

# SPIRITSPEAKER STUDIO, BOOK 1: THE GRAND OPENING 通靈事務社 1：開張大吉

*Looking to make the most of his spirit medium partner's talents, a "ghost-phobic" private eye turns his small detective agency into a center for mortal contact with the nether realm focused on handling a myriad of supernatural cases.*

Private eye Adam Hsieh, harassed by the spirit of his former tenant, a woman who had hung herself in her rented room, turns to gifted spirit-medium Wen Hsiao-Ching to help negotiate a way for both to coexist in peace. Ching's rounding success in that endeavor leads to their mutual business partnership in Spiritspeaker Studio, with Ching its Chief Investigator and Adam her assistant. The studio takes on all comers, providing various and sundry services including but not limited to finding long-lost pets.

The three-volume *Spiritspeaker Studio* series leads readers through the litany of oddball cases taken on by Ching and Adam. In the first volume, the duo investigate a malicious spirit haunting a mansion, a cryptic closet that bewitches its owners, a female ghost who roams the internet, a child spirit trapped in a cloth doll, and more. More than becalmed, these once-restless spirits are unshackled, after which they continue helping the investigators break important new cases and scare the pants off mortal miscreants. Seemingly inexplicable, however, is their continuous failure to locate a missing dog. "Where is that dog?..." is thus an intriguing enigma that "dogs" the pair throughout the series.

In this series, author Teensy weaves contemporary social issues into enduring urban legends and nativist myths. The bright, lively writing style, soulful protagonists, and array of uniquely talented ghosts and



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ghoulies combine to give readers a warmly satisfying sense of justice and closure.

## Teensy 星子

A powerful storyteller in the fantasy genre, Teensy is well-known for integrating nativist mythology and occult legend into stories of the modern, urban world. Originally a writer of online serial novels, he is today a prolific author of well-known print works such as *In the Underworld* and *The Immortal Gene*. Rights to his best-known series *The Oracle Comes* have already been sold for adaptation into a graphic novel, Netflix series, video game, and theatrical production.

# SPIRITSPEAKER STUDIO, BOOK 1: THE GRAND OPENING

By Teensy

Translated by Cheng-Yi Tsai

## Case #01: The Million-Dollar Villa

This was our first case. It may in fact be one of our most important.

Mr. Adam Hsieh, the CEO of our studio – that is to say, I myself – will be recording it in its entirety.

This case has us traveling to a villa to exorcize a spirit that has been haunting it for decades...to send it along its way...to send it to where it belongs—

□

The sky, dripping a faint flow of rain, was gray and overcast.

Umbrella in hand, Hsieh Chu-Kung stood at the end of the street in a little neighborhood halfway up the hill. Muttering into the recorder pen in his hand, he set his eyes upon the gloomy villa he'd been called to.

“Chief Negotiator Hsiao-Ching and I are now just outside the villa. It's not much of a looker, just an ordinary single-family residence really, but it's on very valuable land in Yangmingshan and has its own yard and basement. Probably worth more than three million...more than the house Dad left me, that's for sure.”

To the side, clutching her umbrella, Wen Hsiao-Ching took out a bunch of keys on a key ring from her pocket. A few bold steps and a push took her past the gate hanging ajar and into the yard.

“Wait! I'm not done yet!” Chu-Kung hurried after her. A sudden sense of cold dread engulfed him as soon as he stepped into the front yard, eliciting an involuntary shiver.

“My goodness...this must be what Chi meant when he said this place makes him quiver!” Scared, Chu-Kung rushed after Hsiao-Ching and followed her as she walked to the main door beneath the eaves. Closing his umbrella, he continued to speak into his recorder.

“Chi is an old friend of mine. We met during high school, and he's now working as a real estate agent. He's the one who referred this case to me.

“The client is a distant relative of his...much older. Six months ago, the client's father passed away and bequeathed his house to the client, so he asked Chi to sell it for him. Chi came here to the villa three times. The first time, he got really ill afterwards. The second time, he broke

his arm. The third time, he saw the dead grandfather of that cousin of his, ran away screaming, and crashed his car on the way home..."

"How come all of the keys here look the same?" Hsiao-Ching complained impatiently as she tried and failed to find the right key to the door among the many on the key ring. "You said your friend has been here many times. How come he didn't label the keys?"

