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and the *Raising Arcadia* trilogy

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WAITING FOR VENUS

Waiting...

I LIVE IN A cosy little vein between two arteries; my evenings are quiet as the grave, or they were until the night Uncle Bernard got hanged. Truth be told, the vein, Evans Road, is more a capillary than a vein, more a lane than a road, but don't tell Evans, whoever Evans is or was. In 1980, it sneaks across the university from Tanglin-side to Bukit Timah Road. Anybody crossing the campus at night, unless they skulk through the grass and bushes, uses Evans Road and I see them – if I'm looking. Not that many make the crossing, so the normal pulse of my Evans Road evenings, once the girls in the dormitory opposite switch off their lights at ten, is almost imperceptible – a deathlike silence. Well, silence broken by the episodic shrill of male cicadas trying to attract a mate. When on, they fill my mind; when they snap off, my mind floats, free, empty, waiting ... for Venus.

As I hang on in hope, waiting for Venus to show up, Professor Bernard Fox, my best friend in the world or by this time out of it, is just up the road hanging by his neck from a rope. I do nothing to save him. Uncle Bernard is dying and I'm doing nothing. I'm not heartless; I'm really quite sensitive. And it's not quite true I'm doing nothing; I'm waiting for Venus to call by. Well, to call by *maybe*. Venus only half-promised. 'I'll try to call by, Tom, after work.' She's done that before. Lucky I'm good at waiting.

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Tonight, it's pretty much waiting as usual: still life with whisky. Nothing suggests the world is turning turtle on me; I'm the same tiny speck I always was – in the same enormous place it always has been since the Empire built it in 1924 and since I moved in a couple of years back – in 1980 a young man full of dreams and nothing in the bank. A place defined by its 'nos': no aircon, no TV, no telephone, no hot water, no glass in the windows. Just 'Hard Furnishings': chairs with no cushion, beds with no mattress, cold water, and overhead fans that wobble on long stems from a high ceiling. My flat's a bit of a desert island. I love it.

Outside my space, suicidal flying insects explode soundlessly on dimly-lit old-fashioned street lamps. Same most nights; why do they do that?

I go into the kitchen to get a tub of ice cubes from the second-hand fridge I bought for a song because its door won't close right and the seller delivered and installed it, saving me the bother. I don't think this simple journey from window to fridge has significance but it does, although at the time it doesn't. I notice the dirty shirt I tossed in the basket last night is still there and still dirty; Norsiah has not been in to clean today, hope she's not sick or something.

I return to sit by my glassless window, looking through open shutters to the deep outside. I semi-focus on the old wind-up clock with luminous hands beside me as my eyelids close ... 9 o'clock and already the whisky's taking over. I'm not thinking, just being. I don't think, therefore I am not; no, that's not right, but never mind. My mind is somewhere, I don't know where. Is that important? I suppose it is. Everything on that night is important.

Waiting for Venus

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'Professor ...?' A whisper from outside. My eyes open. Inches away, a silhouette. It doesn't startle me. I am beyond startling.

'I wish.' I sigh.

'*Bitte?*'

'Bitter?' The whisky talking, trying to be funny. 'Not much. This is my first teaching job. Can't become professor overnight. There's still time.'

'It is five minutes past the 10 o'clock.'

I look at the clock; he's right. An hour has gone by and I didn't notice it go; lost time, not waiting, not wasted, not killed, just lost. 'Yes, I know. Most of the lights have gone out in the girls' dorm.'

'*Bitte?*'

This brief encounter with a Germanic shadow I recall because I remember everything that happened that night – well not quite everything, there's the lost hour. Then the cicada starts again and the black shape at my window shouts to be heard above the insect's scream. I don't answer; I've just noticed what's behind him.

'Professor Haddock?' The voice is accented. Must be German.

Behind him waits a black Citroën of the large-bonneted World War II type with double chevrons on its grill and its engine ticking over, ready for a quick getaway. It must have come onto campus from the Bukit Timah side; I'd have noticed had it turned the corner from Dalvey – but maybe not if I'd been transported back forty years during the lost hour; doubtful I suppose, time transmutation, but after half a bottle of whisky,

and with a German at the window saying *bitte* and a WWII Citroën in the driveway, I can't be completely sure. The silhouette glances back at the car. The owl-eye headlamps light up its face. Blond, bronzed, square-jawed and built to last a thousand years; can't get more stereotype than that – although I suppose you can if you pop in a WWII backdrop. Now I know what it feels like to be invaded by Olympian sculptures from old war movies.

