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Mortal Taste

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“And the other thing I meant to tell you,” said Clarissa Cobwebs, “is that the real way to understand pumpkins is through homotopy theory.”

Lem McLaughlin looked at her admiringly. They were seated in her comfortable kitchen on a Saturday morning chopping vegetables. Baskets and basketsful stood on the floor around them, newly picked and still wet with dew from her garden—eggplants, squashes, a couple of enormous pumpkins—all waiting to be done. The two had been slicing and dicing for an hour already, though, and the room was full of steam, the warm sweet scent of stewing pumpkins, and the cozy plopping noises of boiling mash and rattling pot lids.

The bright California sunshine came pouring in the windows over Clarissa’s face as she sat there talking and chopping away. As usual, Lem had long lost the thread of the argument, and was content to sit there and let the warm flow of her voice wash over him. She seldom stopped talking, and it was an astonishing, multihued and never-ending stream of esoteric information. Who else could have combined a passion for low-dimensional topology with a passion for squash? Zucchini, butternuts, acorns, yellows, crooknecks, pumpkins, and gourds, warm, plump, and ripe, they came welling endlessly from the cornucopia of her garden. Seed catalogs with unbelievable pictures and promises fantastic as El Dorado of giant spotted hybrid spaghetti squashes or white albino eggplants lay scattered in her front room in between her latest copies of the *Journal of the American Mathematical Society*; new recipes for eggplant Parmesan were stuffed together with reprints of her own topology papers in her recipe box. In winter she drove up to run an advanced graduate seminar in the Berkeley mathematics department; in summer she drove up and down the coast selling her pies and vegetables to the four-star restaurants.

How Lem himself was ever lucky enough to fit into her scheme of things was not entirely clear to him, and he was content to remain gratefully ignorant. An amateur interest in combinatorics, and a California real estate license that allowed the two of them to poke around inside multimillion-dollar houses, an ability sometimes useful in Clarissa’s own hobby of detective work, were the only tangible credentials he could offer. He did all he could to help her spade her pumpkin patch, and thanked his lucky stars to know her.

He noticed she had stopped talking. “Don’t you think so too?” she asked again.

He grinned. “I was looking at you and forgot to listen to what you were saying,” he said.

She looked at him with her big blue eyes. They were as deep as the sea and could look straight through anything—an intricate mathematical theorem, a lying witness, or a friend so caught up in the way a strand of her hair dangled as she bent over her work that he could lose track of her words. “I know exactly what you’re thinking about,” she said, “and you have to wait till tonight. Our reservation for eggplant Parmesan at the Thai-American Restaurant is at 4 p.m., I promised to bring them twenty pies, and it’s very important that we not be late.”

They sliced pumpkin.

“Squash is so interesting,” said Clarissa, “it’s even in Shakespeare. ‘This squash, this gentleman,’ the king calls his little boy in *The Winter’s Tale*. You’d wonder if it was winter squash. Actually it wasn’t even our kind of squash. Ours came from America, an Indian word. But there’s such a deep human need for the word and the vegetable that they’ve invented it twice.”

Her busy hands flew over her chopping board. Lem tried to watch her eyes and his knife at the same time.

“It goes back to what I was telling you about the topology of the sphere,” she said. “You have solid spheres and hollow spheres, they look absolutely the same from the outside, but they’re fundamentally different. Take one point out of the hollow one and it collapses like a punctured soap bubble, it’s homotopically contractible to a single point. And nature obligingly provides us two kinds of squash to match, solid summer squashes and hollow pumpkins. Mathematics shows us what can be done, and then nature does it for us, all in perfect harmony.”

The thought of the beautiful harmony of Clarissa’s spheres was so fascinating that Lem forgot to watch what he was doing and sliced into his thumb. Clarissa’s knives (which had on occasion proved unexpectedly useful in her amateur detective work) were honed so razor sharp that one could cut quite deep almost without feeling it, until the blood came welling up onto the table. “You klutz,” laughed Clarissa, “don’t bleed all over the pumpkins,” and she ran to get a bandage.

