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Seven authors. Seven works of detective fiction on the brink of publication. One invisible reader named "Ghost" who brings them all crashing down with one click of the "Send" button.

How do you write "true crime"? How *should* we write it? In this piece of masterful metafiction that packs every bit of the punch of crime writing, Wolf Hsu plays out an answer to that question in the form of seven spooky interactions between famous crime writers and a faceless, somehow precognitive internet reader named "Ghost."

Each one of these authors has written a crime novel, the primary event of which has, in fact, been adapted from true crime events in Taiwan. Each book is expected to be a blockbuster when it comes out. But not long before publication, every writer in turn receives an email from an unknown person who has somehow read the manuscript ahead of time, and has seen through the holes and contradictions in every plot. Amidst an exchange of emails, each author watches his or her much-prized story topple before their very eyes.

In this polished, cool, and impactfully narrated collection of stories, Wolf Hsu invokes a great question of crime literature through scenes of reading, writing, and deconstruction. Through these stories, the reader lives and relives the imagined stories, only to turn and doubt what he has just seen.

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FIX

By Wolf Hsu

Translated by Mary Bradley

01 Knock on Wood

But your luck will change

If you'll arrange to

Knock on wood

—“Knock on Wood” by Dooley Wilson

He frowned at the computer screen.

After a moment, he stood and got out cigarette papers and tobacco. He quickly rolled a cigarette. Quickly took a drag. Exhaled slowly. When he felt a bit calmer, he plopped himself back in front of the computer with the cigarette between his lips. A loosely packed clump of tobacco dropped from the lit end, a sudden airborne brightness that landed neatly on his thigh before it burned out.

“Fuck!” he roared, and jerked convulsively.

Not because of the momentary scorching sensation on his thigh.

Because of the positively shameful email open on his computer screen.

Why the hell was he looking at this kind of email in the middle of the night? Now he was sorry he hadn't made good on that fan's invitation; he should have headed for the pub after his talk. Even though he hadn't cared much for the fan's looks, hearing himself referred to nonstop as a “great master” would have been a whole lot more pleasant than reading this.

Just a few hours ago, he'd been in a very good mood.

He was well known within national literary circles. As a student, he had swept every major award. The older generation of writers saw him as a new cornerstone; the present generation saw him as a leader for their times. His work was not only acclaimed by literary purists but also read with enthusiasm by the general public. In an era when reading habits were deteriorating on a daily basis, he was essentially the Holy Savior of the publishing industry.

For this reason, when he announced his new book would reflect social realities and combine literary depth with the thrill factor of crime fiction, readers began to pant in anticipation. With only the title made public, the internet teemed with conjecture and discussion.

Naturally, his publisher wasn't going to slack off with a soon-to-be bestseller on their hands. Not only had they arranged various pre-release promotional events, they had also set up a schedule for preorders and media coverage.

Including that day's Tea Time Talk.

They might call it a Tea Time Talk, but no one drank tea; multiple bottles of red wine were uncorked instead. He sat in an upholstered easy chair. Sitting or standing around him were

the director of publishing, editor-in-chief, senior editor, managing editor, marketing manager, and reporters, plus the fans who had pulled who knew what strings to be there.

It was an informal event, a room where he alone held the floor.

"Excuse me, sir? Your new book, why is it called *Knock on Wood*?" asked a reporter.

"'Knock on wood' is a foreign expression." He gave the group of people facing him his professional smile. "People in Britain and the United States believe touching a wooden cross or something made of wood can ward off bad luck and bring good luck their way, so saying 'knock on wood' or 'touch wood' is like asking for a blessing. In my new book, the protagonist is a detective who's come back from overseas, so when he runs into problems during an investigation, he knocks on wood."

"You're just so amazing!" gushed a seated fan who kept inching forward. "But I know the title has more than just the one meaning, right, sir?"

Not much in the looks department, he thought to himself, *but full points for effort, at least*. He smiled. "You're right. In choosing this title, I absolutely had another meaning in mind."

He paused for a moment to take in everyone's look of anticipation. "That's a little something for you to figure out while you're reading the book. So, wait until everyone has a copy, then give it your best shot."

No one said anything, but they all flashed a smile that said, *I'm so clever, I'll definitely figure it out when the time comes*.

Except he wasn't smiling now. Not one bit.

The email on the screen seemed to ooze malice.

It came from an account he didn't recognize, and the sender hadn't signed it. And while the opening salutation was perfectly polite, the message that followed was anything but. It pointed out quite bluntly that his novel *Knock on Wood* was seriously flawed and, in essence, badly written.

Knock on Wood wasn't even out yet. What was this asshole ranting about?

Readers sent him all sorts of emails. Some of these said his work had become a guidebook to life, or had flipped a switch that opened up a whole new way of looking at the world. Some came with an attached file and requested advice, and others just sang his praises. Sometimes he would answer to show how approachable he was, but he mostly just skimmed them.

