

## FEASTING ON FAMINE: THE LEGENDARY NOBODY

(Based on a true crime story)

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By Jim Algie

His body melted into dreams rising like smoke from an opium pipe, where his wife tickled his face with her hair. “I love to see my cute little mouse wake up with a smile on his face,” she said. When See Ouey opened his eyes, the only thing tickling his face was a creepy-crawly scurrying across his forehead. He swatted the insect away. He spat a curse and sat up in the back of the rickshaw. Every night was the same. No sooner had he drifted off to sleep than insects ruined his rest.

See Uey sparked a match, the smell of phosphorus wrinkling his nose. As the flame flared up, he moved the match across the wooden planks of the rickshaw, crawling with chubby brown cockroaches. He smashed a few of them with one of the rubbers sandals he’d cut from a car tire. With

every smack, he recalled his mother berating him as a boy, some Buddhist or Taoist saying, “If you kill an insect you’ll be stupid for a week.”

Smashing them was a futile pursuit anyway; the insects scurried away too quickly. Sweat raining down his chest and forehead, See Ouey breathed a sigh of defeat and put on his sandals.

He stepped down from the rickshaw. As soon as he tried to stand upright, pain shot up his spine and struck his head like a hammer blow. He groaned and massaged his lower back. Pulling rickshaws for three years in Bangkok, and the two decades he’d spent bending over rice fields in China’s island of Hainan, made it impossible for him to stand up straight anymore.

Little by little, he thought, I’m bending towards the grave. Soon I’ll be crawling around on all fours and those horrible Thais will be right when they call us Chinese labourers “human animals”.

The street was dark, the moon cobwebbed with clouds. The only light came from a single streetlamp near the corner of Chinatown’s Yaowarat Road. From the moon’s position in the sky, perched above the dragon silhouetted on the shrine’s rooftop, he figured it must be around 3am.

Now that he thought about it, See Ouey realized that his mother was right. All the insects he’d killed and eaten had made him this stupid and illiterate. It was the only explanation he could think of for his miserable

life and rotten luck. Well, there was that, and the Japanese soldiers and the Thais.

He walked around the rickshaw massaging his lower back. As those aches dulled, the stabs of hunger sharpened. See Ouey wrapped his arms around his stomach. He rocked back and forth. All he'd eaten that day was a bowl of rice porridge salted with fish sauce, and a couple of half-rotten bananas. The meat and produce stalls in the Old Market wouldn't be open for another hour or two but, when he counted the coins in his pocket, all he had was barely enough to cover the rent of the rickshaw. Thinking about his favorite Hainanese dish—boiled chicken breasts, doused with soy sauce and the red and green chili peppers Thais called “mouse droppings”—deepened his hunger.

Arms wrapped around his stomach, he paced the street, passing Chinese-style shop-houses with metal grates and a pile of garbage where rats scampered through the debris rattling cans. The stench of rotting pineapples and dog shit burned through his nostrils and tunneled into his brain, unearthing memories he had tried to bury:

*See Uey crawled through the mud on his elbows, the explosion of cannonballs rippling the earth under his stomach...he ran across the battlefield, a Buddhist amulet in his mouth to protect him, the smoke*

*thick enough to obscure the bayonet on the end of his rifle...a cannonball exploded in front of him and he bit down on the clay Buddha image, choking as he swallowed it...the commander in his brigade ordered the soldiers to cut the livers out of the corpses of Japanese soldiers and eat them raw. "We must take on the power of our enemies. It's the only way we can defeat them."*

*Even dog meat, even the soup made of offal, tasted better than those bloody livers. For days after consuming them he had diarrhea.*

*That was the scene he most often associated with the war: a half-eaten Buddha image sitting in a pile of blood, faeces and chunks of undigested liver from a dead soldier. But their commander was right. Only two days later they overran the Japanese forces along the coastline of Hainan.*

Power was what he needed now: power. It was the only way he could earn enough money to go home and see his wife again.

"Hey! I need a ride home."

He looked over at the man, dressed in trousers with some kind of Western-style hat. He was fat, so he had to be rich, and the man was sweating beer. Slowly he swayed from side to side like rice stalks in a breeze. He'd probably just been to see one of the prostitutes in Green Lantern Lane, which was Bangkok's main red-light district in the 1950s.

See Ouey's prayers to the Black Tiger God at the shrine devoted to him had finally been answered. The god had delivered this man to him at precisely this moment for exactly this purpose. But what should he do now? On the battlefield, he only remembered killing one Japanese soldier, and that was by accident: the Jap had leapt into their trench and fallen on the upright bayonet of See Ouey's rifle—a machete lashed to the barrel with strands of bamboo. The bayonet pierced the Jap's stomach. Eyes and mouth agape, See Uey looked at the soldier sliding down the bayonet towards him, spewing entrails that smelled like a meat market on a hot day. In the cannonade of shells bursting and gunfire cracking, the enemy soldier could not have heard his apology, "I'm sorry...I'm sorry." The Jap tried to speak. All that came out was a dribble of blood trickling down onto See Uey's face. Under the soldier's weight, the rifle shook in his hand. He could barely hold it upright. The Jap was almost on top of him now, their eyes locked together in mutual surprise. Then the rifle slipped backwards and the dead Jap landed on him face first—

“Hey! I said I need a ride home.”

It was that air of impatience and self-importance the rich exuded that bothered him the most, like their time was always more valuable than his, as if See Uey had been waiting around all night just to lug them home. The rich

were like whiny children with teething pains who needed mothers to smear opium on their gums.

See Ouey wiped the sweat from his forehead. He walked over and asked him, “Where do you want to go?”