“My helper,” she said after his finger was properly laced up in gauze and she had kissed him to make it stop hurting. “I think Lem is short for lemma, a subordinate result used to help prove the main mathematical theorem.”

Lem contemplated his role as a lemma in the deep and beautiful mathematical theorem of Clarissa’s life. “Fair enough,” he said. “But it’s also short for *leman*, a medieval lover.”

“I like that too,” said Clarissa.

“Just so you don’t think lemon, a bad used car,” said Lem.

“Of course not,” she laughed. “Oh, did we put the lemon in the pumpkin yet?” And so they added the lemon juice and lemon peel, the brown sugar, the chopped nuts and dates, the cinnamon and the nutmeg which, when whipped all together with some cream or yogurt made Clarissa’s pumpkin pies into airy sunshine-colored dreams utterly unlike the ugly logy brown lumps that usually bore that name.

“We’re three-quarters done,” said Clarissa, “and I don’t want you trying to use both hands and bleeding into my food here. You sit and stir the pots so they don’t burn at the bottom, and I’ll tell you what we’ll be doing this afternoon at the Thai-American Restaurant. You see, I think I’ve solved the Coconut Murders, and this is going to wrap up the case.”

Lem settled himself down to listen and stir, trying to avoid scalding his uninjured hand in the steam. Clarissa’s deep mathematical insight had solved a number of baffling cases over the years, and he was eager to hear about this latest success. “What were the Coconut Murders?” he asked.

“Surely you’ve heard about them,” she replied. “In the past six months, over a dozen people were found murdered here along the coast, with coconuts in their mouths.”

“Coconuts?” asked Lem without understanding.

“Coconuts,” she replied. “Death by coconut. Brutal and deadly. You can imagine how it hurts going in: the lips gradually shredded off, the face stretched out and torn, teeth broken in, the jaw slowly dislocated.”

“And then...?”

“And then it’s all the way in, and nothing on earth can pull it out again. There’s no room for air to get around it, and the person slowly chokes or suffocates or drowns in his own blood. It’s cheap—how much does a coconut cost, a few dollars? And it’s quiet—the victim can’t scream, can’t get a single sound out. Cheap, quiet, brutal, and deadly.”

“How horrible,” said Lem.

“The first body was found beside the road, and then the next one on the rocks by the beach, and then a third in a dumpster behind a shopping mall. At first the police thought it was one of those crazy California psychopaths, and then they thought it was a new cult, and then there were more and more, one practically every week, and they didn’t know what to think. Finally they contacted me and asked if I could find any pattern.” Clarissa’s eyes took on a look of deep and troubled compassion as she recalled the scene.

“Fortunately I was able to help them. As I told you with the hollow sphere, if you can find a single point to break into a problem then its whole structure

changes: it's homotopically equivalent to a lower dimensional problem, and with work you can contract it to something manageable."

"The topology of homicide detection," said Lem, remembering finally again to scrape the cooking pot.

"The first thing I recognized," said Clarissa, "was that this wasn't a new form of murder at all, but a very old one. I can't imagine why the police missed that, especially around here, why they didn't have anyone else familiar with Asian cultures who would remember it. Maybe I have an advantage from my work. Mathematicians go to meetings all over the world, because a mathematician is at home wherever there are other mathematicians. A farmer or cook also always has something in common with other farmers and cooks. So you get to talking, and you pick up all sorts of bits and pieces about other cultures. Coconuts were actually the standard method of execution in ancient Thailand, or Siam as it used to be called. Or, rather, it was one of the two standard methods. A high-class criminal, a nobleman, had the privilege to be crushed to death by the step of a trained elephant. But a commoner had no such mercy, he had to eat a coconut."

"So the murderer was from Thailand," said Lem.

"Well, it blew the case open, at least," said Clarissa, "and they knew to start looking at that angle. Thailand and crime put together means opium and drug smuggling, and once they checked that out they found that yes, most of the victims were somehow connected to the business, in a low level way, just starting, or trying to get in, or perhaps rivals to someone who was in. The police were enormously relieved that it wasn't a madman, just 'normal' criminal business dealings, and they thanked me and said they would take it from there."

