

S.T.E.P.

Set in the near future, governments are using big data to better manage day-to-day bureaucratic problems. Enter a criminal's data into the SABOTAGE system for example, and it will tell you their likelihood of reoffending. But is that all the government is using big data for? With this as their theme, the four linked crime stories in this collection take the genre to the future and with a new twist.

A Japanese gang leader leaves prison and much to the surprise of the authorities, he gets pulled right back into criminal activity. Has something gone wrong with their SABOTAGE system? A lower level officer of the Ministry of Justice and a detective famed for being able to crack any case within five days are investigating. But as they start to get closer to the truth, a body is discovered...

Mixing science fiction and the gritty realism of the best of the crime genre, these stories are like four speeding bullets fired by two of the Chinese-speaking world's most original mystery writers.

Mr Pets 寵物先生

Mr Pets, pen name of Wang Chien-Min, works as a software engineer. Now a member of the Mystery Writers of Taiwan, he continues to write criticism, as well as produce his own works of fiction, bringing in elements from fantasy, science fiction and horror to reinvigorate the genre. He is the winner of the first Soji Shimada Mystery Award.

Chan Ho-Kei 陳浩基

Chan Ho-Kei was born and raised in Hong Kong. He has worked as software engineer, scriptwriter, game designer and editor of comic magazines. His first mystery novel, *The Man Who Sold the World*, won the Soji Shimada Mystery Award in 2011. His next mystery, an epic Hong Kong crime novel, *The Borrowed*, is being developed as a major film by renowned director Wong Kar-Wai and will be published in five foreign languages.



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By Mr Pets and Chan Ho-Kei. Translated by Chenxin Jiang.

Episode 1: s

sabotage / 'sæbəˌtɑːʒ, 'sæbəˌtɑːʒ/

verb: to destroy or damage (something) deliberately

noun: the act of destroying or damaging something deliberately

File number: cas05-n-0002741-17829

Date: June 19, 2028

Prisoner name: Matthew Fredd (Age: 38)

Prior conviction: Y/~~N~~

Convictions served:

2008 – Criminal intimidation

2012 – Criminal damage

2019 – Assault (domestic violence)

Charges: Arson, aggravated assault, first-degree murder

Sentence: ---

That goddamn Ching Chong was anyway going to burn himself to death one day.

Now if you think I'm a racist, you're wrong. I may be white, but I'm no member of the Ku Klux Klan or the Neo-Nazis, I've never even voted Republican. Back in jail I had lots of black brothers. A racist wouldn't call a black man his brother, right? Of course, I wouldn't either, if I'd had a choice, but you've got to play your cards right in jail, or you won't survive.

And now that I'm out of there, of course, I can do whatever I like, right?

There you go again, thinking I'm racist against coloured people. I really don't mind immigrants, whether they're from Indonesia, Kenya, or Bolivia, as long as they don't mess with me, I don't pay them any attention.

But the annoying Chinese man next door kept doing all kinds of weird things. That son of a bitch.

I'd lost my home before being locked up, thanks to that crazy bitch Irene, so after being released I had to move into a grubby little studio apartment downtown. Since I was broke, the state reemployment centre found me a job as a janitor at a public school, which just about covered food and rent. The apartment was in a three-storey building with two rooms on each floor. I lived in 101 on the first floor, and the Chinaman lived in 102.

He was an old geezer in his sixties, and like most Asian men, he wasn't tall. He had a wrinkly old face, a slightly hunched back, and sparse grey hair combed over a half-bald head. He always wore cheap-looking grey or deep brown Mao suits, and he had a terrible accent. Every time he addressed me, he seemed to be mocking me by pronouncing Mr Fredd as Mr Fag. Did he think going to jail means you've automatically been fucked in the ass?

I'm not a mean guy, so it's not as if I was out to pick a fight with him, but that man just wasn't normal. If he'd been alive two hundred years ago, I bet he'd have been burnt or hanged for witchcraft. I mean, I could just about handle his having his wife's ashes in an urn in his

apartment; the first time I met him, he kindly invited me into his apartment, and pointing at a Chinese urn on the shelf, said: 'That's my wife.' But I couldn't stand the stink of the food he cooked. Every day when I got home, there would be a sour stink emanating from his apartment. Come on, what's wrong with just eating something normal like a pizza or hot dog?

