

THE
OWL
AND
THE
TESSER-
ACT

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FIRST PUBLISHED IN EFICION INDIA VOL.03 ISSUE.01, 2014

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In 2002, Grigori Perelman, a young hermit mathematician living with his mother in his native St. Petersburg, astonished the world by quietly publishing on an Internet forum his proof of the Poincaré Conjecture, the greatest mystery in topology and an impenetrable problem for a century.

Several years later, after his proof had been independently verified, he was awarded the Fields Medal, which is frequently seen as the Nobel Prize of mathematics. Then he became the first and still-only winner of the Clay Prize, a million dollar award for solving one of the ten biggest problems of the next millennium.

He refused to show up or accept either prize. Since then, he has declined interviews of any kind and has scarcely interacted with anyone apart from his mother. He rarely leaves his apartment.

Most surprisingly, he has emailed former colleagues declaring that he has quit mathematics altogether.

This is what happened.

I. Statement of the Problem

If $\Omega = \emptyset$ then M is diffeomorphic to a finite isometric quotient S^3/Γ of the round 3-sphere, to $S^1 \times S^2$ or to $S^1 \times \mathbb{R}P^3 = \mathbb{R}P^3 \# \mathbb{R}P^3$.

Plain as day!

Grisha, where Dirk had

$$\mathcal{L}^+(\gamma) \geq \int_0^{\tau_0} \sqrt{\tilde{\tau}} \|\dot{\gamma}\|^2 d\tilde{\tau} \geq \int_0^{\tau_0} \sqrt{\tilde{\tau}} C^{-1} \|\dot{\gamma}\|_0^2 d\tilde{\tau}$$

had

$$\int_0^{\tau_0} \sqrt{\tilde{\tau}} C^{-1} \|\dot{\gamma}\|_0^2 d\tilde{\tau} = \frac{1}{2} C^{-1} \int_0^{\sqrt{\tau_0}} \left\| \frac{d\gamma}{ds} \right\|_0^2 ds \geq \frac{1}{2} C^{-1} \frac{v^2 r_{i+1}^2}{\sqrt{\tau_0}} \geq \mathcal{L}_0^+.$$

a crowd-pleaser, yes, but even more so, it slams the Ricci Flow peg into the Poincaré hole and – finally! – presto!, you’ve got the proof. Zuo, you Ming-Dynasty rent-a-CV faker vaunce! Morson, you no-nuts poseur pretender almost-genius guesser! It was all in the admissible curve. The rest of us were eeeediots! You start with the canonical neighborhood assumptions, do the backflip to surgery and then sidestep the Harnack Inequality with a pinching/Gromov-Hausdorff convergence combo and BOOM! G-d in a pot.

Boy, this Perelman cat was hard to nail down. I tried for a year to get next to him. Just wanted to learn his secrets. Impossible! What a hard case.

I mean, I tried everything. Never wanted to kill anybody before. This guy is way off the charts. Obvious, I can hear you saying, but I’m pretty off the charts myself. My resumé kills. I’m awesome at almost everything. I lost to my sister once, all too famously, but apart from that – and she touched the young man in question during the contest, which is beyond unfair and was beyond uncouth at the time – I’ve got a winner’s record. I win and maintain my holy humility, thank you, without being a damned nun, thank you again. But Grigori Yakovlevich, you were a fair block of granite.

First I tried the voluptuous blonde. Easy. A dead man would awake, cross himself, thank the apostolic fathers, kneel before the Lord, beg forgiveness in advance, smack his head on a plank to verify his lucidity, and then ravage his brains out in the middle of Red Square if he had to. No dice. Nothing. Not even a bounce in the pulse.

I tried the Lisbeth Salander caper. 5’1”, Swedish, goth, pissed, no tits, taut, sociopathic genius savant, hacker, photographic memory, recounter of Stockholm street names, violent. He noticed me as I brushed past him hard near the Glavpochtamt Central Post Office in St. Petersburg on Pochtamskaya Ulitsa, one block west from the St. Isaac’s Cathedral on Isaakievskaya Ploschad and off Pochtamskiy Pereulok next to the hot dog stand. “Do you need directions?” I asked him petulantly, but he did not respond to my aggression or dangerous beauty or my question. “If you want to learn some manners,” I declared, “just go up Ulitsa Komsomola, hang a right on Arsenal’naya Ulitsa, and again on Arsenal’naya Naberezhnaya, and you’ll get to the Kresty Prison, where they might smash it into you.” He gave me a horridly quizzical look as he beat a retreat with his hands stuffed in his denim jacket pockets, his eyes ablaze and the balance of his features firecracking together, marveling, perhaps, at my detailed choreography or at my aggressively anachronistic humor. Nothing could entangle this man. He was invincible.

