Mangum, PI

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The name's Mangum. Dirk Mangum, PI. Yeah, that's right. I am a Principal Investigator. On a National Science Foundation grant. Didn't start out that way, though. You don't just decide to be a PI. No, you have to earn the right. For me, it wasn't anything I expected. Just a fortuitous set of circumstances, although it didn't seem fortuitous at the time. Quite the contrary.

I was working as a snot-nosed post-doc out of a sleazy hole-in-the-wall office in LA. Actually, UCLA to be specific. It was my third year of a three-year appointment, and I didn't have anything to show for the first two years except for a stuffed wastebasket, a pile of empty Orangina bottles and a whole lot of self-doubt.

My story begins on one of those days you get in LA. The sun was shining, a slight breeze was ruffling the palm trees, and it was an even 70 degrees. Actually, I just described every day in LA. It's enough to make you want to scream. Just give me a cloud, or some fog. Or, God forbid, a hailstorm. But no, there is the sun, day in, day out, beating a drum beat on your brain, banging out its sunny sun dance until you want to do things that would get you into serious trouble with Accounts Payable.

I was hunkered down in my office, feet up on the desk, sucking on my second bottle of Orangina for the day. I had been wrestling with the proof of a lemma all afternoon, but it had me in a double overhook headlock and the chances of me ending up anywhere other than flat on the mat were slim indeed. The constant drone of the air conditioner sounded like a UPS truck tackling the continental divide. There was a knock at my door.

"I'm not in," I yelled.

There was a pause and then a second knock. I sighed, lifting my feet off the desk.

"If you won't go away, you might as well come in."

The door swung open, and I just about swallowed my bottle of Orangina. Standing in the door was none other than Walter P. Parsnip, chair of the Berkeley Math Department. He was dressed suggestively, in a white button down, top button undone to expose his clavicle, and slacks so worn you could almost see through them at the knee. His shirt clung to his chest, the outline of his bulging stomach obvious for all to see.

I found it hard to believe he was here before me. I used to drool over this guy's articles when I was an undergraduate. He had a career built like a brick shipyard. And talk about legs. He published his first article in 1932, and he was still going strong. Half the functions in Wang Doodle theory were named after Parsnip, and the other half were named after his dog.

I gave him a long look up and down and then said as smoothly as I could, "Well, come on in here, and take a load off."

He took his time coming in, giving my eyeballs a chance to run over his body at will. I took full advantage of the opportunity. He slid into the overstuffed leather chair that sat in front of my desk and stretched his legs out before him.
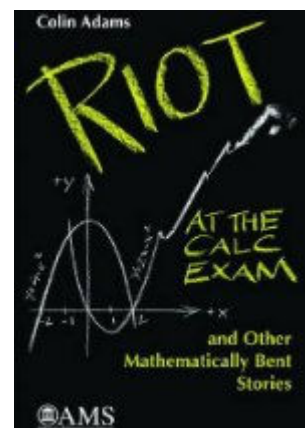
I noticed a single bead of sweat work its tortuous way down his nose and then drop off, only to land on his extruding lower lip. I gulped.

"I'm…," he started to say.

"Oh, I know who you are," I said, cutting him off. "What I don't know is what someone as hot as you wants with someone as cold as me."

"I'm in trouble," he said.

"Who isn't?" I retorted.

"I'm in deep trouble," he said. He fixed me with a look that would have made me swallow my tongue if I hadn't happened to have been chewing on it at the time.

He leaned forward conspiratorially, giving me a nice view down the inside of his well-used pocket protector. "I've got a theorem. It's a big one."

"I bet it is," I said, trying to sound casual.

But I knew that if Parsnip thought it was big, it would make Riemann Roch look like Zorn's Lemma.

"It implies Canooby."

The Canooby Conjecture, perhaps the biggest open problem in all of Pinched Rumanian Monofield Theory. You solve Canooby, and they deliver the Presidency of the American Math Society to your doorstep.

"Doesn't sound like a problem to me," I said.

"It's joint work with Kazdan."

I lifted an eyebrow. Kazdan was the current darling of the math community. Twenty-six years old, Belgian and brilliant. So hot that if he was a waffle iron, you could pour batter in the front end, and get fully cooked waffles out the back. Belgian waffles.

