

Neil Oddie

The Helper

Part 1

The stench of dried fish from the street market below permeated every cubic inch of the dormitory. Competing with a neon sign perched outside the bedroom window, a solitary light bulb hanging from the ceiling flickered on and off with nauseating irregularity. Unmuffled by screens of drying laundry strung across open windows, an incessant symphony of traffic noise resonated throughout the cavernous apartment. An agitated gaggle of young women bickered furiously while waiting for the only working shower. Teresa's head was throbbing.

Relieved to be leaving the squalor of her crowded quarters, Teresa checked the contents of her small, fraying satchel before stepping out into the chaotic maze of Ilha Verde – Macau's northern ghetto. "Little Manila" as the girls liked to call it. *What an insult to Manila*, she thought, as she sidestepped a family of eager cockroaches circling a steaming drain.

Jostling amongst a throng of freshly showered heads, Teresa waited at the bus stop for what seemed like an eternity. She became aware of a balding dog watching her, mockingly, from the far side of the street. Without breaking eye contact, he squatted, quivered tensely and relieved himself on the cobbled pavement. *So that's what Macau thinks of us*, she mused to herself, deprecatingly.

The journey to Taipa seemed unusually long and tiresome. Having ridden the same route for the last six months, Teresa had become largely numb to the unpleasantness of the morning commute. The musty aroma of damp, oily hair mixed with Macau's habitual exhaust fumes had become commonplace. Even the foul stench of fermenting tofu no longer offended her olfactory sensibilities. There was, however, a new, exotic scent in the air that caused her nostrils to expand and contract involuntarily.

The smell of a man's aftershave would not normally arouse attention in a crowded bar or casino. This was, however, not the case on the Route 26 bus from Patane which, at 6 o'clock in the morning, is almost exclusively frequented by women. Teresa could not immediately discern its provenance, yet the fragrance exuded strong, musky tones reminiscent of leather and toasted almonds. It conjured up an intense

Neil Oddie

masculinity with a pheromonal potency that she was not accustomed to. Or certainly had not been for many years.

When half the bus cleared out at Barra, Teresa found herself locking eyes with a dark, handsome man of Mediterranean appearance. Portuguese, she assumed, given Macau's colonial heritage. His salt-and-pepper hair – topped with a felt fedora hat – betrayed the distinction of late middle age, while his tailored suit hinted at an elevated professional status. A lawyer, she guessed. Or maybe a banker. *Why would this rich gweilo be traveling on a bus, let alone this bus?* she wondered with conspicuous perplexity. Noticing her inquisitive gaze, the man nodded politely and – slightly lowering his eyes through a pair of rimless spectacles – forced a hesitant smile from one corner of his mouth.

-

The sound of a poorly tuned piano billowed through the open front door as Teresa stepped out of the elevator. The melody was far from graceful, yet she found it strangely welcoming. It was certainly preferable to the cacophony of moped traffic that invaded her dormitory back in Ilha Verde. A porcelain dragon glared at her from a plinth just inside the threshold. Cowering under its scowl, she slipped off her tattered beige sandals and stepped into a pair of pink Hello Kitty flip flops.

A small yet ferociously vocal Yorkshire terrier raced up to Teresa and began sniffing her ankles with disconcerting enthusiasm. Was it the dried fish or the toasted almonds that he was savoring with such determined vigor? *Or is it me?* she considered, self-consciously. Trailing a few feet behind was the dog's equally vocal owner who looked like she'd just arrived home from an all-night bender. A rash of lipstick around her mouth and swishes of smudged mascara on her cheekbones revealed a hasty – and largely futile – attempt at makeup removal. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was twisted and tangled as if she had been rolling around in a bush; a whiff of alcohol and cigarettes stubbornly clung to her shabby chic clothing. Her low neckline was adorned with a string of shiny charcoal-grey pearls, while an array of oversized gemstones crusted her manicured fingers. She insisted on Teresa addressing her as “Mrs. Chippenham” although she could not have been more than five years her senior. Her husband and friends referred to her - quite simply - as Chippy.

