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A black and white photograph of a man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a leather jacket over a light-colored shirt. He is looking down intently at his hands, which are clasped together. The background is dark and textured.

INSPECTOR ZHANG GETS HIS WISH

Stephen Leather

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By Stephen Leather

Inspector Zhang walked out of the elevator and looked left and right. 'Which way, Sergeant?' he asked. He took out his handkerchief and polished his thick-lensed spectacles, which had clouded over when he had walked from the cloying Singapore night into the blistering air-conditioning of the hotel.

Sergeant Lee was in her mid twenties, with her hair tied up in a bun that made her look older than her twenty-four years. She had only been working with Inspector Zhang for two months and was still anxious to please. She frowned at her notebook, then looked at the two signs on the wall facing them.

'Room Six Three Four,' she said, and pointed to the left. 'This way, Sir.'

Inspector Zhang put his spectacles back on and walked slowly down the corridor. He was wearing his second-best grey suit and pale yellow silk tie with light blue squares on it that his wife had given him the previous Christmas and his well-polished shoes glistened under the hallway lights. He had been at home when he had received the call and he had dressed quickly, wanting to be first on the scene. It wasn't every day that a detective got to deal with a murder case in squeaky-clean Singapore.

They reached room Six Three Four and Inspector Zhang knocked on the door. It was opened by a blonde woman in her mid-thirties who glared at him as if he was about to try to sell her life insurance. Inspector Zhang flashed his warrant card. 'I am Inspector Zhang of the Singapore Police Force,' he said. 'I am with the CID at New Bridge Road.' He nodded at his companion. 'This is Detective Sergeant Lee.'

The sergeant took out her warrant card and showed it to the woman who nodded and opened the door wider. 'Please come in, we're trying not to alarm our guests,' she said.

Inspector Zhang and Sergeant Lee slipped into the room and the woman closed the door. There were four other people in the room – a tall Westerner and a stocky Indian wearing black suits, a pretty young Chinese girl also in a black suit and a white-jacketed waiter.

The waiter was standing next to a trolley covered with a white cloth.

The woman who had opened the door offered her hand to the inspector. 'I am Geraldine Berghuis,' she said, 'I am the manager.' She was in her thirties with eyebrows plucked so finely that they were just thin lines above her piercing blue eyes. She was wearing an elegant green suit that looked as if

it had been made to measure and there was a string of large pearls around her neck. She had several diamond rings on her fingers but her wedding finger was bare. Inspector Zhang shook her hand.

Miss Berghuis gestured at a tall, bald man in an expensive suit.

'This is Mr Christopher Mercier, our head of security.'

Mr Mercier did not offer his hand but nodded curtly.

The manager waved her hand at the Indian man and the Chinese woman. 'Mr Ramanan and Miss Xue were on the desk tonight,' she said. 'They are both assistant managers.'

They both nodded at Inspector Zhang and smiled nervously.

Ramanan was a in his early forties and the girl appeared to be half his age. They both wore silver name badges and had matching neatly-folded handkerchiefs in their top pockets. Inspector Zhang nodded back and then looked at the waiter. 'And you are?' Inspector Zhang asked.

'Mr CK Chau,' answered Miss Berghuis.

'He delivered Mr Wilkinson's room service order and discovered the body.'

The waiter nodded in agreement.

Inspector Zhang looked around the room. 'I see no body,' he said. Miss Berghuis pointed at a side door. 'Through there,' she said. 'This is one of our suites, we have a sitting room and a separate bedroom.'

'Please be so good as to show me the deceased,' said Inspector Zhang. The manager took the two detectives through to a large bedroom. The curtains were drawn and the lights were on. Lying on the king's size bed with his feet hanging over the edge was a naked man. It was a Westerner, Inspector Zhang realised immediately, a big man with a mountainous stomach and a pool of blood that had soaked into the sheet around his head.

'Peter Wilkinson,' said Miss Berghuis. 'He is an American, and one of our VIP guests. He stays at our hotel once a month. He owns a company which distributes plastic products in the United States and stays in Singapore en route to his factories in China.'

Inspector Zhang leant over the bed and peered at the body, nodding thoughtfully. He could see a puncture wound just under the chin and the chest was covered with blood. 'One wound,' he said. 'It appears to have ruptured a vein but not the carotid artery or there would have been much more blood spurting.' He looked across at the sergeant. 'Carotid blood spray is very distinctive,' he said.

"I think in this case we have venous bleeding. He would have taken a minute or so to bleed to death, whereas if the artery had been severed death would have been almost instantaneous.'

The sergeant nodded and scribbled in her notebook.

'Note the blood over the chest,' continued the inspector. 'That could have only happened if he was upright so we can therefore deduce that he was standing up when he was stabbed and that he then fell or was pushed back onto the bed.'

He walked around to look at the bedside table. On it was a wallet and a gold Rolex watch. Inspector Zhang took a ballpoint pen from his inside pocket and used it to flip open the wallet. Inside was a thick wad of notes and half a dozen credit cards, all gold or platinum.

'I think we can safely rule out robbery as a motive,' he said.

Sergeant Lee scribbled in her notebook. Inspector Zhang walked back into the sitting room. Miss Berghuis and Sergeant Lee followed him.