I watched as Parsnip crossed his legs, his pant cuff riding up enough to expose some hairy leg over the top of his black sheer socks. He caught me taking a gander.

"So, what's the problem with working with Kazdan?" I asked.

"Kazdan isn't working with me any more. He dumped me for Vishy."

Shwase Vichy. Youngest faculty member to ever get tenure at Chicago. He was still packing a lunch box. Must have been hard on Parsnip.

"How can I help?" I asked, looking deep into his milky brown eyes. They were eyes you could spend a lot of time looking into. Why you would want to do that, I don't know, but people pick strange hobbies.

"It is a lemma," he said. "Just one lemma I need. With the lemma, I will have my proof."

"What makes you think I can help you with your lemma?" I asked, leaning back in my chair, trying to appear disinterested.

"They tell me you are the best when it comes to the theory of semiupperpseudohypermultitudinal fluxions."

"Well, that was the title of my PhD thesis. But you're the first person to ever pronounce it correctly."

"It is exactly what is needed to solve my dilemma. What will it take to get you to help me, Dirk?"

He placed his hand on mine. I felt the warmth of those gnarled hairy knuckles.

I smiled my most captivating smile. "Who in their right mind would turn down a chance to publish with you?"

He smiled back.

Over the next eight months I devoted myself to the problem. I should have been publishing papers based on my thesis, to ensure a follow-up job, but instead, I thought of nothing but the lemma. I worked on it in the shower. I worked on it in the tub. I even worked on it at the office. It became an obsession.

I started to dream about it. There was one where Parsnip and I were dancing the rumba and Shwase Vichy danced over, laughed in that falsetto laugh of his and said, "Oh, no, you are not doing math here." I woke up in a cold sweat.

And still, the lemma wouldn't budge. Parsnip notwithstanding, I was ready to give up. It seemed hopeless. But then, one day, as I was stepping off the bus, it hit me. An epiphany. I realized what I had been missing. I couldn't believe my stupidity. When all this time, I had been working on semiupperpseudohypermultitudinal fluxions I should have been thinking about multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions. I had been looking at it exactly backward. With this realization, I knew that I had not only solved the problem, but I had created a whole new field of mathematics.

The other passengers waiting to get off the bus began to push, but I didn't care. I knew I was right.

I rushed to my office, overwhelmed with excitement. I would have Parsnip's undying gratitude. A tenured position at Berkeley might be in the offing. Parsnip picked up his phone on the first ring.

"Hello, Parsnip? I solved your problem."

"You solved it?" he shouted back into the phone. "This is amazing."

"Yes, it is," I said. "Why don't you come on down from Berkeley, and I'll show it to you. Then you can tell me how great I am."

"No, I can't wait," he said. "Please fax it to me now. I'll come down Monday."

I should have smelled a double-dealing rat, but they have yet to perfect an odor-producing phone. So I faxed it to him.

The next morning, when I opened the LA Times, I saw the huge bold headline splashed across the page: PARSNIP AND KAZDAN SOLVE CANOOBY. I did swallow my tongue this time, but luckily I coughed it back up. There was a huge picture of the two of them shaking hands with the governor. I had been played for a fool.

Figuring out what had happened took me less time than it takes a barn fly to find sustenance. Parsnip and Kazdan were working on Canooby the entire time, but they got stuck. They needed help, but they weren't about to let a piss-ant post-doc like me get my name on a theorem as big as this. So they came up with their ruse. Parsnip comes to see me, acting the jilted collaborator, desperate for my aid. Sucker that I am, I fall head over heels. They figure I can't resist his charms, and they're right.

Once they have the fax, I'm history. Nobody will believe a post-doc without a single publication to his name and with a job disappearing faster than the woolly mammoth. In a year, I would be pumping Slurpees at the local 7 Eleven.

The first three days, I sat in my office and cried into my Orangina. Although diluted, the salt in the tears added zest. The next three days, I tried to figure out how to franchise salted Orangina.

