A is for Arson
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"Fire on Crowley Street," said Detective Howard Johnson, Benji's Bombay Palace. "Get yourself down here pronto."

Ron McDonald made a note of the address, put the phone down and looked at the "home-cooked" meal he was about to start when the call interrupted. "Ironic," he thought as he looked at the charred meat, "I guess I'm not the only one who overcooked dinner."

When he arrived in the area, it was a maze of one ways and he couldn't find the street. He ran into a crowded Chinese restaurant and waved the address at one of the waiters who looked at him blankly.

"No read English," he said.

The manager came over and also looked blankly at Ron's piece of paper. "No read English. We all speak, but no read or write."

Ron was starting to panic. He was new on the job and wanted to make a good impression on Howard Johnson, whose reputation as the Sherlock of his day was legendary.

"Crowley Street?" Ron asked. "Do you know it?"

"Oh, why you not say? I know. It round corner, left, not far," grinned the manager.

As Ron made for the door, his empty stomach grumbled hungrily as tantalizing smells of garlic and spices filled his nostrils. He made a mental note to come back for take out when he'd finished at the fire. The restaurant was full to bursting, always a sign that the food was good.

"Not much left to see," said Howard, as Ron finally joined him at Benji's Bombay Palace. "Seems that the fire started in the pantry and some poor schmoe got trapped inside."

Ron surveyed what was left of the burnt restaurant. "Any I.D. on the dead guy?"

Howard jerked his thumb in the direction of one of the police cars where a young sergeant was talking to a middle aged Indian man. "Ramesh Patel over there says it was his brother inside, but whoever it was is burned beyond recognition. He wouldn't have lasted long in the fumes. There's not a lot left."

"Take Mr. Patel down to the station, McDonald. See what you can find out. The usual... accident, suicide or arson." Then he sighed wearily, "and while you're at it, I'll let his wife know what's happened."

Ramesh was hysterical with grief as Ron offered him coffee, which he declined.

"Sorry we don't have anything stronger," said Ron.

"No. No. I don't drink. Never have. It is against our religion."

"Must have been hard, working in a restaurant," Ron commented. "You know, serving drinks to all your customers."

Ramesh shook his head. "Oh no. We didn't serve drink. Benji was insistent on it. We're a vegetarian and non alcoholic restaurant."

"So what do you think caused the accident?" asked Ron getting down to the matter at hand.

"No accident, not an accident," Ramesh insisted.

"Suicide then?" suggested Ron. "Do you think he might have taken his life?"
Ramesh stared open-mouthed at Ron. “Suicide? Benji? Never! Why would he do that?”

“Never having meat or booze would drive me to it,” thought Ron, as he searched his mind for the usual reasons... heartbreak, divorce, finances. “So tell me,” he asked, “how was business?”

Ramesh shifted uncomfortably. “Business was great. Booming. We are... were... the best in area.”

Dave had his doubts and made a note to check the restaurant’s bank statements. An eating place that didn’t serve booze didn’t sound like a recipe for success in his book.

“What about his wife?”

Ramesh hung his head. “Oh, poor Sushila. Someone must tell her.”

“My boss is telling her now. Where was she at the time of the fire?”

“At her mother’s,” sighed Ramesh. “She will be heartbroken. They were inseparable.”

“OK Ramesh, so if it wasn’t an accident and it wasn’t suicide, then what do you think happened?”

“Arson,” replied Ramesh without hesitation. Then it was Ron’s turn to sigh. This was going to be a long night.

At one o’clock in the morning, Howard and Ron sat in the station and went over the facts.

“So what have we got so far?” asked Howard.

“Something’s not right,” said Ron eagerly to impress the boss with his insight.

“It never is, son. It never is,” Howard sighed. “So what’s bothering you about the case?”

“Ramesh says he thought it was arson,” said Ron.

“Benji’s wife, Sushila, said the same thing,” added Howard, “so I have to say that she didn’t seem too surprised about the fire. Like she’d been expecting it. She told me that some local restaurant called Tip Top Wong was in competition for the business. It’s a Chinese place round the corner.”

“That’s it!” shouted Ron. “That’s what’s not right! Ramesh told me that the Chinese were doing badly because everyone in the neighborhood preferred Benji’s Bombay Palace, but that’s not what I saw. I had to park near Tip Top Wong. The place was packed with people and the food smelled really good.”

“Sushila thinks it was them,” Howard pulled out a letter. “She says this was sent to Benji only a week ago. She says Mr. Wong was always threatening them.”

Ron examined the paper. It was written like a ransom note, the letters clumsily cut out and glued down to make sentences.

It read, “SET OUT \ NOW OR WE’LL MAKE YOU.”

“Ron shook his head. “I’ll be surprised if it’s them. I showed them a piece of paper with Benji’s address on it. None of them could read it. The manager said they all speak English, but don’t read or write it.”

