

New Fiction by Pavle Radonic: Murder, War and the Dead



An old unsolved murder mystery in a foreign sea-port. Ship Captain the victim, done nobody any harm. Who killed Captain S. Palori and why?

Why was Palori's mission kept quiet from the populace of the island country that received his cargo three full years? This was the further and larger question, one ultimately of State and international relations.

Poor, unfortunate Palori. Second-Mate Rashid was still grieving the man more than thirty years later, in the midst of his own recent misfortune.

Palori's misery might have been over instantly with a single bullet, no lingering or hardship. Rashid's lot on the other hand would be hardship and trouble all the remaining days of

his life.

The tale of Palori's end and Rashid's own present difficulty were bound up together. You could not have the one without the other.

Usually Rashid kept a fine and sunny disposition. Even eighteen months after his accident he had learned not to complain and irk listeners with his troubles. People could not listen more than a little to tales of woe. That kind of thing could not be endured more than once in a while. Little wonder Rashid adopted that uncomplaining manner.

It's OK. A nuisance, but you know. Not so bad.

In the first place, Rashid would do himself no good at all moaning and groaning.

How does a man turning sixty cope living suddenly with one half-leg and a half-foot? Eighteen months after his accident Rashid had time to consider and rake over the past. There had been the lying prone in a hospital bed a good time too. Out on the water seamen were tutored in reflection by waves and far-fetched skies. Rashid showed all the signs.

One thing Rashid had surmised was that amputees had a shortened life span. The problem was something to do with the circulation, the truncation bottling up the blood somehow. In his remaining limbs Rashid could feel the change, even in the unaffected arms. The former strength in Rashid's hands had been lost, his secure, tight clasp never returning. A simple double-knot was beyond Rashid now.

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Just as Palori and the ship's story came in segments, the

matter of Rashid's condition and his particular circumstances followed the same pattern. The wheelchair was one thing, presenting the general case plainly enough for anyone to see. Enquiring after details and examining more closely needed a number of meetings.

Vietnam came up somehow without warning. Being a younger man still short of sixty, Rashid seemed an unlikely source for anything touching the war in Vietnam. Developing the account of sailing days, the usual roll-call of countries and ports was tallied. All the old sailors brought out the extensive experience. There were something like two hundred countries visited during Rashid's career on the water, numerous ports among them. Mombasa, Panama, Texas... Ho Chi Minh was finally included in the list of impressive, out of the way points on the compass.

Following which full circle, Rashid's last, fateful trip to Vietnam, where he had gone to investigate a business opportunity. First Palori's fateful trip to Vietnam; followed thirty years later by Captain-in-his-own-right by then, Rashid the Malay.

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Palori never made it out of Vietnam; Rashid had gotten more than three quarters of the way home. On the Peninsular highway in Negri Sembilan, Malaysia, riding his big *Kawasaki 900* through the monsoonal downpour, the rear tray of a Double B it may have been suddenly swinging across in front of Rashid and pulling him under its wheels.

Through the early telling, before we had arrived at Palori, it had been assumed the shoe on the end of Rashid's good leg enclosed an intact foot. Not the case; therapeutic item.

On the fourth or fifth meeting, Rashid waved a hand at the shoe with its adhesive straps rather than laces, only then observed for the first time.

Though wasted, both arms and hands were whole and undamaged; ribs and shoulders well-healed.

Divorced. An eighty-nine year old Ceylonese mother, who spoke a language unknown to her children, living alone out in Bedok South. Estranged sibling relationships made things harder again.

The former sailor's grass-widow encountered her first husband across at Geylang Serai Market recently for the first time in twenty years. A small island like Singapore, yet even so the former wife had heard nothing of Rashid's accident of more than a year and half ago. Their two daughters the same no doubt, ignorant of what had become of their father.

The former wife had asked after Rashid's new wife and was surprised, shocked indeed, to learn there was none.

(Had Rashid rehearsed what he would tell his wife when they finally, inevitably met? It was impossible to tell and difficult to ask)

I have only one wife. Never another, Rashid told the woman who had divorced him twenty years before.

Pointing at his heart when he delivered the encounter at the *Labu Labi* table.

It made the former wife cry. Seeing him suddenly in a wheelchair; then comprehending the solitariness on top.

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Almost certainly, one assumed, Rashid had led the wayward sailor's life away from home. Rashid himself had been the victim of a port shooting, at a table outside a bar in the Philippines. Jealous husband or boy-friend involved, Rashid had surmised.

