

# WHO MURDERED MRP ?

## AN INDUSTRIAL MYSTERY

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The events are TRUE. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

### Episode Three: The Clue of the Long Time Ago Order

**The Case So Far:** Hard boiled private eye Conrad Sultant is hot on the trail of the MRP Killer that stalks the corridors of the ACME Widget Co. Already, he's uncovered a case of blatantly *Borrowed Capacity* and exposed an instance of secret Capacity Smoothing. Now, we find him working late on...

### The Clue of the Long Time Ago Order

The graveyard shift on a data stakeout is never fun. My feet were sweating puddles into my crepe-soled brothel creepers. The ash tray I had super glued to the dash of my car was on borrowed capacity. A dense, unseasonable mist obscured the smoking chimneys of the ACME Widget Company. The dull thud of machinery bored its way into my throbbing cranium. Between the night, the fog, and my own nicotine-fed efforts to stay awake, I just about missed Mickey's left foot as he stepped across midnight into tomorrow.

I'd been chasing red herrings long enough. I'd already spent a week of midnights with a fag in one hand and a mouse in the other, cruising the information super highway in search of the data I needed to catch the MRP killer. All I'd come up with was the E-mail address of a Moscow *dacha*, the design specs for a Trident submarine and an alphabetical listing of *Guardian* journalists. Not only was I getting nowhere, I couldn't pay my phone bill. If I was going to nail the MRP Killer, it was time for action.

That's exactly what I'd told the MD that very afternoon, when I asked for permission to burglarise his engineering department. He hadn't been convinced, at first ...

"Why, Mr. Sultant, must you resort to such blatantly criminal activity, in order to determine who killed Mr. P. Body and simultaneously murdered our MRP system," was his obvious question.

"I can't blame you for being sceptical," I said. "But it's the only way. I've been in this business for thirty years and I've been on *this* case for two issues now. Aside from flat feet, what have I got? P. Body is filed away in the morgue and your MRP system has gasped its last, futile breath. OK, so I've got Mr. Manu Facturing nailed to rights in a clear-cut case of *Borrowed Capacity* and Mr. Prod Uction facing a rap for *Capacity Smoothing*. So what? My hunch is there's more to this case than meets the proverbial eye. If I'm going to prove it, I'll need hard evidence. To get it, I need access to Acme's MRP Database. Somewhere in that jungle of facts and figures, our MRP killer has left his fatal clue! And remember ..." I gestured towards the buildings, chimneys and loading bays outside the Boardroom window - "... the killer is still out there - somewhere. Do you want him to strike again?"

The MD gave me a look like I was from Inland Revenue and I'd asked for his expense receipts. I had him convinced. "You have my full co-operation, Mr. Sultant," he assured me. "I want this madman brought to book and my MRP back on track. Now." He wasn't kidding.

Neither was I. So, with the moon lurking somewhere behind the swirling fog of night, I slipped past the chain-link perimeter fence into ACME's main production building. Inside, the factory floor was ablaze with light and a buzz with activity. It was like Regent Street at Christmas. Forklifts zipped between machines and loading docks. Men in overalls

scampered everywhere, like worker bees fighting a honey famine. I remembered de-briefing Bond after that gold caper in '64. Only these workers weren't turning gold into Rolls-Royces. They were turning Bills of Material into the widgets that would bring us out of recession.

From the factory floor I found the connecting doors into ACME's administration offices. In reception a bored bozo from Securigroup was manning a bank of closed circuit monitors. The Pink Panther was on every channel.

I crept past him along the quiet, carpeted corridors. Before long, I found the door I wanted. The brass plaque said: 'B. Eng. Master Engineer.' I tilted my torch to examine the chrome door hardware and got out the break and enter tool the MD had given me - a micro-chip credit card that would unlock the Master's Lair. I could hear the guard on patrol, whistling a Henry Mancini tune as he padded his way in that direction. He was getting closer. I pushed the entry card into the little slot by the door knob. The door swung open and I was in.

