

## IN THE HOUSE OF MR. POO



ON THE MORNING AFTER THE new moon, there were no lodgers in the house of Mr. Poo. There was a body under the back steps, but the body was dead, and had never lodged in any formal sense with Mr. Poo. It had washed up on the beach sometime during the night and been removed from public view by Mrs. Poo, a wiry, greying woman of great age and determination.

At first Mr. Poo had been inclined to leave the body where it was, along the fringe of sand, and give the whole matter over to the authorities. Mr. Poo was not given to extraordinary exertions. He had stood on the sand, musing in an unsettled way about the proper fate for a washed-up European body—particularly that of an adolescent, unknown to the island—when Mrs. Poo had pointed out the red, twisted markings on the boy's neck that indicated death by more deliberate means.

Mr. Poo had scratched at his stomach and spat a line of betel juice onto the sand. There could be no further talk of involving the authorities. The current climate of sentiment against the Chinese ensured that the very knowledge of a murdered European on the island (for what else could the neck markings mean?) would be taken as a sign of criminal infiltration by the family Poo.

Rumblings had been growing of late on the island—wild tales of tong war and drug-running that bore less relation to the quiet, settled world of the landlords Poo than to the last set of martial arts films imported from Hong Kong and shown against a sheet hung between two trees outside Suvendra's grocery store and bicycle repair. There were no other Chinese on the island with whom the Pooos might have initiated such a tong war. Indeed, the nearest Chinese community of size was on the mainland at Hat Yai, and neither of the Pooos had been there since the war. But it was the very irrationality of the claims that gave them credence, as it matched the islanders' growing confusion over their own expendability in the combat with modern market forces.

Still, rumblings or not, the body was there. Well out of sight from the house, or any passersby, but there nonetheless. It was evident that something must be done. Mr. Poo announced as much to his wife and then, with a yawn, decided to think matters over properly, and retired to the wooden platform under the shaded verandah of the house.

Mrs. Poo listened submissively to her husband's advice and then, after he padded off, dragged the body with great effort between two garden hoes up off the beach, across the patchy yard littered with browning palm fronds and an upturned dugout canoe, to the steps behind the house, where she stowed it carefully out of sight beneath two gunny sacks and a length of tarpaulin.

Mr. Poo knew nothing of this. He lay, as was his wont, lengthways on the wooden platform and watched the swell and dip of the waves that dodged past the western end of the reef and slid safely home to die on the shores of his beach.

Mr. Poo was a quiet, elderly fellow with a scalp so bald that the isolated tufts of white hair merely accented its nakedness. Left to himself, he might not move for hours, or even days, but in company he was a very smiley man. It was difficult to tell if he had any teeth even when he smiled, as his mouth held the clotted bloodstained mess that marked the final stages of betel nut addiction.

It was a happy, vacant smile, as big as Mr. Poo was small, though he possessed a potbelly of which he was enormously proud. He lay then, on the morning after the new moon, rubbing his belly affectionately and not thinking about the dead body which had been dragged up the beach to rest behind his house. He was thinking instead about money, and the remote chance of getting any, and whether it was possible that Suvendra's credit ledger might ever be mislaid.

Mrs. Poo was working over the wash basin in the backyard with a dim sense of impending trouble, when the sound of voices came through the palm thickets along the path to town. They were European voices and her first thought, naturally, was of the body.

Mr. Poo's first thought was of lodgers and he patted his belly at the thought of business at hand. He sat up, yawning, and waited for the voices.



"I mean, you can't just say, 'he understood,' can you? I mean, he might have understood a bit, or a lot, or—Hello, here's someone now. Hello? Have you got any rooms here? Rooms? Beds?"

The speaker was a fair, curly-haired boy with a permanently raw, sunburned forehead that spread redness like a stain across his face. That he was Australian, Mr. Poo knew, for he had heard the accent several times before. But usually it was accompanied by a swagger and a backslap, not the short, mincing steps of the boy before him.

Mr. Poo smiled helpfully, revealing his gash of clotted crimson. His English was sketchy, but here, without doubt, were lodgers.

"See what I mean now?" The curly boy turned to his partner. "I can't tell if he's understood, can you?" He looked again at Mr. Poo and shaped his words unnaturally on his lips. "Rooms?" he said. "Beds? Sleep?"

Mr. Poo nodded and smiled.

“Good God, can’t he do anything but display his horrible gums? Beds! Sleep!” The Aussie laid his head on his palm as a hint.

His partner—a slim, dark Maltese with calf eyes and a Cheshire smile—laid a hand on the curly boy’s arm. “There,” he said softly. “It don’t do to look too anxious.”

Mr. Poo stood up, yawned, fumbled on a hook for some keys, and shuffled off around to the back of the house. The newcomers followed.

Mr. Poo led them up the back steps and pointed into a small room tucked under the eaves. He was smiling as widely as possible, in a vain effort at entrepreneurial allurements. There were a number of debts due in town and the last of the Poo’s ready cash had been expended the week previous in a *mah jongg* game on the public square.

“He’s got a canoe,” said the sunburned Australian, peeking over his shoulder. “Did you see that? The dugout?”

“Too small.”

“How can you be so sure? I heard once about—”

“Later. He wants us inside.”

“But still, we can’t rule out . . .”

Whatever else he said was lost inside the room. From her squatting position beside the outdoor wash basin, Mrs. Poo watched and wondered in her slow, steady way. It was too late to move the body now, but she could find no reason to think that its presence was known, or that its resting place was anything but secure. She would have to tell her husband, she realized, but later. He would not be pleased.

For one awful moment, the thought flitted through the mind of Mrs. Poo that the two lodgers had come to look for their missing European friend, but she set it carefully aside, along with a well-wrung pair of Mr. Poo’s trousers, and took up something new. Trouble visited often enough without one beckoning it in from across the road.



The sun had fallen onto the sea by the time the lodgers re-emerged from their room. Through the rift in the cloudbank over the outer islands, it shot its final shafts of light and lay dying in a pool of its own red afterglow. Mr. Poo lay on his platform, resting his head on a wooden four-by-four with a look of obvious contentment. The bare, polished wood seemed to have shaped the naked head to itself—flattening and squaring it off with the precision of a carpenter’s plane.

The sunburned boy was talking. “. . . a couple days’ supplies and a compass. If we’re not out too long . . .”

“It’s too small.” Even when the Maltese spoke he held the smile on his face: clean, white, and sharp, like the edge of a surgeon’s gown. And, like the gown, a sterile, unoffending cover for the work at hand.

Mr. Poo watched the pair with a sleepy eye. They moved under the covered verandah and sent the cat slinking into the trees.

“If it’s so bloody small, what do you fancy doing? Sitting ’round here ’til somebody turns up with the rope and our descriptions on a police list?” The Aussie’s voice rose as it finished.

The Maltese’s eyes flicked to Mr. Poo and back. “Nobody’s going to turn up,” he said. “The only person who could have done us was Billy, and he’s been shark supper long since by now.”

“God, I hope so.” The boy shook his curls. “I never did fancy him and his fertile-smelling little females. He was too bloody young, anyways.”

The sun dipped out of sight and the red band across the sky softened.

“We could do a trial run in the canoe at least,” said the curly boy. “I mean, what’s the hurt?” He threw an endearing look at his friend.

Mr. Poo yawned and nestled his shoulders into the edge of the board.

The Maltese followed his movements. “Tomorrow we ask about boats,” he said. “Casually, mind. Casually.”

