. It was a functioning commune embedded deep in a non-functioning communist state. Siri and Daeng themselves lived above their noodle shop.

"It's called a trauma," said Siri. "Sometimes, something so horrible happens that your mind can't take it anymore. It shuts up shop and puts a 'closed' sign in the window. Comrade Noo is in there and his parts are recovering very slowly but his mind isn't ready to come out. I can't imagine what they did to him but he needs time every bit as much as he needs medicine."

Over some eleven bottles of Lao rice whisky and endless plates of pork lahp and spicy salad, the residents listened to Siri and Daeng's amazing adventures in Thailand. All the couple left out were tales of possession and s²ances and running battles with malevolent

spirits, even though they were true. Just as there were bureaucratic layers of impossibility, so there were supernatural dimensions that rational educated people in the West would never believe to exist.

The average Lao, brought up in a small community, had no doubts that there were spirits. They sought advice from them. They asked for forgiveness. Even the business people in the capital erected spirit houses to placate the ghosts. Many claimed to have seen the phantoms but few would have had the type of relationship Dr. Siri had developed. Despite his scientific training, Siri had been forced to concede that there were spirits. He would have preferred it to be otherwise but he was undeniably possessed by a thousand-year-old shaman by the name of Yeh Ming. The old Hmong had never made direct contact with Siri but had been a magnet for a menagerie of ghosts that had passed in and out of the doctor's life. This science-versus-supernatural dichotomy had fascinated and confounded him in equal measure.

Only recently had Siri learned the fundamentals of communication with the dead. Portents had shown that he would someday gain control over his innate abilities. But he was seventy-five-a few months off seventy-six-living in a population that barely made it past fifty. He was starting to wonder whether being dead would be such a bad thing. It would certainly simplify matters. What better way to communicate with spirits than to become one?

In the meantime, his only functioning spirit guide was a boisterous transvestite fortune-teller by the name of Bpoo. They didn't get along. She was sarcastic and rude and even though she saw the future she kept it to herself. She was forever criticizing the doctor for his slow progress as a medium.

Of late, Siri's social circle had changed somewhat. He spent more time with shamans and healers. During an audience with a witch in the north, for example, he'd made a dubious deal that affected both himself and Daeng. The woman produced elixirs that substituted one condition for another; the witch had replaced Madam Daeng's chronic rheumatism with a tail. This was an exchange Daeng was delighted with; Siri had no complaints. In fact he found her new appendage somewhat erotic.

The witch's solution to Siri's problem, however-that of his inability to talk to spirits-was a little more complicated. And as a result of her elixir he had started to disappear from time to time. He found himself in places created in his own mind. Daeng would turn over in bed to find a warm but empty place beside her. Yet lately, when he was no longer in the same dimension as his wife, he had discovered portals to the other side. He learned that those who resided there believed that the other side was where Siri had come from. All very confusing even to the doctor and not at all helpful when it came to his hobby. Dr. Siri was in fact a most competent amateur detective and as such one should imagine that seeing spirit signs everywhere would be an invaluable asset. Yet only once had he been able to interpret their significance before the case's resolution. Invariably he was left to his own devices to solve mysteries in the old fashioned traditions of his hero, Inspector Maigret.

The old man studied the face of the young fellow sitting opposite. They were in one of those Chinese rooms cluttered with opulent furniture designed to make a visitor feel out of place and inferior. The chairs in which they sat were teak thrones with mother of pearl

inlays that cut into the young man's backside every time he shifted his weight. The only sound was the hum of a hornet trying to find its way back out through the open window.

"I don't just want him dead," said the old man.

"No?" said the youngster.

"No. I want him so dead there's nothing to bury."

"That's not a problem."

"I'm told you have skills," said the old man. He leaned forward for his glass of cranberry tea. The young man nodded.

"As long as you can get me there," he said, "I'll do what needs to be done."

"Of course I can get you there. I just want to be certain the expense will be worth it."

"I don't fail. And as you know I have my own reasons for doing this. It will be a shock for him to see me, assuming he remembers me. And a nasty end is the least I can offer."

The old man smiled and sipped his tea.

Siri and Civilai were sitting on their log on the bank of the Mekhong eating baguettes that Civilai had baked himself. Since his retirement he'd thrown his wife and their cook out of the kitchen and established a culinary occupation there. Thanks to the current d² tente with Thailand he'd been able to stock up with ingredients. Today's baguettes contained processed ham with mustard to be washed down with one more bottle of Chardonnay.

Ugly the dog growled in his sleep at Siri's feet.

"So, tell me," said Civilai. "How on earth did your dog make it back from Thailand? I can't see him chasing the plane from Bangkok."

"Although I'm sure he could," said Siri. "But no. We'd left him in Udon with a friend. Once we were sure we wouldn't be flogged in the dungeons below Chitlada Palace we phoned him-the friend, not the dog. He drove Ugly to the river and launched him back home. He was waiting for us at the noodle shop when we got there."