"New heights in hypercompetitive Eastern business," remarked Lem, stirring the pumpkin mash.

"Well, as I said, the method was quick, cheap, and brutal, and the ancient tradition might make it specially terrifying to potential rivals from that culture. So yes, it was a good business technique, at least for people in a business with murder among its techniques."

Clarissa chopped into the last big pumpkin with special force, as though it were one of the murderous evildoers. "Unfortunately the case turned out to be more complicated than the police thought. The drug trade from Southeast Asia to California is big and widespread, and they couldn't watch it all. The leads they thought they had all dried up, and the murders kept happening with distressing steadiness, all over the place. It wasn't a little turf war by one gruesomely flamboyant eccentric, but something much more dangerous. Someone very big, very central, very cold-bloodedly methodical, was dominat-

ing much of southern California by systematic ruthless horror. Last week the police called me again for help, and this time I vowed I wouldn't stop before I had run the murderer to earth."

"Lem, don't let the pumpkin burn!" Clarissa interrupted herself. "It's our friends at the Thai-American, and it's very important today. I want to give them our best."

"Sorry," said Lem, who had forgotten to stir in his excitement. He stirred repentantly and vigorously for a few minutes until the bottoms of all the pots were clear again.

"So last week I went in and had a look at the murder weapon. The police had never thought to look, you can't do ballistic tests on a coconut. The pathologist cut the coconut out of the tortured face of the corpse and handed it to me, and I stood there and looked at it," said Clarissa. Her eyes flamed with blue light that seemed it could penetrate stone, and her hands moved in a blur cutting the pumpkin. "I have always loved coconuts," she said. "One of the deepest theorems in topology, on the orientability of vector fields, can be expressed simply by saying that it is impossible to comb the hair smoothly all the way around a coconut."

Lem struggled to follow her words.

"The beauty of every tropical island in the world is its coconut palms," she said. "The palms exist because of the magnificent cleverness of nature, to invent coconuts that can float across a hundred miles of salt ocean and stay alive to seed a desert island. And here such a coconut was used for murder." She shuddered involuntarily.

"I stood there in the morgue and shook the coconut," she recalled. "It was quite fresh, and I could hear the milk sloshing freely inside it. The first thing any one of us knows of life or warmth or love is a mouthful of milk from our mother's breast," she said. "And here this person had died with his mouth torn open and holding a mouthful of sweet warm coconut milk he could never reach. How monstrous evil can be!"

"I looked at the coconut," she said, "and I saw more deeply than the police had. Perhaps it was because I had more experience with vegetables than they; perhaps because I had less experience with murder, and was more profoundly moved, and thought to look where they had not. But I saw this was no ordinary coconut. It was a magnificent specimen, perfectly round and unblemished. Such coconuts are quite rare, and they seldom come to market, because they are reserved for the restaurant trade."

"My insight was quickly confirmed by the police examiners who could check the other cases without feeling the pain I did," she said. "After that, it was straightforward."

“So the murderer was someone from Thailand involved in the restaurant business,” said Lem. “And in two hours we have reservations at the Thai-American Restaurant.”

“Lem,” exclaimed Clarissa, “you may yet become a topologist!”

A sudden thought struck him. “It’s not the Wattanapanits, is it?”

“Of course not,” she said. “They’re our dear friends. But they have no idea what horror is going on in their kitchen.”

She stood up and shoveled the last of the diced pumpkin into the pot. “Be a dear and pack a bushel of vegetables for the Wattanapanits,” she said. “But give them only the best. And hurry, we have to leave in an hour and I’ll need most of that to do insurance work on my computer.”

“Insurance work?” asked Lem. But Clarissa had run off already.



