

“But, if he lies about lying, isn’t he telling the truth?”-- confused logician (the only kind)

The Truthful Ones
by Ahmed Ali Khan

Of course, it was you who murdered him in the most ruthless fashion, you despicable specimen of humanity.

Could you please ask your robot guard to keep away from me before I laser him down?

Yes, I dare to pull a laser gun on you. Keep your hands away from your desk as well. Let us see what you were reaching for. Ah! This is where you keep your laser gun, I see. You have a license for it? No matter. I am going to confiscate it for the time being.

What right do I have to barge in your office and call you a murderer? The right of absolute certainty.

Well, let me tell you my story and you will know how I know.

The murdered man was the owner of a tannery that did moderately well. He was thirty-four years old, good looking, good humored, efficient, quiet, having few friends and fewer enemies. He had married four years ago and as far as appearances go, the couple led a happily married life. They did not have any children. I found out that the tanner had been missing from his house – a luxury home in the Deer Park region of Toronto - for the past two months. His wife had reported the matter to the police and the police had searched for him or his body without any results, until now.

So who could have killed such a man? Why? And most important of all, how?

The “how” appeared to be the most complicated of the three questions.

Please don’t interrupt. Of course, being the murderer, you would know all about the “who,” “how,” and “why” but I am going to relate things my way and you are going to listen because you have no choice.

I was talking about who could have killed the tanner.

Only three persons seemed to have any motive.

His wife was one – an attractive woman of about twenty-nine. Outgoing and very expressive. She seemed to be quite broken down by her husband’s murder. She was the beneficiary of his substantial insurance policy, recently taken out. Her motive for murder could have been greed.

Then there was his childhood friend, the physicist. Handsome, suave, dapper. With several patents to his credit, he was rich – way richer than the murdered man. Four years ago, this friend had been the rival of the murdered man for the affections of the woman who eventually spurned him and married the tanner. What did she see in the tanner that was lacking in the physicist?

Perhaps her intuition made her aware of some short-coming in the physicist's nature. This man's motive in killing the tanner could be a slow, smoldering envy.

The murdered man recently had a bitter quarrel with the manager of his tannery over a matter of embezzlement. He had sacked the manager. The manager was known to be one of those people who have a trigger-temper. In my investigation, I also found that he had underworld connections. Revenge might be the motive for murder here.

Back to the million-dollar question: Who had killed the tanner? His wife? His friend? His ex-manager?

Our investigation finally led us to you. So here we are - my colleague, Mr. Robert Mach and I - to arrest you and charge you with first degree murder.

It was one of the most elaborately planned and elaborately executed murders I have had to deal with in my ten years of service as a police officer. It was also one of the cruelest murders in my experience.

About two kilometers from the tanner's house, there is a thickly wooded park. In a remote corner of the park, someone had built a cabin out of strong logs. No one knew who had built the cabin, when or why. In fact, no one seemed to know that the cabin existed until one day last month, a picnic party chanced on it.

Stop interrupting. I am just laying the facts before you to make it easy for you to confess.

The cabin aroused the curiosity of the picnickers. One of them, a girl, went up to the door and knocked. There was no answer to her knock. She idly turned the spherical doorknob. It was not locked. She pushed and the door lazily creaked open inwards. A stench hit the nostrils of the girl. When her eyes became slightly accustomed to the darkness inside the cabin, she screamed.

The room was completely bare except for the body of a man and the stench was the stench of death.

The body was later identified as that of the tanner.

Upon autopsy, it was found that the man was a diabetic and had died of sugar deprivation. There was no other cause of death, no injury, no indication of poisoning, nothing.

The cabin in the woods had many curious features. It had one room. The room had one door leading outside. There were no windows, no ventilators, no skylight, and no electrical or any other types of light fittings. The cabin was totally bare. The cabin, including the door, was made of strong and heavy wood. The door was fitted with a spring lock which could be opened easily either from the inside or from the outside by turning the spherical knobs fitted on it. No key was needed.

It was one of the strangest death cases. There were so many questions begging answers.

Who had built the cabin? Why had the dead man come there? Most important of all, once inside the cabin, why hadn't he come out when all he had to do was to turn the doorknob, open the door and walk out? There were no signs to indicate that he was physically restrained from moving.

The door couldn't have been blocked from outside because it opened inwards. If the blockade had been big enough to cover the whole doorframe, placing and later removing it would have left some sign or other. No such signs were found even after intense scrutiny.

According to the autopsy, he must have been in there at least three days before death overtook him.