"You know most people would just get another dog," said Civilai. "There are plenty of unpleasant looking strays to choose from."

"None like Ugly."

Siri patted the dog's head and his tail stub thumped against the clay. The old friends ate and drank and looked across at Thailand. The river was running so low grasses had taken over the river bed and there was just a shred of water visible near the far bank. It all gave the false impression you could walk to Thailand. Unlike many great rivers, the mighty Mekhong had its humble moments.

"So, what's next?" said Civilai. "I imagine once you've successfully scammed the junta f² hrer of Thailand there's nothing more to aspire to."

"On the contrary," said Siri. "Daeng and I are thinking about gate-crashing the next Party Convention and nominating each other for seats on the politburo. The elderly can get away with anything. We're an untapped market. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What menial duties has the committee lined up for you for the next few months?"

Siri noticed a brief uncomfortable sideways glance before Civilai answered. It usually signaled that he was about to be lied to.

"Oh, nothing special," said Civilai.

"What about unspecial?"

"Well, I don't know. I might have to go to Moscow in a couple of months."

"Trade delegation again?"

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

Silence.

"Civilai?"

"I might . . . you know. The Olympics."

Siri got to his feet and adopted his most disdainful stare.

"Olympics?" he said.

"Maybe."

"You're going to Moscow for the Olympics and you thought it unnecessary to tell me?"

"What's this? I'm telling you now. We've been so occupied listening to your Thai stories I haven't had a chance to mention it."

"You don't think it could be of interest to me, Civilai? Little Laos gets invited to the Olympic Games for the first time in its history, a chance to mingle with the world's greatest athletes. You don't think your attendance at such an event might warrant a brief newsflash?"

"I didn't really want to bring it up."

"Why not?"

"I knew how you'd react."

"And how have I reacted?" Siri put his hands on his hips and puffed out his chest.

"You've automatically decided you'll be coming with me."

"And what, may I ask, is so wrong with that? I'm a qualified physician. Every sports team needs medical personnel. I was a highly placed university wrestler and boxer in my day. I have certificates. I'm fluent in French and Vietnamese."

"The Games are in the Soviet Union," Civilai reminded him.

"I'm aware of that. They'll have interpreters, won't they? I can't believe you didn't recommend for me to go with you."

Civilai looked away and blushed.

"Wait," said Siri. "You did recommend me, didn't you?"

"Siri. I . . ."

"What did they say?"

"I don't-"

"What did they say?"

"They said they'd sooner bring in a monkey than have you represent Laos at an international event. They think you're a liability. That you'll embarrass the Party."

Siri wobbled a little and sat back down on the log. "So who's going as the team doctor?" he asked.

"Not decided yet. They have a list. All the overseas qualified doctors at Mahosot with Party membership. Eight of them."

"Am I not even on the list?"

"You're eighth."

"Behind Supasit the optician?"

"Sorry. I've requested to have Dtui in the team. She's a nurse and she speaks Russian. And I've insisted there be at least two women in the party."

"You've insisted? So, what exactly is your role in all this?"

"Siri, I . . ."

"I'm waiting."

"Head of Mission."

"You're running the show and you can't even get me included?"

"It's political. I don't really have much power."

"Yet there you are requesting team members. And you're not even a sportsman."

"It's a diplomatic rather than a competitive mission, Siri. We don't have any athletes who stand a chance of competing at that level. It's a public relations campaign. The first time the Olympics will be held in a communist country. The Soviets have invited all their socialist allies to make an appearance. They're paying for the trip, equipment, uniforms. All we're lacking is ability."

"When does it start?"

"We go in June."

"Isn't it a bit late to start putting a squad together?"

"They've been running competitions in schools and colleges since January. We have visiting Soviet coaches here as advisers."

"Oh, well, that's all right then. We'll win medals for sure."

"I knew you'd be upset."

"Upset? I won't be upset until the Aeroflot flight leaves Wattay without me."

"Siri, this is one you can't win. You've antagonized everyone on the politburo. None of them likes you and if they find out what you got up to in Thailand . . ."

"Yes? What will they do? Throw me out of a fast-moving truck?" He stood and put his half-eaten baguette on the log.

"Siri, don't do anything stupid."

"Stupid is my middle name," said Siri. "And to be honest I'm a little disappointed you didn't put up more of a fight on my behalf, Comrade VIP Head of Mission."

"Siri."

But Siri was in a huff. He headed off along Mahosot Avenue with Ugly at his side.

"And there's too much yeast in the baguettes," he shouted.

"Siri!" Civilai called after him.

"Don't talk to me."

"Your sandals."

"What about them?"

"They're here."

A month had passed since Siri learned of his exclusion from the Moscow Olympics. Comrade Noo was hanging on but an intravenous drip was a poor substitute for actual food. His wounds refused to heal and his body lost mass every day. The doctor could find no physical reasons for the monk's decline. It was as if he'd aba...

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