The man said, “Surawong. I’ll give you twenty-five *satang*.”

Ashamed of his ragged blue pyjamas, tiny physique and faltering Thai, See Ouey looked down at the dirt road. “Twenty-five satang...too far.”

“Well, that’s what I usually pay.”

“Too far twenty-five satang. Very late.” Dealing with drunks was one of the worst parts of the job. Sometimes they vomited in the back of the rickshaw. Then he’d have to clean it up. Sometimes they refused to pay. Often they berated him for not going fast enough.

“Never mind. I’ll go and find another rickshaw Chink.” The drunk turned and teetered down the road.

*Rickshaw Chink. Rickshaw Chink. Rickshaw Chink.* How many times had he been called that in Bangkok? Dozens and dozens. Every time he’d swallowed their insults and his anger. He’d swallowed them, yes, but he’d never digested them. In his stomach a wok steamed and sizzled with rage even stronger than his hunger.

But the anger was also a tonic. His back no longer ached. His stomach

cramps disappeared. The battlefield memories dissolved like cannon smoke. Walking back to his rickshaw, See Ouey grabbed the hollowed-out buffalo horn he used to scoop water from the canals and stole up behind the fat man, stealthy as a tiger: the meat of a man or an animal made no difference to the Black Tiger God who now guided him.

See Ouey leapt into the air, bringing down the buffalo horn on the back of the man's neck with all the force he could muster. The horn cracked against bone, sending vibrations running down his arm. The man fell face first onto the dirt road, wriggling as blood gurgled from the wound. The god had taken possession of See Ouey; the buffalo horn was its single fang.

The man mewled as the god opened up wound after wound in his back. With each stab, he heard insults clashing together in his head like cymbals at a Chinese opera: "Rickshaw Chink! Human animals! The Chinks who destroyed the temples! Pussy blood Chinks! Chink! Chink! Chink!"

He could not stab fast enough to pay back every slur.

The front grate of a shop-house clanging open or shut pierced his ears. He looked up and down the street. He couldn't see anyone. Not yet. But soon enough the vendors would be bringing their food and fruit carts down the street to the market.

He rolled the dead man over. Without looking at the corpse's face,

he ripped open his shirt, buttons popping. The Black Tiger God opened the man's stomach with its fang and tore out the liver with its claws. The liver was still warm as he closed his eyes to take the first bite. Blood flooded his mouth. The first gristly bite went down with a grimace. Immediately, his stomach tightened and tried to expel it. Vomit leapt into his mouth. He clamped his hand over it and forced himself to swallow.

The steel grate of a shop-house opened with a clang that caromed down the street. The Black Tiger God forced the rest of the liver into his mouth, gnawing on the gristle as he tried to saunter, when he wanted to run, back to the rickshaw. Wiping his mouth clean with his hand, he grabbed the rickshaw and pulled it towards the canal.

Down by the waterway, flanked by wooden houseboats with corrugated iron roofs, cocks crowed as the sky faded from black to blue. At least the marshy smell of the water drowned out the taste of blood clogging his throat.

Concrete stairs led down to the canal's edge. Squatting like a duck on the bottom step, he washed his hands and cleaned the horn. Its tip was dented and bloodied with scalp tissue. Then he scooped up water with the horn, gulping down mouthful after mouthful.

See Uey knew he should throw the murder weapon into the canal, but



it was the only memento he had left of his homeland. Lately he'd heard the Thais adopt a Chinese expression "to travel with a pot and a mat" for any trip taken on the cheap, because that was all most of the Chinese immigrants had brought with them to Thailand. Hungry and destitute, See Uey had pawned his cooking pot and sleeping mat two years ago.

The horn belonged to his first pet, a female water buffalo born in the early morning, so he named her *Seow Fung*, the "Scent of Dawn." Thinking of her, he stroked the horn as if it were the animal's dark hair. As Seow Fung grew bigger, he rode her alongside the rice paddies, past the orchards of dragon fruit, and down by the cliffs that overlooked the South China Sea spangled with sunbeams.

When Seow Fung was only eight, she was dragged away by the floods of the monsoon season with winds that pulled back palm trees like catapults, launching coconuts into the sea. For days on end he searched for her. Beside a stand of bamboo, he found Seow Fung's corpse, bloated with water and blackened by the sun. Flies licked the tears from his face as he knelt in the mud beside her.

Ten years later, when he told that story to his first girlfriend, she said, in the special voice she reserved only for him, a smile on her sun-freckled face, "I know I could find a richer and more handsome husband than you,

but I don't think I could ever meet a man with such a heart as soft as tofu.”

What would she say now that the Tiger God had forced him to kill a man and eat his liver? Could he ever tell her about the cannibalism that both the Chinese and Japanese soldiers practiced on the battlefield? His stomach clenched. His eyes and throat burned.

Sadness, he thought, was a kind of hunger that worked in reverse. It made him feel as hollowed out as Seow Fung's horn, which he had cut off and kept as a memento of her that also served as a good-luck charm.

See Uey knew that keeping the murder weapon might be his undoing, but it could also be a talisman that would protect him. In any event, he would not part with the horn.

Across the canal he saw a couple of women wearing sarongs walk down the steps to bathe in the water. He wiped his eyes and trudged back to the rickshaw. Using some banana leaves he found on the ground, he wrapped up the buffalo horn and went to hide it under the backseat. His hand stopped in mid-air. Running across the floor of the rickshaw were trains of ants cannibalizing and carrying off the antennae, the wings and the legs of all the dead cockroaches.

Watching the ants cheered him up. He was not alone. He was not strange. Life fed on death. This was nature's way. The fat man had been one

of those cockroaches. He had to die so the Black Tiger God could live.

