

Mystery of the Murdered Professor



Sau Sheong Chang

Mystery of the Murdered Professor

Sau Sheong Chang

This book is for sale at http://leanpub.com/murdered_professor

This version was published on 2014-08-21



This is a [Leanpub](#) book. Leanpub empowers authors and publishers with the Lean Publishing process. [Lean Publishing](#) is the act of publishing an in-progress ebook using lightweight tools and many iterations to get reader feedback, pivot until you have the right book and build traction once you do.

©2014 Sau Sheong Chang

Contents

Station 1

Station

“So what do you think of this case,” Inspector Hisham grunted as he sat down on his well-worn chair. The inspector was a middle-aged man with a short crop of hair and a steadily growing paunch. Though he wore striped shirts to hide it, the unmistakable folds near his midsection that gave rise to a minor optical illusion betrayed his efforts. His colleague, Sergeant Lee, the other hand was almost bald. By design, he always told himself, finishing the job where nature stopped her hand, rather than foolishly keeping tufts of hair to the side. Lee was slightly taller than his partner but not much better in shape.

“Looks like a tough one,” Lee mumbled, shaking his head. Computers were not his cup of tea, and murdered computer science professors with cryptic messages were decidedly not his customary bag of teh-o. Knife-wielding gangsters, murderous maids and wily conmen he can handle but all these computer stuff made him feel out-of-sorts and uncomfortably aware of his age.

“Well, it could be petty crime,” started Lee lamely as he sipped his cup of teh-o. He knew it was a bad answer as soon as he said it. Hisham snorted, “Must have been one crazy and stupid petty thief to have just taken away his laptop and not the money in his wallet, or any other valuables in his room.”

“How about his undergraduate student, Deborah Thomas?” offered Lee. “Could be another student stabbing his supervising professor?”

Hisham glanced at his friend and colleague of close to 30 years and offered him a file. “Let’s start from the beginning.”

“Who discovered the body? Who was the last person who met him? What was he doing then? What was his schedule for the day?”

Lee flipped the file open. Both he and Hisham had read all the documents at least twice that morning and knew all the facts at hand, but it was a routine between them. Talking through the facts and evidence often trigger new ideas and possibilities.

“A cleaner, Ting Kim Choo, found Jonathan Giles’ body on Saturday morning 9:25am,” said Lee as-a-matter-of-factly. “She cleans all the rooms of the teaching staff every morning, and usually reaches Giles’ office around that time.”

Hisham nodded him on.

“The forensics people reported that he most probably died between 10 - 12pm on Monday 31 March, two nights ago,” continued Lee, reading the file. “He wasn’t doing anything out of the ordinary, he normally works quite late at the university.”

Hisham settled down comfortably.

“According to his assistant, Stephanie Tan, his schedule that day was as normal, relatively packed. He was scheduled to meet a number of people till late afternoon but had no appointments after 5:30pm.” Lee glanced up from the file, waiting for any questions but Hisham grunted him on.

“He went to a staff meeting with a few other professors from 2:00 to 3:00 pm. He met someone called Pearlie Wee at 4:00 pm. From 4:30 to 5:30 pm he was supposed to meet up with Debbie Thomas, one of the final year students he was supervising.”

“So Debbie Thomas was the last person to see Giles alive.”

Lee tapped the file absent-mindedly. “Yes, that looks like it. Though we can’t say for sure he didn’t meet anyone else. Not all his meetings were recorded. Stephanie Tan mentioned that he often have other meetings without putting them on his schedule.”

“How about the usual people he worked with?”

“Well,” said Lee frowning. “Depends on how wide a circle we want to draw, the numbers can be anywhere between 10 to 50. At least

that's where the investigative reports show. We have the names, but not everyone has been interviewed."

"The most recent ones, just before the murder?" persisted Hisham.

"The easy ones are his assistant Stephanie Tan, his three final year students, including Debbie Thomas and about four or five colleagues from the university."