'So, what time did you discover the body?' Inspector Zhang asked the waiter.

'About ten o'clock,' said the manager, before the waiter could answer. 'Mr Chau called down to reception and we came straight up.'

'By we, you mean the front desk staff?'

'Myself, Mr Mercier, and Mr Ramanan and Miss Xue.'

Ramanan and Xue nodded at the inspector but said nothing.

Miss Xue looked over at the bedroom door fearfully, as if she expected the dead man to appear at any moment.

Inspector Zhang nodded thoughtfully. 'The corridor is covered by CCTV, of course?'

'Of course,' said the manager.

'Then I would first like to review the recording,' said the inspector.

'Mr Mercier can take you down to our security room,' said Miss Berghuis.

'Excellent,' said Inspector Zhang. He looked across at his sergeant. 'Sergeant Lee, if you would stay here and take the details of everyone in the room, I will be back shortly. Make sure that nobody leaves and that the crime scene is not disturbed.'

'Shall I call in Forensics, Inspector Zhang?' asked the sergeant.

'Later, Sergeant Lee. First things first.' Inspector Zhang and Mercier left the suite and went down in the elevator to the ground floor. Mercier took the inspector behind the front desk and into a small windowless room where there was a desk with a large computer monitor.

On the wall behind the desk were another three large monitors each showing the views from twenty different cameras around the hotel.

Mercier sat down and his expensively-manicured fingers played over the keyboard. A view of the corridor on the sixth floor filled the main screen. 'What time do you want to look at?' asked Mercier.

'Do we know what time Mr Wilkinson went to his room?' asked the inspector.

'About half past eight, I think,' said Mercier.

'Start at eight twenty and run it on fast forward if that's possible,' said Inspector Zhang.

Mercier tapped on the keyboard. The time code at the bottom of the screen showed 8.20 and then the seconds flicked by quickly. The elevator doors opened and a big man and a small Asian woman came out.

'That's him,' said Mercier. He pressed a button and the video slowed to its proper speed.

Wilkinson was wearing a dark suit with a Mao collar. His companion was a pretty Asian girl in her twenties with waist-length black hair wearing a tight white mini dress cut low to reveal large breasts. She was holding Wilkinson's hand and laughing at something he had said.

'Freeze that please,' said Inspector Zhang as Wilkinson and the girl reached the door to the suite.

Mercier did as he was told and Inspector Zhang peered at the screen. He recognised the woman.

'Ah, the lovely Ms Lulu,' said Inspector Zhang.

'You know her?'

'She is an escort for one of the city's more expensive agencies and when she isn't escorting she can be found in one of the bars in Orchard Towers looking for customers.' The woman was wearing impossibly high heels but she barely reached Wilkinson's shoulder.

'The Four Floors of Whores?' said Mercier. 'She's a prostitute?'

'Come now, Mr Mercier, as head of security in a five-star hotel you must surely have your share of nocturnal visitors,' said Inspector Zhang.

'We have a policy of not allowing visitors in guests' rooms after midnight,' said Mercier primly.

'And I'm sure that your guests adhere to that policy,' said Inspector Zhang. He looked at the time code on the video. 'Ms Lulu is from Thailand, though she travels to Singapore using a variety of names.'

Now, from the time code we can see that Mr Wilkinson and Ms Lulu arrived at eight thirty. Can you now please advance the video until the time she left the room.'

Mercier tapped a key and the video began to fast forward. Guests moved back and forth up and down the corridor, hotel staff whizzed by, but the door stayed resolutely closed. Then at nine thirty

on the dot the door opened and Ms Lulu slipped out. Mercier slowed the video to real time and they watched as she tottered down the corridor in her stiletto heels.

'So we can assume that Mr Wilkinson paid her for one hour,' said Inspector Zhang. 'Now, when did Mr Wilkinson order room service?'

'I'm not sure,' said Mercier. 'We will have to talk to the waiter.'

'Then please fast forward until the waiter arrives with the trolley.'

Mercier did as he was told. At five minutes before ten the waiter appeared in the corridor, pushing a trolley. He knocked on the door, then knocked again.

'What is the hotel policy if the guest does not open his door?' asked Inspector Zhang.

'If the "Do Not Disturb" sign is on then the member of staff will phone through to the room. If it isn't then it's acceptable to use their key.'

The waiter knocked again, then used his key card to open the door. Inspector Zhang made a note of the time. It was nine-fifty eight.

'And at what time did the waiter call down to reception to say that he had found Mr Wilkinson dead on the bed?'

'Just before ten,' said Mercier. 'You'll have to ask Miss Berghuis. She'll know for sure.'

They watched the screen. After a minute or so the waiter appeared at the doorway. He stood there, shaking, his arms folded, then he paced back and forth across the corridor.

The time code showed 10.03 when Miss Berghuis appeared, followed by her staff. They hurried into the room.

Mercier pressed a button to freeze the screen and pointed at the time code.

'Three minutes past ten,' he said.

'No one went in or out of the room except for Mr Wilkinson and his guest. His guest left at nine-thirty and the next time he was seen, he was dead.'

Inspector Zhang nodded thoughtfully as he put away his notebook. 'So, please, let us go back to the room. I have seen everything that I need to see.'