An hour later they were tearing down Highway 1 on their way to the restaurant. In one side of the back seat was the bushel of vegetables Lem had packed, each fresh and perfect, including colorful squashes—yellow, green, tan, one huge rock-like grey—some pumpkins, and a dully gleaming black eggplant. At the other side were stacked the twenty pumpkin pies that Clarissa had filled in a last five-minute swirl of activity. She had changed into a stunning short sky-blue strapless dinner dress that set off her neck, arms, and shoulders, and complemented the blue blaze of her eyes.

“Watch the curves, Lem,” she called above the rush of the air from the windows of the car.

“I am,” he replied.

“On the road, Lem,” she said.

“Oh, those,” he said.

They drove on for awhile, with the pink fire of roadside iceplant on one side, the thunder of the Pacific surf on the other. The magnificence of the scenery was enough to make one forget for a moment that there were people in the landscape too, people who lived, and worked, and bustled about, and occasionally killed each other.

“So who is the murderer?” asked Lem finally.

“I can’t say absolutely yet,” answered Clarissa. “I think I’ll have the final step of the proof within the next hour. But the hypothesis to be proved is that it’s Mr. Maleenon.”

“The Wattanapanits’ chef,” said Lem.

“Yes,” she replied. “I doubt he did the killing, but he’s the mastermind.”

He was always such a genius in the kitchen.”

“So Mr. Maleenon is Mr. Malefactor,” said Lem. “I remember his Parmesan. And how he scolded the waitress for being too slow.”

“He made the reputation for that restaurant, over so many years,” said Clarissa. “First with Asian cooking, then mastering all our Western types, including his famous Parmesan. But it’s a hard, unsparing life; it can get lonely among the pots and pans. The reward’s so much more in the work itself than from outside praise. He may have grown proud or weary, and thought he saw an easier way, and his heart became corrupted and turned to evil.”

The seagulls floated high above them in the cloudless deep blue sky, creatures yet untainted.

“He came over at the same time as the Wattanapanits, didn’t he?” asked Lem.

“Yes, I think so.”

“So he must have been a Buddhist too.”

“Theravadan, yes, straight and narrow.”

“I thought they didn’t do such sorts of things.”

“Most of them don’t. Most people don’t, whatever their religion. But an individual soul, every one is different. And coming to America here, where everything has to be done too quick, and too cheap, and too easy.”

“An individual soul,” echoed Lem. “But that’s theology, that’s even beyond the range of your mathematics.”

Clarissa drew up one knee, sat back, and stared thoughtfully out the window. “Not necessarily,” she said. They both watched in amusement as they passed a rock full of sea lions, sprawled and bellowing and having all the time in the world.

“To a first approximation, you can consider theology as just a distinguished old branch of applied mathematics,” she said. “Think of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, or of the Virgin Birth. You can’t prove those things; you weren’t there. They’re axioms. You assume them and see what comes out. Men like Aquinas are great and profound mathematicians, deducing the necessary consequences of their large sets of axioms.”

“Well maybe for our rationalistic Western religion...” objected Lem.

“Eastern too, what’s the difference?” replied Clarissa. “It’s living and reasoning with abstractions, and that’s mathematics. A sophisticated Buddhist will tell you that Gautama Buddha bears the same relation to The Buddha as the line I draw on my blackboard bears to a mathematical line. The chalk

mark is a reminder, a symbol, a little sign to help us in our reasoning, in the same way that the life of the historical Buddha is a reminder or symbol or sign to help us contemplate the idea of holiness.”

“And evil?” queried Lem.

“Evil,” she said, “is a flaw in the pattern. Maybe if we really understood it, it wouldn’t be a flaw at all, but anyhow it’s a characteristic in the pattern. It’s like the twist in a Moebius band. You can turn the band around and around in your hands and say ‘The twist isn’t here,’ but it’s always somewhere, and you can’t get rid of it till you pin it down and cut it out. And at that point it’s no longer a Moebius band. Oh, do hurry, Lem,” she cried, “it’s already ten to four!”

He floored the accelerator and they roared down the switchback.



They made it to the Thai-American Restaurant by four minutes to four. The Wattanapanits were already waving to them from behind the bamboos by the little lotus pond by the door.