Neil Oddie

“Leave her the bloody hell alone, Rufus” she exclaimed to the dog in the exaggeratedly nasal drawl that is the reserve of the English upper class. “Who knows where she’s been!” Alcohol had clearly made her oblivious to the presence of the other non-canine, English-speaking mammal in the room.

Equipped with the resilience of an experienced domestic helper, Teresa remained resolutely unperturbed save for an involuntary twitch of her left eye.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Teresa?” Mrs. Chippenham snapped, bypassing even the most meager attempt at a morning pleasantry.

“No, ma’am. It’s nothing, ma’am. So sorry, ma’am. I just have a terrible headache today, ma’am” she retorted gingerly.

“You don’t have your period again, do you?”

“No ma’am. Just a bad headache, ma’am. I’m ok, ma’am,” she lied, recalling last month’s episode when she was ceremoniously expelled without pay for precisely that reason. *What sort of woman treats another woman like that?*

“Good. I should bloody well hope not.”

“Yes, ma’am. I mean no, ma’am,” she agreed shakily, while straining to contain her inner discomfort.

As if to escape the awkward silence that hung between them, the two women retreated to their respective comfort zones. Mrs. Chippenham to the reassuring splendor of her Steinway piano, Teresa to the pink tiled sanctuary of the utility room.

Despite a pool of water that had gathered at the base of a freshly poured tumbler of gin and tonic, the grand piano was resplendent. With its gleaming mahogany surfaces and oversized stature, it commanded a domineering presence at one end of the vast living room. At the opposite end of the room, an enormous set of French windows gave onto an expansive and heavily landscaped roof terrace, which boasted spectacular views of Macau’s glittering skyline.

Neil Oddie

The utility room, by contrast, contained rusty old appliances whose corners were propped up on beer mats. Although mostly tidy and well ordered, the room was strewn with soiled undergarments as if revealing the scene of a passionate crime. Boxer shorts hung from the handle of a wall cabinet, while a pair of knickers dangled from a light fixture like discarded dental floss. A red lace bra lay at the base of a heavy steel sink, waiting patiently to be washed – a duty which, as ever, Teresa carried out with forensic thoroughness.

-

The manner in which Mrs. Chippenham reclined on the chaise longue reminded Teresa of the alabaster statues that adorned Macau's casinos. Although clothed – unlike her sculpted counterparts – her voluptuous form and relaxed pose exuded a similar air of self-satisfaction and sexual self-confidence. With a cigarette smoldering on the coffee table and a half-empty drink sandwiched between her thighs, she commenced her morning consumption of Western literature. *Vogue* and *Hello* were perennial favorites; however, she was also an avid reader of Hong Kong's edition of *Good Housekeeping*. The latter choice was one which Teresa found perversely amusing as she crouched awkwardly in the corner of the living room, scrubbing the travertine marble floor with an old toothbrush.

"Teresa, darling," Mrs. Chippenham began, typically when prefacing an order to empty her ashtray or replenish her drink, "I'll be going out for lunch with the girls today, so I'll need you to hold the fort."

"Yes, ma'am. Of course, ma'am," Teresa responded, slightly taken off guard by the magnitude of such a responsibility. *Maybe she does trust me after all.*

"I'll also need a dress ironed. Nothing too fancy. The new Valentino will be fine."

"Sorry, ma'am. Which one –"

"Stupid me. You obviously wouldn't know what that is. It's the short pink one. Purple trim at the bottom," Mrs. Chippenham huffed impatiently, without once lifting her eyes from her magazine. "Make sure it's ready by noon."

"Yes, ma'am."

Neil Oddie

Unfazed by Teresa's lingering sideward gaze from the corner of the room, Mrs. Chippenham hovered her loaded cigarette to one side of her face and – blatantly ignoring the presence of the nearby ashtray – flicked the ash onto the floor.