"Here, let me help." As if anticipating her complaint, Chu-Kung left his umbrella by the door and took the jingling keys from Hsiao-Ching. He continued to speak into his recorder pen. "Every time Chi visited the house, he would prepare label stickers beforehand, but they would always blacken and peel off as if they'd been burned after he left."

Pausing for a moment, he let go of the recorder and took out a sheet of label stickers with door names like "wall gate" and "main door" written on them. He picked out keys and tried them in the keyhole one by one, resuming his recording in the meantime.

"Chi's distant cousin's grandfather..."

Chu-Kung paused and turned to Hsiao-Ching. "A distant cousin's father and grandfather...What should I call them?"

"It's *his* distant cousin, what does it matter what *you* call him?" Hsiao-Ching rolled her eyes at him and added, "Call him 'old man' if you like him or 'old coot' if you don't, I don't really care."

"Show some respect for the dead!"

Chu-Kung gave her a nervous glare and resumed recording.

"At any rate, Chi's cousin's grandfather...the 'old man'...He was a successful businessman in his youth and made quite a fortune. But then his wife died in an accident, and he was never the same afterwards. He got involved in esotericism, sold a lot of his properties, and fell out with his son—"

The old man's son offered to take over his business and he agreed. However, his son lacked his talent, and the company was on the verge of collapse after only a few years. The old man's son had to ask him for bailouts repeatedly. After selling some of his properties for that purpose, he soon stopped as bailouts simply led to more bailouts. As a consequence, the two of them fell out.

At that point the old man stopped bothering with shaving and taking care of his appearance. His neighbors and friends started calling him "The Ascetic" because of his appearance and lifestyle. But his old business rivals settled on just calling him crazy.

The Ascetic stopped bailing out his son and refused to save the company he had built with his own hands. Instead, he spent the remainder of his fortune on mysterious artifacts and curios, believing that his collection possessed powers beyond the mortal ken. He would tell everyone he was immortal and could return his dead wife to life.

Many years later, The Ascetic was found dead on his own bed. By the time he was discovered, nothing was left of his body but bones. They were not even sure exactly when he had passed away. The one who had discovered his body was an experienced burglar. Exactly what he saw during that burglary would forever remain a mystery, but he gave himself up to the police

holding a piece of femur in his hands and staring ahead blankly in a daze. It was said he had remained so for a long time afterwards...even well into serving his sentence.

*Clack.* The door was now unlocked. Withdrawing the key, Chu-Kung politely gestured to Hsiao-Ching to enter the building.

She left her umbrella outside and pushed her way silently past the door. The furniture in the living room on the first floor, antique in appearance, was visibly buried under thick layers of dust. Following closely behind, Chu-Kung continued his recording in a low voice.

"After the funeral, the old man's son wanted to get rid of the house, but it just wouldn't sell no matter how hard he tried....For a decade, the situation continued like that without any change. Before dying of cancer, his son told Chi's cousin, his own son, that the old man's ghost still haunted that house. He shouldn't try sell it, or else he'd suffer misfortune and illness as well. Chi's cousin, thinking his father to be simply not in his right mind in his last moments, put the house on the market immediately after his father's death. However, accidents happened each time realtors brought customers to the house. Sometimes, prospective buyers would suffer headaches and start vomiting. Other times, they would encounter an 'accident' on the stairway. Realtors never managed to close a deal on the property. In the end, Chi's cousin asked Chi to handle the case, which is where we come in..."

Chu-Kung paused and took a deep breath before continuing.

"In any case, Chi's cousin, that is to say our client, offered us a very good deal. He doesn't care how we do it, but, on top of our consultation fee, he'll pay us a commission equal to five percent of the selling price if we can sell his house. Damn! Five percent of three million dollars! That's way more money than what I made investigating adultery cases!"

"You're really loud and distracting," remarked Hsiao-Ching as she glared at Chu-Kung with a frown. "Who even records their cases this way anyway? Do you think this is your diary or something?"

"This is just how I like to do it..." Chu-Kung reluctantly put away the recorder pen after marking down the time and date. "Alright, you can start now."

Standing at the center of the living room, Hsiao-Ching's head swiveled around until, at last, her gaze settled on the ceiling.