Then I show up as Angelina Jolie. Eeediot. He has no idea who she is, and he thinks I’m just a smoldering parasite with a collagen problem.

I try a studious chick, the Russian plain Hillary Rodham, tinted grey glasses, a slide rule, and Heraclitus in the original (actually, the original) popping out of my pocket. He sees me, licks his lips when he eyes the papyrus, but zilch, nada. He walks on with his nose in the air.

I try girls, boys, a ewe. This kid has no heartbeat. He's not straight. He's not gay. He's not perverse. I think he's just disciplined.

Then another tack. I show up as a rabbi, a Lubavitcher sage with a quick step, a sharp wit, and a black felt hat set back on my head. I arrange to bump into him in Yuzhno-Primorsky Park and to accost him following our mutually distracted run-in as Pechorin might have done.

"Ahoy, fellow, now look where you're going!" I said loudly, my hands clasped behind my back and my trunk leaning forward. "You might knock a man down and then what? Inadvertency and deliberacy carry common culpability."

He frowned and made to start walking again, and just before I could say something to stop him, he turned and blurted "I'm sorry." Then he began to start away again and then just as suddenly wheeled around once more. "I say, I don't know about your inadvertency and deliberacy idea. If I intend to strike you, I am surely more guilty than if I do so accidentally." He straightened his back. "Even a dog knows the difference between being kicked and tripped over."

He thought he had me there, so he grinned. I grinned back. "Legally, maybe so, and even morally, I may not be able to argue. But ethically, Oliver Wendell Holmes helps you not one shred!" I declared. "A hostile regard for fellow man is as plentiful in he who willfully attacks another as it is in he who takes no pains to avoid causing the identical harm. Tossing your leavings out of a window onto the heads of passersby without looking below beforehand to see if they are watching is as grievous a treatment of other human beings as lying in wait with those same leavings to dump them at just the moment a cadre passes by."

Perelman gnashed his teeth, apparently deciding what to think of my proposition. I felt out of my league, both mentally speaking and doctrinally, so I decided to push on right away, before he could regain his footing or come to some adversarial conclusion.

I cocked my head sideways with some drama and looked him in the eye. "Do you play chess?" I asked him, holding him with my gaze.

"Yes," he said, shuffling his feet and putting his hands in the pockets of his brown corduroy jacket.

I dare say I looked quite interesting in my garb, with my coat and pants flecked just so with dandruff and tiny bits of smoked fish and black bread and my pais and tzitzis straggling out and discolored just enough to show that I was a man of learning. I gripped my beard in my right hand and stroked it for extra effect. There is nothing young brilliant men love more than being gazed upon in evaluation by older men with interesting faces.

“Are you a scholar?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he stammered. “I study. Seriously.” Then he screwed up his face in self-doubt from having perhaps debased himself in both our eyes by pressing his case too hard.

“Let us play chess,” I said to him, and I slung my arm through his and dragged him along chatting about learning and study and walking in parks for health and mental cultivation until we reached the famous smoking Pushkin Café, where we settled into a table and ordered coffee, and I removed my hat and yarmulke lest someone mistake the place for a kosher restaurant. We smoked and played chess and enjoyed coffee and schnapps. He defeated me twice quickly, and then I took the third game.

It was all going so well. Then he crossed his arms, tiddly now from the vigorous chess and schnapps, and he said, “But you don’t support math education.”

By this time I was in a euphoric mood, and we had been joshing each other back and forth over the hours, so I took his remark as part of the spirit of fun. Unfortunately, I was simultaneously wrong and ignorant of both the grosser and finer points of the debate to which he was adverting. Stupid of me, of course, as it would have been wiser to study in advance the au courant topics of haredi and mathematics, such as there are any, and particularly in light of Grisha’s father living and teaching, as he did, in Israel. All of which misreading and ignorance conspired to lead me to say, “Well, in all truth, Ramban didn’t study math.”