And his witchcraft was even worse than his cooking. On my fifth day in the apartment, I noticed a completely different smell.

It was the smell of burning wood.

I was just taking a nap, and when I woke up, grey smoke was wafting into my apartment through the gap under the window. I thought the house was on fire, so I dashed out into the street without even putting my clothes on. A strange sight awaited me there. In the alley right next to our house, the old man was burning what looked like bits of paper in a red iron bucket. There were lit incense sticks stuck in some sorta flowerpot right next to the bucket. I know Chinese people burn incense and all, but these sticks were ridiculous. They must have been an inch thick and about twenty inches long, and there must have been at least five or six in the flowerpot. The incense gave off a choking smell. There were a few big white Chinese buns on a plate on the other side of the bucket. At least they probably were white, but had since been flecked grey with the ashes. Did he plan on eating them?

'Mr A, what the hell are you doing?'

'Ah, Mr Fag, hello!' The old man smiled, revealing his stained yellow teeth. 'I worship, I hope I don't disturb you?'

'Is this a Chinese thing or what?' I asked, brushing the ashes away from my face.

'Yes, every first and fifteenth day of the month, we worship earth god, so we have a peaceful home.' I had no idea what he meant by earth gods and peaceful homes, but it must have been some sorta Chinese superstition.

'But it's not the first or fifteenth today,' I said.

'Not western calendar, moon calendar,' he explained.

Right, the Chinese and their lunar calendar. But wait... 'Does that mean you're going to be doing this twice a month?'

'Yes,' the old man said, tossing more paper into the iron bucket. 'About twice a month, but on Ching Ming and Ghost Festival, Ghost Month when the hell gate opens, a few more times...'

'Your smoke is getting in my apartment,' I objected bluntly. I had no idea what he was talking about, but if this was going to go on 'at least' twice a month, how the hell was I going to survive living here? The old man looked up at the window, turned to me, and smiled again.

'Mr Fag, so sorry! No one lived in your apartment, next time I move away from the house, very sorry, Mr Fag!' There it was, mocking me with that fag, fag, fag.

'Even if you move your bucket further away, you could still burn the house down. These old houses are generally made of wood. They burn very easily.' I pointed to his red bucket. A few pieces of paper were picked up by the breeze, and floated out where they landed next to his bucket.

'No worries, Mr Fag, I do this many years, nothing happened.' The old man kept smiling as though he didn't care. 'You're so nervous, you hurt yourself playing with fire when you were a child? I heard, childhood memories can shape a person...'

The old man kept yammering on, talking about all kinds of things, psychoanalysing me for objecting to his incense burning. I kept quiet, let him keep talking, and went back to my room. His tone reminded me of something I preferred not to think about. In prison, they forced me to see one of those psychiatrist types every week. They had me do all kinds of bullshit exercises, like saying what I saw in an inkblot. It's a damn inkblot, for crying out loud! What was I

supposed to say: uh, I see Satan in this inkblot?

I'm not a man who gets mad easily, so even though I was mad at the old man, just as I got mad at the psychiatrists, I wouldn't lift a finger against either of them. Only an idiot would do something impulsive like kicking the old man's bucket over and punching him in the face. That just gets you thrown back in jail. The only time I ever did something like that was when I beat Irene up. I regretted it afterwards. Not that I regretted teaching that whore a lesson—but I should have done it in a way that didn't bring me such trouble.

Two weeks later, the old man was burning bits of paper in the alley again. I closed all the windows, but somehow the ashes kept getting in. It's not as though the apartment was otherwise comfortable; there were termites, roaches and fleas everywhere, the tap water was yellow with rust, and the whole house shook when the trains rumbled past. So the old man's insane paper-burning was just the last straw. In years of drifting in and out of prison, I'd never lived anywhere like this. The state penitentiary was a five-star hotel in comparison to this shithole.

It took me a month, but finally I found a new apartment. It was also downtown in an equally dodgy neighbourhood, but I made sure there were no stupid Chinese people in the building. I would rather hob nob with drug dealers than another Mr A. It cost a little more than I could afford, but I figured it was worth it.

I'd already paid three months' rent in advance, so I couldn't move right away. I tried explaining to the landlord, but even though he had no problem with my moving out, he insisted that there was no way he'd return the prepaid rent.