"According to his assistant he also often go to developer meetups', whatever they are."

Hisham shrugged. "Maybe he dabbles in the property market?"

"Doesn't seem like it, but can chase it down."

Hisham grunted non-committally.

"How about the personal angle? What about his family?"

"Not much from that angle – he is basically married to his work. Single, doesn't have much family here. Has a brother, married, have 2 kids. He meets up once in a few weeks. Most of his other family are in France."

"So who have we interviewed from that list?"

"We have short statements from all of them," said Lee, shaking his head. "But nothing out of the ordinary so far."

"Ok, let's have what we know of crime scene," Hisham shifted in his seat, then changed his mind and stood up. Better to stand up and walk around these days. Too much sitting down is not too healthy.

"Jonathan Giles was clubbed to death with a single stroke at his temple," said Lee, frowning again. "Most likely murder weapon is a snow globe that was also a paper weight on his desk. His assistant confirmed that it's his, a gift from his nephew and niece during their holidays. The globe is missing."

"The room was ransacked in a rush but nothing else except his laptop, the globe and perhaps some CDs were taken. There were

a couple of hundred of dollars in cash in an unlocked drawer, and the professor was wearing some valuables himself. All untouched.”

“Doesn’t seem to be robbery then,” said Hisham pacing now. “And robbery would be very strange indeed, given that someone would pick an occupied office to rob when there are plenty of other empty offices next to it.”

“Finally, the strangest bit of this case is the last words written by the professor ‘P versus NP’, on Debbie Thomas’ final year draft report,” said Lee. “In blood too. No idea what that means.”

“Well, good thing we recovered his backup disk in his safe,” continued Lee methodically. “David Ho from the computer forensics should be able to recover the documents in his computer and we’ll know more.”

“This ‘P versus NP’ thing is getting a bit on my nerves though,” grumbled Hisham. “What’s P and why is it against NP? What the heck is he trying to tell us? Couldn’t he have just told us his killer’s name or something?”

Lee was about to reply when there was a knock at the door. A bespectacled young man in a crisp long-sleeved white shirt, perhaps in his late twenties stood politely near the open door. He was holding to a laptop at his side and waited for the acknowledgement of his presence. Hisham waved him into his room.

“Yes, David?” he asked expectantly. “So what do you have for us?”

“Sir,” began David diffidently. “Sorry but I overheard your last sentence. ‘P versus NP’ is a major unsolved mathematical problem in computer science, is that something you found with Professor Giles?”

“An unsolved maths problem?” stared Hisham unbelievably. “He was trying to do a maths problem just before he died?”

David Ho looked confused.

"It's what he wrote on his student's final year draft report," explained Lee. "He wrote it in his blood."

David's frown turned into a grimace at the mention of blood, then cleared quickly and his eyes widened. "Maybe that's what got him killed?"

"What?" scoffed Hisham. "Solving a maths problem made someone angry enough to want to kill him? If that's the case we'd have dozens of dead maths teachers in schools everywhere."

"Um, well the other problems didn't have a million dollar prize attached to it."

Hisham and Lee sat up straight and both stared at David, as if he suddenly sprouted wings on his back and was flying off into the sky. "Say what?"

"The 'P versus NP' problem is one of seven Millennium Prize problems," explained David. "The Clay Mathematics Institute in America is offering a million dollars to solve each one of these problems."

Hisham scratched his beard thoughtfully. "Perhaps I should have paid more attention to maths during school," he muttered to himself. He never did think much of mathematics beyond arithmetic though, to his personal dismay especially when trying to teach his teenage son homework.

"Well, it looks like there's motivation enough for murder," said Lee, voicing out their thoughts. "Thanks for that David. So what else do you have for us?"

"Ah yes," started David, placing the laptop he was holding crisply on Hisham's table and flipped it open. "We've recovered his data from his backup hard disk. It was quite easy, he just used Carbon Copy Cloner and cloned his hard disk regularly - "

"Spare us the gory details," muttered Hisham again. "Tell us what you've got."