'Haddock, yes, professor, no,' I say. 'I am Doctor Tom Haddock. What do you want?'

'I want to see Professor Fox, but he does not answer his door. I knock very hard. May I call him from your telephone?' VW-problem. Definitely German. Definitely stereotype; although I tend to stereotype too readily. I'll never be a novelist.

'No. Don't have telephone.'

I must sound brusque; he leaves without a thank you. I could call out and tell him there's a public phone at Guild House a hundred metres down the road just opposite Bernard's front door but I don't – *he didn't say thank you*. Doesn't he know there's a courtesy campaign on? An unseen hand inside the Citroën opens the passenger door for him and off he goes Tanglin way. I wonder why on earth a German in a WWII Citroën would visit Bernard after lights-out in the girls' dorm, but I don't wonder hard enough to go and check on him; I could, I have the key, but I don't.

I sit on in the room we call the living room, as if all the other rooms are dead. Funny language, English. Still, it is my language; my mother tongue as they say. Well, I suppose it is, my mother spoke English, though when I started to talk, I probably spoke more Malay; the *amah* was Malay and I loved her as only a very young boy can love the woman who washes behind his ears

and foreskin. Most of the other kids in the *kampong* were Malay, except for some Chinese in the market and a few Tamils from the rubber plantation and I would speak Malay with them all; it was the language of fun and games and *sandwic ais krim dan kek*. I didn't distinguish the two languages much back then; Mum and Dad spoke English but everybody else in my world spoke Malay – so Mum and Dad were the odd ones out. I grew into English and Malay grew into the national language of Singapore, one of three official languages, no, four, I tend to forget Tamil, a minority language, but aren't they all? Then again, Malay is the language of the national anthem so it can't be all that minor, can it? I slouch in my armchair, ask myself senseless questions and tenderly sing Majullah Singapura.

I'm not in the habit of sitting alone singing the national anthem, so maybe the whisky's really taking over. I love the tune though and I know all the words; more than I can say for God Save the Queen. In Singapore, we sing the national anthem in the home language of the nation next door. Nobody questions that. As an academic, it's nice to have something I don't need to question, form into a hypothesis, test and prove. And I suppose it keeps the neighbours happy.

Why do I remember singing the national anthem? No reason really; perhaps I imagined it. I am young then: gathering memories without reason. Imaginative. I'll live forever. Life has yet to gift me its fear of death. Although death must be in the air. I should smell it, sense it; I should do something about it. But I don't. Instead, as Uncle Bernard dies, I make Venus a present of the most valuable thing in the world I will ever have: my time. And Venus, bless her, doesn't even know I'm giving it to her.

Shall I wait for Venus or pop her into my pending box and

nip down the road for a few beers with Madhu to celebrate the coincidental start of both our birthdays at midnight? I didn't tell Venus it's my birthday – well, it will be in an hour – I didn't want her to feel obliged to come or do something silly like buy a present.

I'll wait. Hang on. Hoping Richard will let her come.

* * *

A few minutes to midnight, another face comes to my window and it's far from my image of Venus. It's a collection of bones held together by the kind of brown-spotted yellow skin you peel back from bananas past their prime: it's Li Fang. Unassuming, a bit distant, Li Fang takes his time to grow on anybody. But he's a hero dressed as anti-hero; and he's likeable – if you like bananas and stick-insects, and I do and he's grown on me. He's cook-manager of Guild House, the restaurant-bar for lecturers and graduates just two minutes down the road and right opposite the front door of Professor Bernard Fox, my uncle and only known living relative, although I never mention the family connection – he insists I do not.

'Doc-tor-Tom-come-quick-lah.'

Chop-chop-chop. Doc-tor-Tom-come-quick-lah. Chickens, crabs and the English language, Li Fang attacks them all with two rhythmic cleavers on a chopping block. After the stereotypical German, another cliché, although this time a deliberate one: the colonial native servant. But this cliché is only a game Li Fang plays; if he wants to, Li Fang can speak English to put Dr Harry Chin, my head of department, to shame; but he doesn't want to – he wants to keep his job. Li Fang's pigtail, if he ever had one, which, knowing him, I very much doubt, is long gone.