In fact, on the contrary, Rashid maintained, the usual seaman's dissolution did not apply in his case.

A handsome man still, Rashid held to the position. There had been no whore-houses, no girls in any ports, no girlfriends of any intimate kind. An irony for such a Sea-salt to lose the loved one blameless like that.

Rashid's good leg carried the marks of his earlier lucky escape in the Philippines: one wound from the bullet that went in above the knee and the other grazing the thigh. That incident too had required a period of hospital recuperation. Put in the shade now by subsequent events.

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Palori had collected his bullet in the head. Early nightfall, Ho Chi Minh City.

Dusk was a strange time in Ho Chi Minh even five years after the war. It was as if the smoke of bombs and chemicals still rose up from the fields despite the intervening years, bringing a premature close of day. Some of it was the peasants burning off, though this was different to what Rashid was accustomed to in Singapore from the Sumatran and Malaysian burn-offs.

Shrouding dusk that rose from the ground in the port of Ho Chi Minh and drew unexpected nightfall in strange, unfamiliar hues.

Even when not on his watch, Captain Palori came up to the bridge, ordered coffee and handed round cigarettes. Palori often sang tunes like the troubadour Malays.

Palori had taken his cigarette over to the port-side window. There beside the bearing compass, at the open window, the Captain blew toward the cranes loading the *Seasweep's* cargo. Marines below working in the compound, trolleys rolling over the jetty back and forth.

Second-Mate Rashid was down in the Mess Hall taking an early supper when the shots rang out. After the heat of late afternoon, all the port holes were still wide open.

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Rashid was scheduled to attend regular medical check-ups for his wounds at two different hospitals. Transport was a problem. One morning Rashid waited from eight until well after noon for the friend who had agreed to drive him. A lift for the appointment would have been a great help. Rashid did not ask that anyone wait for him to finish with the doctors, just drop him.

Without money for cab fare, a few weeks previously Rashid had wheeled himself back from *Tan Tock Seng* out in Balestier Road. Cars honking behind. Rashid had kept to the kerb and pushed on. Luckily some Bangla boy helped him over the Kallang Bridge. The soon-to-turn sixty former bike enthusiast enjoyed the rush going down on the other side.

Sore shoulders and fingers afterward, thumb and forefinger especially. Three hours in all. Twice now Rashid had returned from the hospital under his own steam.

As Rashid's story emerged the news-reports of the death of the

famous old Viet general Nguyen Vo Giap, reminded of the figures. Two and one half million Vietnamese casualties during the course of the war; 58,000 Americans on their side, Rashid was told after some double-checking.

No surprise this for former Captain Rashid. The population of Singapore three decades ago dying in a long, protracted war against the French and then the Americans.

Fifty-eight thousand Americans tallied roughly for Rashid too. A short while Rashid had revolved the latter figure, calculating quietly for himself over some minutes.

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Second-Mate Rashid signed on from the beginning with Captain S. Palori, in 1979. Full three year term on the *Seasweep*. After Palori was killed a Filipino Captain was brought in to take command.

The job could not wait; as soon as the *Seasweep* was loaded, anchors away. Some kind of investigation dragged on for a while behind them at the dock. It was a hopeless, futile endeavour. Palori's killer would never be found. Five years after the war, not only Ho Chi Minh, but the whole region was awash with guns of all kinds and no end of marksmen.

All the ports were dangerous, Ho Chi Minh particularly. The *World Vision International* Chief and the Shipping Agent had warned the men never to stray from the compound on the dock. It was highly dangerous. No-one had anticipated the deck or the bridge could prove equally so.

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Rashid gave the well-known report of the returning sensation of the missing limb. Chuckles at it as if at the captivating play of a favourite child. Funny that.

One evening raking over the details, recapitulating key points, a small, precocious boy happened by and stopped directly before Rashid in his chair. Clearly the pair was known to each other from the footpath outside the *kopi* shop.

The boy had not forgotten Rashid. Not forgotten and perhaps dubious and unsatisfied at the man's by-play.

Hey Mister. Where's your leg?

Again Rashid repeated the tale of his fishing accident that he had told the boy previously.

Hanging over a line, no bite. Waiting. Waiting.

The boy was looking into Rashid's chair harder than he was listening.

Like a rifle barrel suddenly raised, the stump twitching up from Rashid's shorts and surprising more than just the boy.