“Be careful with that bushel basket, Lem,” said Clarissa sharply, “don’t scratch the paint. I wouldn’t want to aggravate anyone with such an expensive car.”

They looked at the bright red sports car crouched next to theirs, low slung and powerful. The license plate read “MLNN 1.”

“Look how hot it is; it must have been driven hard and fast just a little while ago,” she said. The air shimmered with heat over the hood, and it seemed to Lem that Clarissa’s blue eyes, looking through the haze, shimmered and flamed as well.

“My dear friends,” said Mr. Wattanapanit, as he took the tall load of boxed pies from Clarissa’s arms, “we’re so glad to see you.” The few streaks of grey hair over his temples were almost the only sign that it was twenty years since he and his wife had arrived at San Francisco harbor without a penny in their pockets, and begun to work the eighteen-hour days that now made them proprietors of one of the finest restaurants on the coast. He and his wife too, a camellia pinned in her simple glossy black hair, were otherwise unchanged—slim, quick, gracious, shy, and gentle as they had always been.

“We have the best seat in the restaurant for you,” Mrs. Wattanapanit said, “the corner of the terrace overlooking the ocean. We open to the public only at five, so you are our special guests, and I myself will be your waitress.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wattanapanit,” said Clarissa, “it was very important that we come early, and we’re honored to have you serve us.”

The view from the terrace was breathtaking. Just a few flower boxes and a thick hawser mounted a little over knee-height served to bound their terrace from the sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the Pacific below. Beyond the rope there was nothing to see but the ocean, its whitecaps sparkling in the afternoon sun and its surf pacing in with immemorial majesty, and then the endless depths of the blue sky. Lem had carried the bushel of garden vegetables in with them and placed it on their wooden table between them. As he looked across the multicolored squashes at Clarissa, her dress and eyes resonating back the blue of the sea and sky, he thought he had never seen her more beautiful.

“Could I offer you some refreshment before dinner?” It was Mrs. Wattanapanit. “We have some special coconuts, their milk is delicious with fruit juice or soda.” She offered a wicker plate with three coconuts.

Clarissa took one up gently in her hand and turned it about. It was perfectly round and unblemished. “Such a fine coconut,” she said.

“Yes,” smiled Mrs. Wattanapanit, “it was a special shipment and they went very quickly, these are the only ones we have left.” She smiled in simple guileless pride.

Clarissa stroked down an unruly strand of the coconut’s hair and placed it softly back on the plate. “I’d love to,” she said, “but with all the coconuts I’ve seen recently I couldn’t give this one the appreciation it deserves. Thank you, maybe some other time.”

Mrs. Wattanapanit smiled understandingly.

“Besides,” said Clarissa, “we’ve come for the eggplant Parmesan, and we don’t want to spoil our appetites. How is your wonderful Mr. Maleenon?”

“He is still wonderful,” said Mrs. Wattanapanit.

“Just as wonderful as he always was?”

“He is still wonderful,” said Mrs. Wattanapanit. A little shadow crossed her face.

Clarissa smiled at her with her frank blue eyes.

“It’s your vegetables, and so your love that we serve here,” explained Mrs. Wattanapanit. “We are in your debt and think of you as one of our family, so I would not conceal anything from you. I do not think he is as wonderful as he was at one time. His mind is sharper than ever. But cooking is art that comes from the heart, and his heart is troubled.”

“Was that his sports car we saw in the lot?” asked Clarissa.

“Yes. He drives it very fast.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wattanapanit,” said Clarissa. “We’ll just sit here on

your beautiful terrace and enjoy the view while we wait for dinner. Our appetites were all ready at four.”

Mrs. Wattanapanit bowed and left.

“You can see she’s absolutely innocent,” Clarissa told Lem. “And she may be in terrible danger here.”

At twenty past four there was no dinner.

At twenty-five past four there was no dinner.

At four-thirty there was no dinner.

Surprisingly, Clarissa did not seem perturbed, but lay back in her seat drowsing, her eyes half shut, listening to the seagulls and letting the late afternoon sun play across her hair and throat.

“Why were you in such a terrible hurry when we came?” asked Lem. “And now we just sit here and get nothing.”