Any hint of *kao-tao* is trimmed to a wise tortoise-bobbing of a crusty head and his frugality of language is trimmed to the needs of a public world – and charades at my window. Bernard told me never to underestimate him. And Bernard knew Li Fang better than anybody.

In public, Li Fang the linguistic museum piece is as representative of the Empire-gone-by every bit as much as his curiously intimate comrade-in-arms, the Oxford-vowelled Professor Bernard Fox. Publicly, both men are the Empire's children, its heirs and its victims. I am one too: one of the Empire's last sons. After the Japanese surrender and the British return, I was born into what we then called British Malaya, a country fresh out of war and rushing into what Dad, an Empire's policeman, called the *Emergency*. But one thing I'm not, is *colonial* and neither is Uncle Bernard or Li Fang; if the three of us fit into colonial typology at all, it must be within the subset of wild colonial boy.

'Come-quick-lah.'

I know it's Madhu's birthday as much as mine and I know we sort of agreed we'd see our birthdays in together at the Guild House at midnight. I'd half-promised to be there when Madhu suggested it – half a promise. Not that I mind sharing a birthday with Madhu, I just have a better offer, or maybe I have, although it too is a half-promise; when Venus gets off work, she will try to come. Maybe she will. Maybe she won't. Half a promise, I suppose, is better than none, but it's still no promise at all.

I can hear, coming from Guild House, a lot more noise than the coincidence of two birthdays should merit – that obscure clamour a lot of people make when talking above each other like a flock of crows coming in to roost. I look at my wind-up clock. The big hand clicks to midnight. I don't turn into a pumpkin but

I do realise the chance of Venus coming is now sinking below any reasonable stretch of likelihood. And it is my birthday. I decide a quick drink with Madhu won't hurt, not if he wants me there so much he sends Li Fang to drag me out. I slip out of my Malay sarong and climb into blue-jeans ethnicity.

* * *

Madhu stands in the middle of the road looking like the frizzy-headed golliwog who used to advertise the best-selling English marmalade before golliwogs stopped being cute and became racist. Around Madhu a small clutch of lawyers clatters alcoholically. They can all speak Tamil but use English as their language, setting themselves apart from the thinner and darker monolingual Tamil labourers who stand in silence in the shadows, roused from their sleep by something more interesting than sleep. Cars and motorbikes fill the street – must have all come in from the Bukit Timah side. Quite a birthday turnout; I never realised I am so popular.

Madhu's car stretches across the tarmac like a road block. Its headlights shine into Bernard's open front doors. Detective Madhu, off-duty at midnight on the birth of his birthday, is in plain clothes. For Madhu, plain means a flower-power shirt three buttons open on a bushy chest. The whites of his eyes and the glint of ivory teeth on a moonless night conjure up conflicting pictures of an avuncular black-and-white minstrel and a half-crazed cannibal. My pal's a nice guy but he's not the spitting-image of the bobby on the beat. If this guy turns up at your door to babysit, your liberal conscience might be tested.

'Happy birthday, Madhu,' I say and reach for my birthday-twin's hand. My fingers close on a snub-nose revolver in a

tension-gripped fist. Madhu just made it up to the lowest of several junior ranks of inspector, something that carries a gun and a license to kill within regulations. He always has a nice smile on his face. But no smile now.

Madhu raises his lethal-weapon hand and places it on my shoulder. I feel the weight of hard metal and hope the barrel is pointing at something other than my head. He looks confused. Later, I understood why: this is the first time Madhu finds himself, as they say, the first person at the scene of a crime, the guy marked out as the prime suspect, although he is never the one who did it. I'm not sure if his hand on my shoulder is to steady him or me.

'I'm s-s-sorry, T-Tom.' Madhu's dormant stutter wakes up. I wait as he tries to swallow it away before learning what he is sorry about. 'Your f-f-r-iend...'

* * *

Madhu waves the gun barrel along the shafts of his car's headlights that pierce Bernard's living room. I don't want to look. I try not to look. But curiosity, as Bernard used to say, is always stronger than fear; that's why Man is in such a mess. I look.

At light-beam's end, I make out what seems to be an old, discarded puppet that nobody wants to play with anymore. It turns alone on a cranky roundabout, dipping into light, ducking back into shadow, round and round. As my eyes focus, the marionette becomes a person; a person swinging by the neck on a rope arcing out from a central capstan, rotating to the lazy revolution of a grouchy ceiling fan.