By midnight many rickshaw-pullers gathered at the entrance to Green Lantern Lane, a noisy strip of bars where men caroused with prostitutes and took them upstairs to small rooms, or to all the Chinese hotels in the neighborhood. Groups of women in short dresses sat outside the bars on wooden benches. The light from all the green lanterns hanging above them made their skin look like rotten meat.

See Ouey had never been inside any of the bars. Before he left on the boat for Thailand, his wife made him promise to remain faithful. So far, he had kept that promise. Yet his eyes kept wandering down over the breasts and thighs of the “chickens” as they passed by with their customers. The prostitutes wore the same heavy make-up as the female characters in a Chinese opera. They rarely looked at any of the rickshaw-pullers, who made filthy remarks about them in Mandarin and Hakka slang. “Look at her! She’s got tits the size of pears!” See Ouey laughed along with the men, but he never flung any insults of his own, because it wasn’t fair. Most of the women (some still teenagers) understood the lewd jokes. Not many of their customers did. He didn’t hate the girls. He hated the men, sneering at them every time they walked by, the envy, the bitterness and the sexual hunger

fermenting inside him like rice liquor. The longer it brewed the more potent it became.

Was that it? Or was the fresh liver he'd eaten last night finally stirring some kind of power within him? Something was turning and twisting inside his stomach, something waiting to be born. When, he wondered, had he started thinking with his stomach rather than his mind?

Standing on the perimeter of the group, oozing sweat, See Ouey eavesdropped on snippets from half a dozen different conversations... "somebody killed a man in Chinatown last night..." "no suspects, witnesses or arrests yet..." "I hear the police are out in force tonight."

None of this had anything to do with him. He hadn't killed or eaten anyone. It was the Black Tiger God. Still, the events of last night had set him even further apart from the other rickshaw-pullers. They were weak and pathetic. They made jokes about the customers, but they still groveled for business. "Where are you going, sir? I'll give you a good price." See Ouey couldn't be bothered anymore. Three years of groveling had gotten him nowhere. Whatever extra money he brought in from building roads and repairing bicycles he stashed inside the buffalo horn to send to his wife. The Hainanese man who composed the letters See Ouey dictated to her folded

the bills inside them. But he hadn't received any replies from his wife in six months. Had she gotten the money? Had she given up on him and found another man?

Tik Lin trudged towards him with the same bow-legged, stoop-shouldered gait that marked all the rickshaw-pullers in Bangkok for life. The sweat on his face gleamed under the streetlight. He had a cigarette rolled from a banana leaf hanging out of his mouth just like those white movie stars in the hand-painted posters outside the cinemas.

Tik Lin was one of the few men from his village who had also survived the Japanese occupation and deserted the army to come to Thailand. At least he had learned how to read and write. He'd become fluent in Thai, too, and liked to joke with his customers that since he was actually a wealthy Thai banker, would they mind pulling him around for a while? Thanks to all his quips, mimicry and funny faces, Tik Lin got a lot of tips. So every night he'd buy a bottle of liquor fermented in herbs and pass it around to all of his friends.

Tik Lin knocked back a shot. Passing the bottle to See Ouey, he arched his left eyebrow and winked with his right eye. "This is better than a rhino's horn for making a man's own horn grow big and strong. Wait till we get back to Hainan. Our wives are going to be sore for a month." Tik Lin

laughed loud enough for the other rickshaw-pullers to look in their direction.

See Ouey smiled out of politeness and looked away out of shyness. After knocking back a few more bitter shots, spilling liquor down their chins as they got drunker, See Ouey said, “We haven’t heard from our wives for months now. Do you think it has something to do with these communalists?”

“Communists.”

See Ouey took another swig of liquid fire. “Right. Communists. But who are they anyway?”

Tik Lin snatched the bottle out of his hand. “Can’t you remember anything? We’ve been through this eighty-seven times already.”

It was embarrassing the way he would flare up like a match head and make these crazy exaggerations. See Ouey pulled his straw hat down to cover his eyes and waited for him to calm down. He took another swig from the bottle.

When he was drunk, things he never noticed demanded his attention, like the halo of blue rimming the silver streetlight, while questions he never asked demanded answers he could not find. Why were the insects attracted to the light? Was the darkness too lonely for them? Didn’t they know the light would kill them? And how did electricity work anyway?

If he kept drinking he might find those answers. That was always the

lie of liquor. His body got heavier, his tongue grew thicker, but his thoughts circled the streetlight like those insects, touching down briefly before flying off again in a different direction.

Tik Lin was showing off by counting his money aloud. Trying not to smile, See Ouey interrupted him so he would have to start again. “What were you saying about those...um, *communalists*?”

Tik Lin glared at him. The streetlight glanced off his eyes. “Let’s go through it one more time. According to Professor Tik Lin, communism is supposed to be about equality. In our country that means five percent of the population are equally rich and the other ninety-five percent are equally poor. Got it now? Don’t make me repeat it again.”

See Ouey lifted up the bottle and took another shot. His tongue and throat were numb. “The communists, the Japanese, the Thais, what difference does it make? Life is one losing battle after another, one hardship after another. I’m so sick of it all I don’t even care anymore.”

“Look at it this way. Many of our friends and family members aren’t even alive now. We’re lucky we survived.” Tik Lin raised the bottle up in the direction of the moon. “To you, father, mother, big sister, little brother, and all our dead friends from the village. I will always be grateful for your many favours and kindnesses.”

Every time he got drunk Tik Lin repeated the same sentimental spiel. See Ouey snatched the bottle out of his hand and drained it. “Most of the time I wish I was dead, too.”