What was it? Suicide? Couldn't be, because there were signs on the inside of the door that he had desperately tried to open it. Somehow, the doorknob did not work so he tried to break down the door. He must have frantically kicked it, pushed and pulled it, pounded against it with his hands and body. The signs clearly indicated all this. Murder, then? No less strange. Why wouldn't the door open when there was no lock on it and it couldn't be blocked from the outside.

One possibility was that he had been kept imprisoned elsewhere, without food and medication until glucose deficiency caused him to die, and then his body was brought to the cabin. But why?

My mind whirled with these questions when the case was assigned to my colleague Mr. Robert Mach, here, and me. I took murder as a distinct possibility and started my investigations accordingly. Soon, based on motive alone, I had my three suspects that I mentioned earlier.

Further investigations made me initially drop one of the three suspects. This man seemed to have been out of the country for a week, around the time when the dead man must have been dying with glucose deficiency.

At this point, my investigations came to a dead stop.

Too bad for criminals like you, but God's justice has a way of catching up with one.

What? Do I believe in God? Yes, I do. Don't you? No, of course you don't. Else you wouldn't have murdered someone so cold-bloodedly.

So it was a fortnight later that something people would call a coincidence happened.

There was the great espionage scandal. You remember that, don't you? It was the big thing in the news, next only to the revolutionary decision of the Supreme Court to accept evidence of androids and robots in the courts of law.

The espionage scandal was something you couldn't have anticipated. In its wake, some highly classified information became public property.

One item of this information dealt with a most exciting discovery: the discovery of a treatment that could render some metals frictionless but this was a temporary effect and the metals would slowly, over a period of a week or so, revert back to their ordinary form.

Do you know how those electric bulbs sometimes light up over the heads of comic-strip characters? Something like that happened to me when I read about this discovery in the newspapers.

And now I will tell you how the man was murdered.

You lured him on some pretext to the cabin you had built. Once he stepped inside the cabin, you closed the door shut and walked away. Immediately afterward, you left the country for a week-long vacation.

Inside the cabin, the man must have been surprised at first. Later, in the darkness of the cabin, he must have tried to turn the knob and open the door. He must have found that, strangely, he couldn't turn the knob. Let alone turn it, he could hardly hold it. The knob had become unbelievably slippery. No matter how hard he tried and by whatever means he tried, the knob simply slipped out of his grasp.

He didn't know it, but the knob on the inside of the cabin has been treated to become frictionless.

He must have become frantic. Not being able to turn the knob, he must have tried breaking down the door, but the door was strong and didn't break. He must have tried shouting for help, but the cabin was in a remote corner of the woods and there was no one about.

And so he died of glucose deficiency three days later, all the while suffering from hunger and thirst. He must also have been terrified of the darkness of the cabin.

Out of the three suspects, only one had access to classified scientific information, only one had the knowledge to have thought of this bizarre murder scheme, only one had the sick, egotistical mind to go to absurd lengths just to prove his cleverness to himself.

When a man, supposedly inferior to yourself, beat you in the mating race, it really burned you up, didn't it, Mr. Physicist?

You laugh.

It is all true, you say, but how are we going to prove it?

You are right. I did not have any concrete proof against you. And so I had to trap you somehow, to make you supply me with the proof I needed. I knew that I couldn't do it with hidden microphones or tape recorders. You are a big shot in the government, working on top-secret defense projects, and anyone approaching you would be thoroughly searched by the security personnel, the way my colleague and I were.

But now I have my proof.

What proof? You just confessed, didn't you?

You laugh again.

You say it is our word (Mr. Robert Mach's and mine) against yours.

Ha! Ha! Ha! It is now my turn to laugh. You may disqualify my evidence in the court, but you will not be able to disqualify the evidence of Mr. Robert Mach, no matter how hard you or your lawyers try.

Why?

Because the rules applying to ordinary humans do not apply to Mr. Mach.

You are practically a dead man, Mr. Murderer. Your goose is cooked, as they say.

My companion, Mr. Mach's testimony will be accepted in the court of law without a murmur, and the testimony will be irrefutable.

You don't believe me? Then look at Mr. Mach. He looks like a man, doesn't he? But he is not. He is an android.

You may be aware that as per the Canadian Artificial Intelligence Act of 2035, testimony of robots and androids is allowed and accepted in the courts of law worldwide. And it is a fact - also accepted in all courts of law in Canada - that robots and androids cannot lie.

The end

Ahmed Ali Khan is a frequent contributor to another realm. I like his work. A lot. In fact, when I see no submission from him, I panic and shriek "KHAN" every bit as loudly as Shatner. (Ahmed lives in Canada. It takes a loud shout to reach him.) I hope you liked this automated noir pastiche as much as I did. Non-lying robots, indeed. Maybe we can use them in the media?