

I Shot the Buddha (A Dr. Siri Paiboun Mystery)

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A fiendishly clever mystery in which Dr. Siri and his friends investigate three interlocking murders-and the ungodly motives behind them

Laos, 1979: Retired coroner Siri Paiboun and his wife, Madame Daeng, have never been able to turn away a misfit. As a result, they share their small Vientiane house with an assortment of homeless people, mendicants, and oddballs. One of these oddballs is Noo, a Buddhist monk, who rides out on his bicycle one day and never comes back, leaving only a cryptic note in the refrigerator: a plea to help a fellow monk escape across the Mekhong River to Thailand.

Naturally, Siri can't turn down the adventure, and soon he and his friends find themselves running afoul of Lao secret service officers and famous spiritualists. Buddhism is a powerful influence on both morals and politics in Southeast Asia. In order to exonerate an innocent man, they will have to figure out who is cloaking terrible misdeeds in religiosity.

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 *The Rat-Catchers' Olympics*. 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.¹

Goodnight, Ladies

It was midnight to the second with a full moon overhead when three women were being killed in three separate locations. Had this been the script of a film such a twist of fate would have been the type of cinematic plot device that annoyed Comrades Siri and Civilai immensely. In their book, coincidences came in a close third behind convenient amnesia and the sudden appearance of an identical twin. But this was real life, so there was no argument to be had.

The first woman died. She was elderly, was in bad health, and was an alcoholic. But it wasn't angina or alcohol that killed her. It was a sledgehammer. For much of her life she'd scratched a living repairing clothing on an old French sewing machine. When her hands weren't shaking she didn't do such a bad job of it, and hers was the only functioning sewing machine for a hundred kilometers. There was a time when she'd divide her income: half for food, half for rice whisky. But she figured rice whisky was rice, right? What was the point of paying twice for rice? She had papayas and bananas growing naturally around her hut, so, although she spent much of her day in the latrine, she decided she got enough nutrition for someone who wasn't expecting to grow. From then on, every kip she made taking up or taking down the hems of phasin skirts was spent on drink.

And that night, that cloudless full moon night, she lay pickled on the bamboo bench her father had made with his own hands and she fancied she could see Hanuman's face in the moon. And then a shadow fell across it and for a second she saw the only love of her life, then a smile, then a sledgehammer.

A second woman died. She had bathed from a bucket of rainwater behind her hut and washed her hair with a sachet of the latest Sunsilk shampoo, a free sample from the company. She was still wearing her damp sarong and deciding whether to keep it on and say, "Ooh, you caught me by surprise," or to put on her yellow sundress, the one he'd mentioned made her look sexy in the light of her little wax candle. She'd climbed the bamboo ladder, creaked through the open doorway and across to the wooden potato box where she kept her clothes. She was changing-she'd decided to go for the sundress-when she heard another creak on the balcony. Her dress was only halfway over her head. She struggled to pull it down. Her Vietnamese driver beau had come early, although it was odd she hadn't heard the truck pull off the road.

"Give me a sec," she said. "I'm half naked. You've spoiled the surprise."

The footsteps creaked behind her, and she anticipated the feel of his hand on her suety breast. But she hadn't anticipated the knife. From the tiny naked candle flame she could see the glint of the blade. She watched frozen as the tip entered her belly and the hilt twisted left and right the way the samurai killed themselves in the movies she used to love so much before they closed down the last cinema.

A third woman died. This was obviously a bad night to be a woman. There are illnesses that make you feel like death but are unlikely to dispatch you there. There are illnesses that are unpleasant but not necessarily uncomfortable, yet without the right treatment at the right moment you're gone as quickly as a sparrow in a jet engine. Hepatitis falls into that latter category. You think you've got the flu, a few aches and pains, no energy, so you sleep all day waiting for it to pass. Then you wake up, and you're dead.

But she'd awoken to see the nice old doctor sitting beside her sleeping mat. He'd given her some pills, and she'd thanked him and fallen back asleep. But the next time she woke it was night and a big old moon was smiling through the window. She felt so well she even considered getting up, giving her stiff legs a walk around the hut. Perhaps a little skip or two. But she opted to stay there beneath the mosquito net where she could imagine dancing at the next village fete.

The moon carved out shapes in her little room, grey shades. Boxes full of memories of her eight children, taken every one of them by violence or disease or flashing colored lights in big cities. Of a husband who never really liked her that much, who fathered their eighth child, then stepped on an unexploded bomb that took out half the buffalo and all of him. On the walls hung pictures of ancient royals and an old calendar. And there in a blurry corner at a low table the kindly old doctor sat mixing some more medicinal compounds.