Never before, however, had he gotten an email that dared to point out his mistakes.

Forget it. Why get worked up about some idiot who judged the book before he read it? His cursor was poised over the "delete" icon when a different thought seized him. How could he ignore such flagrantly abusive criticism the first time someone challenged him? If this got out, how would he maintain his image as "the Master"?

"Dear Anonymous Reader, I received your message. I take all criticism with an open mind, but *Knock on Wood* is not yet available for sale, so you can't have read it. Criticizing a book before you read it is ignorant, senseless, irrational, and uncultured behavior. Since you didn't sign your email, I would also call it cowardly. Wait until you have read my new book, at which time you are welcome to discuss it with me."

He read his message through twice and considered it a job well done, with evidence to back up his point. No doubt that would shut the bastard up.

He clicked “send,” then stretched, stubbed out his cigarette, and looked at his Facebook news feed. He had just decided to turn off the computer when a message flashed onto the screen. He had a new email in his inbox.

Apparently the asshole had replied.

The salutation was still conventionally polite, after which the writer stated that he had read the manuscript. The message was signed “Ghost.”

What the hell kind of name was “Ghost”? He’d read it? How?

He frowned as he thought for a moment. The managing editor and senior editor had both read the manuscript. The editor-in-chief also claimed to have read it, but he felt sure that was so much hot air. Other than the editors, there were the book’s endorsers, recruited by the publisher. They had probably read it, although one of his seniors in the literary world could have just signed his name instead of using some weird code name. As for active bloggers, none of them knew enough about literature to criticize his work.

The people who had read the book wouldn’t write this kind of email to him. This Ghost person had to be lying.

“Dear Ghost, I don’t believe you’ve read the manuscript. You haven’t offered any concrete criticism, so we can’t have any sort of meaningful discussion. If you continue to write to me, I won’t reply. Furthermore, I will regard it as harassment and reserve the right to sue you.”

He angrily hit “send” and then rolled another cigarette. He’d had time to put the cigarette in his mouth but not to light it when Ghost’s reply came.

After the customary, unmistakably polite opening – which now seemed to lack any politeness whatsoever – Ghost had written, “Thank you for your openness to discussion. Here is some concrete criticism for your consideration: The gunfight scene used to develop the main line of deductive reasoning in *Knock on Wood* has several obvious problems. You overlooked all of these and arrived at a completely erroneous conclusion. Please check your material more thoroughly, or at least read more detective fiction.”

His jaw dropped in shock. The cigarette fell from his mouth onto his thigh.

Fortunately, it wasn’t lit.

The title of *Knock on Wood* did indeed have another meaning.

In addition to being a British and US expression, it was also the title of a jazz song in the film *Casablanca*. In the movie, the singer accompanies himself on the piano and gets the audience involved as well. When he sings “knock on wood,” the other musicians and the audience knock three times, either on their instruments, or by rapping on their bodies or the tables.

Those three knocks were the real reason he chose *Knock on Wood* as the book’s title.

The story was built around a whodunit mystery.

Detective fiction began in England and the US. After extensive circulation and evolution, various countries produced interesting specimens of their own, and his country was no exception. Yet to his way of thinking, outstanding examples of the genre from other nations reflected their social conditions, whereas his own country’s detective fiction too often stuck to the forms established elsewhere. It lacked local character, and thus excellence.

So before he wrote the book, he interviewed police officers to learn how they worked cases. His detective in *Knock on Wood*, returned from overseas, was meant to serve as contrast for the local police. He would take crime fiction's typical master sleuth setup and emphasize his detective's attention to detail and objective analysis. These qualities would allow his detective to find the key and solve the case, whereas local law enforcement's carelessness, caused by pressure to solve the crime and public opinion, would lead them down a false trail.

Naturally, the police wouldn't seek out a foreign detective to help investigate the case without some reason, so he made his detective an old friend of the investigating officer. The officer talks about the case with the detective while they reminisce over a meal. He has already worked out what must have happened, but the detective thinks several aspects of the case have yet to be explained.

While writing the book, he had also discovered that, despite national gun control laws, it wasn't difficult for members of the criminal underworld to get their hands on guns and ammunition. Some of these weapons came from the massive overseas smuggling wave of the 1980s and 90s, while others were built from scratch. All it took to find this information was a bit of extra digging, but local detective fiction rarely talked about it. In his opinion, a lot of writers didn't do nearly enough research before they started writing.

He planned a gunfight in which a police officer dies in the line of duty. He then described how emotional factors cause the police to rush the case. By closing it too quickly, they neglect important details, and this allows the detective to point out the problems and overturn the results of the investigation.

The gunfight takes place inside a karaoke room in one of the KTV businesses littering the country.