“Big brother, I’m not going to indulge your bitterness anymore. I have to go and find a rich customer for one last fare of the night.” He staggered towards the other rickshaw-pullers.

Tik Lin was a liar, too. He was actually going to see one of the whores like he did every time he got this drunk. “What a fool...rhino horn...oh, I’m a rich Thai banker...yes, sir...please, sir...thank you, sir,” See Ouey muttered to himself. “Go to hell, sir. The Black Tiger God’s fang is much stronger than your horn.”

See Ouey squatted down on the dirt road, losing his balance and falling over sideways on his right elbow. Cockroaches skittered past him. He stood up and began stomping on them, pretending they were communists, Japanese soldiers and rich customers who’d scorned him.

Slathered in sweat, See Ouey squatted like a duck beside the metal shutters fronting a Chinese herbalist. The smell of herbs seeped from under the shutters. He drained the last drops of liquor from the bottle. Just then, one of the women, wearing a short red dress walked out of the huddle of rickshaw-pullers, arousing stares and a few wisecracks. She returned the



insults and laughed.

See Ouey stared at the roundness of her breasts, like Chinese pears ripe to be plucked. His mouth opened. As she came closer, her heels scraping the dirt, his eyes moved down to the darkened hollow between her legs, imagining the swallow's nest feathered with fine black hair. When she walked past, his eyes fastened themselves to the mounds of her bottom, near enough so he saw the upside down triangle of her underwear. His testicles began breathing.

Without wanting to, without even thinking about it, See Ouey stood up and followed her. The lane was dark and narrow. It was flanked by shop-houses. He couldn't stop, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but creep up closer and closer behind her. The young woman's hips held sway over him. They pulled him along like a water buffalo with a rope through its nose.

The Black Tiger God *smashed* her over the head with the empty bottle. She fell to her knees beside a pile of baskets stinking of garbage. Wielding the bottle like a club, he dented the back of her skull three more times. She fell on her face. He grabbed her by the hair and rolled her over on to her back. He knelt down and dropped the bottle. Then the god ripped the front of her dress open and tore off her bra.

She let out a shriek and tried to slap his face. With one hand he pinned

her arms. With the other, he grabbed the gold chain around her neck and pulled it tight as a noose. The woman gurgled and wept. Her eyes bulged like a toad as he tightened his stranglehold.

After she stopped struggling, he looked at her bare breasts, massaging them with his palms, before taking the bud of her right nipple into his mouth as he slid her underwear down. Moving on top of her, he pulled the bottoms of his pyjamas down.

She screamed.

“Shut up!” he hissed.

She screamed again.

He smashed the bottle open and stabbed the serrated side into her throat. As the bottle severed her jugular vein a geyser of blood erupted.

The coppery smell and taste gave the Black Tiger God a rush of bloodlust. With his fangs, he tore off her nipple. Using the jagged end of the bottle as his sex, he pushed it in and out, in and out, the bottle squelching as it sawed back and forth.

Down the street a dog barked. Another dog howled. .

See Ouey looked up. Then he looked down at the woman, her throat gashed open like a vagina. What happened? Where was he? Who was she? He couldn't remember anything. One minute he was talking to Tik Lin, the

next he was kneeling beside this woman, whom somebody had murdered.

Why? Why would someone do that?

See Ouey picked up the gold chain and put it in his pocket. With blood drying on his face, he ran down the lane as a pack of street dogs tore at the flesh of the dying woman.

## II. Meditations on Death Row

The cells in the jail reminded See Ouey of the cargo hold in the belly of the boat he and Tik Lin had sailed on to Thailand. The hold was dark and dank, too, poisoned with the eye-watering stench of sweat and urine, rats and roaches scuttling everywhere. In a way, death row was better: no swells or storms to turn his stomach inside out. In another way, it was far worse: See Ouey was astonished to find that he'd become the biggest mass murderer in Thai history.

“Watch your back, cannibal,” one of the guards told him, “because you’re going to get eaten alive in here. That’s why they nicknamed this prison the ‘Big Tiger’.”

Wearing leg-irons like all the other inmates, See Ouey sat in a corner of the cell with four other Chinese men, near a hole in the floor for a toilet. He always kept his back against the wall to watch the other convicts.

The only relief from the constant threats and the boredom was playing mahjong with bottle caps. Between games, See Ouey and the other Chinese men passed their days complaining about the prison, the guards, the lousy food, their unfair death-sentences, pulling rickshaws, the communists, the Japanese soldiers – one complaint after another. The other men had been convicted of murdering the local owner of a Thai fishing trawler who had refused to pay them their wages after four months at sea.

None of them complained as bitterly as See Ouey. He had not killed three men, one woman and four children. The police had made him a scapegoat. All he could remember was the Black Tiger God consuming the fat man and the prostitute, pawning the gold necklace and getting drunk with Tik Lin, who berated him in the back of his rickshaw one night. “I can’t believe you sent those letters to your wife warning her about how bad life was here and that she shouldn’t come unless she wanted to work on Green Lantern Lane.”

“I thought it was better to be honest.”

“You’re not honest. You’re just stupid and naïve. No wonder our wives found other men. I also can’t believe you trusted that man to actually send the money to your wife.”

“He was my friend. He was from Hainan. So I trusted him.”

“He’s an opium addict and you can never trust them.”

“Is he?”

“Look at him! You could put him out in a rice field to scare the birds away.”

See Ouey remembered their argument, but he didn’t recall killing Tik Lin and eating his liver, like the police said. He also didn’t recall murdering the pawnbroker who wrote the letters for him and promised to send the money to his wife. Those killings were not his fault. He was drunk and the Black Tiger God was hungry. That was all.