-

Scarcely thirty minutes had passed since Mrs. Chippenham had left the apartment, when Teresa heard a faint knocking at the front door. Letting out an impulsive bark, Rufus sprang from the piano stool and raced towards the entrance, skimming the floor with his little black nose. Following in his wake – albeit with far less urgency – Teresa observed the terrier as he gorged himself on a sumptuous aroma drifting through the gap above the threshold. Slowly opening the heavy door, she too became hypnotized by the intensity of the fragrance, despite residual vapors of toilet cleaner still present in her nostrils. Unable to instantly assign it to a specific memory, the pungent scent of leather and toasted almonds was nonetheless acutely familiar to her.

“Good day, young lady. My name is João and I am a friend of Mr. Chippenham. Is he home yet?” a middle-aged man asked in a soft Portuguese accent, while politely removing his fedora and holding it to his chest with well-rehearsed humility.

“No, sir. He is not home yet, sir,” Teresa responded with obvious trepidation. As with his cologne, the man seemed vaguely familiar to Teresa yet her precise memory of him remained hazy.

“He is expecting me here at two o'clock. May I come in and wait for him, madam?”

“Umm. Sorry, sir. Umm. I don't know whether I should –”

“Do not worry, young lady. Mr. Chippenham and I are old friends. I assure you that I will not be a burden to you,” he insisted persuasively, crouching slightly and tilting his neck to maintain eye contact.

Trying to evade the man's persistent gaze, Teresa paused for a few seconds while considering her predicament. *Mrs. Chippenham asked me to hold the fort, but surely I can't leave an old friend of Mr. Chippenham sitting outside on the doorstep!*

Neil Oddie

“Very well, sir. Come in, sir. Please take a seat in the sitting room,” she said shyly, while opening the door with one hand and restraining Rufus with the other.

“Can I get you some coffee, sir?”

“No. That will not be necessary. But thank you,” the man responded as he stepped into the entrance hall with labored deference.

Under the judging scowl of the porcelain dragon, Teresa pushed the heavy door closed until it latched with a loud click. At that precise moment – as if the sharp sound of the locking door had simultaneously unlocked her clouded memory – she remembered the man on the bus with unassailable clarity.

After a momentary hesitation, she turned round and stared at the stranger with a mixture of fear and confusion. Before she could even muster the words to speak, one hand was over her mouth and the other was lodged firmly on her back, pulling her towards him.

-

It was dusk by the time Mrs. Chippenham arrived home. The flashing neon lights from the Macau skyline were projecting a dancing palate of bright colors on the living room walls. The apartment was otherwise completely dark.

Surrounded by broad strokes of blood smudged up the walls and along the marble floor, Teresa sat shivering in the corner of the living room, curled up tightly into an agonized fetal position. Her blood-stained blouse was devoid of buttons, while her unbuckled jeans lay halfway down her thighs. Her tangled black hair fell loosely across her bruised face, masking an unending cascade of tears.

The throbbing inside Teresa’s head intensified as a blinding light pierced her closed eyelids. She heard a door slam firmly followed by the sound of Mrs. Chippenham shouting in a loud and unintelligible voice as she ran into the living room. Teresa prized open her swollen eyelids as the pounding of footsteps resonated louder and louder through the marble floor. *She’s getting closer.*

Neil Oddie

Struggling, Teresa lifted her chin from her chest and looked up helplessly at the approaching figure. Her buttonless shirt fell open as she raised her hands in front of her face in a gesture of self-defense. In the endless seconds that followed – with eyes closed and face shielded – Teresa waited for Mrs. Chippenham to react. She braced herself for a verbal barrage of unrivaled ferocity – one that would dwarf the kind of onslaught she had sustained in the past for even the most minor of digressions.

Anticipating such a reaction, Teresa receded once again into her protective fetal ball. What she felt at that point, however, was not the unbridled outburst of wrath which she had expected. It was not the name-calling, the judging, the ordering or the accusing that she had become so accustomed to over the last several months. It was the gentle sensation of an arm being placed around her shoulders – one with such a delicacy and sensitivity as to be barely perceptible. With a silent calmness, Mrs. Chippenham cradled Teresa's forehead in the palm of her hand and placed it against her cheek. Teresa wept uncontrollably as pearls of tears dripped from the precipice of her grazed chin onto Mrs. Chippenham's pink and purple dress.