"Is the old man upstairs?" Chu-Kung crept up behind her and raised his head to follow her eyes.

"You're too close," said Hsiao-Ching with a frown. She scooted away from him and pointed to the front yard door. "If you're so afraid, why don't you just wait outside?"

"What do you mean, afraid? What makes you think I'm afraid?" Grunting in annoyance, Chu-Kung pointed to the stairs leading to the second floor. "Are you going up right now?"

"I sure am," Hsiao-Ching said as she strode towards the stairs. Chu-Kung hesitated and did not follow her. As the distance between them grew, the air began to feel colder and more oppressive. Fear struck him, and he ran to where she was.

"Hsiao-Ching, something isn't right..."

"What isn't right?"

"Your Field, it seems to have shrunk in this building..." Chu-Kung stammered. "Does that mean the old man is rougher than Fen?"

"The old man upstairs *is* pretty rough. Fen isn't rough at all, though," Hsiao-Ching remarked nonchalantly. "Anyway, it's all the same to me."

The two of them reached the second floor. Chu-Kung gasped: The silhouette of something tall and dark could just barely be seen through the door to the main bedroom, hanging ajar. The black shadow looked like a giant bowing down to peer outside. In its head were two faint stars of shining red light, looking like a pair of eyes.

Intimidated by the palpable aura of dread exuded by the massive dark shadow, Chu-Kung shuddered and could only meekly follow along as Hsiao-Ching walked towards it, seemingly without a care.

She pushed the door open. A gust of chill wind carrying an eerie scent of putrescence rushed forth from the room. Scared beyond his limits, Chu-Kung grabbed Hsiao-Ching's arm and stammered, "Give...give me two minutes, I'm not ready for this yet..."

"..." Hsiao-Ching glanced down at his trembling legs and told him, "I'll go in by myself, then. You wait outside."

"Huh?" Chu-Kung, eyes squinting and head lowered as if to avoid the crimson gaze of the giant shadow in the room, asked frightfully, "By yourself...will you be okay?"

"I'll be fine." Hsiao-Ching shrugged. "I'm more worried about you getting scared to death."

"If I stay just outside the door..." Chu-Kung thought visibly. "Will I still be within your Field?"

"Probably." Hsiao-Ching paused and said, "Close the door after I enter the room. I'll stay as close as I can to the door, and we'll be close enough if you keep your back to the door. Does that make you feel better?"

"Yeah..." Chu-Kung nervously nodded. He was about to say more, but Hsiao-Ching had already gone into the room and closed the door behind her.

He quickly turned around and pressed his back against the door. Hugging himself but still shivering, Chu-Kung muttered ashamedly, "Come on, Adam Hsieh, be a man! Did you practice judo for ten years just to let a girl negotiate with a ghost all by herself while you hang around outside? Isn't James Bond your idol? Would James Bond let his girl go deal with ghosts while he cowers behind her?"

Having engaged in some self-recrimination, Chu-Kung began to look for excuses for his actions. "Still, you can't exactly fight ghosts with judo. James Bond never had to fight ghosts either. I'm not like Hsiao-Ching...She has nothing to fear from ghosts thanks to her natural talents. She's really a one-of-a-kind negotiator with the supernatural..."

As he muttered, he could faintly see smoldering ashes dancing in the corridor ahead. The air had become distorted, as if in a mirage. At the same time, a semicircular bubble a couple of meters wide shimmered into being around him. Inside this bubble everything was normal...with neither ashes in the wind nor mirages in the air.

This bubble was Hsiao-Ching's Field. Chu-Kung knew he would be absolutely safe as long as he stayed inside.

Taking a deep breath, he took out his recorder pen, swallowed, and began to speak. "Now, our chief negotiator has entered the room and begun official negotiations with the old man. I wonder what they're talking about right now? We'll have to ask Hsiao-Ching after she comes out...Oh, what am I even talking about? Am I even recording the case anymore? I can't record anything while outside that room! Calm down, calm down! I'm Adam Hsieh, CEO of this studio! Right...I should talk about how our studio came into being. That whole thing with Fen sort of counts as a case too, so I should put that on the record as well."

Chu-Kung cleared his throat and continued to speak. "Three months ago, we weren't called Spiritspeaker Studio yet. We were known as Adam Investigation Services."