I looked around the darkened room. Right away, I sensed something was missing. Where were the filing cabinets? Where was the data? All I saw was a big black desk. On it was a shimmering white computer. What kind of engineer could be in charge of this pristine, plastic domain?

'The Master,' the MD had called him. But just what kind of Master, I was yet to find out. My gaze followed my torch as I inspected The Master's Lair. The walls were covered with awards and certificates of outstanding achievement from every sphere of endeavour. An MBA in Manufacturing Management from Warwick University. A First in Electronic Engineering from Brunel University. Trophies and shields for everything from cricket to conkers. This guy was a superstar at everything he did. I thought of other so called master criminals I'd encountered. Men with ice water in their veins and Intel inside. With a shudder I reached for the power button and fired up The Master's computer.

'User Number' flashed onto the screen. I checked the confidential crib sheet the MD had given me and typed in some digits. 'Password' came up. I typed from the crib sheet and the machine came to life. I found the 'Reports Menu' and clicked it into action. A maze of menus and sub-menus filled the screen. Where should I start? I didn't have a clue.

I clicked without purpose, scattering random files across the video desk top. Jeeze, but this thing was fast. 'Recommendation For New Purchase Orders?' No. 'Capacity For Work Centres AA to AB?' No. 'Purchase Order Report By Supplier?' Maybe. Open: 'Summary Info'. Nothing. I needed evidence, dammit. Something that would send this killer up the river where he belonged. I loosened my collar and went instinctively for my smokes, but the last one was lying lifeless in the ashtray of my car. Never mind. I had to find that one, irrefutable clue. But where was it? What file was it in?

Click. Negative. Click. Negative. Click, click, and click again. The night wore on. Hours passed. Mickey's feet ran laps round my watch face. I had to be out of there soon. I forged on. Hey, what was that file? A 'Short Lead Time Order Report' ... Hmmm. What date? The very day Mr. P. Body was found stiffed out by a pallet of widgets. Mere co-incidence? I didn't think so. I clicked it open.

The file was multi-layered labyrinth of dates and digits. I tried to concentrate. But the numbers were all running into each other on the screen. No, this couldn't be it, I thought.

It's just another poxy order for another 1,000 widgets. 'Start Date: 20/08/88' ... 'Finish Date: 23/10/90' ... What? An Elapsed Time of 1,000 days to make 1,000 widgets?

With the clang of a gallows doors, the penny dropped. This was the needle in the haystack I'd been looking for and it stuck out like a sore bleedin' thumb. The smile on my face said, 'Gotcha!' It was the kind of smile I didn't normally get after spending the night with a computer. I fumbled through the empty fag packets in my pocket, found a spare diskette and whacked it into to the A drive. I clicked 'Copy Disk,' watched the drive monitor flash twice and I was out of there. The first red rays of morning were slicing through the fog.

I was in the Boardroom drinking coffee when the MD arrived.

"You look terrible, Mr. Sultant. Why the silly grin," he remarked. "Have you been drinking?"

I muttered something about the wagon I'd been riding on and poured another cuppa java. The MD was a busy man. He got right to the point.

"The MRP Killer, Mr. Sultant. Have you made a conclusive identification? Have you obtained the evidence you need to arrest this evil culprit?"

"Maybe," I said, sliding the diskette across the mahogany of the board room table. "A Short Lead Time Order Report that I posted from The Master's PC. Tell me. How long has your present MRP system been up and running?"

"The present system was installed only a week ago by The Master Engineer. However, it replaced an older system which The Master had wisely decided was obsolete for our purposes."

The gallows door of reason clanged once again. "I suspected as much. Now, how long does it take to make a widget?"

The MD looked about as confident in my question line as I was in my own chances of riding the water wagon to the finish line. "An unusual question, Mr. Sultant. But, barring any complications, machine capacity for widget manufacture is one hour per unit."

"Not one day per unit," I clarified. "Not 1,000 days to make 1,000 widgets?"

"Certainly not," scoffed the MD. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I think it's time to meet The Master," I said. "Let's go."

When we got to his office, B. Eng, The Master himself, was hanging yet another meritorious award on his wall. "For Outstanding Achievement and Dedicated Service to BPICS," it said. The MD made the introductions and the Master made the first off-handed gambit.