They went back to the sixth floor. Two uniformed police officers had arrived and were standing guard at the door to the suite. They nodded and moved aside to allow the inspector and Mercier inside.

Sergeant Lee was scribbling in her notebook and she looked up as Inspector Zhang walked into the room. 'I have everyone's details, Sir,' she said.

'Excellent,' said the inspector, striding towards the bedroom. 'Come with me please, Sergeant Lee. Everyone else please remain where you are. I shall return shortly.'

Sergeant Lee followed the inspector into the bedroom and he closed the door behind them and then looked at her, barely able to control his excitement. 'Do you know what we have here, Sergeant Lee?'

The Sergeant looked at the body on the bed. 'A murder, sir?' Inspector Zhang sighed. 'Oh, it's much more than that, Sergeant. What we have here is a locked room mystery.'

The Sergeant shrugged but didn't say anything.

'Do you know how long I've waited for a locked room mystery, Sergeant Lee?' She shrugged again. 'No, Sir.'

'My whole life,' said Inspector Zhang, answering his own question. 'We have no unsolved murders in Singapore, and precious few mysteries.'

He sighed.

'At times like this I wish I had a deerstalker hat and a pipe!'

'Smoking isn't permitted in public buildings, Inspector,' said Sergeant Lee.

'I know that,' said Inspector Zhang. 'I'm simply saying that a pipe would add to the effect, as would a faithful bloodhound, tugging at its leash.'

'And hotels in Singapore do not allow pets, Sir,' said Sergeant Lee.

Inspector Zhang sighed mournfully. 'You're missing the point,' he said. 'The point is that that we have a dead body in a room that was locked from the inside. A room that no one entered during the time that the victim was murdered.'

Sergeant Lee, we have a mystery that needs to be solved.'

'Shall I notify the forensics department, inspector?' asked Sergeant Lee.

'Forensics?' repeated Inspector Zhang. 'Have you no soul, Sergeant Lee? This is not a mystery to be solved by science.'

He tapped the side of his head. 'Zis is a matter for ze little grey cells.'

It wasn't a great Poirot impression, but Inspector Zhang thought it satisfactory. Sergeant Lee just found it confusing and she frowned like a baby about to burst into tears.

'Let me look around first, then we'll decide whether or not we need forensics,' added Inspector Zhang, in his normal voice.

'Sir, that is not procedure,' said Sergeant Lee.

'Indeed it is not,

but we shall inform them in due course. However, I would first like to examine the crime scene.' He turned to look at the body. 'So what do we have?' mused Inspector Zhang. 'We have a dead body on a bed. We have a wound but no weapon. We have a room that was locked from the inside. We have sealed windows and no way in and out other than through a door into a corridor that is constantly monitored by CCTV.'

He shivered. 'Oh, Sergeant Lee, do you not appreciate the beauty of this situation?'

'A man is dead, Inspector Zhang.'

'Yes, exactly. He is dead and somewhere there is a killer and it is up to me to find that killer.'

He looked over her and smiled like a benevolent uncle. 'For us to solve,' he said, correcting himself. 'You will be Watson to my Holmes, Lewis to my Morse.'

'Robin to your Batman?' suggested Sergeant Lee. Inspector Zhang peered at her through his thick-lensed spectacles as he tried to work out if she was mocking him but she was smiling without guile and so he nodded slowly.

'Yes, perhaps,' he said. 'But without the masks and capes. You know that Batman made his first appearance in Detective Comics way back in 1939?'

'I didn't know that,' said the Sergeant, scribbling in her notebook.

'And that he is sometimes referred to as the World's Greatest Detective, which I always considered to be hyperbole.'

Sergeant Lee continued to scribble in her notebook. 'What are you writing, Sergeant Lee?' he asked.

She blushed. 'Nothing,' she said, and put her notebook away. Inspector Zhang nodded slowly and walked slowly around the room. 'I assume you are not familiar with the work of John Dickson Carr?' he said.

Sergeant Lee shook her head.

'He was a great American writer who wrote dozens of detective stories and most of them were locked room mysteries.'

He created a hero called Dr Gideon Fell, and it was Dr Fell who solved the crimes.'

Sergeant Lee tapped the side of her head. 'By using ze little grey cells,' she said, in a halfway passable French accent.

Inspector Zhang smiled. 'Exactly,' he said.

'Now, in his book *The Hollow Man*, itself a locked room mystery, John Dickson Carr used Dr Fell to expound his seven explanations that lead to a locked room murder.' He nodded at his Sergeant. 'You might want to make a note of them, Sergeant Lee,' he said. "Now come with me.'

They went back into the sitting room. Miss Berghuis was sitting on the sofa next to Mercier.

The waiter was standing close to the door as if he was keen to get out of the suite as quickly as possible. The two assistant managers stood by the desk in the corner of the room, looking at each other nervously.

Inspector Zhang walked to the window and stood with his back to it. 'So, I have now examined the CCTV footage covering the corridor outside this room, and I have examined the crime scene.'

Sergeant Lee fumbled for her notebook as Inspector Zhang continued.

'The CCTV footage shows that Mr Wilkinson arrived at his room with a guest at eight thirty and that his guest, a young woman who is known to the police, left exactly one hour later. What I need to know is when Mr Wilkinson ordered from room service.'