Clarissa squinted at him, rubbed her eyes, yawned and stretched, and it seemed as though she were gathering herself for some contest of mind or spirit far more severe than complaining about delayed dinner. “We’re not getting nothing, Lem,” she replied softly. “We’re getting evidence. I knew when we came that we would get either dinner or a murderer, not both. It seems we’re not getting dinner.”

At four thirty-five she reached into her purse and pulled out one of her knives (which had on occasion proved unexpectedly useful in her amateur detective work). Selecting one of the gourds from their basket of vegetables, she calmly began whittling. The chips of the hard brittle material flew at the bite of her keen knife. “This is a model of a Riemann surface,” she explained. “Technically it’s the minimal domain of analyticity of a complex-valued function. But you can just think of it as a spiral staircase with the levels very close together.”

Lem was getting so hungry he didn’t know if he wanted to follow her explanation.

“Each time you circle around the middle point you come out one level higher,” she explained. “It’s just like a detective case. You keep coming back to the same piece of evidence, but each time you yourself have grown in wisdom up to a higher level and you understand it more deeply.”

At four forty there was no dinner.

At four forty-five, in a flurry of dishes and embarrassed apologies, Mrs. Wattanapanit finally brought their dinners. “Mr. Maleenon felt it wasn’t quite ready yet, I told him you’d been waiting so long, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“We’ve been enjoying your beautiful terrace here,” smiled Clarissa. “It’s

such a lovely afternoon, don't worry." She unfolded her napkin. "Bon appetit, Lem!" She took her first bite.

Suddenly, astonishingly, her eyes blazed. With a grimace of disgust she spit out the food. "Proof!" she cried. She pulled Lem's plate away before he could eat a bite. "I must speak to Mr. Maleenon!" she called.

Mrs. Wattanapanit ran.

"What's the matter, Clarissa?" asked Lem.

"Proof!" she said, and took up her whittling. "Don't touch your plate!"

Mr. Maleenon appeared, wiping his hands on his apron. "Madame said something was wrong?" he asked.

"Ah, Mr. Maleenon!" exclaimed Clarissa, rising with a smile and shaking his hand. "Even a great chef can sometimes have an off day. Actually I wanted to ask you about something else too. Won't you please sit down for a moment and have a cup of tea with us?"

"As Madame wishes," he said stiffly, bowed and went back into the restaurant. A few moments later he returned with a cup of tea, made his way to their table, and seated himself across from them with his back to the ocean. His initial appearance had been nondescript, a thin little man with his coarse black hair combed low across his forehead, a sidelong shuffle and a downcast look. As he sat across from them now, though, and he and Clarissa measured each other's gaze, Lem saw the depths of fire and pride and hate and danger that blazed in his jet-black eyes, eyes like those of a fallen angel, and Lem realized that he and Clarissa had never confronted a more dangerous adversary.

"I do some mathematical consulting work for the police authorities," began Clarissa, "looking for patterns hidden in the information, and lately we have been analyzing the drug problem here in California."

"I have heard it is a great problem, Madame," agreed Mr. Maleenon courteously.

"Since I've been friends with the Wattanapanits for so many years, I'm quite familiar with the restaurant business. It seems particularly likely that the center of the problem might lie here."

"That I couldn't know. It would seem it could lie anywhere."

"No," Clarissa said, "the restaurant business has particularly many opportunities and temptations."

Mr. Maleenon listened impassively.

"As the famous chef of this restaurant, you are so at its heart and center, we thought you might specially well be able to help the Wattanapanits and us identify trouble spots."

Mr. Maleenon did not reply.

“So many customers go through a restaurant every day,” Clarissa pressed on. “Maybe some want to buy something else than a meal. There are so many employees—part-timers, temporaries, irregulars, friends of friends filling in. Many are poor, or just new in the States, they might be tempted to do something illegal for money.”

Lem looked back and forth between the two of them, Clarissa lit by the late afternoon sun, Mr. Maleenon crouched in a brooding silhouette against the sea.

