

Murder in Mind

A Novel of Detection

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67,500 Words

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Chapter 1

Nothing so absurd can be said, that some philosopher has not said it.

Cicero, *De Divinatione*, ii, 58

Paul Wallace sat up in bed as his alarm went off. It was the last day of his first week in college, and he had begun to lose that first faint sense of claustrophobia that comes when all one's personal goods and oneself, a kitchen and bathroom, and an assortment of furniture, all share a space that an Ancient Roman would have found on the small size for a bath. He could only hope that in the weeks to follow his knees and elbows would lose the permanent blue-and-yellow blotching that came from repeated violent contact with shelves, doors, table edges and bookcases. Perhaps in time he would come to navigate through his tiny, crowded world with the grace and purpose of the temple dancer whose bronze image stood on his coffee table. But he doubted it.

Last year he had completed an M.A. in Philosophy. This year he had applied, and been accepted for, a Ph.D. course, to be supported by working as a Senior Tutor. The position was at a new university, in a different State. It had meant leaving his parents' wide-verandahed Queensland home and cramming himself somehow into this tiny college flat. He had thought of himself as a kind of hermit, striking alone into the wilderness of pure thought. He had not bargained for the mortification of the flesh that went with it. Hermits at least could chisel away at their cells and make them larger. Modern college rooms were fixed in size.

He rose carefully and eased himself around the corner into the bathroom. It was only a minute or two before he had forgotten his resolve to be graceful, and flinching from a sudden burst of hot water, he drove his elbow once more into the cold tap. At home he would have relieved his feelings with a yell, but yelling in the College usually brought anxious enquiries from the other tenants, so Paul cursed instead. He finished his shower, dried himself tentatively and dressed feeling damp. Fortunately the sun was out, and by the end of his short trip from the college to the cafe at the western end of the campus, he was back in good spirits.

Breakfast in the cafe was one of Paul's guilty secrets. After three mornings spent queueing in the college for undercooked porridge, overcooked bacon and individual cardboard boxes of cereal, all washed down with muddy coffee, his spirit had broken free. His parents would never have approved — in fact Paul could almost hear his father's incredulous tone, demanding “They lay on breakfast for free, and you go and *pay* for it?” — but it was worth it. Here were fresh hot croissants and cappuccino with real cream. Here there was an Indian girl waiting on tables, who had actually smiled at him by his third visit. Here there was meaningful conversation; or at least there would be, when Paul found someone to converse with. For the moment he was happy to eat and drink and watch the staff and students hurrying through the Main Gate on their way to take up their daily roles.

He noted with interest that The Girl was there again. He had given her the mental capitals after seeing her breakfasting there alone two days before. Women by themselves were sufficiently rare, even on campus, to focus Paul's attention, and this one was attractive enough, and in the right age group — graduate rather than undergraduate — to encourage some pleasant speculation on his part. She was tall and slender, with a mass of black hair in tight curls, and a large pair of glasses gave her an owlish look that was — from Paul's point of view — encouragingly bookish. Best of all, she had even glanced up and appeared to

notice him this time around. No doubt some clever ploy on his part could make them better acquainted; all he had to do was think one up. Undeterred by the fact that four years of planning clever ploys had got him nowhere as an undergraduate, Paul daydreamed pleasantly over his breakfast.

Not many students yet, being early February — not many staff either, come to that. Although academics here, like everywhere else, made a good deal of fuss about the students' holidays being the only time they could get their own work done, few of them actually seemed to be putting in long hours. In Paul's own school, Philosophy, only half-a-dozen of the nine lecturers were putting in regular appearances, and then often for half-a-day or less at a time. Things would become more hectic, Paul knew, as the beginning of March drew nearer.

It was ten to nine when he left the cafe and began the pleasant, meandering walk across the campus, past the ornamental pond, to the Carpenter Building, which housed the School of Arts. The Carpenter Building was basically a four-storey block of ferro-concrete with windows in, but its stark appearance had been softened by covered awnings, pathways and bridges linking it to the rest of the University. The links were symbolic rather than actual: the Faculty of Arts was very much a law unto itself.

