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Inspector Singh Investigates: A Most Peculiar Malaysian Murder

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Extract

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'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.'

(A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens)

'Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!'

(Proclamation of independence by Tunku Abdul Rahman, first Prime Minister of Malaya on 31 August 1957)

One

The accused, Chelsea Liew, was in court. She sat on a wooden bench in a wooden box, handcuffed to a police woman.

The prosecutor, a large, shiny Malay man, marking time until his own elevation to the Bench, watched the court official read out the charge in a slow, ponderous voice, 'That you, Chelsea Liew, on or about the eighteenth day of July, committed murder by causing the death of Alan Lee.'

The judge said, 'How does the accused plead? Guilty or *not* guilty?'

The shrivelled old man with large, yellow, herbivorous teeth and a thick head of implausibly black hair managed to inject a wealth of disbelief into the possibility of a not guilty plea. Many of the judges in Malaysia were drawn from the civil service, which meant they had previously been public prosecutors themselves. Their instincts were conservative and their sympathies rarely with the accused in criminal trials.

Chelsea's lawyer, a tall, thin Indian man with a large Adam's apple bobbing above his white, winged collar, struggled for diplomatic words that would not

involve criticising any party for whom the judge had sympathy – basically, everyone except his client. 'My Lord, the evidence is circumstantial. The police and prosecution have rushed to judgement because this is a high profile case. The charges should be dismissed outright.'

Teeth were exposed in a parody of a smile. The judge, hunched over his elevated table, black gown bunched about his shoulders, looked more like a vulture than a member of the Bench. He said, 'Guilty or not guilty?'

The lawyer recognised a lost cause. He stole a quick nervous glance at the woman in the dock. At last the accused muttered, 'Not guilty.' Her lawyer sighed with relief.

The judge rapped his gavel. 'Accused to be remanded in custody until trial dates fixed.'

Her defence lawyer made one last attempt to assist his client. 'My lord, this is an unusual case involving a mother of three. Although bail is not usually granted where the charge is murder . . .'

He was interrupted. 'Application for bail denied!'

The judge stood and the lawyers, members of the public in the gallery and court staff rose hastily to their feet. No one was permitted to sit in the august presence of the law. Even, thought the lawyer angrily, if it was personified by an incompetent, semi-senile old man with a stunted sense of justice. Gown billowing, the judge walked out – his work done for the day.

Chelsea's lawyer slumped back into his chair, shoulders bowed. The prosecution team looked pleased. Only the accused did not react. Her anger and emotion had been spent long before her marriage had culminated in the murder of her husband. She

stared at the ground between her feet. When a policewoman took her arm and led her out, she went without resisting.

Inspector Singh was wedged into a small plastic seat at Changi Airport. Hunched up, his belly compressed his lungs. His fleshy, sweaty knees were pressed together chastely to avoid inadvertent brushes with the people on either side. Inspector Singh had a strong dislike of physical contact with strangers. Unfortunately, his girth made it difficult for him not to encroach onto their seats. His shirt was wilting and his shirt pocket, full of pens, was tearing slightly at the corner. Patches of damp were visible under his armpits and just above his belly. Only his white sneakers looked as fresh as when he had put them on before setting out for the office – blissfully unaware that he was about to be assigned to the case that he had, only that morning, been reading about in the newspapers. He remembered feeling sorry for the policeman who had the dismal task of finding the murderer of Alan Lee. He felt much sorrier now that he knew it was himself.

Inspector Singh was waiting for a flight to Kuala Lumpur. He sighed, a breathy, wheezy sound; a heavy smoker, his breathing always sounded strained. He needed a cigarette but smoking was prohibited indoors and pretty much everywhere else in Singapore. He wondered whether he dared nip outside for a fag. As much as he viewed his assignment in Malaysia with trepidation, he did not want to miss his queue number. Singh knew he would not be on the case if he was not the unofficial 'most likely to be forced into early retirement' entry in the Singapore police yearbook. He sighed again, causing

his neighbour, a middle-aged white woman, to glance at him surreptitiously. Singh knew what she was thinking. A dark man in a turban who seemed worried and preoccupied? She was hoping not to be on the same flight as him. Singh had neither the patience nor the inclination to explain to her that the six metres of cloth that he had wound around his head expertly that morning into a black, pointy turban reflected his heritage as a Sikh. It did not indicate terrorist proclivities and neither, for that matter, did anyone else's turban.