On the seventh day, I received a grant proposal to review from the National Science Foundation. And wonder of wonders, it was from Kazdan and Parsnip. They wanted five-million dollars to study multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions. Now, why the National Science Foundation sent the proposal to me for review, I'll never know. They certainly didn't know I invented the field. And it's unlikely they realized there was a connection between multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions and semiupperpseudohypermultitudinal fluxions. But for whatever reason, the osprey of opportunity had come to roost in my lap, and I have to tell you, it felt good having it there.

For the next two weeks, I worked on multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions. I saw vistas never before glimpsed by man or beast. I wandered the high plateaus of human thought, breathing the rarefied air. To protect myself from the elements, I built little Quonset lemmas, small rounded pup tents, only made out of words and symbols. I thought I might need them if it rained. And it did rain. First a little bit. And then a lot. It poured as if the high plateau of human thought was a giant toilet bowl and somebody — I don't know who, as this analogy is confusing me a bit — somebody flushed that toilet. There was a deluge. For you see, I realized that multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions have absolutely nothing to do with pinched Rumanian monofields or the Canooby Conjecture. Yes, I had been mistaken. Oops. My bad.

So I wrote a one-hundred page review of the grant proposal, pointing out the error and explaining how the field of multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions, although useless for the purpose outlined in the proposal, was, in fact, just what is needed to model appropriate salt content in carbonated beverages.

Then I drove up to Berkeley, arriving at the height of a lecture being given by Parsnip on Canooby. Although he saw me enter the lecture hall, it didn't seem to shake him in the least. No, he seemed to relish the opportunity to show me how carefully he had constructed his deception. I sat down in the front, right next to Kazdan.

Parsnip was going on about functor this and functor that, when I raised my hand. He paused. I stood up and said, "Cut to the chase. Who invented multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions?"

He actually smiled. "As everyone knows, it was Kazdan and I. Don't you read the papers?"

"Oh, yes, I read the papers," I said. "But you know what they say. Don't believe everything you read."

"Young man, I'm not sure I understand what you are getting at. Should I know you? Are you a graduate student visiting from out of town? Perhaps you are looking for the cookies. They are in the Math Lounge."

"The name's Mangum, Dirk Mangum," I said calmly. "But you know that."

There must have been something in the way I said my name that made him uncomfortable. The self-assured smile fell from his face for just a second.

Then I fired. "If multihyperpseudouppersemitudinal fluxions play such an important role in the solution of the Canooby Conjecture, then why is it that they aren't connected? Canooby assumes that the fluxions are connected."

Parsnip's expression went from unsure to shocked in a split second. I had clearly hit my mark. He gripped the lectern to support himself as the blood fled from his face. He was clearly in pain.

"What do you mean they aren't connected?" he croaked.

Kazdan leapt up from his chair, but there was nothing he could do. The audience sat in stunned silence as they watched the tableau unfold. I fired again.

"I mean, they aren't connected. Not attached to one another. Capiche? There is space in between them. Here's one, and here's another, and you can't get from the one to the other. Comprende? THEY COME IN MORE THAN ONE PIECE. So they don't apply to Canooby!"

Parsnip fell to one knee. A shudder went through the audience. Kazdan grabbed my sleeve, for what purpose I don't know, but I shrugged him off, and he fell back into his chair, stricken.

I smiled then at Parsnip. He reached up a trembling hand in my direction. "Dirk," he said. "Help me, Dirk."

For a moment, I almost felt sorry for him. But I got over it.

"See you around," I said. "Actually, I kind of doubt I will." I walked out the door as he crumpled to the floor.

When I got back to LA, I submitted the grant review. To quote from the letter I received,

> *Never before have we received a review that so clearly demonstrates the genius of the reviewer, while also demonstrating the entire paucity of ideas in the original proposal. Not only do we reject the proposal, but we would like to give you a grant. How does a million dollars sound? And that's just for the first year. Any time you want additional funds, day or night, just call the director of NSF. Her home phone number appears at the bottom.*

Parsnip and Kazdan were so embarrassed that they dropped out of Pinched Rumanian Monofield Theory entirely. Now they work in probability, mostly taking turns pulling colored golf balls out of bins. I ended up staying at UCLA. After a while, you get used to the weather. And I have been a PI ever since. If you need a PI, give me a call. My number's in the book.