Initially, nine people are in the room. Two are KTV hostesses. The other seven are local mafia bosses and thugs-for-hire. Two of these men, Wu and Sheng, are main characters. The three sofas in the room are arranged in the typical horseshoe configuration. The TV with its scrolling lyrics is positioned directly opposite one of the sofas, with a sofa to the left and right. The sofas enclose two large tables, which are pushed together and spread with liquor bottles and snacks. This is the setup when the gunfight takes place. Wu is sitting in the middle of the sofa opposite the TV. On his right is one of the hostesses with someone else on his left. Sheng is sitting in the middle of the sofa to the right of the TV with someone on his left and right, as well. As a result, two people sit between Wu and Sheng. The remaining three people, including the other hostess, are sitting to the left of the TV on the sofa that's opposite Sheng.

Wu and Sheng are good friends, having hung out together since they were kids. Both are carrying guns, standard Glocks as well as modified firearms. Everyone in the room is drinking and singing while they fool around with the guns. After he's downed several bottles of booze, Wu thinks the KTV service stinks and the hostesses in the room are too ugly, so he kicks both girls out. Then he picks up the Glock lying by his hand, and fires several random shots at liquor bottles on the table and at the ceiling.

Worried about having an incident, the KTV staff call the police, who immediately dispatch officers to the scene when told that someone is firing a gun.

As they stand outside the door to the private room, the officers hear the faint thrum of music and sporadic gunshots inside. They signal to each other, and a tall, strong, slightly overweight officer nicknamed “Doughnut” charges into the room and fires at Wu. The startled Wu levels his gun and fires back. The three officers waiting outside rush in to provide backup, and everyone opens fire. Wu is shot through the heart and dies at the scene. Doughnut is down, too. Everyone involved, including Sheng, is wounded.

The backup officers control the scene and get Doughnut to the hospital, but they can’t save him. Doughnut took three bullets: one to the face, one to the top of the head, and one between his chest and abdomen, which hit a lung.

Those three bullet wounds are the story’s mystery. The three shots that caused them are what made him think of the three knocks in the song from *Casablanca*, and this is how *Knock on Wood* became the book’s title.

While they eat, the investigating officer says to the detective, “Doughnut was a good cop. Before he left that day, we talked about grabbing a midnight snack together. Then he didn’t come back. Judging by the evidence at the scene, both Wu and Doughnut opened fire and killed each other. We’d been looking to bring in Wu for a long time. That son of a bitch had a rap sheet a mile long. His death is nothing to cry about, but he takes a bullet in the heart and still gets off three shots, killing one of our men. Frankly, such a quick death lets him off too easy. I can’t accept it.”

“What about fingerprints on the bullet?” the detective asks.

“We tested them, but it wasn’t much use.” The investigating officer shakes his head. “There were a lot of people at the scene. All of them, including the hostesses, touched the bullets. It’s obvious the hired guns were showing off and took the bullets out of the gun before they were fired. Besides, the person who loaded the gun isn’t necessarily the person who— Hold on, what the hell do you think you’re doing, asking these questions?”

“Hm.” The Detective thinks things over for a moment. “You want my help?”

“What do you mean, help?” The investigating officer waves his hand. “The prosecutors have already decided to close the case the way I just told it to you.”

“Is there a possibility – I’m just saying a *possibility*,” the detective taps his finger on the table three times, “that it didn’t actually go down that way?”

“Oh, yes, the amazing foreign detective!” The investigating officer’s laugh was part genuine anger and part mock good humor. “You think the local cops are so bad they must be wrong?”

“I just said a *possibility*!” The detective looked earnest. “This is a big case. An officer was killed in the line of duty. Is there any possibility this case was closed too fast? That you had to appease fellow officers and satisfy public opinion? I’m an outsider. My point of view is relatively objective. Let me take a look at what you’ve got. Maybe I can find something.”

The investigating officer shakes his head. “We might be old friends, but how can I hand over police files to a civilian?”

“We’ll keep it between us. You don’t want to close this case feeling uncertain, do you?” says the detective in a low voice. “Besides, I’ll be looking at hard evidence. When I’m done, maybe I’ll reach exactly the same conclusion. That won’t hurt the case. But if I find something differ-

ent, maybe discover someone else is responsible for Doughnut's death, wouldn't that make you feel like the case is really closed and that you haven't let Doughnut down?"

"But it's just like you said," mutters the investigating officer, sounding uncertain. "This case involves one of our own. Everyone wants it solved quickly...."

"It won't take long," says the detective. "Let me catch the real killer. Then you can give Doughnut some comfort in the afterlife."

Looking through the files, the detective's first question involves the bullet casings that fell around Wu.