A rat landed in See Ouey’s lap. He leapt to his feet, squealing. Some of the inmates laughed. One of them yelled, “Hey Chink, I thought you were hungry.” See Ouey snatched up the rat and bit off its head. He spat the head at the inmate who had yelled at him. He bared his teeth and snarled at the dozen other inmates in his cell. Then he threw the rat on the floor and leapt up and down like a monkey, chattering gibberish, until the guards restrained him.

One of the inmates said, “Better leave him alone. The fucking cannibal is crazy.”

See Ouey’s ploy paid off. The other inmates, even the guards, thought he was insane. From a distance, they still taunted him in the prison yard,

where the death-row convicts were only allowed an hour a day of sunlight, but they wouldn't come near him.

That would prolong his life a little. It would not save him from the executioner. The inmates on death row lived with the constant threat of their sentences being executed without any warning whatsoever. There were no appeals and no reprieves, no chances to call or meet with their friends and families. The guards came for them late in the afternoon. Within twenty minutes they were dead. One convict in the cell next to him had heard a rumour that he was next and slashed his wrists open. The guards took him to the doctor to stitch up the wounds. Then he was executed.

After two months in prison, See Ouey dreamed of a wandering monk he'd once given food and shelter to in his shack by the orchard of dragon fruit on Hainan. The monk reminded him of an old saying he'd first heard his mother use, "Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

That was true. For too long See Ouey had cursed the darkness. Now he would light a candle. The monk had shown him how to meditate. At the back of the cell, lit by a single light bulb protected by wire mesh, See Ouey sat cross-legged, his eyes closed, counting to seven as he slowly inhaled. While exhaling he counted backwards. He acknowledged the voices he heard, the smell of bodily wastes, the memories lighting up then dimming,

the stabs of hunger. He acknowledged all of these thoughts and sensations. Then he tried to let them go.

Deep in meditation, his breath rising and falling like the sea, he questioned the nature of his anger. What did these words like “rickshaw Chink” really mean? A rickshaw was made out of wood, tires, an axle, seats, and many other things. It was complicated. It was connected to a lot of different things.

Was See Ouey a Chink? There were millions of people in China, all of them different. It was absurd to call them all by the same name.

See Ouey decided that the noises people made with their mouths meant as little as the wind, or children babbling to themselves. From now on, he would speak only when necessary, choosing his words carefully.

Memories kept disturbing his peace of mind. Tik Lin said, “Did you hear about the empress who had a life-size phallus carved out of jade for her personal use?”

“No, I wonder how much that would cost.”

Tik Lin cocked an eyebrow. “New or used?”

A smile spread across See Ouey’s face. He’d been unfair to his old friend. Sure, Tik Lin was a loudmouth and a braggart, quick-tempered and obsessed with sex, but he loved to make people laugh. Tik Lin liked to

remind him that he was too serious, that he didn't see the funny side of life. And he was right about See Ouey's bad memory, his poor judgment of other people, and his selfish bitterness—

*See Ouey jumped up and down on Tik Lin's chest, breaking his ribs, crushing his lungs.*

Remembering that murder, he opened his eyes. No, no, no. He massaged his forehead with his hands to wipe away the memories. He concentrated on his breathing again. But he couldn't escape the truth. The Black Tiger God had not done that to Tik Lin. See Ouey had. The Black Tiger God hadn't killed or eaten or raped anyone. See Ouey had done these things. There was no one else to blame. Not the alcohol or the opium, the Japanese or the communists, the poverty or the discrimination.

But the four children? He only remembered throwing the pawnbroker's son against a wall to make him stop crying. He didn't remembering eating the boy's liver.

How did that happen? The last few days of his freedom returned to him through the murky, fish-bowl haze of a week-long debauch, alternating days of alcohol with ten-pipe sessions in different opium dens. He remembered pawning the gold necklace. He remembered the argument with Tik Lin, but what night was that? The third or fourth night? The fifth?



His legs went numb. He unfolded them and rubbed his calves. The chains around his ankles chafed at all the blisters bleeding pus.

He remembered lying in the opium den on the wooden bed, beside one of the hard, square pillows the owners used to discourage customers from staying too long, when the woman he'd killed looked down on him, her red dress in tatters, a mirror covering the breast he'd savaged. The mirror was emblazoned with an image of the Black Tiger God holding a blade in its mouth. But the mirror reflected See Ouey's eyes and teeth. She held up her hands, two more mirrors glued to her palms, like he was an evil spirit she wanted to banish. Each of them reflected the same image of the Black Tiger God but with See Ouey's eyes and mouth. He tried to close his eyes but couldn't. He tried to move his head, but that was impossible too.

*See Ouey crawled across a battlefield, shells rippling the mud under his belly. See Ouey wormed his way across the floor of the opium den, broken mirrors made out of teeth cutting his hands, the shards spotted with blood, falling down stairs, the street outside, Tik Lin laughing, the moon another mirror image of See Ouey and the Black Tiger God, the corpse of a water buffalo with only one horn trapped inside a cloud, he ran and stumbled, fell and ran, the crazy plan to turn himself in, he'd get a reward if he showed them the murder weapon and told them about the Black Tiger*

*God, they'd send him back to Hainan, he'd be reunited with his wife and Tik Lin –*

Stop! He was panting and sweating now. Bottle caps clicked on the floor. An inmate paced the cell, his leg irons clanking while he muttered and laughed to himself: another man gone mad on death row.

See Ouey closed his eyes. He drew in each breath for seven beats, counting backwards as he exhaled. He couldn't attach himself to these memories anymore. The memories were shackles that chained him to the past. Admitting to his guilt, acknowledging his remorse, was enough.

