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THE PROFESSOR
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The Professor

By Robert Yeo

'Mr Neo please.'

'Yes, this is Neo speaking.'

'CID speaking. Inspector Toh here. We like to interview you –'

'Interview me? What for?'

'Professor Lim Kia Choon murder case. He was killed two weeks ago. It was in the papers. You know him, Mr Neo?'

'But I'm sure he knows a lot of other people. Why do you want to speak to me?'

'Routine check, Mr Neo. Don't worry, lah, we found your name in his book, what.'

'What book?'

'Address book.'

'Oh!'

I recalled I had spoken to Kia Choon about six months ago and he'd invited me to stay at his apartment in London. He was going on sabbatical and hoped to spend some time in a university in London. After three months there, he was going to Beijing and Hong Kong. And then –

'Mr Neo, can you come down to CID headquarters please?'

'Where's that?'

'Cecil Street.'

'Ok, let me see my diary.'

I flipped through my office diary and found a Thursday afternoon free.

'What about next Thursday afternoon?'

'No problem. What time, Mr Neo?'

'3 pm.'

'Ok. See you next Thursday. I'm Inspector Toh.'

'Ok, Inspector.'

Next Thursday I was promptly at the CID HQ at 3pm, and after enquiring about Inspector Toh, found his room on the second floor of a long, four storey building.

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Inspector Toh introduced himself as well as a colleague who went by the name of Tan. I didn't ask if he was an inspector too and neither of them wore uniforms. Toh was the older of the two; he looked like forty-five, was clean-shaven and kept his hair neatly combed. His colleague Tan, was mustachioed, with tousled hair and younger, about thirty-five.

Toh beckoned me to a chair opposite a small table, pulled a drawer and showed me two colour photographs.

As I looked at the photos, he asked, 'Do you know these two men?'

'What men? Boys, lah,' Tan said.

The first photo, half postcard sized, was that of a Chinese youth of about nineteen I guessed, bare up to his waist. The second was of about the same age, also shirtless but with his genitals showing.

'No!' I said loudly.

'You sure, ah?' Toh asked.

'Please look carefully, Mr Neo.'

I looked again and shook my head.

'You're Dr Neo?' Tan asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'Same time in university, must be,' Tan continued.

'Yes, same time,' I said.

'How long you know him, Dr Neo?'

'Long time, more than twenty years.'

'You know he like that one?' Tan asked, and he swayed his arms and hips in an exaggerated way.

'No, I don't know.'

'Why you call people like this, Mr Neo? They are homosexuals, right?' said Toh.

'Homos, lah,' said his partner. 'Why you say homosexuals?'

'I try to be polite, use what you call it, we learn in school, euphe...euphe something –.'

'Euphemism,' I said, helping him.

'What's that, all big words?' Tan said. 'I can also remember my English in school when we learn idioms. Call a spade a spade.'

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‘Tan is right, I think Mr Neo. Why we play games with words? When I was in school, gay means happy, jolly. My English teacher always say words like this are adjectives. Now, not anymore. How come Dr Neo?’

When I considered Toh’s question it was clear to me he did not care about political correctness, so long as he got on with investigative tasks. That both he and Tan were being judgmental of ageing yuppies like Kia Choon and myself, with good education and, in their eyes, bad morality.

Yet both the tone of the detectives’ remarks and questions did not appear offensive. Toh seemed like he really wanted to know and Tan’s crudities seemed spontaneous.

So I decided to answer Toh’s questions, aware all the time that he gave space to my hesitation, gave room for my considered pause.

‘Well, Inspector Toh, language has to change because of new ideas, new inventions. I’m sure you use the computer which has introduced new words like mouse, byte, download.’

I paused to allow him to reply, noticing that there was an electronic typewriter in the room.

‘We still use the typewriter,’ Toh said, indicating the machine, ‘but when got a lot of information we use the computer. My colleagues in the forensic department use the computer in their investigation. New inventions ok but what about new ideas?’

‘Some new ideas have to do with people’s attitudes. For instance, not long ago black people in America were called niggers because they were the descendents of slaves and held in contempt. Since the sixties that word is not in polite use anymore because people’s attitude towards racial discrimination has changed.’

‘What word they use now?’ Tan asked.

I did not answer his question directly.

‘Did you read Literature in school, Inspector Toh? Inspector Tan?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Toh replied.

‘Did you use the book To Kill a Mockingbird?’

‘Yes,’ said Tan. ‘About a lawyer Atticus who defend a Negro accused of raping a white woman.’

‘Yes, and you remember how the majority of white people referred to him?’ ‘I think you are right, Dr Neo. They call him nigger.’ Tan remembered.

‘Right. But you can’t use the word now, at least not publicly. I mean, we could refer to our Sikh friends privately as Bangali or byee but you can’t do that in public. It’ll be too sensitive racially.’

Both then nodded.

‘But Inspector Toh, maybe we should come back to the reason for my being here now. I can’t help you with the two photos but I want to ask you where you found them?’

‘Professor’s bedroom,’ said Tan.

Toh nodded. He pulled from his drawer a newscutting of The Straits Times and asked me to read. The headline was DON STRANGLED IN SUSPECTED MURDER. I read briefly and picked up details that the victim was found strangled in the bedroom, that there were no signs of forced entry, that the institution was not mentioned and that the police was treating the case as murder. I recalled having read the report a couple of weeks ago.