The narrow gap between the room's table and sofas and the intensity of the gunfight led the officers to think anyone not shooting ducked down in his seat and covered his head; they assumed no one changed location. Most of the casings around Wu fell to his right, but one fell to his left. Wu was using a Glock. The gun's design suggests to the detective that all the casings should have been ejected backward and to the right, and therefore should have fallen to the right of his body. Since there was also a casing to his left, it seemed obvious that someone else fired on that side of him.

Wu took a bullet to the heart, which appeared to result in his immediate death. He couldn't have pulled the trigger several times before he died. This increases the likelihood of another shooter.

The detective next reviews the forensics reports on everyone else at the scene and finds that four of the seven had gunpowder residue on their hands. This, in addition to showing that multiple shots were fired, implies that more than one person shot at the three officers.

The detective tells the police his suspicions, the police re-question everyone involved, and one of them finally breaks: the person who was sitting on Sheng's right admits that he felt him move to a different seat.

All the clues are in place. In light of this, the detective reconstructs the events of the shootout and discovers the truth.

After Wu shot Doughnut in the face, Doughnut shot Wu dead; Doughnut fell forward, and Sheng took advantage of the other three officers' retreat from the KTV room to reload and leave his seat. He moved to Wu's position, then fired two additional shots at Doughnut, who was lying on the floor on his side. This caused the two strange gunshot wounds.

Sheng changed position to pin the blame for Doughnut's killing on Wu, of course, since Wu was already dead. Fortunately, the detective is attuned to the smallest detail, and so he hasn't let the real killer get away with it.

Ghost was talking specifically about the gunfight scene. Had the bastard really read *Knock on Wood* before it was out? Or had he made a lucky guess?

He quickly reread his notes and skimmed that section of the book. The deductions looked sound to him; assuming Ghost had actually read it, where was the problem?

He stood up.

What he needed right now wasn't a cigarette, but some twelve-year-old Macallan whisky.

The three glasses of Macallan before bed caused him to wake up somewhat later than usual the next day, and he almost missed his talk scheduled for that morning.

The talk was at the invitation of the city university's literature department and was held in their largest classroom. The department head welcomed him in person at the school's entrance, directed him to a reserved parking space, and accompanied him into the classroom. He stood at the podium. The students and teachers crammed into the classroom applauded.

He gave them his professional smile.

The audience's reaction told him that his talk had been up to his usual standards; he hadn't actually thought about the annoyances of last night at all. Ghost's emails seemed no more than a midnight snack carelessly eaten past its expiration date – momentary discomfort aside, some time on the toilet and a flush had left no trace.

Until the Q & A session after the talk.

"Excuse me," said a student. "May I ask what kind of book *Knock on Wood* is, exactly?"

"It's a detective story with a very localized setting." He smiled and winked. "Of course, it doesn't lack the literary quality I always insist on."

"Sir." Another student raised a hand. "What does the book's title mean?"

The write-up of yesterday's Tea Time Talk should have come out already. Didn't these students pay attention to publishing news? He bit back his impatience and was about to respond when he suddenly remembered a line from Ghost's email.

"The gunfight scene has several obvious problems."

He instantly lost all interest in answering.

On the drive home, he pulled out his phone to check email while stopped at a red light.

Did his story really have a plot hole? Had Ghost written again with more clues? Or did Ghost just want to play a practical joke on someone famous? Did he think it was cool to have his say and just leave him hanging? Was he waiting for Ghost to send the next email, or did he want him to drop off the radar and stay there?

Whether he was waiting for it or not, he had another message from Ghost.

He opened it. It consisted of a greeting and a YouTube URL. Nothing else.

Was it a virus? He examined the URL carefully. It looked normal. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He was about to click on it when a loud honk from the car behind his made him jump.

He looked up. The light was green.

The video had some foreign guy in it, shooting at a target.

He stared at the screen, baffled. Why had Ghost sent him this?

The video kept going. The foreign guy broke the gun down and laid its components on a table, explaining the structure of each one. This was starting to bore him. The gun in the video was the same standard Glock used in *Knock on Wood*. He'd read all kinds of information about it for the book. He already knew everything the guy in the video was saying.

The foreign guy finished his explanation and started to shoot at the target again. Bang, bang, bang, bang. His eyes crinkled in the beginnings of a yawn when he suddenly gaped at something on the screen.

As the foreign guy fired, most of the bullet casings did, in fact, exit the gun's chamber to the back and right. Not all the bullet casings were so well behaved, however – after the guy in

the video fired a round, the slight movement of his hands and small differences in how the casings were expelled from the chamber meant some of them discharged to the left. One of the casings shot straight up and struck the guy on the forehead.

Ghost had sent the video to tell him this: the position of the bullet casings the detective in *Knock on Wood* had given so much weight shouldn't have raised any question at all. Three bullet casings on Wu's right and one on his left did not mean a second person had fired.