

S.J. Huang

THE NEW SINGAPORE HORROR COLLECTION

Horror strikes deepest when it hits close to home. This collection uncovers the secret fears that lurk within the Singapore psyche, the unspoken terrors obscured by the lights and hubbub of city living. For all our modernity, we have never quite shaken off the primal predators that stalk our minds to this day. Outside, the unknown skulks in the shadows, waiting to pounce; within us, there resides a primitive darkness we fear we may never expunge.

These 13 stories explore our disquiet, our unease about the things we cannot see, understand or hope to easily overcome. Sometimes these are the things that threaten our humanity, yet at times it is our very humanity, it seems, that remains the greatest threat to humankind.

THE NEW SINGAPORE HORROR COLLECTION

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FICTION

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S.J. Huang

"These supernatural stories range from the suspenseful and frightening to the introspective and poignant. This is one collection which should not be missed!"

– Nicky Moey, bestselling author of *Asian Ghost Stories*

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For Review



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*For Wei Xuan,
my light and star*

For Review

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THE OFFICE

When finally his colleagues were all done with their congratulations, Jimmy found himself alone in his cubicle once more. The office was fast emptying—it was a Friday, after all—but he took his time to tidy the scattered files and papers on his desk. What he was about to do happened only a few times in one's career, if one was even that lucky, and he wanted to savour every moment.

"Not going yet?" Aaron, on his way out, paused to look at him.

"Nope. Got plenty to tidy, plenty to move."

His colleague laughed. "You don't have to do it today, you know? Your new office isn't going to run away."

Jimmy returned a chuckle. "I know, I know. Just want to get it sorted out so I can hit the ground running next week."

"And that's why they promoted you. See ya."

From his desk he could hear the *ding!* as the lift arrived. The office became deathly quiet.

For about two hours he worked in complete silence, oblivious to the dying light outside the windows. Done at last, he regarded his handiwork. At least half a dozen stacks of papers and folders, rising neatly like the skyscrapers shining in the dark outside, ready to be carried to the next phase of his career. He cast his eye at the window, taking in the jewelled towers glittering beyond. Once, a long time ago, he had stood at the feet of these behemoths, staring up in wonder, feeling an insatiable hunger stirring within him. To be at the top, no matter what it took.

And here he was. He stood up, looking over the cubicle wall into the dark, empty room awaiting him. Now that the moment was here, it felt strangely anticlimactic. No cheers, no applause. Just him and his things, and he even had to move them himself. After all the things he had to do to get to this point...all he felt now was fatigue and a faint impatience to get it over and done with.

His phone buzzed. A WhatsApp message from Aaron.

My god, did you see the news?

He scrolled further.

“Man Falls to His Death...” read a link to the *Straits Times* website.

For a blank moment he wondered why Aaron had sent him that, only to feel his throat tightening as the

first tendrils of suspicion clenched his gut. His thumb hovered over the link uncertainly. It *couldn't* be. Why on earth would Chris even...

He felt a chilly wind in his face and a shaky weakness in his legs. All at once he was staring down from a great, dizzying height at the narrow strips of road hardly thicker than his shoelaces, and specks of people and cars so far away they moved with indifferent muteness. Jimmy shook his head, but the mental image clung on stubbornly. He could feel the strong gusts buffeting him from behind, egging him on. One foot already lifted, a ridiculously shined oxford trembling in thin air. One step forward, and it would all—

He sat down quickly, feeling his strength forsake him utterly.

He had to know.

His thumb jabbed the screen so hard he could hear the clack of thumbnail against hard glass. A white screen, a dawdling blue line slowly crawling right. The page took forever to load.

SINGAPORE: A man was seen falling to his death from an office tower in the CBD on Friday evening, in full view of passers-by below. Witnesses say the man, wearing a mustard yellow dress shirt and black pants, appeared to have fallen from Sky Plaza.

No. No. *Breathe*, Jimmy told himself. *You've got to breathe.*

I think it's Chris man, Aaron went on relentlessly. Mustard yellow, his fav colour. Remb what he said when they fired him? I will jump. I will jump in front of all of you. Sky plaza is just opp, maybe you can—

Fuck this! Jimmy threw down his phone. He could hear his own ragged breathing. For a while he stared blankly into the air, before a sudden impulse jerked his eyes upwards, forcing him to look upon the cold, lifeless room that was now his.

He felt his skin crawl.

No, not today. He had to leave. All his papers and things, piled on his table, waiting—they'd just have to stay where they were till Monday. He was getting out of there. He grabbed his jacket and laptop bag and made for the lift lobby.

The lift wouldn't come. Frantically, he slammed repeatedly at the call button, but it wouldn't light up. He looked up at the display above the lift.