"I'm feeling much better already," she said.

But he didn't respond. She heard the last swizzle of liquid mixing in the glass and the old doctor walked on his knees to the net. He was between her and the moon the whole time so she couldn't see if he was smiling. She recalled he had a nice smile. With his left hand he held out a glass containing a few centimeters of cloudy liquid. It seemed luminous in the rays of the moon. With his right hand he pulled up the netting so he was inside with her. He gently lifted her head just enough that she could drink the medicine. There was a smell of incense about him. She thanked him and the last memory she would ever have was of a kindly old doctor in the robe of a monk.

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Three Isms (Two Weeks Earlier)

There was the question of appropriateness. Should Dr. Siri Paiboun and his wife, Madam Daeng, have been attending a Party seminar that condemned the pagan rituals of spirit worship? It was particularly inapt given the doctor had become prone to vanishing from time to time and his wife had grown a small but neat tail. She had not yet mastered the art of wagging. It was true that no third party had witnessed these supernatural phenomena so there was always the possibility the couple had become dotty in their dotage and were given to hallucinations. But there was no denying the clunky wooden chair was playing havoc with Madam Daeng's backside or that she would periodically squeeze the hand she held and look to her left to be sure there was still a doctor attached to it. These were odd times in the People's Democratic Republic of Laos, but there were few times that could boast normality.

The seminar, as well as this tale (not tail), came about due to an uncomfortable conflict that had arisen amongst the three isms: Buddhism, animism and Communism. Those who preferred their public forums free of hocus pocus needed not attend. But it was undeniable that even into the fifth year of socialist rule, the phi-the spirits of the land and the air and those that resided inside folk-were the only authorities peasants in the countryside could count on with any certainty. The phi's growing influence was a bother to the still fledgling government. In its attempt to do away with the wizardry that had seeped into Buddhist practices, the government had all but wiped out Buddhism completely. By the beginning of 1979 there were no more than two thousand active monks in the country, down from ten times that number when the reds took over. Temples were being used to store grain or host re-education courses for doubting officials or as long-term accommodation for the homeless. With no organized religion to fall back on, and with uninspiring local cadres representing Vientiane, a good number of rural folk were reanimating pagan gods and seeking advice from spirits. Assuming, that is, that they'd ever really stopped doing so.

According to the Ministry of Culture, this increasing addiction to the occult was unacceptable. Senior Party members were told categorically not to be seen partaking in the rituals of mumbo jumbo. This presented problems as their wives were sometimes spotted sneaking out of the house before dawn to give alms to the monks who had survived the purge. Perhaps the maids of ministers were not discouraged from refreshing the flowers and soft drinks that adorned the spirit houses, or from burning incense at the family altar. In the ill-conceived words of senior Party member, Judge Haeng, "A good socialist does not need to believe in the phantoms and freaks of folklore or religion because he has Communism to fulfill every need."

But both the judge and Dr. Siri had other things on their minds as they sat listening to the Party's bureaucratic attempts at exorcism. The previous evening they had received a visitor both men had believed, and wished, to be dead. He had first arrived at the crowded grand reopening of Madam Daeng's noodle shop, lurking in the shadows of the riverbank opposite. Siri's dog, Ugly, had felt the need to single out the uniformed figure and stand on the curb, barking in its direction. Odd, that.

In the light from the only firework to be had at the morning market that day-a

Shanghai Golden Shower—Siri had clearly seen the face. There was no doubt. Nor was the doctor surprised on the morning of the seminar to have been approached by the little judge, his acne twinkling like festive lights. He dared not look into the doctor's bright green eyes when he spoke.

"Siri," he'd said, "I was . . . umm . . . visited again last night."

"I expected so," said the doctor. "Me too."

"Well, what . . . I mean, what should we do?"

"We? I'm a retired coroner and noodle shop proprietor. You're head of the public prosecution department. You're in a much better position to do something."

"Don't be ridiculous, man. You know we don't have a protocol to deal with . . . with . . ."

". . . ghosts?"

"Whatever you choose to call it."

This was not the first time they'd discussed the matter. They'd had a similar conversation a week earlier. At an interminably long workshop on Marxist economic policy, out of boredom and devilishness, Siri had nudged Judge Haeng seated beside him.

"You'll never guess who I woke up next to this morning," said the doctor.

"I hope she was much younger and better looking than your wife," Haeng replied, hoping to be offensive.