At which point Grisha stood and gesticulated and flew into rages and hurled insults at me and then stormed off into the street.

I had to come up with yet a different plan. I walked around the city more mopey than I would care to remember, thinking about what I knew of Perelman that would provide an avenue into his life and giant brain.

As far as I could tell, Perelman liked and respected none of his colleagues at the Institute, and nearly virtually none in the world save one or two in America, maybe, but he never saw them. He had no romantic connections or friendships. He frequented no restaurants or bars, played no casual poker or whist, had no interactions with old professors, had no sports heroes or favorite actors, read no literature of a specific kind with any consistency,

visited no shops for more than the barest and briefest transactional reasons, cared nothing for the visual arts, did not appear to like animals, held no movements within civil society in special esteem, and regarded politicians as subspecies of doormat lice. He did appear to have an interest in the Talmudic sages, but we have already established my ignorance of the field, and while he did listen to German and Russian composers, the ones he liked were dead and he never seemed really to relish the music with enough concentration to suggest that he would respond to expertise. I doubted it. There was no hook into him. He had no vices I could see except arrogance, pride, and the resulting isolation. How to seduce a man or nail him to the wall if he doesn't really do anything at all, let alone anything wrong? He barely liked to talk about mathematics, unless he was delivering a lecture. All he did all day was sit in his room, emerge for meals, walk through the parks of St. Petersburg, and return home for dinner with his mother, with whom he spent 100% of his time.

“Eureka! What an eediot I had been. It was sitting in front of me all along. The answer was Grisha's plump, Jewish, hyper-devoted, former math PhD candidate, borscht-making, clothes-mending, long-divorced, Mama Babushka Ludmila. The way to get next to Grisha was simply to be the one and only person who was already next to him. I would take her form and ρε γαμώτο [re gamoto]!, it would all be laid out like a Spartan prostitute.

I sat down on a bench in Imperial Blood Park and considered the plan's obvious challenges.

First, assuming I could take her place, how could I know enough of the intimacies between mother and son to maintain the ruse long enough to gain his confidence?

Second, and relatedly, even if I did carry off the reenactment well, as it applied to chitter chatter, life memories, and childhood playthings, did Grisha and his babushka even talk about his work? Or would his mother's sudden curiosity about the proof spoil the success?

A quick reconnoiter would answer these questions, I decided, and besides, I wasn't sure there was a better alternative.

But that didn't solve the third problem, which was how to kill a healthy woman who almost never left her house or her son's side, and then dispose of the body, without alarming the shit out of him.

This was not easy job. You'd think I would have certain advantages, and of course you'd be right. But to kill an adult is one thing. To spirit away her large body in a short amount of time without creating havoc or at least noise is another. Two people who live together in close quarters for decades can detect unusual patterns of air flow, let alone unusual bumps in the night. Mother and son Perelman ate every meal together, left their bedroom doors open while they slept, I soon learned, kept all of the windows shut and locked to avoid the loss of stifling

gas heat, and were rarely out of each other's earshot for more than an hour at a time.

For a moment, the old mild depressive thing returned. All of a sudden, after nearly a year of trying to crack open Grisha's life and mind, I found myself, at the end of my much-vaunted wits and in spite of anything I had ever imagined to be possible, gumshoeing around like a Las Vegas divorce case dick documenting the comings and goings of the two exact individuals with the most aggressively tepid social schedule in all of Europe so that I could murder one of them, take her place, and then recreate her life in its knit-and-potato excitement, so that I could then spend enough time with the other that he might reveal his secrets of intellection!

How humiliating! I used to be cool. There was a time when it was so easy for me to learn the cool new stuff. They all used to ask me for inspiration. Now I have to chase it. And even if there was dirty work back then, I had armies of hoplites and acolytes for it. It's so much harder on me now. Enlightenment has become debasing to achieve.

II. Progress

Stalking yielded useful information within weeks. On Mondays, both Grisha and his mother were out of the house at the same time. She would return from the market with fresh vegetables, and he would get home fifty minutes later to eat the soup. Not enough time to clean up from a struggle, but an easy opportunity to replace the paprika with hemlock and hasten her death while she tasted her own cooking on the stove.