Singh felt his need for a cigarette sharpen. To hell with it. He would have to risk missing his flight. He felt in his trouser pocket for the reassuring rectangle of his cigarette packet and hauled himself with difficulty out of his seat. He wiped his forehead along the band of his turban with the back of his hand. It itched when he was hot.

He lumbered towards the exit and was brought up short by the sound of raised voices. He looked around with mild curiosity. It did not take him long to identify the source and cause of the altercation. Two men squaring-off. One white, the other Chinese. On the First Class carpet. It seemed that they had converged on the desk at the same moment and were now disputing right of way.

Singh really didn't feel like interfering. He took a step towards the exit and then glanced back. He saw the long-suffering expressions on the faces of those queuing up to fly 'cattle' class and made up his mind. He moved silently towards the men, his sneakers muffling his approach. Not that they would have heard him anyway. They were so engrossed in shouting each other down. The white man was beefy and red-necked, his nose a mosaic of broken veins. The

Chinese man was slim and fit, wearing the yuppie uniform of polo shirt and chinos, his expensive matching luggage in a heap by his side.

Singh walked up to the men standing almost toe to toe, placed a fat-fingered hand on each man's chest and shoved. They parted like the Red Sea. The white man tripped over the edge of the deep blue First Class carpet and barely avoided falling over. He said angrily, 'Who the hell do you think you are?'

The Chinese man nodded to second the question, his face contorted with rage. Singh was amused to see this united front between the erstwhile combatants.

He smiled pleasantly and said, 'Inspector Singh, Singapore Police Force.'

Both men looked disbelieving. Singh didn't blame them. He was an overweight, sweaty, hairy, unconvincing example of a policeman.

He asked, 'So what's this about?'

'He took my place in the queue!'

'No! He cut in front of me.'

The pretty woman behind the check-in counter rolled her eyes at Singh.

Singh looked at the two men, one eyebrow raised thoughtfully.

Then he turned his back abruptly on them and walked over to the Economy queue. He counted out the first ten and beckoned to them imperiously. The passengers looked doubtful but succumbed to Singh's air of authority and followed him. He gestured to the First Class check-in and they lined up quietly, one tiny woman in a *saree* saying sheepishly, 'But I only have an economy ticket.'

'Not to worry, madam,' said Singh politely.

He turned to the two men, 'You two – at the back of this line.'

'What do you mean?' blustered the Caucasian.

'You heard me, get in line here.'

'Behind all these people?'

'Yup.'

'You can't do that!' It was the Chinese man.

'I've just done it . . .'

'I'll have your badge for this!' he stammered angrily.

Singh grinned, suddenly happy. He said, 'There's a long queue for that too!'

He waddled back towards his seat, ticket stub between clammy fingers. There was no time left for a cigarette. But it had been worth it.

Forty-five minutes later he was on the plane, sitting next to an elderly Malay man wearing a white shift, open sandals and a neat, white, round turban on his head. The Malay man grinned at Singh as he sat down, baring sparse, long teeth clinging to red, receding gums. But after a brief inquiry had elicited that his companion was Singaporean, the older man lost interest and slumped back in his chair.

The plane juddered and Singh looked nervously out of the window. He could see the coastline of Peninsular Malaysia. Singapore, a small island separated from the Malaysian mainland by a thin strip of water, the Straits of Johor, and connected by two bridges, had disappeared from view.

He forced his mind back to the matter at hand – the reason for this unexpected trip to Malaysia. He had the file in his briefcase but he did not take it out. There was no privacy on board the aircraft to be reading the details. Besides, he knew the skimpy facts by heart. It was the depth of passion running beneath the surface that had occupied the newspapers in Malaysia and Singapore for the last couple of

weeks and promised to make the case a nightmare. Inspector Singh's superiors had decided that the poisoned chalice would be his. From their point of view it was a splendid choice. If he managed to find a way through the thicket of politics overwhelming the case, they would claim the credit. If he failed, they would hang him out to dry, pleased to get rid of one of the last mavericks in the Singapore police. His was not an organisation that appreciated instinct over method, results over means, footwork over paperwork. He was the elephant in the room that no one talked about but everyone hoped would do the decent thing and take early retirement. As he had not done it so far, he was on a small plane, enduring a bumpy flight, to a town up in arms.