“It could start out very small,” she said, “a fortune cookie saying ‘You will soon be very happy’ dusted with LSD. Then it could grow. A part-time busboy might leave a bag in the restroom, and one of the customers might pick it up later.”

Mr. Maleenon watched her as a snake might its charmer.

“How many takeout boxes go out here every day?” she asked. “How many boxes come in every morning from all over the world marked ‘bananas,’ or ‘shrimp,’ or ‘fish sticks’? How many bags of white powder would fit in one of your dumpsters out back? Do the trucks coming in the middle of the night just empty them, or can an empty sometimes get switched for one full of something else? If I wanted to run a drug distribution center for the whole state of California, I couldn’t think of a better place than this restaurant!”

“Madame has a vivid imagination,” said Mr. Maleenon. “I am very busy cooking and really have no time to think of such things. I apologize for the eggplant, but I really must go back and start preparing for my other customers.”

Clarissa continued as though she had not heard. “A frequent sign is the sudden purchase of luxury items by unexpected people.” She gestured casually towards the heavy gold chain Mr. Maleenon was wearing. “Public records can be surprisingly informative. For instance, very few other \$100,000 sports cars were sold around here recently.”

Mr. Maleenon flushed angrily. “I work 12, 14, 16 hours a day for many years in a hot kitchen,” he said. “Maybe you should look where people don’t do much and have big salaries. Mathematicians sit around all day staring at nothing and say they’re working. They travel, they ship big heavy boxes they say are full of books, they have crazy students who take lots of drugs. Maybe the police should look there!”

“From the car records, real estate records, immigration records, and so forth, here is the organizational chart I have deduced for your organization,” said Clarissa, and handed Mr. Maleenon an intricate diagram with boldface “Maleenon” at the top. An involuntary curse left his lips, and his hand moved for an instant towards his jacket pocket. Clarissa laughed. “Enraged

chef shoots customer complaining about Parmesan.’ It wouldn’t work Mr. Maleenon, would it? I didn’t think you would try to do anything to me yourself, it just isn’t your way. But just in case, I brought my friend along here for protection. He could tear you apart limb from limb.”

Lem tried to look fierce.

“I’m not completely helpless myself either,” said Clarissa. There was a blur so fast it could hardly be seen and her knife stood hilt-deep in the rock-hard grey squash that stood beside her, in a different direction but no nearer than Mr. Maleenon’s own twitching face. She wrenched the blade out and put it back on the table. “There’s been human blood on these blades before,” she said, “and calculating trajectories is just ordinary differential equations.”

After some moments Mr. Maleenon had fought back to his icy composure. “I apologize again for the Parmesan,” he said dully. “My staff will be contacting you whether you have any further suggestions.”

“Your staff,” said Clarissa contemptuously, “are those the people with the coconuts? The poor Wattanapanits have only three left now. ‘Murder will out,’ Mr. Maleenon, yours is out and it’s too late to stop it. I mailed several copies of that chart, with full explanations, to the appropriate authorities this morning already. For insurance I’ve also put a dozen copies on the Internet. They’re encrypted now, and just call each other up and change their names every once in a while so no one can find them. But once a month or so they will call me up, and if I’m not happy and healthy enough to solve the random little math problem they will use to identify me, they will decrypt themselves and post your misdeeds on bulletin boards all over cyberspace.”

Mr. Maleenon looked around wildly for a way to escape.

“Over a dozen murders, Mr. Maleenon, and probably at least a quarter-billion dollars of drug business on that chart alone. Why don’t you cooperate?” asked Clarissa. “You might begin by telling us more about the meeting you had this afternoon with the big boys from Mexico.”

Mr. Maleenon started violently.

“Your car was still steaming when we came,” she said. “Tell us, it’s the only good thing you can still do in this incarnation. Who are the higher-ups? We’ll surely find something interesting in your house and your car even if you don’t help.”

“You have no warrant,” he hissed.

“We’ll get one,” she replied.

“You have no cause.”

“Yes, we do.” With a superb finishing stroke she gestured toward the Parmesan.