"It's a relief to know you're on the case, Mr. Sultant," he said glibly. "Needless to say, we'll all miss Mr. P. Body. And none of us feel safe while his killer is still at large. What can I do to further your enquiries?" I'd never seen a cucumber quite so cool.

"Not much. Just answer a few questions and open a few files," I replied, indicating his PC. Then I took him down the same path I'd followed the night before, straight to the Short Lead Time Orders File.

"Did it really take 1,000 days to complete this order?" I asked him.

"Well, er, no," replied the Master. Did I detect a quaver in his voice, a crack in his otherwise impenetrable defences? "This must be a production error. Perhaps Mr. Prod Uction mis-typed the data when confirming the order? Or maybe the Foreman altered the standard hours to improve the department's bonus?"

I turned the quartz-halogen desk lamp so it shone directly on my quarry. He blinked into its penetrating glare as I asked my next question. "I already know that on the day Mr. P. Body was killed you reviewed the progress of installation of

the new MRP system. But, according to Personnel's records there were no data entry clerks assigned to your department during the installation period. How do you explain such a quick MRP installation with so few staff to key in the entries?"

There was only one answer to that one and The Master knew it. "Personnel was not involved because I installed the new MRP system myself by initiating a System Transfer of Key Databases."

"A System Transfer?" The MD was confused. "Doesn't that rely entirely upon the total accuracy of all the data held by the old MRP system? And its compatibility with the new system? What if something - say something seemingly insignificant like a unit of measurement or standard time reference, is meant to be different in the new system? The system transfer of data wouldn't take that into account. The base data used to drive the new MRP system would be utter rubbish!"

"Which is exactly what this Short Lead Time Order Report is telling us," I said. The expression on the Master's face said it all. This was the smoking gun I'd been looking for. He was on the ropes and down for the count. But why had The Master - the very personification of the workaholic success story, done it?

"I didn't have any choice," he pleaded. "I was way behind installing the new MRP system. There was no time for the manual entry of data. I had to meet my deadline. If I didn't, I could see plenty of young engineering graduates out there who could."

He gestured at his walls of citations. "In today's market, all of this past productivity means nothing. It's what you do today that counts. So, to meet my deadline, I ran a system transfer. My Bills of Material records were accurate. I thought it was low-risk. To speed it up further, I transferred all the standard times and units of measure."

"And that was the big mistake. The bloody fingerprint that got me thinking," I said. "In the old MRP system it took one hour of real time to make a widget. So the old system used hours as its unit of time. But in the new system, an hour 'aint an hour. It's 1/24th of a day. So if you take the time to work it out, the new system should have shown this order as 1,000 widgets produced at a rate of 1/24 of an hour per widget. That's 1,000 widgets divided by 24 hours." Even a mathematical flat-foot like me knew that wasn't going to work out to 1,000 days. I checked my notes. "That's 41.66 days of machine time to produce 1,000 widgets."

"Not 1,000 days at all," said the MD. "Which means this is not a Short Lead Time Order, as the report says it is."

"Exactamundo. The way I see it, data's a life-blood. It flows round the system and if it's not pure... "

"If it's not accurate!" injected the MD.

"... the system is as dead as poor 'ol P. Body. When The Master ran his transfusion of tainted blood, MRP didn't stand a chance."

Faced with the evidence, The Master'd been reduced to a grey shell of a man. A man without blood himself. A *Spitting Image* of his former, perfect self. The MD seemed satisfied with the analogy. "Surely it would have been more cost effective to bring in staff to properly manage the data transfer in the first place?"

"Certainly," I thought to myself. But I knew if they'd done that, MRP would be alive today and I'd be out of a job. As it was, I still had a lotta work to do. There was that Overdue Works Order Report that I'd seen in the Master's system. Could there really be 3,200 orders overdue? Who knows what secrets they held, what new suspects they'd reveal and what evil lurks in the minds of men?

Next Episode:

"THE CLUE OF THE LONG OVERDUE ORDER"