I returned the news clip to Toh and asked, ‘What else did you find?’

Toh hesitated. ‘You want to know, ah?’

I nodded. He got up and went to the smaller room and came back with a stack of magazines and books tied up together and several calendars. Calendars?

‘Look at this first.’ Toh indicated a knee-high stack of magazines and began to untie them. I flipped through a few which were obviously gay magazines, in full colour and black and white, of men in various contortions of nudity. They were American and European men and as I looked for details, saw that many of the magazines were a few years old and originated from New York, London and Amsterdam. They were well-thumbed and dog-eared. They were not the male equivalent of say Playboy magazines, which I had last seen in New York newsstands. Penises proliferated, varying in length and were often in stages of ejaculation. Boys and men were in a variety of love-making poses not familiar to me. All kinds of male kissing abounded.

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‘See this,’ Tan interrupted, and he brought out more magazines, this time in Chinese and showing Asian boys and men. From Hong Kong and Taiwan, I thought. ‘This one is interesting,’ he continued, and showed me a book with the title Guide to the Gay Bars of Europe 1990. I looked inside and found that it originated in Amsterdam and had gone through several printings.

‘Got some more,’ Toh said and unfolded a few desk calendars and stood them up on the table. Such calendars usually carry the pictures of beautiful women, scenes or products advertised but in such cases, crude cut-out pictures of nude men from other sources were glued to the original pictures.

My memory flashed to the last time I had seen Kia Choon in his office at the university where he kept a very neat desk with a table calendar of the Lake District and we had discussed the possibility of a driving holiday there. He maintained a clean apartment in London and had said my wife and I were welcome to stay with him in June, the month of the school and university vacations, and subsequently drive up to Wordsworth country.

This meeting took place last September, and now it’s January of the new year and if we had firmed up our plans, we would’ve gone this June of 1995.

‘Want to see any more?’ asked Tan.

I wanted to say no but Tan sensed that I needed to be absolutely convinced and produced a couple of wall calendars. Like the smaller versions, pictures of naked boys and men had been cut out and glued to the original pictures.

‘No more, thank you,’ I said, and stood up.

‘Thanks for coming, Dr Neo,’ said Toh. ‘Nothing to worry, lah, this is a routine interview. We have to look for all clues.’

‘Any luck so far?’

Toh shook his head.

‘What about the two young men?’

‘Don’t know yet. We checked the bars, show nothing so far.’

‘What bars?’

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'Gay bars, lah. This Professor Lim will go out in his car and look for them.'

'You mean he knows them?'

'No, don't think so. Just go and pick up, if you know where to go, not difficult.'

That evening, after dinner, I told my wife about my CID interview. She had been his student in university. We rummaged through old newspapers and found the accounts of his case, including one of his wake, with photographs. The report said there were no signs of forced entry and speculated that the victim probably knew his assailants.

'But the detectives said Kia Choon didn't know them,' I said.

'Didn't know whom?' my wife asked.

'The boys he picked up in bars.'

'When he picked them up he didn't know them. But if they met again, they will not be strangers anymore.'

I thought about it and realized she was right.

'You notice at the wake his coffin was covered?' my wife asked.

'Maybe the family was ashamed because it was not an ordinary death. First, it's a murder and then he's gay and there's all this publicity.'

'Yes, but I think that's not the real reason. The real reason is that he died of strangulation and I think his face is all distorted. Became blue already.'

'Ok, I understand...'

I became silent, taking in the facts as they unfold like a murder mystery.

'But how do you know so much?'

There were knowing glints in my wife's eyes.

'I've just watched the programme on television about the reconstruction of his murder case.'

Up to this point, I resolutely refused to hear any more about Kia Choon's death. To say that I knew little about him is to admit how impossible it was to know friends well unless they were prepared to tell you intimate facts about themselves. And to have an old friend tell you he was a homosexual, without provocation, was not heard of. At least not for this generation.

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The sixties revolution which provided many sexual liberties did not, it seems to me, bring homosexuality to the open. Somewhere in the seventies or was it in the eighties, gay and lesbian lobbies became important in the West. Openness about sexual preferences became accepted. Once in 1986, I had received a call from the editorial assistant of an academic journal published in New York in response to an article I had submitted about gender and theatre in Singapore. The first thing he did was to give his name and the second was to tell me that he was gay. But this could not have happened in Singapore. Not in Kia Choon's generation. My generation. Born around 1939-40.

But was it a generational thing or was it just the fact of living in a society like ours? In another country Kia Choon could've led a more transparent life. He would have been able to live together with a male partner, would have been able, openly, to go to official and unofficial occasions with the partner, and that would have prevented Kia Choon from leading a double life. Respected professor in the day, six and a half days a week and a cruiser of young men after hours, on weekends and public holidays. How must he have looked at some of his male students on weekdays with weekend eyes. The Kia Choon I didn't know. I tried to keep the remembrance of the man I knew very well as an undergraduate. Were there, in those pristine impressions, shards of purple that I did not recognize because we lived in more basal times?

The phone rang again. My wife picked it up.

'Inspector Toh on the phone. Says he is sorry to call you at home but it is urgent.'