Out of Service.

He ran—he didn't know why he had to run, but he did—to the stairwell, feeling a rush of relief as he found the door unlocked. But as he stared over the railings, seeing how the steps spiralled down endlessly in neat, cascading rectangles, his spirits sank. Sixty-six storeys. There had to be another way.

He would call for help. Somewhere in his phone, somewhere, he had the number to the maintenance

office. All he had to do was give them a call, and they would sort it out. They had to.

He returned to the lift lobby and dialled their number, but there was no reception. He waved his phone around and waited for a bit, tapping his feet. He knew the building had decent coverage. As the minutes trickled by and nothing changed, he began to feel cold all over. It couldn't all be coincidence, the lifts not working, and now his phone. He paced about at the lobby, reluctant to go back to his desk. He didn't want to see the dark, empty room staring back at him so accusingly. The room had once belonged to Chris and now it seemed to glare at Jimmy like an empty eye socket, gouged of life.

"My god, I'm being ridiculous." He felt a little better hearing his own voice, even if it echoed slightly in the still emptiness. "You know what, I'll just send the bloody fellows at the maintenance office an email. They better still be around. Or heads will roll."

He strode back to his cubicle, averting his eyes so that he wouldn't have to see the vacant office, but it remained at the periphery of his vision, shadowed and sinister.

He booted up his laptop and sent the email. Within minutes he had a reply.

Hi Mr Ang,

To my knowledge the lifts are currently operational.

Allow me to check if everything is in order, and I'll get back to you.

"Great, just great. Bunch of incompetent idiots." He leaned back into his chair, rubbing his tired eyes. He could kill for a nice cold beer.

His heart stopped cold. The lights in Chris's office were on.

He felt his eyes squeeze shut and his head dipping, almost as if bracing for a blow. *Breathe, breathe.* Steeling himself, he slowly opened his eyes to where he thought his laptop screen to be, squinting laboriously so that all was shut out save for the small rectangle of light right in front of him. Every breath came out in quivering starts. *Please, please, come on.*

One new email.

Hi Mr Ang,

The lifts are working fine. Would you like to try again?

His shaking fingers set to work. *I cant call the lift wehre I am. Cld you please take the lift up to 66 flr?*

An agonising minute. Then, *Okay, give me a moment.*

Hurry, you idiot, he begged silently, his head still bowed, huddling over the laptop like a caveman

over life-giving fire. His neck was starting to hurt. *Hurry, hurry.*

The still silence of the office was now close to suffocating. He squeezed his eyes shut, so hard that stars spat and sputtered in the inky blackness. Every hair on his being stood erect, tingling antennas afraid to receive. With each rustle of an errant sheaf or creak of a roguish table, he gave an agonised twitch and sank deeper into a foetal position. In the grey, buzzing waters of his mind there was a single pinprick of light—the *ding!* of the lift that would spell salvation.

A whimper escaped him. He could hear the murmur of feet dragging themselves across the carpet. No, there was no mistake. Closing his eyes had only made his hearing all the more acute. The sound seemed to have started from Chris's room and was approaching his cubicle—any moment now, if he raised his head, he would see Chris peering over his cubicle wall with those disapproving eyes of his, as he always did back when he was still the boss. Before *he* had gotten him fired.

"No...*please.*" The words were drawn from him as they would from a child facing the rod, a prisoner facing the noose. "*Please...*"

The shuffling stopped—awfully close to his cubicle. He felt a twinge in his bladder. As the seconds crept by and the silence continued, unbroken, a part of

him began to reel from the sheer fatigue of terror. *Look up*, a voice in his mind whispered. *Just look up and it will be over.*

He opened his eyes. The carpet at his feet swam in and out of focus, streaked with flashes of black. Too much blood in his head. As his vision began to clear, the mundane, ordinary sight of his shoes set against the carpet began to make him feel foolish. There were no unusual sounds, no shuffling to be heard. Even his shallow, panicked breathing was starting to slow. He had allowed his mind to play tricks on him.

Then right above him, someone—*something* cleared its throat.

He screamed. He shot up and tore to the lobby, his fear-cramped thighs screeching in protest. Once there he could barely stand; his legs were wobbling so badly. Palms on knees, he took a deep breath. Then another. And another. The voice of reason bubbled up in his consciousness. He hadn't seen anything as he leapt up. Nothing. No one, nothing, not even a shadow. Just the lights in Chris's room. He was being ridiculous. Completely ridiculous.

It's just your bloody conscience, he told himself. *It's in overdrive.*

He hadn't meant anyone any harm, of course. But Chris had royally screwed up—why shouldn't he capitalise on it? It would've been stupid not to.