“I will never tell,” he screamed. With sudden desperate resolution he snatched the eggplant from the basket and, grimacing painfully, forced it with both hands into his mouth.

Lem leaped up to try to stop him.

“Careful, Lem,” warned Clarissa. “He may still have a gun. This is no coconut. Wait till he passes out and then we’ll cut it out and save him for his trial.”

Mr. Maleenon slumped behind the table, his face grey, his hands twitching. A lifetime misspent was evidently flashing before his dimming eyes. His motions grew fainter, had almost ceased. But then at the end must have come something so terrible, perhaps a glimpse of the Buddhist hell he would momentarily be entering, that with an unexpected last spasm he jerked up again to his feet and stepped back to fend it away. The heavy hawser caught him behind the legs and, before they could reach to stop him, he fell backwards down to the Pacific.

In a moment he was gone, vanished like a nightmare dream. There was nothing but the afternoon sun and the sea, a mother deep enough to hold all her children, no matter how they had erred.

“How sad,” Clarissa finally said with a shudder. “A chef of genius, and a beautiful new eggplant too, both lost to evil. There’s a special section of Buddhist hell kept for those who ‘fail to conduct themselves properly and have no kindness in their hearts.’ Horse-headed demons with iron rods are now driving his soul into the flames to burn and be purified. Only after many incarnations may it ever become human again.”



It was very late, after endless statements and inquiries and explanations and affidavits, that Clarissa and Lem finally got home. They still hadn’t had dinner, and the Wattanapanits who, shaken and apologetic, had closed their restaurant for the day, had insisted on giving them one of their own pumpkin pies to take back with them. This they now ate, sitting side by side on the sofa with dinner on their laps, two people with two forks eating out of one box.

“I still don’t understand what was really going on,” said Lem finally.

“We knew there was going to be a big meeting this afternoon, trying to unify the California and the Mexico drug cartels,” explained Clarissa patiently, “but they couldn’t find out exactly where. Also, they just couldn’t get the clinching evidence that Mr. Maleenon was head of the whole operation here, or that he was the one responsible for the Coconut Murders. If you push too hard for information with that sort of thing, people get suspicious and move or

cancel everything. Your informers are risking their lives already, so you have to make do with what you have.”

“I gathered that much,” said Lem. “But why did we have to rush so to get there by four?”

Clarissa took a thoughtful bite of her luscious pumpkin pie. “Our best hope,” she said, “was to get Mr. Maleenon somehow to compromise himself after the meeting. So I called a few days ago and made an unusually early dinner reservation. He couldn’t move the meeting without looking weak and ridiculous, and he couldn’t move my reservation without blowing his entire nasty operation open to the Wattanapanits. I’m sure he drove like the devil to get back, but I just hadn’t left him enough time. Cooking is art, it’s nature and mathematics together in harmony, you have to do it honestly. No matter how great the chef, it’s impossible to make eggplant Parmesan that takes an hour to bake if there’s only half an hour to do it. He probably even tried the microwave in desperation. But one taste and I knew, and he knew that I knew, and he was trapped. The mediocrity of his Parmesan proved him the murderer.”

Lem stared at Clarissa for a full minute in stunned admiration. “What a mind,” he said, “what a mind!” He thought for a while, and looked some more. “What a mind,” he repeated. He looked another minute. “What a mind, and in what a body too!”

Clarissa smiled at him with her big blue eyes. “I know exactly what you’re thinking,” she said. “My name is Clarissa, not Nerissa, but ring theory is good mathematics too.”

“What?” said Lem.

“It’s in Shakespeare, we’ll look it up later,” she laughed as she turned out the light.

Postscript: I originally wrote this story (together with two sonnets) as lighthearted literary content for a planned class website on which my ENGL 398 technical writing students might post their resumes. The project, alas, fell through; I publish the story here now with affectionate regards to my students. And thanks to Adisak Wongkajornsilp for teaching me about Thai culture; he once told me the grisly Thai tradition of executing people by making them eat a coconut, which became the nucleus of my story.

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