The body circles face up towards the ceiling; the knot pushing the chin jauntily to one side. The neck that in life had almost

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disappeared in the academic's hunch is in death stretched out so long that, at first, I think it's not Bernard's at all. But it is. It's Uncle Bernard – turning at the fan's slowest speed, the speed he likes best, enough to circle the air around him yet leave papers undisturbed on his desk. Under his orbiting feet, a brown mongrel dog snaps at the intruding light.

* * *

I'm one of those who respond slowly to surprise. I don't think myself amazingly cool-headed, dim-witted or hard-hearted. It just takes a few minutes, hours or days before I burst into tears or yell yippee. I'm not expecting to find Uncle Bernard dead; I know we talked about suicide last night but had I supposed Bernard to be in any danger, I'd have done something about it, at least I hope I would, although I did nothing, so maybe I wouldn't. Truth is, I'm more wait-and-see than do-or-die. Even this afternoon, when witnessing Bernard and Li Fang divide up the diamonds, I didn't ask what they were doing; I just witnessed what they wanted me to witness: the two tiny pyramids looked equal. It might have been two small boys cutting a chocolate bar in half; I was just there to witness fair play, not to ask questions. Anyway, had I asked a question, neither would have answered me. I'm an academic; I ask questions; it's my job. But I'm a Singaporean academic, I know when to ask questions and what to ask; I ask one now: 'Have you called the police?' All pragmatic Singaporean.

'I am the f-f-fucking police.'

'Yes, of course you are, Madhu. I mean the murder squad and ambulance and so on.'

'Li Fang te-li-pon,' says Li Fang beside me. He seems

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unfazed; still playing pidgin. Maybe after what he lived through under the Japanese, when hangings, he says, were daily events, and after surviving the Emergency, when whole villages were razed and commies like him buried themselves so deep in society they couldn't climb out, he takes the death of just one *ang mo* in his stride. But it's not that; I know how close Li Fang was to Bernard. Maybe, like mine, his emotions take a bit of time to kick in. Or maybe it's the diamonds.

I don't want to look, now I can't tear my eyes away from Bernard's slow-motion revolution. Mesmerising. Like a cobra's dance. I am only vaguely conscious of a large shape untying itself from the dark knot of birthday guests and entering my space. 'This must be a terrible shock to you. I know you were the very best of friends. Like father and son. You must be devastated. Such a terrible thing...' It's Tambiah, the solicitor and Madhu's closest friend and drinking partner. I cut him short. The reality before me is coming through in bits and bursts. I hit Tambiah with a burst. 'Too much to hope you and Madhu found the killer as well as the body?'

'Steady on old man,' says the solicitor. 'Nobody can establish the cause of death at this point.'

'Well, it doesn't look like an accident.'

Tambiah lets the sarcasm pass. 'I can see you're upset,' he says. 'But suicide seems the likeliest explanation ... empirically speaking. Murder by hanging's just not practical. Thing is, until Madhu can get to the body, nobody can even establish that Bernard is legally dead – although it is obvious, I'm afraid.'

Legally dead? Can anyone be *illegally* dead? Are the *illegally dead* arrested and charged? And if Bernard hanged himself, how did he manage to turn on the fan?

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About the Author



ROBERT COOPER is a British subject who has lived overseas most of his life in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Laos. He studied French literature at the Sorbonne in Paris before switching to anthropology in the UK. He received a PhD in Economic Anthropology after two years with Hmong villagers in Northern Thailand and Laos. Following publication of *Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response* (Singapore University Press, 1984), he was elected Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

Robert left an academic career in anthropology that included lectureships at Singapore, Chulalongkorn and Chiang Mai universities to join the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He served with the UN in Laos, Geneva, Malawi, the Philippines, Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh and Indonesia. In 2000, he became Head of the British Trade Office to Laos. He spent a year in Vietnam advising the government on poverty reduction, before returning to live and write in Vientiane, where he owns the bookshop *Book-Café Vientiane* and works on increasing literacy among young Lao. In addition to English, he speaks French, Lao, Malay/Indonesian and Thai.

Robert is the author of *CultureShock! Thailand* and companion volumes *Thais Mean Business*, *Thailand Beyond the Fringe* and *CultureShock! Laos*. He has also written cultural guides to Bahrain, Bhutan, Croatia and Indonesia, and three novels set in Asia and the UK.