“Stay calm, my dear. Breathe.” Mrs. Chippenham finally whispered in a solemn but deeply reassuring voice. After a prolonged and wounded pause, she then added chokingly: “This happened to me once too.”

“I'm s... s... so sorry, Mrs. Chippenham. It's all m... m... my fault. I can explain,” Teresa stuttered, gasping for air between the sobs.

With a delicate squeeze of Teresa's clenched fingers, Mrs. Chippenham gently lifted her head and turned to look at her directly in the eye. “None of this is your fault, Teresa,” she consoled, tenderly stroking her knotted hair while Rufus looked on jealously. “And please call me Chippy.”

Neil Oddie

Part 2

An hour in the confessional had failed to deliver the spiritual nourishment that Teresa so desperately craved. With swollen tears pooling in her half-opened eyes, she perched nervously on the cold church steps, resting her back against a crumbling statue of St. Anthony. As the sickly aroma of incense gradually gave way to the stench of dried fish and exhaust fumes, an untamable nausea welled up inside her. Hiding her face ashamedly behind her frayed canvas satchel, she rolled her torso to one side and vomited at the foot of the statue.

Six weeks had passed since the attack. The external scars had healed, yet her internal wounds were still open and raw. Wiping vomit from the corner of her mouth, Teresa felt a profound sense of shame and loneliness.

“Why does no one listen to me? Why does no one care?” she muttered tearfully, directing a contemptuous scowl at the stone crucifix above the church door. *Not the Church, not the police, not my friends, no one. Why did Chippy have to move back to England?*

-

With her back still leaning awkwardly against a concrete calf muscle, the sound of approaching footsteps roused Teresa from an involuntary slumber. Through squinting eyes, she made out two silhouettes marching down the church steps towards her. She promptly rose to her feet, brushed the dirt off her backside and positioned herself judiciously to conceal the dregs of vomit that clung to St. Anthony’s broken toes.

“Miss Teresa, my name is Father Felipe,” announced a tall man dressed in black cassock and crisp white dog-collar. “Let me introduce you to Senhora Maria. She runs an organization that provides shelter to women in Macau and helps them gain wholesome employment. I brought her here to speak with you.”

“Thank you, Father,” the woman interjected with a warm smile and a reverent bow of her head. “I shall take it from here.”

As the priest bounded back up the steps towards the church door, the woman turned and looked directly at Teresa – first examining her face, then lowering her eyes to survey the rest of her body. As she did so, Teresa noticed a discernable hardening in the woman’s facial expressions. The friendly, compassionate air that she exuded in the presence of Father Felipe gradually gave way to one of coldness and indifference.

Neil Oddie

“Come with me, young lady,” she instructed assertively, stretching her long manicured fingers around Teresa’s upper arm. “Let’s get you fed and showered.”

“Thank you, ma’am. God bless you, ma’am,” Teresa replied humbly.

-

A loud horn from a passing moped shattered the stagnant silence that hung between the two women as they navigated the cobbled side streets.

“I am a good worker,” Teresa proudly declared, attempting to lure the other woman into conversation.

“All Filipinos are good workers,” the woman responded curtly.

“Where will I be working? When would you like me to start?” Teresa continued with a newly discovered enthusiasm. Choosing not to respond, the woman allowed another barren silence to emerge between them.

Rounding a corner into a quiet dead-end street, Teresa caught sight of three young Filipino girls appearing from a gated doorway, sparsely clothed in stiletto shoes and skin-tight dresses. A smartly dressed man followed closely behind, casually donning a felt fedora as he stepped out onto the stone pavement. Hastily ushering the girls into a shiny black sedan, the man cocked his head to one side and – squinting through a pair of rimless spectacles – channeled a lingering gaze towards Teresa. After a torturing pause, he forced a faint but familiar smile from one corner of his mouth.

Noticing a sudden slowing of her pace and whitening of her cheeks, the woman grabbed Teresa by the forearm and dragged her towards the open doorway. Strangling any attempt at a protest, the woman pushed her against the concrete doorframe and placed an extended index finger firmly over Teresa’s quivering lips.

“You start tonight. Casino Lisboa. You work for Senhor João.”