'That will be on the bill, inspector,' said Miss Berghuis. She went over to the trolley and picked up a small leather folder and took out a slip of paper. She studied it, and nodded. 'The order was placed at nine thirty-six,' she said.

'Excellent,' said the inspector. 'So from that we can assume that Mr Wilkinson was killed sometime between the placing of the order at nine thirty-six and the arrival of the order at nine fifty-five.' He frowned. 'That does seem remarkably quick, Miss Berghuis.'

The manager smiled. 'Inspector, we are a five-star hotel. And Mr Wilkinson ordered only a club sandwich and a pot of coffee. Hardly a challenge for our chefs.'

'Very good,' said the inspector, as Miss Berghuis went back to sit on the sofa.

'We can therefore rule out Mr Wilkinson's guest as the killer, as we know for sure that he was still alive at nine thirty-six.'

Miss Xue nervously raised her hand. 'Actually, Inspector, we know that he was alive after that because he spoke to his wife at about a quarter to ten,' she said.

'How so?' asked Inspector Zhang.

'She phoned at nine forty-five,' said Miss Xue. 'I was on the desk and I was there when the call came through from America. Mrs Wilkinson was on the phone to her husband for almost five minutes.'

'Are you sure?' asked the inspector.

'I am sure that it was his wife, and they spoke for several minutes,' she said.

'Whether it was for three, four or five minutes I am not sure.'

Inspector Zhang nodded. 'Then we can assume that it was indeed Mr Wilkinson that she spoke to,' he said. 'I cannot believe that a wife could be fooled by an imposter. So we therefore know that Mr Wilkinson was alive just five minutes before the waiter arrived at his door. Yet we know for a fact that no one entered the room prior to the arrival of the waiter.' He drew himself up to his full height of five-feet seven inches and looked in turn at the faces of everyone in the room. 'That means that what we have here is what we detectives refer to as a Locked Room Mystery.'

He paused for several seconds, nodding wisely before continuing.

'As I was explaining to my colleague earlier, there are basically seven explanations as to how a body can be found in a locked room. Explanations provided by the talented mystery writer John Dickson Carr. I think it would be helpful to run through them. The first possibility is that the murder is in fact not a murder, but a series of coincidences or accidents that give the impression that a crime has been committed. A man stumbles and hits his head on a piece of heavy furniture, for instance. Then we have a body, but no weapon and no killer.' Inspector Zhang paused to make sure that he had everyone's attention before continuing.

'In this case, an accident is unlikely, considering the nature of the wound and the fact that the body is lying down. Plus the blood is only on the bed. If he accidentally stabbed himself on for instance the lamp on the bedside table, we would see blood on it. There is no blood anywhere but the bed, so it is safe to say that it is on the bed that he died.'

He turned to look out of the window and linked his fingers behind his back. His spine clicked as he straightened it, and he sighed. 'The second explanation is that it is indeed a murder, but a murder in which the victim is compelled to kill himself. Or herself.'

A mind-altering substance can be used, a gas or a pill, LSD for instance. Mr Carr suggested that a man might become so bewildered that he could strangle himself with his bare hands, but of course we know that is impossible.'

'You think he was drugged?' said Mercier. 'Or gassed? How could gas get into the room, we have central air conditioning and the windows are sealed.'

'If he was drugged, the Forensics Department would know,' said Sergeant Lee.

'They could perform tests.'

'He did not stab himself to death,' said Inspector Zhang quickly. 'If he did, the weapon would be in his hands. Or on the bed. There is no knife, therefore he did not kill himself.'

'And I see no evidence that the victim consumed food or drink in this room.'

He went over to the minibar and opened it. It was full. 'You see, nothing has been taken from the minibar, and there are no unopened bottles in the room.'

He looked over at the room service waiter. 'Mr Wilkinson was dead when you got here? He was dead on the bed and you saw the blood?'

The waiter nodded.

'So he did not consume anything that the waiter brought into the room. We can rule out poison or drugs.'

He went back to the window. 'It is the third explanation that creates some of the most fascinating fictional locked room mysteries,' he continued.

'That is where it is murder, and the killer uses some sort of mechanical device to carry out the killing. A gun concealed in a phone, for example. Or a knife that springs out of a suitcase. Or a pistol that fires when a clock is wound, or a weight that swings from the ceiling, a chair that exhales a deadly gas when your body warms it.' He waved a hand at the bedroom. 'In this case we would be looking for some way of stabbing Mr Wilkinson and making the knife vanish.' He smiled at his Sergeant. 'What do you think, Sergeant Lee? Do you think there is a mechanical device hidden in the bedroom?'

'It is unlikely,' she said quietly, as if she feared giving him the wrong answer.

'I agree,' said Inspector Zhang. 'It is a hotel room, like any other.' The Sergeant smiled with relief.

'It is a suite, one of our best,' said the manager. Inspector Zhang nodded, acknowledging the point. 'But nothing in the room

has been changed, am I correct? Everything is as it should be?'

'Other than the body on the bed, yes.'

'Then we shall move on the fourth explanation. Suicide.'

'Suicide?' repeated the Sergeant. 'But if he stabbed himself, where is the weapon?'

'The point of the suicide is to make it look like a murder,' said Inspector Zhang.

