



**THE**  
**SEIZING**  
**OF**  
**SINGAPORE**

**IAN STEWART**

**Political intrigue  
unleashes a torrent of violence,  
trickery and bloodshed**



Jeremy Lord swore softly to himself as a trickle of sweat slid down the side of his face. He mopped it up with his handkerchief and once again shuffled the five glossy prints which had been tossed on to his desk a few minutes before by the picture editor. It was normally a task he enjoyed: choosing the girl for the daily cheesecake shot which the paper ran on page three. But today he was finding it hard to concentrate on any aspect of his work as editor of the *Singapore Guardian*. The building's air-conditioning system was out of order and, in the steamy heat that was a concomitant of the island nation's location just north of the equator, work of any kind was not much of a pleasure.

The five girls were undoubtedly as fine a collection of pretty young maids as had ever landed on his desk. They represented most of the racial strains that made up Singapore's polygenetic community. Three were Chinese, as befitted a country in which seventy-eight per cent of the population traced their ethnic origin to China. Two of them were particularly attractive, but the selection also included an alluring Malay girl and a beautiful sari-clad young woman whose parents, or earlier ancestors, had emigrated to Singapore from India.

Damn, Lord thought to himself, I've always been like a child in a sweetshop when it comes to choosing women.

Even when he had been living with his wife he had possessed a roving eye, and she had made little effort to conceal her annoyance when his eyes swivelled after a slim pair of legs or a pretty face as he drove through the streets

of Singapore. Since his separation, he had happily played the field, but he was beginning to wish that he could find just one woman who could hold his attention for more than a week or two.

It was not really the job of the editor to vet the daily cheesecake picture, but he had taken to spending so much time in the photographic department, going through the daily assortment of potential 'Guardian Girls', that the picture editor had finally adopted the procedure of bringing them to Lord's office.

Lord shook his head in irritation as the piercing strains of a Cantonese opera, relayed by a local radio station, came through a window which he had opened in the hope of creating a welcome draught in his suffocatingly hot room. He was part Chinese and found comfort and satisfaction in much of that racial heritage, but he had never been a fan of the music of China - neither the northern, Peking opera nor the southern, Cantonese opera. His taste in music had been developed during the years he had spent at boarding school in Australia, and ran mainly to pop and soft rock.

He got up and closed the window, opting for suffocation by heat rather than the mental torture of a Chinese orchestra. Then, realizing the time had come to make a decision, he closed his eyes and stabbed a finger towards the five prints. Finding that his finger had rested on the nicely-shaped bosom of the Malay girl, he shuffled the prints together with his pick on top and fastened them with a paper clip.

The telephone rang as he tossed the prints into his 'Out' basket, and he answered with a crisp, 'Lord.'

'*Cho San,*' a woman's voice said in the formal Cantonese greeting.

'Hello, Mother,' Lord replied in English. 'I was just thinking about you and wondering how the maternal side of my family could possibly be Chinese when I have no affinity with the music of the Chinese race.'

'It is not fitting that a dutiful son should be so disrespectful to his parents or his ancestors,' she stated primly, still speaking Cantonese.

'Oh, Mother, don't be so pedantic. How you can expect your son to be a paragon of Chinese virtue when you yourself broke the biggest taboo of all by marrying a *kwei lo*, I'll never know. I'm Eurasian, don't forget. My disrespect must come from my English father. You know how shameless the English are.'

'Now, Jeremy,' she said, lapsing into English when it became apparent that she could not draw him into a Cantonese conversation, 'you're making fun of me. I just want you to understand the Chinese traditions, especially those concerning the family, so that you will be proud of them and be able to explain them to the sons you will have one day.' It was galling to Jenny Lord, née Ong Siew Kyau, that her son and his wife had separated before producing a child.

'I am proud of our Chinese traditions, Mother,' Lord told her.

'And don't make fun of your late father,' she said. She paused for a moment and then added quietly. 'He was a good man. Oh, Jeremy, I wish he could have lived to see you become an editor. He would have been so proud.'

Lord knew that his mother took great pleasure in the fact that her thirty-five-year-old son was editor of Singapore's leading English-language paper, but he wondered if his father, a man of uncompromising moral character, would have seen it in the same light. Lord's own sense of satisfaction at attaining a goal he had set himself in his earliest years in journalism was tempered by the nagging memories of the moral compromises he had had to make to reach his position and to hold on to it.

It was not easy to be an editor in the land of Lim Yew Sik. The Prime Minister ruled his small country with an iron hand, and while there was no formal censorship, a stream of instructions, admonitions and guidelines issuing from the Ministry of Information left editors in no doubt about the political path they should follow in their editorial columns. Those who were tempted to follow a different drummer were soon brought into line through the imposition of economic,

judicial or proscriptive measures. Some Chinese-language editors had been summarily arrested and imprisoned. And Lord recalled with anguish the fate of a good friend who had put his money, time and talent into a new newspaper not much more than modestly outspoken. He was pressured into closing, at a tremendous financial loss and emotional shock, merely to serve as a warning to others.

Lord had at first played a role as apologist in the face of the growing political excesses. He had been a staunch supporter of Lim, who had, almost singlehandedly, fostered a Singaporean spirit among the island's disparate people, raised their living standards to one of the highest levels in Asia and created a stable economic climate receptive and attractive to foreign capital. Moreover, the man had been popularly elected. Nevertheless, as opportunities for the expression of political opposition were gradually reduced and the assumption of 'temporary' emergency powers by the government increased, Lord became increasingly uneasy in his role as unquestioning recorder of the Singaporean scene.

He felt a need to challenge the leadership's arguments that a nation as small as Singapore needed a pragmatic, authoritarian government to preserve its identity and economic stability in a region of intense political, racial and religious tensions. He had become embarrassed by the way the paper sidestepped controversial issues, pandered to the paranoia of the men in power and served up a bland diet of pretty girls, petty crime and economic success stories.

He wondered what his stern, moralistic English father would have thought of the paper his son edited. It was not even an echo of the old *Straits Times*, or *The Times* of London or the *Manchester Guardian*, which were his father's chosen fare. 'Pap' was his father's favourite word of disparagement and Jeremy could imagine him applying it to the *Singapore Guardian*.

Of course, the Singapore of the eighties was a far different place from the Singapore of the fifties. Harry Lord, the former private in the British Army whose grim sojourn in