'It's a contract, you know what that means? Like, C-O-N-T-R-A-C-T. You signed it, now you got to live by it. I'll give you back the deposit within 14 days, like the law requires, but if you move out before three months are up, you're not seeing a penny of that rent.'

There were plenty of empty rooms in the new apartment block I found, so I wasn't worried about being stuck without a place in two months' time, and the rent didn't look as though it would go up. All I had to do was survive another forty-odd days of Mr A: forty days of stinky cooking, smoke, and Mr A's ugly face.

I thought I'd be able to stick it out by spending most of my nights and weekends at the bar, but then something happened Mr A had warned me about.

It was one of those crazy Chinese holidays that call for extra rituals.

Now Mr A started burning incense every day, and also did his ridiculous paper-burning ceremony every three or four. One day, when I glanced out of the window, I saw the ash-flecked buns next to his red bucket had been joined by some bottles of wine, a plate heaped with oranges, and a whole roast chicken. The old man was placidly feeding pieces of paper into the iron bucket one at a time, while he mumbled something under his breath. He reminded me of a Haitian voodoo priest. I hoped the chicken wasn't going to come alive.

The smoke made me cough out loud. Just as I was about to wash my face in the bathroom, a couple of roaches emerged from the pipe and scuttled across my basin. Furious, I reached for the showerhead to spray them with water, but they made a nimble exit, mocking me just as Mr A had.

I'd had enough.

The following day after work, I stopped by a hardware store in the city. 'I need pesticide,' I said to the man behind the counter in the household products section.

'What kind of insects?' he said.

'Fleas, roaches, termites, you know.'

He turned and took a bottle of insecticide off the shelf. It was a little taller than a beer bottle.

'No, not this kind, I want the kind that comes in gallon tubs with a spray nozzle.' The man looked surprised, but didn't say anything and instead walked into the room behind the counter before returning with two plastic buckets with a hose and spray nozzle.

'Are these the only two kinds you have?' I asked. The man frowned, as if annoyed that I was being so picky, but he went and got two more. I read and compared the labels carefully, and found the symbol I was looking for on one of the buckets.

'I'll take this one,' I said, taking out my wallet.

'This one's only good for roaches, sir. If you're dealing with termites and fleas as well, I suggest the blue bucket,' the man said. 'And it's cheaper too.'

'No, this is the one I want.' I stared hard at the man, daring him to disagree with me. He seemed to have given up on arguing with me. He took the cash, gave me a receipt and change, and handed me a square plastic bucket full of pesticide.

Another thought occurred to me. 'Do you guys have superglue?' I asked, figuring a hardware store would stock glue.

I passed by the alley on my way home from the store. It looked as though the old man had done another ceremony while I was at work. The ground was covered with ash and half-burnt pieces of paper. I picked up a few of them. In the dim glow of the streetlight, I could just about make out some red design and Chinese words on the yellowing paper. I asked someone about the paper, and they said it was paper money that the Chinese traditionally burn for their gods and ancestors, so those words must have been either words of blessing or the value of the money.

Just as I reached for my key to open the door to my apartment, I heard the old man humming a tune. He was always listening to Chinese music really loud. Chinese noise I liked to call it. It was all clanging drums and cymbals that barely deserved to be called music. Every time the old man went downstairs to burn incense in the alley, he left his door unlocked. On a couple of occasions, I'd been tempted to just walk in and destroy the stereo system, but of course I didn't. Like I said, I'm not an impulsive man.

Back in my apartment, I tossed the pesticide aside and took a ready meal out of the freezer. I put it in the microwave, opened a can of beer, and took my phone out. I connected it to the TV and turned the TV on, putting my earphones in so I could blast out the old man's noise. Just to de-stress.

For days after that, I did nothing after work but think about the best and most effective way of using the pesticide. The roaches were still mocking me just as Mr A always did, smirking in their dark corners. 'Smirk away, your days are numbered,' I told them.

On Saturday around noon, I read the instructions, put on my mask and began spraying the pesticide all over my apartment. I had enough spray to do every corner several times, if anyone had seen me right then, they would have thought I'd gone mad. I sprayed a full two gallons of pesticide around my apartment, on the walls, the ceiling, under the bed... I didn't leave a single nook or cranny out. The instructions said that the bucket contained enough pesticide for a three-storey building, but I knew two gallons was barely enough for my purposes. While I was spraying, I could see the roaches scurrying away in fright. I couldn't help smiling under my gas mask, despite the smell.