Anyone else in his place would have done the same, even Chris. *Especially* Chris.

Well, that idiot was gone. Crumbled like a soft little snowflake, crying and making all those silly threats when they fired him. *He had no right to do that*, Jimmy thought fiercely. *He knew how the game was played, he played the game himself. He had no right at all.* The heat of indignation melted the iciness in his chest, and his breathing settled into a tamer rhythm.

Now, where the hell was the maintenance person?

He jumped when the phone rang. It wasn't his mobile, but his office line. Or at least it sounded like it. He couldn't be sure, standing so far from his desk. Reluctantly he considered the dark path in front of him that led back to his cubicle. It was clear. No ghosts, no bogeyman. He craned his neck slightly forward to catch a glimpse of Chris's office. The lights were still on.

He cursed silently. That was the one thing he just couldn't account for. He could have sworn he hadn't set foot inside at all, much less turned on the lights. But...perhaps he had done so when he was preoccupied with the moving. "In the zone", so to speak. After all, he did like to know the lie of the land before he proceeded, and the re-location to the VP's office was as significant as any other project he had embarked on in his career. It was only natural

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for him to have gone into the room at some point to get a feel of the place, even if he hadn't consciously thought about it. All too natural.

In slow, mincing steps he started for his cubicle. As soon as the dreaded room came into sight he turned his eyes to meet it head-on, unblinking, almost daring it to do its worst. His steps became strides. The phone was still ringing when he arrived at his cubicle.

"Hello."

"Ah hi, Mr Ang. This is the maintenance office. I tried going up to the sixty-sixth floor but the lift just wouldn't stop there. Might be a technical fault."

"This is ridiculous, man. Can you get it fixed quickly, before I make a complaint?"

"I'm really sorry, sir, but I don't think it's something we can fix immediately. How about you come down to the sixty-fifth floor and try there?"

Jimmy made a cluck of irritation. "Cannot lah. My pass won't work on that floor." The building's security protocol required an access card to be tapped whenever one exited the stairwell to enter the office area. The sixty-fifth floor housed a different company, and his access card wasn't going to work on that floor.

"Don't worry, sir, I'll send one of my guys up to the sixty-fifth floor to open the stairwell door for you. Very sorry for the trouble, sir. But I think that's the only way you can get out for now."

"Seriously," he muttered as he hung up the phone. But it beat going down all sixty-six flights of stairs on foot.

His attention returned to Chris's—no, it was *his* room now—and taking a deep breath he strode inside and turned off the lights. It felt good. It felt normal. He was sane again.

The phone rang. He ran back to his desk and snatched up the receiver. "What now?"

Silence. Then a soft breathing filled his ear.

"Who's this?" he nearly shouted, his voice cracking.

The breathing stopped. "Why, Jimmy. Why."

He threw the receiver down and ran. He barged through the door to the stairwell and was on his way down to the sixty-third floor before he realised he had overshot. "Sixty-fifth floor," he muttered to himself. "He said sixty-fifth floor." Turning around reluctantly, he slowly trudged up the stairs. His heart was still thumping wildly and his breaths were staccato huffs. His shaking hand grasped blindly for the hand rail.

Just what the hell was that? The maintenance manager didn't seem like the kind who would dare play a stupid prank like that, but you never knew with people. That was the only explanation for it. He kicked the wall, more in frustration than fury. It was supposed to have been a day of celebration for him, a day of victory. Instead, he was running around like a dog with its tail between its legs. All

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because that idiot couldn't accept that he had lost, had chosen to kill himself like a freaking loser. Oh, and screw Aaron too, for telling him about it. What was he trying to imply?

Deep breaths, he told himself. Everything was under control. Nobody had seen his panicked outburst—and screw that prankster, whoever he was, he was going to pay for it—nobody saw him as anything other than the up-and-coming VP who was destined for great things. Everything was under control. Everything was okay.

He had reached the sixty-fifth floor landing. A tug at the door—locked. He tapped his access card. Denied, as expected. Where the hell was that guy? He shook the door by its handle, but it didn't budge.

"Hello!" he called. "I'm here!" Nothing. He peered through the narrow window in the door. A dim hallway leading to the lights of the lift lobby—empty. With a sigh he took a step back and folded his arms. *Five minutes*, he told himself. *Five more minutes and I'm going to walk down all the way to the fucking first floor and tear those idiots a new one.*

In the distance he thought he heard the *ding!* of the lift. Finally.

Footsteps echoed towards him from behind the closed door—and suddenly within him he felt a squeeze of primal fear. What if it wasn't the

maintenance guy? He squinted through the window again. He could make out a silhouette, still fairly far off, coming towards him. Something, something was wrong. It looked...*familiar*, somehow. That wave of his hair, that saunter. The shape of his head.