“Right,” David hurriedly. “We did the standard checks on the files that were modified just before he was murdered and for any suspicious looking files.”

“And?”

“Nothing at all,” answered David. “And no ‘P versus NP’ solution either,” he added.

“Hmph,” grunted Hisham. “So you have nothing for us.”

“No so,” David shook his head emphatically. “I found a rather unusual file in his hard disk.”

“Well?” Lee was exasperated. Working with these IT types sometimes tested his patience. “What’s so unusual about the file?”

“It looks like some script file,” began David. Hisham and Lee looked blank again. “By that,” David continued hastily. “I meant that it is a piece of software.” Hisham looked at him.

“Like *Microsoft Word*?” Hisham was puzzled.

“Not in the normal sense though,” said David hastily. “Wait, let me open it up for you. The name of the file is `singleton.rb`.” David opened up the file. “There is only one line in it.”

call ruby on time

“Um,” started Lee slowly. “So what does that mean?”

“I have no idea,” shrugged David simply. “It could be some kind of message, I think. Whatever it is, it’s not code since it doesn’t run.”

“Call Ruby on time,” mused Lee. “Is Ruby someone’s name? Someone Giles knew? And why call her on time?”

“Well,” said David. “Ruby is the programming language that this script is in. Files that end with `.rb` are usually Ruby scripts.”

“And?”

“So I tried to run this script, it’s a piece of software. But it doesn’t run.”

“So why did you think it was suspicious then?” asked Lee, puzzled.

“Well,” said David hesitantly. “It was in the root folder of the disk and there weren’t any other files other than it. Also, the file creation date was a bit odd, it is dated May 3rd, 1971, which is way older than anything else on the hard disk.”

Lee threw his hands up. “Forget I asked. You’re the expert.” He took another sip from his teh-o.

David smiled uncomfortably.

“Perhaps we should try the angle of ‘Ruby’ as a name of some girl he knows?” suggested Hisham musingly. Sometimes these IT types think too much into their computers.

“Did that as well,” replied David eagerly. “I opened up his Address Book, and did a search on the name ‘Ruby’. There are a number of people associated with that name, but that’s not strange, Professor Giles is apparently quite active in the Ruby developer community.”

More blank looks. “You mean developer as in the companies that build houses? His assistant mentioned that he often attend ‘developer meetups’”

“I mean the programmers who develop software in the Ruby programming language. Developer is another name for programmer, though not exactly. You see -”

Hisham put up his hand wearily to stop David. Sometimes I think they live in separate worlds or speak a separate language, he thought to himself. Unfortunately for himself and for Giles, their world and the real world collided violently and fatally. “Let’s move on.”

“There are maybe close to 40 names associated with the word ‘Ruby’,” continued David awkwardly. “However, one name in particular struck me.”

Hisham and Lee pricked their ears. David wasn't a bad sort -- young, eager and quite sharp. Would make a good detective one day, he if was inclined to go to the field.

"There is a girl named Lim Ru Bi in his Address Book. Ruby Lim," explained David. "She is also in the Ruby developer group that Professor Giles goes to frequently."

Hisham shook his head. "It's a bit slim."

"But we shouldn't discount that," disagreed Lee. "Cover all angles."

"We'll also need to do the standard groundwork and do the next round of detailed interviews," Hisham glanced at Lee. Lee recognized the unspoken language. Time for interviews and shaking up some people.

"Let's do this then," said Lee briskly, scanning his document again. "I'll go do the detailed interviews with those outside of the university then have a chat with Ruby Lim."

Hisham nodded with resolve. "And I will go with detailed interviews with his students and colleagues, the ones who last met up with him. Let's meet back here this afternoon at 4:00 pm."

David shuffled his feet in askance.

"And David," continued Hisham kindly. "When we're back if we need anything we'll call you again."

And that was that.