The location of each School in the Carpenter Building depended on two things; the prestige of the subject itself and its popularity with students. Faculty meetings reflected a constant struggle by popular but unprestigious schools like Sociology and Anthropology to gain ground at the expense of unpopular but prestigious Schools like English and History itself. Philosophy was a favourite target for invective from both sides, being detached and sceptical enough to arouse the ire of the deeply subjective sociologists, while politically it tended to favour individual expression at the expense of unanimity, alienating the hidebound traditionalists from English and History. As a result Philosophy had been relegated to the worst location in the building; it was situated in the windowless basement, bracketed at one end by the toilets and at the other by a grey, cheerless room full of computer terminals belonging to Architecture, which had long since run out of space in its own airy, fanciful building.

To Paul, the brief corridor seemed an endless vista, and the tiny office he shared with two other tutors sometimes felt as if it contained the world. It was, after all, his first *real* job. After years of cramming knowledge into his head he was about to mete it out in measured phrases to eager students. The insights that had come to him during his struggles with Nietzsche and Schopenhauer could now be shared. And he was getting paid for it!

He entered his room to drop off his briefcase. Bonnie Elliott, one of the other tutors, was working at her desk. She travelled back and forth with a neat little laptop computer which Paul secretly coveted. Though some of the lecturers affected to scorn the PC and prefer the methods of Descartes, Paul suspected it had less to do with austerity than with the fact that the School's budget ran only to an elderly Epson in the secretary's office. Now Bonnie's long fingers were running over the keys with practised speed. "Good morning," he said.

"Oh! Morning, Paul." Her gaze flicked back to the screen.

"Writing your paper?"

"No, just playing around. Come and have a look." She turned the computer screen to face him. "It's an artificial intelligence program. I type questions and the program responds. I got it from a friend in Computer Science."

“What do we need that for when we've got real intelligence?”

“Not enough of it around, that's why. I might try and work it into the paper somewhere.”

Paul consulted the screen. He read:

What is the longest river in Australia?

The Murray River.

Where does it start?

In the Snowy Mountains.

What is the most windy river?

I do not understand “windy” in this context. Can you define it?

The windiness of a river is its total length divided by the distance between its start and finish.

I understand.

It didn't seem very exciting to Paul. “So what's the connection?”

“The connection is that we've spent two and a half thousand years trying to work out how people think. The AI people have been on the job for a couple of decades and they're well on the way to building machines that can do it. Maybe we can learn something.”

“Is that what we're trying to do?” Paul said. “I thought we were probing the secrets of the Universe.”

Bonnie threw up her hands. “You see? We can't even agree what our *subject* is!”

“True.” Paul conceded. “I know one thing, though.”

“What's that?”

“It's not rivers of Australia.” With this parting shot he left for the Common Room down the hall.

As an undergraduate, Paul found the words Common Room had conjured up an image out of Oxford or Cambridge, a cavernous wood-panelled salon where servants hurried back and forth with port and staff members in tweeds with leather-patched elbows discussed profound issues. The reality was a concrete box slightly larger than his office, crammed with leftover tubular steel furniture, hung with a few Greek travel posters and strewn with assorted journals, reprints and letters ‘for information’. Pride of place was given to a mahogany bookcase at the end of the room, a gift from the recently-retired Head of School. At the other end a set of pigeonholes were used to store mail and any circulars addressed to staff members. Paul's pigeonhole contained a note from the Salaries Department informing him that his pay had been adjusted from one inexplicable figure to another inexplicable figure. Neither figure bore any relation to what Paul had calculated he should be getting. The realms of higher metaphysics were transparently clear by comparison with the motives and behaviour of the University administration.

He was still puzzling over the discrepancy when he became dimly aware of a hurried figure behind him. The figure bustled in, collected a few scraps of mail and turned to go. Paul assumed it had gone again when he was suddenly aware of a strangled cry from the other end of the room. He looked up — and placed the figure as Dr Rawitz, a small dapper man whom Paul had met only briefly.

At the moment, though, Dr Rawitz's interest was directed elsewhere. He was looking at the floor in front of the bookcase, gazing at something that Paul couldn't see, and hopping agitatedly from one foot to another. His moustache was quivering with indignation. "Who could have done this?" Paul heard as he drew closer. The little man reached out and grasped Paul's elbow to draw him forward. With his forefinger extended, he pointed dramatically to the bookcase and declaimed in accented English. "Paul, look! Plato has changed colour!"