Inspector Singh was quite convinced there was absolutely no possibility of a successful resolution to the case he had just been handed. There never was when religion trumped rational behaviour and politics influenced police work. Malaysia and Singapore were both former British colonies, once part of the same country but now two suspicious and independent neighbours. For both countries, every act of state by the other was potentially a threat or an insult. The tabloid press and politicians in both countries were competing for airtime by issuing the most inflammatory statements. There was talk of 'unwarranted interference in domestic affairs' by Malaysian officials. Singapore officialdom had adopted a superior tone about 'justice being seen to be done'.

And yet, thought Inspector Singh, the historical and family ties that bound the two nations together were stronger than the disputes that divided them. But that just exacerbated every disagreement between the countries. Between Malaysia and Singapore,

there was none of the polite distance and formal dispute resolution of strangers – every difference of opinion was a family feud. And there were all too many opinions being vented in newspapers and online about his new case.

The plane came in to land over undulating hills covered in neat grids of oil palm. Singh caught a glimpse of the Formula One racetrack – yet another project by the previous government to drag Malaysia onto the world stage. Mahathir, the previous prime minister, was convinced that as long as he built the biggest, the best and the most expensive of everything, Malaysia would be treated with respect by the international community. Predictably, Malaysia had instead become a byword for the funding and construction of white elephants.

Singh walked towards the trains linking the Kuala Lumpur International Airport terminal building and the arrival hall. The ceiling above was lit with hundreds of small lights intended to look like the stars at night. He had read somewhere that a computer program had been used to locate the lights randomly and so no pattern was detectable. He scowled. Programmed randomness struck him as an oxymoron. He caught the connecting train and was further irritated. It was automated – did not have a driver. Inspector Singh had spent a career exploring the fallibility of man but he preferred the risk of human error to the certainty of electronic indifference to his well-being. Moments later, he stepped out of the air-conditioned coolness of the terminal into the sweltering tropical heat.

Singh strolled to the massed ranks of Mercedes Benz and climbed into the back of the first one. The Malay driver – almost all the drivers on the author-

ised limousine service were Malay – had an unkempt, wispy, black beard. His car on the other hand was immaculate. A verse of the Quran was plastered on the rear window. Inspector Singh did not read Arabic but he knew the expression was 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his only Prophet'. Across the glove compartment there was another sticker with the words 'You'll Never Walk Alone' emblazoned next to a logo of Liverpool Football Club.

Noticing the inspector looking at it, the driver asked, 'You Liverpool supporter?'

Inspector Singh watched continuous cricket coverage on the cable cricket channel in Singapore. But he felt mischievous and said, 'No, Manchester United.' He had forgotten that United was no longer the hate figure of the football world.

The driver nodded sympathetically. 'Very hard now for other teams. Chelsea boss got all the money.' He guffawed, exposing two rows of gold fillings that Singh could see glinting in the rearview mirror. 'Last time, what is important is who wins the game. Now what is important is who has the richest boss. *Bagi orang kaya trophy sahaja!*' Give the rich man the trophy right away!

Inspector Singh laughed and then pulled out the newspaper he had picked up on the plane and settled down to read the latest on the matter that had brought him to Kuala Lumpur.

Two

'There is nothing for you to do here! I don't know why you came. The Malaysian police can handle everything. You should go back now.' The speaker's moustache, a neat black brush with flecks of grey, bristled angrily as he shouted at the man across the desk from him. His eyes, under straight, thick brows, glared at the inspector from a nut-brown face.

Inspector Singh remained expressionless. He said, 'You have no choice and I have no choice. So we can do this the easy way or the hard way.' Seeing that the Malaysian Superintendent of Police was unmoved by this call to reason he added, 'After all, neither of us wants to see a miscarriage of justice.'