Good! So I pick the lock while they are out, substitute five or six seasonings with poisonous leaves, secret myself away in a corner while I wait for her to taste and die, move the corpulent remains to a closet till I can disappear it more fully later, and – presto! – assume the role of doting babushka in time to dump the bad soup, make a fresh pot, and serve it hot to the son. Nothing to it.

Except Ludmila Perelman's stomach is made of steel. After twenty-five minutes of watching her sip what must have been 85% toxins from her wooden spoon, and cooing and oohing and adding more hemlock, wolfsbane, kudu, angel's trumpet, dried asparagus berries, suicide tree leaf, daphne, foxglove, and laburnum all the time till she could have killed Alexander's elephants, I start sweating bullets in anticipation of Grisha's imminent return and ingestion of nearly perfect mouthfuls of poison while his mother looked on as strong as a rhino. She's not dead, not dying, not even so much as clutching her chest or racing to the commode. Instead, she is lolloping and tralalaling and belting her way through Tatyana's entire libretto from Eugene Onegin, as far as I can tell, which is altogether a new behavior in my weeks of observation and not one I've ever previously associated with wolfsbane or suicide tree leaf, but here she is, bursting out in song and doing a rather admirable job of it, too, I dare say, though her ample figure might allow her more convincingly to play the contralto role of Tatyana's

sister Olga, I think to myself, considering whether audiences in St. Petersburg are quite as forgiving as they used to be in Catherine's day, and I conclude not, generally, though after all, a voice is a voice, and . . .

WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING? HE'LL BE BACK IN TEN MINUTES!

In ten minutes, Grisha comes home and engorges himself on raw poison. Unless, of course, that fruity yoga organic chemist I relied on for the purchase mistakenly gave me an armful of African Rooibos or peyote instead of the intestine-dropping basket I was sure I had ordered in perfect Peter Russian, thank you, though come to think of it I never inquired as to whether he was Russian or, in fact, if he was from some other place – he did look swarthy-Georgian-Uzbek somehow, I realize now.

No chancing it. Worst case if I let things lie is Grisha is lying on the floor expiring from organ failure, and best case is he is on the table in an Onegin peyote yodel mock-seducing his fat mom. Either way, I can't afford the risk. No. I must create a diversion instead. The clock is ticking down fast, and I'm getting desperately short of ideas and time, so I creep around the corner to Grisha's room, look outside to make sure no one is passing below on the street, and smash a window pane as loudly as I can. I hear the rattle in the kitchen as Mother Perelman startles, and I hide myself just behind the door so she can't see me as she enters. She barrels past me and brings her hands to her ears, saying "tut, tut, tut," and I steal into the hallway while her back is to me and into the kitchen. First I replace the herbs. Then, and aware that it will cause another awful rattle, I tip the soup into the sink. The clatter immediately provokes a shout from Grisha's bedroom, and I fly across the apartment and into a small closet where all manner of old shoes and coats and board games are stored, knowing full well that I will probably have to spend the whole night as there is no escaping now. Oh, the indignity of crouch-sleeping among rancid sneakers and musty rabbit fur linings, gasping for air for fifteen hours. Though I eventually did manage to open the box for *Repulse the Reactionist-Anarchists* and played a memorable enough if solitary game while awaiting the next morning.

Grisha comes home, and the Perelmans exchange heated conversation about what could possibly have caused the window to break outwards (Eeedit! If I had just thought about that a moment longer!) and then the soup to spill over into the drain. They quickly conclude that the real mystery was the window. Grisha helps me with the question of the soup by deciding rapidly that his mother must have been startled into dropping the pot in such a way that it precariously lingered on the edge of the sink till it fell over. Having only one domestic puzzle at hand after all, Grisha, with his mother's general agreement, though she still demurred on several particulars, as to whether, for example, it was likely the exact posture of the pot or the sloshing inside the pot that, when taken together with the posture, caused the tumbling of the whole thing into the sink, decides that it doesn't bear major investigation tonight, since while two points of puzzle make a suspicious mystery line, only one point of puzzle makes for but a dot, which doesn't usually point to foul play but to one kind of happenstance or another, such as,

for example, the age of a windowpane or a loose nut on a piece of furniture that shifted and sent the nut flying through the window or any similar thing which might cause the pane to break and which would probably reveal itself to them in the coming day or two.