“Right,” said Howard, “that’s exactly what I’d say if I knew I’d just sent a letter like this. You go back there tomorrow and check the facts. Maybe the man you spoke to didn’t read or write English, but don’t jump to conclusions. There’s probably someone there that does. And while you’re at it, speak to a few locals. See if you can find out just how thriving a business Benji’s actually was.”

The next day, Ron sat with Mr. Wong in his Chinese restaurant happily diving into a plate of complimentary spring rolls. They were the best he’d ever tasted.

“So sorry,” said Mr. Wong, “no one here write or read English. One day soon I learn, but so busy, have no time.”

“Ah,” said Ron. “So who does your menu?”

“Local printing shop,” explained Mr. Wong. “He translate for us. He very educated man. He do menus for all restaurants round here.”

“So how was Benji’s doing?” Ron asked Mr. Wong.

“Not too good,” said Mr. Wong. “Locals like to come here better. Patel brothers hate us, but what can I do? Business is business. I think if food go good then room for everybody, but Benji’s food no good.”

Mr. Wong looked up as a disheveled vagrant with matted hair stumbled in.

“You go round back to kitchen,” he ordered the man who shuffled out immediately. “So sorry. Everybody come here for hand out.”

“I don’t blame them,” said Ron, wiping the crumbs from his mouth, “That was truly excellent.”

“After devouring his spring rolls, Ron went round the back to find the vagrant. The man was sitting in the alley eating rice and vegetables from a carton.

“Good food,” said Ron. “The man nodded but didn’t look up. “Did you ever go to that Indian place for food?”

“You know, Benji’s Bombay Palace?”

The man shook his head. “Not any more. Used to, but they didn’t like us hanging around.”

“Us?” questioned Ron. Who do you mean by us?”

“Me and my friend, Arby,” said the man. “The Patel’s used to give us food, but lately turned us away. They threw Arby out last week. He had a big fight with the owner.”

“What was his beef with Arby?”

“He said Arby offended the customers,” the man laughed. “Arby didn’t like that. We got our pride. Anyway, what customers? They never had any.”

“So this Arby guy,” asked Ron, “where can I find him?”

The man shrugged. “Dunno. Haven’t seen him for a few days. He’s probably underneath a cardboard box sleeping it off somewhere.”

“How will I know him?”

“You can’t miss Arby. Dark ponytail, tattoos up his arms and a couple of nose rings.”

Later that afternoon, Howard and Ron conferred over coffee. “What have you got?” asked Howard.

Ron glanced at his notes. “Ramesh says the business was doing well. The locals say different. Ramesh and Sushila say they think the threatening letter was written by the Chinese. Doubtful, unless Mr. Wong’s lying. By all accounts, Benji’s was no threat to Tip Top Wong. The business there is thriving.”

“Anything else?” asked Howard.

“We’ve established that there was a fight last week between Benji and a vagrant named Arby.”

“Have you spoken to him?”

“He’s disappeared,” answered Ron. “Apparently the Patel’s were getting a bit fed up with him hanging around always wanting hand outs. Also, he has a reputation for getting aggressive when he’s had a drink and was last seen threatening the Patel’s. I’ve checked all his haunts, but no one’s seen him for a few days.”

“Do you think he could have set fire to the restaurant and took off?”

“I’m not sure,” said Ron.

Howard thought for a moment. “Here’s what we have to do. First, we have to get a clear picture on what was going on at Benji’s before the fire. See if you can put a few pieces together. Second, we go back to the station. Forensics has taken anything they could find in the remains of the pantry. It’s all on my desk. I’m sure there’s something there that will shed some more light on the case.”
INSTRUCTIONS FOR DETECTIVES:

1) Complete the two puzzles, one of which shows the scene at the restaurant before the fire and the other, the exhibits on Detective Howard Johnson's desk.

2) Check the puzzles for the clues to solve the mystery.

3) Hold the crime solution up to a mirror to read the answer to the mystery.

THE SOLUTION:

The pieces were beginning to fit together like a jigsaw. Rod and Greg were out for lunch at the partner's bank. The stories seemed to be many money coming in from the restaurant. Horgan had been heard by someone near the fire. His story is kind of thin, but we've learned an important thing about David's partner, the man who was seen leaving the scene at 100th Street. Horgan is a known carnival man, and we've learned that he was at the scene.

"Seems to me you could have a carnival there," said Horgan. "I feel so very happy, says Horgan."

"What happened?" asked Rod. "Nothing much, says Horgan."

"But why are you here?" asked Rod. "Nothing much, says Horgan."

"Just so you know, Rod," said Horgan, "I feel so very happy, says Horgan."

"I'm just here to tell you," said Horgan. "I feel so very happy, says Horgan."

"But why are you here?" asked Rod. "Nothing much, says Horgan."

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