The officer did not respond. He sat at his desk, drumming his fingers on the table in an impatient tattoo. His desktop was devoid of anything that looked work related. Perhaps, thought Singh, the higher-ups in Malaysia merely waited around behind big, empty desks until there was an opportunity to throw their weight around with some foreign cop. He knew from his own experience in Singapore that the further up the ladder one got, the more the job was about politics and statistics than actually dealing with crime.

The Malaysian policeman was waiting for some reaction from his Singaporean counterpart. Singh wondered if he was expected to acknowledge the wisdom of the man's remarks, pick up his bags and head back to Singapore with his tail between his legs. Surely it was obvious that his superiors in Singapore had more leverage over him than the officer glowering at him across the desk? Still, if there was a waiting game to be played, Inspector Singh was a past master. He sat nonchalantly in the chair, eyeing a display of plastic flowers in a plastic vase.

The Malaysian was the first to blink. He stood up, walked over to a filing cabinet, slid open a drawer and took out a large folder.

He said, 'I do not like it but certain quarters have demanded that I cooperate. This is what we have done so far. We have the wife in custody. You can see her if you like. You can interview any other person in Malaysia but only if they agree. We cannot make anyone talk to you. I will send you my ADC. He will assist you.'

And watch my every move and report back to you, thought the inspector, but he did not say anything. This was a higher level of cooperation, however reluctant, than he had expected. Pressure must have been brought to bear at the highest levels. He nodded his thanks to the scowling man and picked up the folder.

The Malaysian leaned forward and put two splayed hands on the table. He said, 'One more thing: if you overstep your authority, I will put you in the jail cell next to the accused. And I don't think the Singapore government will send anyone to rescue you!'

Inspector Singh nodded cheerfully, assuming

correctly that amusement would be the response that his opposite number would find most infuriating. He wondered when Malaysian officialdom would get over its need to indulge in theatrical bullying.

A few strides later he was out of the door. The muffled sound of footsteps caused him to turn round and he saw a young policeman hurrying after him. Singh stopped and waited.

'Sir!' A smart salute accompanied the greeting. 'I am Sergeant Shukor, aide-de-camp to Superintendent Khalid Ibrahim. He asked me to help you with this case.'

'Good. You can start by finding me a place to sit down and read this report,' ordered Inspector Singh. 'And then I'll need some tea.'

Inspector Singh lumbered after the young policeman assigned to be his minder and was shown into a small room with a desk and filing cabinet. He sat down heavily in the lone chair in the room which creaked a noisy protest. Singh swivelled around to look out of the heavily tinted glass windows behind him. On a field, a posse of young men dressed in blue shorts and white T-shirts were being put through their paces by a trainer whose booming voice could be heard faintly by the inspector. At least there was still an emphasis on fitness and not just computer skills in the police-training manual, he thought. As if to emphasise his own devotion to health, he lit a cigarette and wedged his large posterior more firmly into his chair.

He glanced at Sergeant Shukor, who was still standing smartly to attention. The young man had a tanned strong jaw, a broad flat nose and eyes that were slightly too widely spaced. If the sergeant has been a briefcase carrier his whole career, he could

not have got his hands very dirty, thought the inspector. The Malaysian policeman's dark blue uniform was pressed to perfection and tight enough to grip muscular thighs and forearms. His regulation service revolver – shiny, black and dangerous – was neatly holstered.

Singh asked, 'So who is actually in charge of the Lee murder investigation?'

'Inspector Mohammad, sir.'

'Shouldn't I be talking to him before getting to work?'

The sergeant looked uncomfortable. He was remarkably transparent for a police officer. His emotions were both visible and decipherable as they flitted across his face.

Singh asked, 'What is it?'

'He was supposed to be here to meet you, sir. But he hasn't turned up.'

The inspector from Singapore grimaced. 'Not another Malaysian policeman with a bad attitude?'

'He's not exactly like that, sir.'

Singh was just about to probe deeper when there was a quiet knock on the door.

At a glance from the senior policeman, Shukor opened it.

A very tall man with thick, short, iron grey hair and a thin, ascetic face walked in. He was dressed in an extremely smart, dark suit, wore a pale blue shirt and a darker blue tie and had cufflinks with a college crest on them. He looked like he belonged on the stage, playing a Shakespearean tragedy, or in a boardroom with lots of deferential subordinates agreeing to everything he said.