'Either to throw suspicion on someone or to defraud an insurance company. I assume that a wealthy person such as Mr Wilkinson would have a lot of insurance. Perhaps he has an incurable condition. Cancer perhaps. So he kills himself in such a way that his wife can still claim the insurance.'

'Perhaps that's it,' said Mercier. 'Surely you check to see if he had any policies.'

'But where is the weapon he used?' asked the Sergeant. 'If Mr Wilkinson took his own life, where is the knife?'

'But that is the point exactly,' said Inspector Zhang. 'To make it appear to be a murder and not a suicide, the weapon must disappear. Mr Carr suggested a knife made of ice. The ice would then melt leaving only water behind. Or a gun could be attached to a length of elastic which would then whip the gun up a chimney or out of a window.'

'There are no chimneys and as Mr Mercier has already pointed out, the windows in our rooms are all sealed,' said the manager.

'And I think ice is unlikely as he would have had to carry it in from outside and the Singaporean climate does not lend itself to carrying ice around,' said Inspector Zhang.

'And if Mr Wilkinson wanted us to make it look like he had been murdered, I don't think he would have positioned himself on the bed. The floor would be a more likely place. Plus, there is the matter of room service. He spent time with the fragrant Miss Lulu, then ordered a meal. Hardly the actions of a man who was about to take his own life.' He folded his arms. 'So, that leads me to the fifth type of scenario discussed by Mr Carr. A murder which derives from illusion or impersonation, where the victim is already dead but the murderer makes it appear that he is still alive.'

'How would that work in this case, inspector?' asked Miss Berghuis, frowning.

'If for instance it was the prostitute who killed Mr Wilkinson and she then arranged for someone else to make the call to room service,' said Inspector Zhang. 'That would give her an alibi when in fact Mr Wilkinson was already dead when she left the room.'

'Do you think that's what happened?' asked Sergeant Lee.

'That's simply not possible,' said Miss Berghuis. 'When a call is made to our Room Service section, the number flashes up on the phone. An order would not be accepted if it came from outside the hotel.'

Inspector Zhang nodded thoughtfully. 'And of course he spoke to his wife after he had ordered from room service so I do not think that Ms Lulu was the killer. So, that then brings us to number six on Mr Carr's list. One of the more complicated of his explanations for a locked room murder, and one of the most successful in works of fiction.'

In such a situation we have a murder which although committed by somebody outside the room nevertheless appears to have been committed by someone inside the room.'

Mercier scratched his bald head. 'That doesn't make sense,' he said.

'Oh Mr Mercier, it makes perfect sense,' said Inspector Zhang. 'Take for instance the icicle dagger that Mr Carr spoke of.'

Suppose it could be fired through an open window or through a hole drilled into the door. Or a knife thrower in a room opposite the building who throws a knife through an open window but has it tied to a length of string so that he can pull the weapon back. It thus appears that the killer was inside the room when in fact he was outside all the time.'

'But the windows are sealed and there are no holes in the door, and besides the main door opens into the sitting room, there is another door off that to the bedroom,' said the manager. 'The ice dagger would have to turn through ninety degrees and pass through two doors.'

Inspector Zhang sighed. 'Madam, I am not suggesting for one moment that Mr Wilkinson was killed by a weapon made from ice.'

'Well you are the one who keeps mentioning it,' said the manager, flashing him a withering look. 'And if the knife didn't melt, where is it?'

'Exactly,' said Inspector Zhang. 'You have put your finger on the crux of the conundrum. Where is the knife? If indeed it was a knife.'

'Do you know?' asked Mercier. 'Why are you asking us if you know?'

'I was being rhetorical,' said Inspector Zhang. He took off his glasses and began to methodically polish them with his handkerchief.

'I am not sure where the murder weapon is, but I have my suspicions. However, let me first finish Mr Carr's list of explanations with the seventh, which is effectively the exact opposite of the fifth.'

Everyone frowned as they tried to remember what the inspector had said was the fifth method. They all looked around, shrugging at each other.

Sergeant Lee walked over to Inspector Zhang and whispered in his ear.

'Inspector Zhang, I need to talk to you,' she said.

'Sergeant Lee, I am in full flow here,' he said. 'Can't it wait?'

'No Sir, it can not,' said the sergeant. Inspector Zhang sighed with annoyance, then nodded at the door to the bedroom. 'This had better be important,' he said.

They went through to the bedroom and stood at the foot of the bed. 'What is it, Sergeant Lee?' asked the inspector. 'You seem concerned.'

'Sir, we really should be calling in the Forensic Department,' she said. She looked at her watch. 'It will soon be midnight.'

'Not yet,' said Inspector Zhang. 'I think we can solve this case without resorting to science.'

'But it's procedure, Sir. And we have to follow procedure.'

'Sergeant Lee, you know that I speak Japanese, don't you?'

She nodded. 'It came in very useful when we were working on the case of the sushi chef who ran amok in his restaurant,' she said.

'Exactly,' said Inspector Zhang. 'But do you know why I studied Japanese?' The sergeant shook her head.

'There is a famous Japanese writer called Soji Shimada who wrote thirteen locked room mysteries, only one of which – The Tokyo Zodiac Murders – was translated into English. I wanted to read his other stories which is why I taught myself Japanese.'