But there was one last thing he had to do before escaping from the prison. He asked one of the Hainanese inmates to write a letter to his wife for him. While the other prisoners slept in rows, packed together as tightly as matchsticks on the bottom of a box, See Ouey and his friend sat together in a puddle of light the colour of urine. The heat was such that his friend could only pen a few characters at a time before the sweat from his wrist began to smudge the words.

Slowly and carefully, See Ouey dictated the letter.

"I suppose I could say I love you, but I'm beyond love now. I suppose I could say that I hate myself for doing all these horrible things, but I'm beyond hatred too. At this point, I am almost beyond everything. My biggest

problem was my hunger. I was always starving for food, money, love, respect, affection, revenge and many other things. But the more I consumed the hungrier I became and the emptier I felt. It was like feasting on famine. So I was never satisfied.

“My new hunger is much more substantial. I’m trying to attain what that monk called the ‘supra-mundane state’. Do you remember when he stayed with us? He told me about how monks practice something called ‘meditations on death’ by sitting in front of a corpse. There are two hundred dead men down here crammed into a dozen cells. I’m meditating on their breathing corpses and the death of my physical self, which has nothing to do with my mind or karma.”

He thought about signing it, “Your Little Mouse”, but that was no longer accurate. After considering it for a moment, he told the other inmate to sign the letter from “Nobody”.

For the next few days, weeks, months, eons, See Ouey only stopped meditating to drink a little water. He ate no food, he didn’t speak, he refused to leave the cell, and he rarely slept. In his mind he conjured up a candle flame and held it there. The flame grew to the size of a lotus blossom that became Nobody’s head. The light burned away his hunger, his desires and the darkness around him, so he finally saw the fate awaiting him. It was

incredible. It was beyond anything he could have ever imagined.

When the guards came to take him to the execution chamber, they were astonished to find he was in such a good mood, saying goodbye to all the other prisoners, wishing them well, promising them they would all meet again one day. The two guards handcuffed him. Inhale...exhale. On either side of Nobody, their arms interlinked with his, the guards walked him through death row, past two different doors and into a small room that held little except for filing cabinets, a wooden table and a ceiling fan. Inhale...exhale. They took his fingerprints and checked them against their records.

One of them asked, "Are you See Ouey Sae Ugan?"

"No, he died in prison. I have no name, but you can call me 'Nobody' if you wish."

The guard offered him a final meal. "Thanks, but I'm on a diet, and frankly the food in here is terrible." Nobody smiled at them.

"Would you like a cigarette?"

"No, thanks." Nobody cocked an eyebrow. "I've heard that tobacco can kill you."

The guards looked at each other. When they saw him smile, all three of them began laughing.

By making these jokes and smiling at them, Nobody wanted to show the guards that he did not bear any malice towards them. It was not their fault they were this ignorant and famished for justice that did not exist. No one knew better than him that there is no such thing as justice. It's another meaningless noise people make with their mouths; it means no more than "Chink" or a birdcall.

The guards took him into another room and made him kneel before a monk with a shaven head, an age-speckled face and a saffron robe. The monk asked him if he wanted a blessing. Nobody smiled and looked up at him. "That's very kind of you, but I met a wandering monk in Hainan who told me that real Buddhism has nothing to do with rituals or blessings. In my own way, I'm a religious man, too."

See Ouey sneered at the monk and snapped, "Don't you dare look at me with that self-righteous smile on your face. You can't kill me. None of you can. Mark my words, I'm coming back to haunt all of you. I'm your bad conscience and I'm your worst goddamn nightmare!"

The guards dragged him to his feet. See Ouey spat on the monk's robe. His eyes darting from the guards back to the monk, he shouted, "All of you are a pack of stupid, vicious dogs. You're thieves, liars and hypocrites. You can all go to hell. When I come back I'm going to kill all your children,

your wives, your relatives—“

A guard punched him in the stomach. See Ouey doubled over and fell to his knees. The blow forced him to concentrate on his breathing again. Inhale... exhale. Inhale... exhale.

Even now, so close to the end, and after months of meditation practice, he could not control his ego, his anger and his insatiable appetite for revenge.

The guards pulled him to his feet. Inhale... exhale. Down another corridor, cool cement under his feet, the hospital smell of urine and cleaning fluid, out through another metal door, the sun slitting his eyes. Inhale... exhale. Grass, bushes and flowers.

A yellow butterfly zigzagged across the prison yard. Nobody stopped. He said to the guards, “I didn’t ask for a meal or a cigarette, but See Ouey and his old friend Tik Lin used to like chasing butterflies across the fields when they were boys. Just a few seconds, please.”

The wandering monk had told him a riddle or parable, “Am I a man who dreamed he was a butterfly? Or a butterfly who dreamed he was a man?”

Nobody decided that he was a butterfly who had only dreamed he was a man. As the butterfly zigzagged across the prison yard, he willed the rest

of his consciousness to it. When it flew up and over the wall, clearing the brambles of barbed wire, Nobody smiled.

Short steps, the leg irons rattling. Inhale... exhale. Inhale... exhale. Another room cool and dark. A big gun bolted to the floor and pointed at a white curtain, behind it a wooden cross in front of sandbags stained with blood. Inhale...exhale. The guards made him sit down on a beam jutting out of the cross. They unlocked the handcuffs. In his hands they placed a single unopened lotus blossom, a yellow candle and three sticks of incense, like he was going to pray at a temple, which was exactly what he wanted to do. To bind his wrists together, the guard used the same sacred white thread that monks use for ritual blessings. Inhale...exhale. Sweat tickled his spine. They raised his hands over his head and roped them to the cross. Around his face they tied a blindfold tight enough to make a vein leap in his forehead.

