

Schrödinger's mousetrap

Part 8: The outcast.

Jack Cohen

Lister sat quietly, waiting for Jirong Feng's interview. He felt somewhat awed by what he had seen of the oriental; he looked to Lister's Western eyes about 22, but he was probably older. Everyone had said how bright he was, with the apparently erratic approach of the truly original thinker. Could he have set up this convoluted crime? Feng came quietly into the room and stood by the interview chair. He turned it around in a quick, graceful movement and sat with his arms on the chair-back, a definite twinkle in his eyes as they met Lister's. Lister smiled, too.

"I had nothing to do with it," Feng said, "at least directly. And I feel that it would be disloyal to some of my friends, my benefactors, simply to spill everything I know about them to you. But I'll respond to your questions as honestly as I can, I want to see this cleared up like we all do. Or all but one, I suppose." And he twinkled again. "Rufus I won't miss. But I've not been carrying a grudge. Everything has worked out so well for me now I've left that gang."

"The University of Wentbridge gave you a black mark, though, didn't they?" Lister asked. "I'd have thought you would feel that Professor Jaeger could have supported you better..."

"Sure he could, but that was not his style: he had to be seen to be doing the correct thing. He often fell on to his back in an attempt not to lean too far forward, as we say in Korea. He sacrificed me to his reputation; but he would have justified that to himself with consideration of all the future postdocs he could help with his reputation intact."

"Is it relevant to my questioning here, what went wrong?" Lister asked. "Is there someone, perhaps Professor Jaeger himself, who knows something about those experimental results that you want to keep secret?"

"No, absolutely not," said Feng quietly. "I'll give you my notebooks of the time, and you'll see what happened. Some measurements were confused as they accumulated in the spectrometer; I took them for mine but they were someone else's. I made



up a great theory assuming they were mine. It's old history now, it was a silly business, all my fault really. But unlike some bosses, unlike Petra — that's Professor Pruszczyński, my present boss — Rufus never forgave anything. Petra says she forgives 10%, it makes for an easier life, and I think I'll adopt that practice. My PhD work has really taken off, you know... much better now."

Lister leaned forward. "Can I ask you why it is that your boss is so spiky — was so spiky — towards Professor Jaeger? Was it just professional antipathy, or was there a deeper reason?"

"Come on," said Feng, "there can't be a deeper reason for Petra. It's not 'just' professionalism, it's scientific integrity; that's the most important thing in the world for my boss..."

"So very important... Mmmm. Now it was Ludmilla Shlomiuka who recommended you to your new boss some time after you were sent away by Jaeger, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, and I want to tell you how grateful I am to her. She has such big troubles in her life, but she likes everybody, is helpful to everybody — she

wrote to Petra recommending me, but she could have lost her job if Rufus had found out."

"And have you kept up your acquaintance with Jaeger's group?" Lister asked.

Feng stared at him for a moment, then

said: "I don't have any silly loyalty to Rufus's lot as a research group. Veronique Dubois, who regularly visits my boss, has been buying me drinks, if you know what I mean, and I haven't been holding back any of the technical stuff I learned as Rufus's student. But most of it's public anyway, they didn't invent much there. Working for Petra is much more interesting. There's a dozen tricks that we've developed that Rufus would've given his eye-teeth for, as you people say.

"But yes, I am occasionally in contact with Ludmilla... I'm very grateful to her and I try to be as helpful as I can now and then as she is going through a difficult time with her husband Dmitri.

"Oh, yes, you wouldn't know. He was one of the early implant cases, fetal nervous

tissue implanted to cure his Parkinson's, they do it properly now, but then... Anyway, his moods are all over the place, he has gone through very violent spells, had to be taken in to the hospital by the police sometimes. She's fairly successful at holding him stable now, but it hasn't been easy. Poor Ludmilla!"

Feng was beginning to tell Lister about his present research with negadex and other materials, and the detective's mind wandered for a moment as he lost touch with the esoteric physics. Feng suddenly realized he'd lost his audience. "Sorry about that," he said. "I get carried away. Is there anything else I can tell you about?"

"Where were you during the coffee break?"

"I had met a couple of women from my old university department in Korea, come over here to do research. I'm afraid that my mind was not on the physics at all, but on how I could get to see more of them. We were interrupted by Wilfred de Bruijn, who shouted at me a bit about my questions to him yesterday after his talk. Then Nigel Lorimer came and took him away. My women friends were not impressed. Do you want their address? They have nothing to do with this affair, I promise you."

To be continued...

Jack Cohen is an author and reproductive biologist based in Newent, Gloucestershire, UK.

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

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