His blood turned to ice. He knew that outline. How many times had that head popped up over the wall of his cubicle, demanding this, demanding that?

Oh god. No—it had to be mere coincidence. Many people with that type of hair, that shape of head. Common, very common. But in the little concrete enclosure that was the stairwell, he felt vulnerable. Nowhere to run but down, all sixty-plus floors of it. And horror of horrors—what if the exit on the ground floor was locked? He would be trapped with...whoever it was. What should he do?

He glanced at his watch—it was nearly 9 p.m. Ridiculous—he was being ridiculous again. He was meeting Mindy at 9.30 p.m., and she didn't like it when he was late. If he wanted any "dessert" after drinks tonight, he was going to have to man the hell up and grow a pair. Think of her, he told himself, think of her in that unbelievably tight dress. Those legs to die for, later to be enveloped in stockings, if he so wished.

He stole one more look at the approaching silhouette, this time a lot more cautiously. Closer up, and with a more collected mind, the sense of

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dread faded. He had been imagining things. But still he couldn't see the person's face. Just one glimpse, that was all he needed. There was a solitary bulb hanging midway in the corridor, and the shadowy figure was now nearly close enough for it to illuminate him.

A single point of light appeared, glinting, growing. The nose. Then the bridge of the nose, the turn of cheek. An eye—

All the roiling fear within nearly boiled over at the moment of revelation—he nearly screamed. It was all right, it was all right. He knew that guy. He had seen him mooching around the maintenance office more than once; that explained why he had found the outline and gait so familiar. Everything had a logical explanation. Everything.

He sighed with relief. He was going to be out of the damned place soon.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and instinctively he turned behind. The last thing he saw, before his slack jaw could even tighten into a scream, was a once-familiar face, mangled and bloodied, and a flash of mustard yellow, daubed with blood red.



"So tell me," said the affable, portly man in his mid-50s, "what do you see?"

The younger man swallowed as he stared at what once had been a human being, as difficult as it was to believe it. "The...injuries look familiar, somehow."

The pathologist guffawed. "That is a major understatement. It looks exactly like the previous one we had."

"You mean the suicide? The one who jumped off some building in the CBD."

"Yep, all suicides from ten storeys up tend to be, shall we say, rather indistinguishable in appearance. But something's a little off here." He grabbed a clipboard from the surgical trolley and flipped through the sheaf of papers. "This one," he said, "was found by the maintenance officer in the stairwell of his office building. The lifts in the building were acting up, so the maintenance person went up to help the deceased. Said he heard a scuffle and a loud thud just before he opened the stairwell door for the deceased. Found the guy on the landing—and promptly fainted at the sight." He paused, his nose crinkling. He didn't like it when the facts didn't add up. He tossed the clipboard aside and returned his gaze to the cadaver before him. "You have to wonder what sort of scuffle would reduce someone to a veritable pulp."

"Maybe he was beaten up very badly. Someone bashed his head in and, um, the rest of his body to boot."

“Doesn’t look like it at all. Not one bit. There would have been tell-tale marks, physical signs. No, this fella looks like he fell out of nowhere and met the landing with the force of a few hundred g’s.” He gave a sigh of resignation. “I’m sorry, Marcus, but I think this is going to be a long night for us.”

The assistant nodded.

“Tell you something though,” the pathologist said, his humour returning. “Don’t think ‘misadventure’ is going to cut it here. The newspapers are going to have a field day when the coroner returns with his verdict.”

The assistant looked at him expectantly.

“Death at the hands of person or persons unknown.”

LIGHTS

Inspector David Chan was about to leave the station when he was forestalled by one of his colleagues.

“Someone’s looking for you.”

“Now?” The past thirty-six hours had been a blur—a particularly nasty murder had found its way to him—and at that moment there was nothing he wanted more than to take a hot shower and climb into bed.

“He says it’s about the Orchid Secondary case.”

Orchid Secondary. Orchid Secondary...

A thick sense of unease quickened in his gut a split-second before his brain thumbed the correct page. The incident about the schoolboy, still unsolved.

“That’s nearly four months ago. Why’s he coming in only now?”

Zach shrugged and turned to go. “Interview Room 1,” he called over his shoulder. “Don’t keep him waiting for long.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. Huang previously worked as legal counsel before leaving the field to pursue other interests, among them fiction writing. *The New Singapore Horror Collection* is his first published work. Whodunnits and psychological thrillers are his guilty pleasures, and his one regret is having devoured all of Agatha Christie's books far too quickly. He can be contacted at huang.sj@yahoo.com.