Hsieh Chu-Kung, CEO of Adam Investigation Services, didn't like his birth name, so he usually went by his English name, Adam. One year ago, Chu-Kung quit his job at an investigation agency and moved into the house his deceased father left him. He had name cards printed, ordered a billboard, bought online advertising, and established Adam Investigation Services, with himself as its senior investigator and CEO.

He had worked on only four cases during those first six months...two adulteries, one missing person, and one missing puppy. Three out of the four were resolved. They still haven't found that puppy.

To earn some extra money, he leased out the main bedroom he was using as his office. The tenant was Fen, a young, pretty college student. Soft-spoken and always smiling, Fen would often cook an extra portion for Chu-Kung when she made meals on weekends. He secretly imagined something romantic might happen between them.

Two months later, she committed suicide...hanging herself on a beam by the door to her room.

Preliminary investigations by the police eliminated Chu-Kung as a suspect. In addition to his multi-day trips out of town in search of that puppy...the suicide note, Fen's diary, plus the messages between her and her family painted a clear picture of the circumstances behind her suicide.

Two weeks before her suicide, her classmates had sweet-talked her into going to a birthday party at a pub. At first, she refused to drink anything alcoholic, but later she gave in to peer pressure and took a few sips of a carbonated, orange-flavored cocktail. Finding it tastier than she expected, she drank a few more glasses and lost consciousness afterwards. When she woke up, she found herself on a bed in an unfamiliar hotel. Rushing to a mirror on the wall, she found herself disheveled, as if her clothes had been removed and then put on again haphazardly. When she tried to remember what had happened, the details came only sluggishly...like in a dream...

Or a nightmare.

[.....]



The results from the forensic exam she took on the down-low were distressing, but she told herself she would get over it. “Just be more careful next time, and pretend it was all just a dream,” she told herself. She put on a smile and kept going as if nothing had happened. She almost succeeded, until she received those pictures of herself, naked. These pictures were sharp reminders that what she had suffered that night was not a dream. It was real.

And it wasn’t over yet.

She didn’t know who it was, or even if they had been at that birthday party. In the end she gathered the courage to discuss the matter with the friend who had talked her into going to the party. However, her friend told her that she too had been so drunk that she didn’t remember what had happened that night. Later, with tears in her eyes, she told her sister what happened and asked her not to tell their mother, who was not mentally stable. However, her mother got wind of it eventually. Infuriated, she called Fen and yelled at her for being a loose woman. She vowed never to recognize Fen as her daughter again, and told her to go die in a ditch.

Fen cried and said she would do just that.

After she hung up the phone, she tore a few pages from her diary, wrote a simple note, and took two belts from her closet and tied them together. She then slung them over a wooden beam next to the door and made good on her promise. Two days later, Chu-Kung, who still hadn’t found the puppy, returned home with some cake that he planned to share with Fen. He instead found her swinging from a beam near her bedroom door. Scared out of his wits, he crawled out of the house, crying for help.

Chu-Kung felt himself prepared for a long fight against depression, but he quickly discovered he was in for far worse. He began seeing Fen *inside* his house.

She first began appearing in his dreams...sometimes seized by sorrow and other times overtaken by rage. When sorrowful, she would cry until her eyes bled; when enraged, she would stare at him with bloodshot eyes and demand to know why she had to suffer so much...all the time grabbing him by his arms or clothes. He would wake up every morning drenched in sweat. He took to sleeping with the lights on, but it didn’t help. Soon, he found strange bruises on his arms, in the same places Fen had grabbed him in his dreams.

He started to look around for various talismans and began going for therapy. He would point at the bruises on his arms and ask if it were possible he was suffering from some variant of PTSD related to finding Fen after her suicide. The doctors told him PTSD couldn’t be the cause of his bruises, but that he might have hurt himself during the course of his nightmares. He began taking sedatives regularly before sleep, but they did not help at all. Conversely, he started seeing Fen even when he was awake. Most of the time he saw her hanging from the beam, unmoving...as he found her on that day he came back home. However, on some occasions, she would appear elsewhere, behaving as if she was still alive, ignoring Chu-Kung’s screams of horror.

On the verge of a breakdown, Chu-Kung packed a few things, fled from his house, and checked into a cheap hotel.