I closed the door and left the building. I ran into the old man burning incense in the alley. 'Mr Fag! Where are you going?' Mr A smiled at me, but his eyes were unsmiling.

'Off to the bar for a drink,' I said without stopping as I walked by.

'Oh really, so early?'

'I just sprayed pesticide in my room and can't stay in it,' I said, waving my hand at the old

man. I got into my battered old truck, drove to the bar, and ordered a beer. But all I could think about was, had it worked?

An hour later, my phone rang. The landlord.

Success! I answered the phone, acted surprised, and drove calmly back. When my truck turned the final corner and I saw the building, I couldn't tell you how happy I was.

The three-storey building had been burned to the ground, and the windows were still smoking. The ground was littered with charred, wet wood and garbage. A dozen firemen were milling around outside by two fire trucks, and a small crowd had gathered. I could make out the landlord, who looked distraught. He was talking to the cops.

'Oh my goodness, what's happened here, sir?' I shouted.

'You've burned my house down, you !' The landlord grabbed me by the collar. The cops held him back.

'No I didn't,' I said. 'Did the fire start in my apartment?'

'Are you the tenant in 101?' the cop asked.

'Yes, Matthew Fredd.'

'Did you leave anything in the apartment that could have been a fire hazard?'

'Not at all, sir, I don't even smoke! I only have a microwave and an electric kettle, I don't even have a stove! How could the fire possibly have started in my apartment?'

The cop scratched his head. 'The fire department did say the fire spread unusually fast... What else did you do today?'

'Well, just before leaving, I sprayed the rooms with pesticide. We've had problems with pests, and the landlord refused to do anything about it, so I figured I'd have to do it myself!'

'Was it flammable?' the landlord asked agitatedly.

'How would I know? It's just regular pesticide... Never mind the fleas and roaches, we had termites, sir!' I said, turning to the cops. 'What if the ceiling collapsed in on me?' I pretended to look innocent and shifted the blame to the landlord. Of course, I'd picked out the pesticide based on the orange Class 3 Flammable Liquid hazard warning.

'If there wasn't an open source of heat, then perhaps it could have been a short circuit...'

The cop turned to the landlord. 'When was the last time an electrical safety inspection was carried out on the building?'

'Uh... I guess... Maybe last year... Or the year before that?' the landlord stammered. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed watching him squirm.

'Wait right here,' the cop said when the fireman beckoned him. They exchanged a few words and then the cop ran back.

'Was the Mr A in 102 Chinese?' he asked.

'Yes, he was,' said the landlord.

'Did he have any unusual habits?'

'Right, now you mention it!' I pretended something had suddenly occurred to me. 'He's always burning incense and bits of paper right outside the apartment, it's a Chinese ritual.'

'That must have been the source,' the cop nodded. 'The firemen found the windows in 101 unlocked. There were bits of burnt paper on the windowsill and a metal bucket outside. The bits of smoldering paper must have been swept into the room by the breeze, which was how the fire started.' The firemen had already found the evidence I'd planted; perfect. I'd collected those bits of paper from the alley while the old man wasn't looking. Then I'd sprayed the room with flammable pesticide, unlocked the window, scattered bits of paper on the windowsill and lit the remaining paper with a lighter and tossed it into the room before leaving. I'd been counting the days and knew that this was the fifteenth day of the lunar month, so the old man

would be doing his ritual in the alley. I'd put my valuables in the car in preparation, not that I had much of value. I'd only been out a short while. As long as I left some clothes and household things in the apartment, the firemen wouldn't be suspicious.

'And how's Mr A?' I asked tentatively, trying to suppress my impatience.

'I'm afraid he burned to death in his apartment,' the cop said. 'He must have raced back home once he realised the apartment was on fire, and didn't make it out in time.'

'Poor guy...' I said, trying to hide my delight. I couldn't believe that even this final step of my plan had worked. The old man must have run back for his wife's ashes. He didn't know that while he was in the alley doing his ritual, I had secretly stuck the urn to the shelf with superglue. I pictured his agitation, the fire burning around him, and wanted to laugh out loud.