'I understand, Inspector Zhang.'

'This is important to me, Sergeant Lee. This is a mystery that I can solve. I want to prove that to myself.' He smiled. 'And perhaps to prove to you that even in the third millennium there is a need for real detectives.'

'Like Batman?'

'I was thinking more like Sherlock Holmes,' said Inspector Zhang.

'We have an opportunity here that we may never have again in our lives. In Singapore we are lucky if we have one murder a year.'

'Lucky, Sir?' Inspector Zhang put up his hand. 'You are right, lucky is not the right word.'

Murders are rare in Singapore. Our island state is the most tightly controlled place on the planet, our Government knows everything there is to know about its citizens, so our crime rate is one of the lowest in the world.'

'Plus we execute our murderers,' said Sergeant Lee. 'Which does act as something of a deterrent.'

'Exactly. So do you not see how special this case is, Sergeant Lee?'

Most detectives would give their eye teeth to work on a case such as this, yet all you want to do is to hand it over to the scientists.' He looked around as if he feared being overheard. 'And what if we have a serial killer, Sergeant Lee?'

'We have only one victim,' said the sergeant.

'That we know of,' said Inspector Zhang, fighting to stop his voice from trembling. 'What if there are more? What if we have on our hands a real live serial killer?' He shuddered. 'Can you imagine that, Sergeant Lee?'

The sergeant nodded but didn't reply.

'You know that Singapore has only ever had one serial killer?' said the inspector.

'Yes, Sir. Adrian Lim.'

'Exactly, Sergeant,' said the Inspector. Every detective on the island knew of the case, of course. It was taught at the academy.

The Toa Payoh Ritual Murders. The killings had taken place in 1981, the year that Inspector Zhang had joined the Singapore Police Force. Adrian Lim, who murdered two children as sacrifices to the Hindu goddess Kali. Lim and his two female accomplices were hanged in 1988.

'But he was caught by forensic evidence,' said Sergeant Lee. 'Police found a trail of blood leading to the flat.'

'Exactly,' said Inspector Zhang. 'Which is why I want to use deduction to solve this case. All the evidence we need is here, Sergeant Lee. All we have to do is to apply our deductive skills. Do you see that? Do you understand?'

The sergeant nodded slowly. 'Yes, Sir, I understand.' He patted her on the back. 'Excellent,' he said. 'Let me now finish my questioning,' he said. 'And you might give some thought as to what this case will be called, because I am sure that it will become the subject of much discussion so it will need a name.'

'A name, Sir?'

'A title. The Locked Hotel Room Murder, for instance. Or The Vanished Knife. Inspector Zhang And The Mystery Of The Disappearing Knife. What do you think?'

'I'm not sure, Sir,' said Sergeant Lee.

'Well give it some thought, Sergeant,' said Inspector Zhang, as he headed for the door.

Miss Berghuis was deep in conversation with her head of security when Inspector Zhang and Sergeant Lee walked back into the sitting room, but they stopped talking immediately and looked expectantly at the two detectives.

Inspector Zhang walked over to the window and turned to face the hotel staff.

'So, to continue, Mr Carr's seventh and final locked room scenario involves a situation where the victim is assumed to be dead before he or she actually is.'

That is the reverse of situation number five of course, where the victim is dead but presumed to be alive.'

'So that would mean that Mr Wilkinson wasn't actually dead when Mr Chau went into the room?' asked Miss Berghuis.

'He was,' said the waiter. 'I'm sure he was dead.'

'But you're not a doctor, Mr Chau,' said Inspector Zhang, 'In the confusion, it might have looked as if he was dead but the actual murder was committed later.'

'That's impossible,' said Mercier. 'He was definitely dead when I got here.'

'And you were here soon after the waiter made the call to reception?'

Mercier nodded. 'You saw the CCTV footage. Everybody was there within a few minutes at most.'

'He was definitely dead,' agreed the manager. 'You only had to look at the body. At the blood.'

'But there was a moment when the waiter was alone with the body,' said Inspector Zhang. 'When he made the phone call. At that moment he was alone in the room with Mr Wilkinson, and we have only Mr Chau's word that Mr Wilkinson was dead.'

'I didn't kill him,' said Mr Chau hurriedly, his eyes darting from side to side.

'I didn't say that you did,' said Inspector Zhang. 'I merely stated that you were alone with Mr Wilkinson and you had the opportunity of killing him if he hadn't been dead already. It is one way of solving a locked room mystery. The room is locked, but the person who discovers the body is the killer.'

'He kills the victim then calls for the police.' He shrugged. 'It happens, but I do not think it happened in this case.'

The waiter looked relieved and loosened his shirt collar.

'Besides, if you did kill Mr Wilkinson, where is the knife?' asked Inspector Zhang.

'Actually Inspector Zhang, we haven't searched anyone yet,' said Sergeant Lee.

'And there is no need to search Mr Chau, Sergeant,' said the inspector.

'What we need to do now we is to go back downstairs to the security office, for it is there that the solution lies.'

'All of us?' said the manager. 'Surely we don't all need to go?'

'It is the tradition, Madam,' said Inspector Zhang. 'The detective gathers together the cast of characters and explains the solution to them before unmasking the killer.'