He said, 'Inspector Singh? I'm Inspector Mohammad. Thank you for coming down to help us

poor Malaysians stumbling around in the dark on this case.'

His voice matched his looks – smooth and effortlessly classy. And his hostility was going to be subtle and difficult to overcome. Singh, suddenly conscious of his damp shirt and pot belly, took the cigarette out of his mouth and said, 'It's my pleasure, Inspector Mohammad.'

'Please call me Mohammad. We don't have time for formality if we're to work together.'

Inspector Singh nodded. 'I understand from the sergeant here that you're in charge of this case?'

'The murder of Alan Lee? Yes, I'm afraid so. Still, it seems a fairly open and shut case, doesn't it?'

Singh gestured to the pile of papers in front of him. 'I was just making myself familiar with the facts.'

Inspector Mohammad's lip curled. 'It's not pretty, I'm afraid. Well, I'd better leave you to it. Shukor here will get you anything you need and I'm in my office when you're done.'

He walked out, closing the door quietly behind him.

Inspector Singh whistled softly through pursed lips. He said, 'Now where did that come from?'

Sergeant Shukor did not pretend to misunderstand the question. 'He's from a very wealthy family, sir. Perak royalty, actually.'

Singh nodded his head. Nine of the thirteen states in Malaysia were former sultanates and had hereditary royalty. It meant that there were a lot of people who could claim to be royalty, or at least related to royalty, knocking about.

Shukor continued, 'He went to boarding school in

England and has a doctorate from Cambridge in Criminal Psychology.'

'Then what's he doing here?'

'They say he loves the job and doesn't want to be promoted till it's all management and no police work.'

Inspector Singh could understand the reluctance to turn into a bureaucrat. He had the same instincts.

'They leave him alone, you see – because he's so well connected,' explained Shukor further.

Singh frowned. He was *not* well connected – and his higher-ups left him alone when it suited them, but not otherwise.

He set aside his curiosity about the Malaysian policeman, and said brusquely, 'Can you get me in to see the suspect?'

The young man nodded. 'Yes, sir. Inspector Mohammad said you would want to see her first so I have already arranged it.'

Good anticipation but he did not like the suggestion that he was predictable or predicted.

'I will see her in two hours. I will familiarise myself with the investigation first.'

The young man understood this to be a dismissal and saluted smartly. 'In that case, I will get you a cup of tea, sir.'

Inspector Singh looked around for an ashtray. There wasn't one. He dropped the fag end on the carpet and stamped it out hurriedly. The material covering the floor looked flammable. He kicked the butt under the desk. It was time to get down to work. He needed to find the quickest way out of this mess and back to Singapore. Singh untied the string that held the case file together and started to read.

The file heading was 'Chelsea Liew' and in brackets

were the words 'Singapore IC'. In that short reference was the whole reason for his being in Malaysia. Chelsea Liew was a Singapore citizen. She held a Singapore identity card. She had married a Malaysian and had lived in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Bangsar for the last twenty years. She had three children who held Malaysian passports. But she was Singaporean. And she was accused of murdering her ex-husband. As a rule, the arrest of a Singaporean by any foreign country would not have involved the Singapore police. The embassy might have had a quick look if requested to ensure that the citizen in trouble was getting the rudiments of due process, but nothing more than that.

This case was different though. The religious overtones, custody battles, public outcry in both countries and political sensitivities between Malaysia and Singapore had resulted in a request by the Singapore government – keen to be seen to be doing something – to the Malaysian government – keen to be seen to be above the fray – that a Singaporean policeman be seconded to the investigation. So here he was, sitting in a grubby room in the Malaysian Police Bukit Aman headquarters, with a file three inches thick, feeling very sorry for himself.

Singh looked at the folder. He thought he recognised the efficiency of Sergeant Shukor in the neatly labelled piles of newspaper clippings, court transcripts and police interview notes. He was familiar with the essentials of the matter. But now he sat back in his protesting chair and let the full story unfold before him. The cup of tea Shukor had brought him sat untouched on the table.