Nobody stared into the darkness, where the flame of a candle grew into a lotus blossom of light. The face of the reclining Buddha, eyes closed, smiling serenely, looked back at him from the center of the flame. Nobody smiled at the Buddha: smiling at the sad, stupid futility of it all, and smiling because, far too late for it to do him any good, Nobody had finally solved the puzzle of life, the riddle of nirvana.

It was a bayonet in a soldier's stomach.

A half-eaten Buddha image in a pool of blood and feces.

A coconut tossed at sea.

A smiling woman with a sun-freckled face.

A train of ants carrying a cockroach antenna.

A newborn buffalo that smelled like the dawn.

It was everything.

And it was nothing at all.

Exhale....

### III. Nobody's Monster

True to his last words to the monk, See Ouey's rebirth began when the prison's doctor and psychiatrist held a press conference to announce their findings one week after the execution.

“During the autopsy we found no abnormalities in his brain and from the interviews I conducted with him in the prison it is my professional opinion he was not insane. During the time he carried out the attacks he may have been temporarily insane, but that's something we'll never know for sure. At times he did speak in a delusional manner that made me wonder if he was extremely religious or simply a nihilist.

“For the first few months in jail he was mostly cooperative. Even



though we had a Chinese interpreter on hand, See Ouey did not speak a lot. I got the impression he had always been a very quiet and shy man. He did express quite a bit of remorse about his heinous deeds, but he always insisted that his crimes were nothing compared to those committed by the Communist Party of China and the Japanese Imperial Army. After he took up Buddhist studies, he refused to speak to us for the last few months of his incarceration.

“In closing, it is my professional duty to add that many doubts linger as to whether he actually committed all the murders he has been accused of.”

The doctor’s comments sent See Ouey’s spirit hurtling around the world on teletype wires that inspired editorials and hundreds of hate mails. “See Ouey wasn’t a man. He was a monster.” “The doctor is even crazier than the cannibal.”

The hostility only made See Ouey’s spirit stronger. His legend grew as it passed from eyes to mouths, from mouths to ears. Thai parents warned their children, “Don’t stay out late at night or the ghost of See Ouey will come and eat you.”

It was the children who began seeing him first, skulking in the shadows as he followed them home, or standing beside a streetlight, his head tipped backwards, his jaws opening like a trap door to swallow the insects as

they plunged earthwards.

Five years after his execution, the cannibal's preserved corpse became the main attraction in the Songkran Niyomsane Forensic Museum in Bangkok's Siriraj Hospital.

To this day, hundreds of tourists and locals pass through here on a daily basis to gawk at all the autopsy and crime-scene photos, crudely labeled in English with lines like, "Beer bottle slash throat" and "Knife cut vagina". Lined up on shelves are jars swimming with stillborn fetuses. Some of the infants who died of water on the brain have bloated heads. For the spirits of these kids, the Asian visitors leave offerings of candy and dolls.

In another glass case is a collection of skulls with bullet holes in their temples. The skulls came from unclaimed corpses. Doctors at the hospital used them to study entry and exit wounds to solve the shooting death of King Rama VIII in 1946, a case that has never been resolved. The museum is air-conditioned to the freezing point of a morgue. As befitting a crypt, visitors speak in funereal whispers.

In one glass case hangs the skeleton of the museum's founder, who wanted his students to be able to study him after he died. But the number of medical students coming here for lessons in forensics and anatomy are minute compared to the tourists and locals for whom the museum feeds a

different kind of hunger, when the gravest taboo becomes the penultimate form of pornography as living eyes probe the naked flesh and preserved organs of the deceased.

Out of the three preserved corpses of murderers propped up behind glass in what look like wooden telephone booths, it's See Ouey's who draws the most stares and frowns from visitors. The cadaver is naked, his shriveled genitals on display. The bullet holes in his chest are visible, but the empty eye sockets have been filled in and whitened with paraffin. Ragged stitch marks on the forehead expose how the doctors removed his brain during the autopsy. Some of the teenagers, trying to act tough and look cool in front of their friends, mutter the same curses See Ouey heard in his day like the "Chinks who destroyed the temples".

As more and more guidebook writers put the museum on maps, See Ouey's legend feeds on the notoriety. Tourists turn the killer's corpse into mega-pixels that shoot through cyber-space to reach inboxes all over the world. A blogger dubbed him "the Jack the Ripper of Southeast Asia". A woman woke from a nightmare in Madrid, certain See Ouey was lurking in her room with a broken bottle sticking out of his groin.

In Hong Kong, a filmmaker heard stories about him from a friend who visited the museum. At first the director couldn't believe it. They put a serial

killer's cadaver on public display? This sounds like something out of the Dark Ages.

The director searched for information about him on-line, finding several photos from the museum and a black and white image of See Ouey. The killer was an unattractive man with a flat nose and huge nostrils. His hair was cut short like a soldier's. Several of his front teeth were missing but it was the look on his face that made the director lean closer to the screen. See Ouey's lips were twisted into a vicious snarl. An image ghosted through the director's mind of an Asiatic black bear that growled at him from behind the bars of a cage in a Shanghai zoo. That was the look on the killer's face: a cornered animal snarling in self-defense. It was a good juxtaposition. He could use that a film.

On the Internet there were only a few bytes of information about the killer: the date of his execution in 1958, his career as a soldier in Hainan, his life of poverty as a rickshaw-puller and labourer in Bangkok and different parts of Thailand. Even the exact number of people he killed – possibly five, maybe nine – was open to speculation.