The manager laughed, and it was like the harsh bark of an angry dog.

'Inspector Zhang, this is not some country house where the butler did it. Just tell us who the killer is.'

'It is not a country house, that is true, but a five-star hotel is the closest thing that we have in Singapore,' said Inspector Zhang. 'Now please humour me and accompany me down to the ground floor.'

The inspector led them out of the room and down the corridor to the elevators. He took the first one down with Mercier, the waiter, Miss Berghuis and one of the two uniformed policemen. Sergeant Lee followed in a second elevator with the two assistant managers and the other uniformed policeman. They gathered together outside the security room and Inspector Zhang led them inside. He waved a languid hand at the chair in front of the monitors. 'Mr Mercier, perhaps you would do the honours.'

The head of security sat down and ran a hand over his scalp. 'We've already looked at the CCTV footage,' he said.

'We looked, but did we really see what happened?' asked the inspector.

He waited until everyone had gathered behind Mercier's chair before asking him to begin the recording from the point at which Mr Wilkinson and the prostitute stepped out of the elevator.

'Here we can see Mr Wilkinson and his guest arriving at eight-thirty,' said Inspector Zhang. 'Very much alive, obviously.'

He watched as Wilkinson and the woman went inside. 'She left an hour later.

Please skip to that point, Mr Mercier.'

Mercier tapped a key and the video began to fast forward. He slowed to normal speed just before nine-thirty in time to see Ms Lulu leave the room.

'Now, at this point Mr Wilkinson ordered his club sandwich and coffee from room service, so again we know that he is still very much alive.'

'So who killed him?' asked Miss Berghuis. 'If the woman left the room and no one goes in before the waiter, who stabbed him?'

'That is an excellent question, Madam,' said Inspector Zhang.

'But can you answer it, inspector?' asked the manager, tersely.

'I think I can,' said Inspector Zhang.

'The key to solving this mystery lies in understanding that it is not who goes into the room that is important. It is who does not go in.'

'That doesn't make any sense at all,' said the manager crossly.

'I beg to differ,' said Inspector Zhang. 'It makes all the sense in the world. It is as Sherlock Holmes himself says in Arthur Conan Doyle's masterpiece The Adventure Of Silver Blaze, it is the fact that the dog did not bark that is significant.'

'We do not allow dogs in the hotel,' said Mercier. 'There are no pets of any kind.'

Sergeant Lee looked up from her notebook, smiling, and Inspector Zhang sighed. 'I was using the story as an example to show that it is sometimes the absence of an event that is significant, which was the case in the Adventure of Silver Blaze. If I recall correctly it was Inspector Gregory who asks Sherlock Holmes if there is anything about the case that he wants to draw to the policeman's attention. Holmes says yes, to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.'

That confuses the inspector who tells Holmes that the dog did nothing in the night-time. To which Holmes replies, "that was the curious incident." Do you understand now, Madam?"

She shook her head impatiently. 'No inspector, I am afraid I do not.'

'Then, Madam, please allow me to demonstrate,' said Inspector Zhang. He put a hand on Mercier's shoulder. 'Please, Mr Mercier, fast forward now to the point where the waiter arrives with the room service trolley.'

'This is a waste of time,' said Mercier. 'We did this already.'

'Please humour me,' said the inspector. Mercier did as he asked and they all watched as the video fast-forwarded to the point where Mr Chau arrived with his trolley and began knocking on the door.

'Normal speed now, please, Mr Mercier.'

The video slowed as they watched the

waiter use his key card to enter the room.

'At this point Mr Chau is discovering the body and calling down to reception.' Inspector Zhang waited until the waiter appeared at the door and began pacing up and down. 'As you can see, no one enters the room until the hotel staff appear.' On the screen Miss Berghuis and her staff appeared and they all hurried into the room. 'At this point you phone the police,' said the inspector, turning to Miss Berghuis. The manager nodded. Inspector Zhang patted Mercier on the shoulder. 'So now fast forward until my arrival, Mr Mercier, but not too quickly. And I want everyone to note that no one else enters the room until I arrive with my sergeant.'

The door to the room remained closed for twenty minutes until Inspector Zhang and Sergeant Lee stepped out of the elevator.

'Normal speed now please, Mr Mercier. Thank you.' Mercier pressed a button and the video slowed. Inspector Zhang walked up to the door and knocked on it. It opened and he went inside, followed by his sergeant. The door closed behind them.

'So, now we are inside, talking to you and assessing the situation. We talk, then I go to the bedroom with you, Miss Berghuis, I look at the body, I talk to you, I walk back to the sitting room, and then I walk out with Mr Mercier.'

On the screen Inspector Zhang and Mercier walked out of the room and headed for the elevator.

'You can stop it there, Mr Mercier,' said Inspector Zhang, patting him on the shoulder.

The picture froze on the monitor, showing Inspector Zhang and Mercier walking towards the elevator.

'So here is the big question, My Mercier,' said Inspector Zhang. 'You walk out of the room now, but when exactly did you walk into the room?'

Mercier said nothing.

'You did not arrive with Miss Berghuis.'

'He was already in the room when we got there,' said the manager. She gasped and put her hand up to her mouth.

'My God, he was in there the whole time.'

