

Schrödinger's mousetrap

Part 9: Out in the cold.

Peter Tuthill

The rain spattered on the glass panes of the conference-hall foyer as Lister shuffled through the last pages of the partially comprehensible report from forensics. He cast a withering glance at the expensive low-fat macchiato, untouched on the table by his elbow. On another day, he might have taken up his personal crusade for normal coffee, available to those with no fluency in Italian. The festive curly star that the girl had cleverly made in the foam on top twinkled back, taunting him.

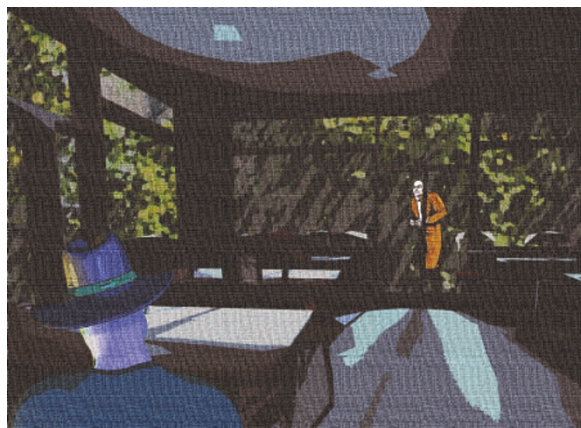
In a perverse corner of his mind, he was delighted as the rain strengthened, engorging the branching braids of water on the window. Somehow it never felt right conducting a murder investigation on a sunny day, and he revelled in today's sympathetic backdrop. For murder it clearly was, any cobwebs of doubt now dispelled by the report in front of him.

He let the new information sink in: Rufus Jaeger died with his stomach laced with a cocktail of anaesthetics and paralytics. Was the murderer making absurdly sure, or was this another tangent, leading into the twisted corridors of academic intrigue?

With a sigh, Lister admitted defeat in the glaring match with his macchiato and, taking a tentative sip, pulled a face before suddenly lowering the cup. Outside the double revolving glass doors was Wilfred de Bruijn, ten minutes early for his interview. Recognizable more by gait than appearance, he moved like a small determined bear, bent forward and seemingly oblivious to the world around him. With increasing puzzlement, Lister watched de Bruijn pass the doors, hunch his coat against the rain, and skirt round the building, entering instead through an unnoticed side-door after an awkward struggle with its latch. As he came past the cafe tables, shaking raindrops from his wild hair and muttering to himself, Lister remarked dryly: "Quite a performance, Dr de Bruijn, but tell me, who are you so keen to keep ignorant of your presence here today?"

Startled suddenly from his internal world, de Bruijn stammered: "Prof ... er ... Inspector Lister, I was just coming to the interview. I hope I am not late."

At Lister's continued quizzical look, colour rapidly rose from his neck to his ears, and he continued. "You mean the ... er ... door? Well, I have nothing to hide and am not avoiding anyone." Here the squirming discomfort became almost palpable. "I ... er ... never go



through revolving doors. Ask anyone from the lab. I just don't like them."

As they made their way to the room commandeered by the police, Lister mused on the contradictions that made up the man beside him, with his intense coal-black eyes framed by thick eyebrows like animated hairy caterpillars. On one hand, this was by all accounts a man of fierce intellect, able to revel in arcane quantum physics. Yet on the other, a man too superstitious to walk through a revolving door. Lister wondered if his mind might be likened to those quantum states he had been reading about after his interview with Dubois. Depending on context, de Bruijn's mind was in an irrational or rational state. Lister drained his coffee, clearing his head of metaphysics — somebody should have warned him about spending too much time among physicists.

The interview was more a stream-of-consciousness diatribe and it was all Lister could do to channel the rant. The traces of South African were almost polished away under a studied BBC accent, but the bright kid who'd clawed his way out from small-town Transvaal was still there, trapped in the cage of his own ambition and raging against a world where intellectual ability was neither necessary nor sufficient to make it to the top.

"Rufus was a scientific parasite, Inspector Lister, a showman, politician and front-man, but he never had an original physical insight in the years I spent working for him. And the minions who put in all the ideas and work just got walked on. Last month, accepting €100,000 prize money for an experiment designed by me that he barely even understood, the use of the scientific royal 'We' in

his speech was the only acknowledgement anyone else got. Well, except..."

"Except?" prompted Lister.

"That damn Ludmilla princess. She's gorgeous and she knows it. I have five times her publications, but I get recognized with 'Ahh — you're that guy who works with Ludmilla!' We may know maths, Inspector Lister, but we are still apes."

"And you and Ludmilla..."

De Bruijn gave a bitter laugh. "No, Inspector, you are in a blind alley there. I think Ludmilla knows to bestow her favours where she stands to gain the most." He glanced pointedly at Jaeger's file on the table. "Although I tried warning her to keep a professional distance."

"Did she ever reply?" Lister asked casually. De Bruijn shook his head.

"Witnesses report an altercation — can you clarify what you were doing during the coffee break?"

"I first ran into that incompetent upstart Jirong Feng, who was in my face about something. Then Nigel Lorimer said he urgently needed to talk to me. But if you must know, I had been meaning to speak to Rufus the whole day. That was my damn mousetrap — well, except for the stupid cheese and fairy-lights. And guess who was sitting back in row 7? Everyone else was up on stage, even that brain-dead yes-man Trotman who nearly burned the lab down with the laser last year. And what the hell are we doing with an industrial laser able to punch holes in steel? So after I got rid of Nigel I confronted Rufus, who was talking to Ludmilla. He dismissed me with his typical arrogance: 'Run along, Wilfred, if I want your opinion I will ask. Don't go getting ideas above yourself.' And he turned his back. After that, I needed a long walk outside to calm down."

Lister drifted down to the foyer, his mind whirling with possibilities. Overhearing animated banter on whether the appropriate collective noun for physics professors should be 'a guffaw', he resisted the urge to chip in with 'an asylum'.

Suddenly, a light came into his eyes as the pieces fell into place. Lister reached for his mobile, he had two important calls to make. "Lister here. Get me forensics."

To be continued...

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Who do you think killed Rufus Jaeger? Catch up on all the evidence and vote for your suspect at www.nature.com/news/mousetrap