At night, on the balcony of his condo overlooking Victoria Harbour, the director liked to stand by the railing, smoking Cuban cigars and drinking Chablis, while he used the sky as a screen to project all the images in his

mind: Wounds opening in a man's back like the mouths of hungry infants lapping up the blood.

He could use that, but what was the killer's real story? He didn't want to make another lunatic-on-the-loose movie.

In a perverse way, the director could relate to the killer's hunger. He was hungry, too: hungry for respect and success. His last two films had been ignored by viewers and napalmed by critics. One more disaster and he'd be back directing music videos again or spending four hours in the studio trying to light a bottle of shampoo. He needed a hit and the public was always ravenous for more films about serial slayers. But there had to be a bigger picture to See Ouey's story.

The director began typing up all the horrific tales of death and deprivation his relatives from Hainan had told him about the mass exodus to Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and America, like the story his grandmother related about how some of the Chinese "snake heads" who charged the immigrants exorbitant sums for their passage, robbed them and threw them to the sharks in the middle of the sea. On her deathbed, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, his grandmother was convinced that the hospital was the cargo hold of a junk. Again and again she pleaded with them in a girl's hysterical voice: "Don't let them throw me to the sharks like

they did to my brother. Please, not that, not that, anything but that.”

His grandfather had told him another story. “This rich woman disguised herself as a peasant, but the pirates saw all the gold fillings in her teeth. So they ripped out her teeth, one by one, with a pair of pliers, and then they used her mouth, well, let’s just say they had their way with her. As a warning to the rest of us, they hung her body from the mast of the junk. By the time we got to Hong Kong, the crows and seagulls had picked her corpse clean. There was nothing left except a skeleton and a few scraps of clothing. I know I should have a lot more happy memories of my childhood, but whenever I start thinking about the past those are the scenes that come to mind first.”

It was disturbing to think that the cannibal could’ve been onboard the same junk as his grandparents. It was much more disturbing to think that, in some strange way, this man’s story was emblematic of a generation of millions of Chinese who had fled the ravages of war only to find worse squalor and debasement than they’d left behind. It was a testament to the strength and family ties of these immigrants that the vast majority of them did not sink to the same levels of cruelty as the pirates and See Ouey.

Even those stories were not enough to write a film treatment. He had to find See Ouey.

The director flew to Bangkok. He dropped his bags at the hotel and headed straight for the museum. In front of See Ouey's final resting case he stood, dumbfounded by all the comparisons to notorious murderers. This little shrimp was "the Jack the Ripper of Southeast Asia" and the "Chinese version of Ted Bundy"?

The cannibal's size bolstered the director's conviction that See Ouey had been the worst kind of coward, targeting women and children he could easily overpower. Like a tiger, he'd probably snuck up on them from behind, not even giving them a chance to fight back.

Something else about the exhibit bothered him too. Why were these killers so famous and no one ever spared a thought for their victims and families? He spoke into his Dictaphone: "This is not going to be another one of those films where the victims are dispatched like pigs in a slaughterhouse. I need a sub-plot... something about a victim's mother and father. The death of their daughter has brought all their marital problems to a head. Maybe she's a prostitute on Green Lantern Lane. The cops are not interested in the case, so the parents have to track down See Ouey on their own. Unless they can find him, their marriage is finished. Maybe there's a sibling in the picture who's going through a nervous breakdown because of the death of their brother or sister. "

The director walked around and around the museum but the only information he could find about See Ouey was a clipping the colour of nicotine-stained fingers from a local newspaper taped to the side of the upright casket. The black and white photo was the same one he'd seen on the Internet. No longer was the director so certain that See Ouey looked like a cornered animal snarling in self-defense. He may have been mugging for the camera, playing up to his image, even enjoying his newfound infamy.

Could one man be the predator and the prey, the killer and the victim?

A young woman studying forensics translated the clipping into English for him. It told him nothing he didn't already know. As a little girl, she said, her parents had warned her not to stay out late or the Chinaman's ghost would come and eat her.

See Ouey's monstrous legend was intact, but what had happened to the man himself? He was nowhere to be found. Unless the filmmaker could bring the main character to life, the movie would be a commercial and critical fiasco.

The director closed his eyes. He imagined See Ouey's spirit wafting across the museum, chill and invisible as the breeze from the air-conditioners, fluttering up the back of his untucked shirt to skitter across his shoulders and whisper in his ear, "Do you see me now? I'm nothing and



nobody. A tiny, ugly man who had everything stripped from him: his wife, his farm, his money and all his self-respect and dignity. Everyone treated me like an animal, so that's what I became." The killer spoke in the same Hainanese dialect as the director's grandfather. "When I looked into the flame of that candle for five days straight... when my mind *became* that flame, I saw that I was going to become an immortal legend and I would never die. *That* was my greatest hunger." See Ouey chuckled bitterly. "Not bad for a rickshaw Chink, huh?"

In his mind's camera eye, the director saw a boy walking a water buffalo beside a cliff top. The camera tracked behind them, slowly panning across a ruffled sea spangled with sunbeams to focus on the boy stroking the beast's horns. The boy said, "You're the only one who understands me. You know what I want, Seow Fung? More than anything, I want for both of us to live forever."

The director opened his eyes. A smile backlit his face. This was great. It was magic. The anti-hero was directing the film for him.

As the eyes of See Ouey's distant relative zoomed in on the browned and wrinkled cadaver, he saw the movie as a different breed of *The Metamorphosis*. For the Kafkaesque creature trapped behind glass resembled the exoskeleton of a gigantic cockroach, its wings shorn, antennae clipped:

an insect trying to become a man.