"There is no woman better looking than my wife," said

Siri. "It was actually Comrade Koomki from Housing." Siri knew how the judge would detest such a notion. Comrade Koomki from the Department of Housing had been incinerated in the fire that leveled Madam Daeng's original noodle shop. He had been up to no good of course, and few people felt sorry for him. But he was unquestionably dead.

Siri was used to visits from the other side. "Step overs from limbo," he called them. He saw spirits everywhere he went. It was a curse he bore. But he rarely discussed such matters, particularly not with Party members. One of the numerous things socialists did not understand was the interplay of dimensions. But there was something about retirement that made a seventy-four-year-old doctor deliberately cantankerous. He'd expected the young man to snort through his nose and reprimand him with a motto, but instead, the judge had turned the color of sticky rice.

"Siri," he'd whispered, "I saw him too. I looked out of my window last night, and there he was, clearly visible in the light from the street lamp."

Siri was surprised not that Haeng had seen a spirit, but that he would admit to it. Clearly the judge had been far more traumatized by the visit than the doctor. During the ensuing hushed conversation they'd attempted to piece together why they might have been singled out for such visitations. The chat had brightened an otherwise gloomy afternoon for Siri. It was the first time the two had cooperated with any enthusiasm, but they had not been able to arrive at a common denominator. Neither man had rendered Koomki unconscious. Neither had lit the fire that consumed him. And neither had danced on his grave.

But now, here it was, a second coming, and not a clue as to the apparition's intent. Siri's train of thought was shunted into a siding by his wife.

"How long do we have to stay here?" she asked, not bothering to whisper.

"You said you wanted to come," he reminded her.

"It was a mistake. I suppose I was hoping for something more . . ."

"Interesting?"

"Rational."

"Well, that's a good one. A rational argument at a Party seminar. Next you'll be expecting cold beer and popcorn during the interval."

"You know what I mean. They advertised it as an appraisal of the coming together of politics, religion and the occult in modern society. But all they're doing up there is belittling the worship of anything that doesn't have a hammer and sickle stuck on it. Do you see any monks or shamans on the stage? No. Is there-?"

Madam Daeng was interrupted by a spindly man in a rumpled denim shirt who turned around in his seat and said, "Some of us have come here to listen to the learned senior comrades."

He turned back as if that were enough said. Daeng leaned forward and flicked his ear. It was a large ear and a powerful flick, so the sound echoed around the auditorium. Some other nearby seat-fidgeters could not resist a chuckle. The kerfuffle temporarily disturbed the speaker at the podium, who lost his place in the script and read the same sentence twice. It was unquestionably the high point of the afternoon.

The big-eared man leapt to his feet, leaned over his chair and took a swing at Madam Daeng. Even in her sixties, Daeng, an ex-freedom fighter, had remarkable reflexes. She ducked beneath the blow and the man was thrown off balance. He fell over the back of the chair and landed on his nose at Siri's feet. The result was a most bloody triumph for the old folk. To his credit, Siri did offer the man his handkerchief to stem the bleeding.

Other Books

Kaya Tujuh Turunan (Crazy Rich Asians), Ketika Rachel Chu, dosen ekonomi keturunan Cina, setuju untuk pergi ke Singapura bersama kekasihnya, Nick, ia membayangkan rumah sederhana, jalan-jalan keliling pulau, dan menghabiskan waktu bersama pria yang mungkin akan menikah dengannya itu. Ia tidak tahu bahwa rumah keluarga Nick bagai istana, bahwa ia akan lebih sering naik pesawat pribadi daripada mobil, dan dengan pria incaran se-Asia dalam pelukannya, Rachel seperti dimusuhi semua wanita. Di dunia yang kemewahannya tak pernah terbayangkan oleh Rachel itu, ia bertemu Astrid, si It Girl Singapura; Eddie, yang keluarganya jadi penghuni tetap majalah-majalah sosialita Hong Kong; dan Eleanor, ibu Nick, yang punya pendapat sangat kuat tentang siapa yang boleh---dan tidak boleh---dinikahi putranya. Dengan latar berbagai tempat paling eksklusif di Timur Jauh---dari penthouse-penthouse mewah Shanghai hingga pulau-pulau pribadi di Laut Cina Selatan---Crazy Rich Asians bercerita tentang kalangan jet set Asia, dengan sempurna menggambarkan friksi antara golongan Orang Kaya Lama dan Orang Kaya Baru, serta antara Cina Perantauan dan Cina Daratan. Novel menarik tentang apa artinya menjadi anak muda, kasmaran, dan kaya, kaya tujuh turunan.

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