TWANG!

Oh Gee! Fishy got dinner now. The *Burger King* one. The other leg was too spicy for Mr. Fish's taste. Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

After the theatrics the child was peering closely again. That was what it looked like, alright. But really?

The Grandpa behind the young lad had showed chattering jaws for apology.

You know how it is.

Which was unnecessary for Rashid. No harm done; the boy was understandably curious.

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It had been assumed Rashid had a flat of his own, rented if nothing else. More than thirty years a seaman; sixteen as Master.

The chaps around Geylang Serai still honoured the former Captain. Local businessmen establishing new ventures picked Rashid's brain for various particulars.

How had the Captain let all that money slip through his fingers, never thinking of rainy days ahead?

By the mid-'90s the shipping game had changed, barter trade becoming the norm, which priced Singaporean Masters out of the business. Far cheaper Indonesian and Chinese officers had been readily available. For a number of years Rashid led the local protests for native Masters on Singaporean ships.

In his chair Rashid slept nights there by *Labu Labi*. When the place closed for the day the old Sea-salt pulled up one of the red plastic chairs for his leg. An improvised sailor's bunk.

When some money came his way Rashid took a hotel room, washing his clothes and using the aircon for drying. Being always so clean and presentable, one assumed other arrangements.

Luckily for Rashid, there would be money coming from insurance and also CPF, once the paperwork and procedures were complete.

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A few years on there would come a whiff of the con man about Rashid. After four or five months of regular nightly sits at the *kopi* shops, Rashid disappeared for a stretch and on return said little about his absence. A hot scheme was afoot, a project that promised rich returns. Only a few thousand was needed, \$4-5K for a nice windfall. Timber or sand it might have been, bundled with the usual oil. One of the Javanese Sultans was on board. If you or any of your Australian friends were interested.

A rift with Bee Choo preceded another absence. Surprisingly, Bee, who always pleaded straightened circumstances, had advanced the Captain a thousand or more dollars. A short-term return had been promised; the time blew out and Bee became importunate. Rashid fully intended to repay; Bee would be duly recompensed. But she could not get about making false accusations; Rashid would answer the police, or any other authority. The money had sunk in some kind of hole and Rashid was in no position to produce a sum like that at the drop of a hat.

Another disappearance saw a turnaround—here was the Captain flashing a wallet thickly stacked with fifties, easily over a grand. There was more in hand too. Had you eaten? Could the Captain buy you a meal or drink? Rashid's numbers had come up on the *4D* or *Toto*.

Rashid's innocence in the rupture with the wife rang somewhat suspiciously too. Remaining faithful and supportive himself, there had been no reason; the woman had simply abandoned her husband. It was rare in that conservative Muslim milieu. The two daughters "followed" the mother; they had become estranged. One would have liked to have heard the other side.

Eight or nine day round trip, depending on the weather. Two voyages a month over three years. Palori was killed around the half-way mark of the cartage.

How many body bags had the *Seasweep* carried? On one particular trip there had been almost fifty in the hold, Captain Rashid reported over the richly sweetened *kopi* that he favoured.

Rashid was in a position to know the numbers. Second-Mate's duty had included going down into the hold with the Marines to verify figures. Numbers correlated with names showing in the clear plastic pockets of the bags, where any personal effects were also placed.

Second-Mate counted off carefully for each delivery, presenting the documents to Captain Palori, and then the relieving Captains after him.

All present and accounted for, Captain.

The ship could not leave port without the clearance.

Verifications could be difficult for the Second-Mate when there was some kind of inconsistency, larger batches usually throwing up problem on top of problem.

So many *Browns* on numerous occasions, seven or eight not unknown on a large, single loading.

Browns in opaque bags of that colour, zippered tight and tagged.

After the exhumation of corpses that had been in the ground ten years many of them, there should not have been such stench rising from the hold and penetrating the entire ship.

Down in the hold masks were useless and the odour saturated clothing and hair. Some of the sailors took their meals on

deck rather than the Mess Hall.

Some of the sailors surmised the chemicals the Americans had dropped infected their dead and possibly posed a threat to themselves now in turn. What might be in store as a result of their work on the Cross and Bones Seasweep?

It was the Devil's own wages. Long-termers on the job were given cholera shots every three months; special pills were available to help the men cope, one morning and one night. Second-Mate didn't like the whooziness and only took a single pill at most.

The bags were supposed to be air-tight.