'Apparently so,' said Inspector Zhang. Mercier stood up and tried to get out of the door but the two uniformed policemen blocked his way. Mercier turned to face Inspector Zhang. 'This is ridiculous,' he said.

'Now Mr Mercier, I am going to make two predictions, based on what I think happened,' said Inspector Zhang.

He nodded at Mercier's jacket.

'I am certain that you are carrying the murder weapon. You have had no chance to dispose of it so it must still be on your person. And because I do not believe that you planned to kill Mr Wilkinson, I think that the weapon is actually something quite innocuous. A pen maybe.'

He registered the look of surprise on Mercier's face and he smiled. 'Yes, a pen. But I also think that you have a camera, perhaps even a small video camera. Am I right?'

Mercier didn't answer but he slowly reached into his inside pocket and took out a black Mont Blanc pen. He held it out and Inspector Zhang could see that there was blood on one end. Sergeant Lee stepped forward and held out a clear plastic evidence bag and Mercier dropped the pen into it. Mercier then reached into the left hand pocket of his trousers and took out a slim white video camera, smaller than a pack of cigarettes.

Inspector Zhang took the camera from him. 'And Miss Lulu, she is in this with you?'

Mercier looked away but didn't answer.

'She is not involved in the murder of course. She doesn't know that Mr Wilkinson is dead because he was still alive when she left the room.'

Mercier nodded. 'She doesn't know.'

'Because you never planned to kill Mr Wilkinson, did you?' said Inspector Zhang.

Mercier rubbed his hands together and shook his head.

'You were there to blackmail Mr Wilkinson?'

'Blackmail?' said Miss Berghuis.

'It was the only explanation,' said Inspector Zhang. 'He was in the room when Mr Wilkinson arrived with Miss Lulu. I am assuming that he wanted to video them in a compromising position with a view to blackmailing him. He was a married man, after all. And divorce in America can be a costly business. The only question is whether Miss Lulu was party to the blackmail, or not.'

Mercier nodded. 'It was her idea,' he said.

'You were her client?'

'Sometimes. Yes. Then she said that she had this rich customer who treated her badly and that she wanted to get back at him. She wanted to hurt him and get money from him. She said she'd split the money with me.'

'So she suggested that you hide in the closet and video them together?'

'She had been in his room before and she knew I could easily hide in the closet. She called me when she was on the way back to the hotel and I was in position when they arrived.

'She made sure that he could never see me. It was easy. But then she was supposed to get him into the shower so that I could slip out but he wouldn't have it. He said that his wife was due to phone him so he practically threw her out of the room. Then he phoned room service from the sitting room so I couldn't get out, and then his wife called. I was stuck there while he took the call.' He ran a hand over his face. He was dripping with sweat. 'Then it all went wrong.'

'He opened the closet? He found you?' Mercier nodded. 'He shouldn't have but he did. All his clothes were in the suitcase and his robe was in the bathroom. I don't know why he opened the closet but he did and he saw me.'

'So you killed him?' Mercier shook his head. 'It was an accident.'

'You stabbed him in the throat with your pen,' said Inspector Zhang.

'He attacked me,' said Mercier. 'He opened the closet door and saw me and attacked me. We struggled. I had to stop him.'

'By driving your pen into his throat?' Mercier looked at the floor.

'I think not,' said Inspector Zhang. 'If you stabbed him at the closet, there would be blood there. The only place where there is blood is the bed. Therefore you stabbed him on the bed.'

'We were struggling. I pushed him back.'

'And then you stabbed him?'

'My pen was in my top pocket. He grabbed it during the struggle and tried to force it into my eye. I pushed it away and it...' He fell silent, unable or unwilling to finish the sentence.

'You stabbed him in the throat?' Mercier nodded.

'And then rather than leaving the room, you hid in the closet again?'

'I didn't know what else to do. I knew that he had ordered room service so I couldn't risk being seen in the corridor.'

'So you waited until the room service waiter discovered the body and while he was phoning the front desk you slipped out of the closet?'

Mercier nodded. 'I went through to the next room but there was someone in the corridor so I couldn't leave and I had to pretend that I'd just arrived. It was an accident, Inspector Zhang. I swear.'

'That's for a judge to consider,' said Inspector Zhang.

'There is one more piece of evidence that I require from you, Mr Mercier. Your handkerchief.'

'My handkerchief?'

'I notice that unlike your colleagues you do not have handkerchief in your pocket,' said the inspector. 'I therefore assume that you used it to wipe the blood from your hands after you killed Mr Wilkinson.'

Mercier reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a blood-stained handkerchief. Sergeant Lee held out a plastic evidence bag and Mercier dropped the handkerchief into it.

Inspector Zhang nodded at the two uniformed policemen. 'Take him away, please.'

The officers handcuffed Mercier and led him out of the room. Inspector Zhang nodded at the two evidence bags that Sergeant Lee was holding, containing the pen and the handkerchief. 'You can send them to your friends in Forensics,' he said.

'I will,' she said.

'I suppose it does prove one thing,' said Inspector Zhang. He smiled slyly.

'What is that, Inspector?' asked the Sergeant.

'Why, that the pen is indeed mightier than the sword,' he said. He grinned.

'There is no need to write that down, Sergeant Lee.'

THE END

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