Forklifts pulled pallets from the rear of delivery trucks. Sometimes the ship waited two or three days for a single truck to arrive, the officers on the Bridge watching the marines lounge, play cards and smoke below.

On the dock they carted ten at a time, slowly and carefully on trolleys pulled by motorized carts. Ten was the maximum on the trolley.

From the jetty alongside, the pallets were craned aboard directly into the hold and sorted into racks.

Second-Mate Rashid had needed to stand on his toes to get the particulars of the topmost bags. Occasionally watched by high-ranking American officers, once even a general of some kind, who climbed down into the hold to inspect.

Second-Mate was specifically charged with ensuring each tier was double bound and securely tied against the typhoons and other weathers.

Out on one side of the port the jungle came down almost to the water, tall trees in the midst that became the centre of suspicion after Palori's killing. Captain Palori's was not the neat, piercing wound from close range. A sniper awaiting his

chance in amongst the lush greenery could have bided his time until Palori presented a clear target.

120-30 metres. Single bullet only ever found, though some of the men reported a hail of fire.

Another body-bag was added for Palori.

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An easy, mostly uneventful passage down through the Gulf of Thailand, past some of the resort islands. Along the East coast of Malaysia and around into Sembawang.

Same route taken by land-lubing Captain Rashid on the *Kawasaki* more than thirty years later, not far inland from the coast.

Through the war there was good business from the Americans come down on R&R into the naval base at Sembawang. Like many other ports of the region, Singapore had prospered with the American presence. The soldiers on a break from the jungle were ready to spend up big. The prostitution industry in South-East Asia essentially derived from the Americans in Vietnam.

The trade in living flesh was an open secret in Singapore, well-known even to schoolchildren. That of the repatriation of foreign war dead much more closely guarded.

The matter was so sensitive that there was not a whisper of any kind. No one had heard of the arrangement in Singapore. Three years' transport to-and-fro.

From Sembawang the bodies were trucked to Changi, where U.S. aircraft took the cargo the last leg home. Local carpenters were engaged for the pine caskets that would present the

remains to kin in the States. Military bands, draped flags and saluting guards of honour.

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Nothing surprising about the secrecy for the City-State. Nothing shameful about repatriating war dead. On the contrary, it was an honourable, compassionate service performed for an important ally.

A certain prudence was all. The Malaya Emergency was some years before. Soeharto in command in Indonesia. The Near and Far East continued at the time very much full-blush Red.

No need provide information unnecessarily to the public. Why would one do that? No harm occasioned.

The Red Alert at embarkation at Ho Chi Minh ran counter to the usual story of the ready Vietnamese forgiveness and charity toward the former foe. Every war left grizzly, hard-arse tough guys up in the hills or jungles, continuing their private struggle. How could one blame renegade Vietnamese units?

Poor Palori, *ni kriv, ni duzan*; neither guilty, nor indebted, as the Montenegrins, well-versed in warfare, concluded for such personal tragedies.

For a while there Rashid had been selling the dried and seasoned packets of cuttlefish and cigarette lighters from one of the *Labu Labi* front pavement tables, earning a few dollars while awaiting his compensation. Smiles and good cheer maintained.

Memorable scenes of the Captain lighting up one of his *Gudang Garams* beside his eighty-nine year old mother, with her own expertly rolled tabacchi.

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In the first months listening to Rashid's unfolding of the Seasweep you could not help wondering. A three year operation of that scale, without a whisper. Asking around, combing the newspapers of the period, the parliamentary record—nothing. Men from the marine sector, the army and police quizzed; politically engaged, educated citizens.

Eventually, five or six years after Rashid left the scene for good, it seemed—he had mentioned a plan to retire in Indonesia—an independent source emerged. Mohammed Noor from Joo Chiat Complex had worked a couple of decades at the Seletar airport, where he sometimes liaised with the port at Sembawang. No word in his time of the transport. But in his retirement, at the Haig *kopi* shops Modh frequented most days, a pal, chap called Man—Osman—an Indian, told of his sewing at Sembawang. It might have been others filling the bags; Man was tasked with the stitching of the fabric, working with industrial machines. Bodies of a single limb, or trunk only; ambiguous bodily segments bundled. Two left arms; a pair of heads. Man saw them go into the bags. They might have been sorted better on the other side. Telling what he had heard from Man at the Haig, Mr Modh swivelled in his chair with a chuckle and grin.