So they let it lie, mom made fresh soup with nonpoisonous ingredients, mom cleaned up the glass, and Grisha patched up a book and some rags into the space with electrical tape so it wouldn't draft during the cold Russian night.

At 2 a.m., I heard him move into the living room and shut the door to his bedroom, presumably because the patch wasn't functioning too well. Over breakfast, Grisha explained the trouble, and his mother agreed to look into repairs while he was working. He declared he would spend the day at his Institute office to avoid distraction, and after some quick calling, his mother made a list of glaziers to visit in person to ensure speediest service. What devotion!

I decided to follow her on her journey in various guises to gather more intel and to see if the trip might afford an unexpected opportunity to kill her.

Hi-ho! Good news sprung as from Zeus's head! Ludmila was compelled by the layout of her options to trundle along the Neva river for no less than six tenths of a kilometer, during which time I might, if I were just close enough, thrust her into the water below and drown her. Hell, I could even plunge in with her if that helped, to hold the woman's flotation-friendly figure under the surface. I could get rid of the woman and her body in one fell swoop.

Dressed as a contractor, I had overheard Mother Perelman talking with the insolent young man behind the counter at Ivan's Tile and Windowpane on the Gogol Prospekt. She struck out for a third time this morning on price, and, more acutely, on the availability of the installer. The identical conversation transpired all three times.

"Hello, I would like to replace a windowpane of these measurements today, please," she would say, proffering her paper with the noted centimeters of width, length, and thickness.

"What kind of glass?"

"I don't know. Standard, I suppose."

"We have that. Twelve thousand rubles per window."

“But only one small pane is broken, do you see?”

“Today is impossible for one pane.”

“Is the window repairman ill?”

“No, he’s in the back.”

“Then whyever can’t we fix it today?”

“You need the Solitary Pane man. He isn’t available.”

“Is he ill?”

“No.”

“Is he booked?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then whyever . . .”

“You must book him one week in advance.”

“One week in advance!”

“He’s a freelancer.”

“And the regular repairman can’t help.”

“Only the Solitary Pane man can solve your problem.”

She asked the young man if he knew if the Great Patriotic War Windowpane and Windshield shop on the Fusillade Prospekt was any good.

“Yes,” he said diffidently, “they trained here,” and he skulked away.

Well, I knew that to get there from here, she would work her way to the Neva where I would have ample riverfront to assassinate her and commit her corpulence to the brackishy deep. I changed my guise into something more professorial, with tweeds, a pipe, a narrow beard, and wire rim glasses, something that would be less likely to arouse suspicion while walking around by the river in the middle of a workday.

I found myself in terrors for the first several hundred meters, however, as the boulevard next to the river, normally so quiet at his hour, was swarming with schoolchildren on their way the Church of the Martyric Beheading, screaming and carrying on and shouting and pushing one another this way and that and generally not moving fast enough to overtake me or my prey. For what felt like an hour, we all trudged along in the sunshine, quite alive and not being killed, when all of a sudden the schoolchildren veered right and away, following their teacher.

Now it was only me and Babushka Perelman, who would be gulping water any second as soon as I laid my hands on her. I waited for a police cruiser to pass, shrugging off a momentary hesitation that maybe the officer in the passenger seat looked at me ever slightly too long and closely as I walked just a couple of paces behind my victim.

As the cruiser passed into rearview, I noticed a tiny and ancient pensioner sitting on a bench some meters ahead, bent and frail, sunning himself with his eyes lightly shut. A witness! He could report the incident, the river could be searched or even dredged, the body found, and my ruse uncovered before I had a chance to finish my business with Grisha.

“No matter,” I said to myself. “If he stirs, I’ll just toss him in, too! Ha ha!”

Feeling elated now that I’d worked out a solution, I plunged ahead, grabbing Perelman’s mom by the elbow, and effecting the kataguruma maneuver, I launched both myself and her into the Neva.

FREEZING! TOTALLY AND UNEXPECTEDLY FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE,
LIEUTENANT KIJE FALLING THROUGH THE ICE, MEASURE-IT-IN-KELVIN, FREEZING BEYOND
FREEZING!

I gasped for air and swallowed ice cold water. I hacked and swallowed more. I’m not built for these climes, I think to myself. Give me sun and olives and evening forest musk –

Then I realized I had let her go! In my shock, I had released Perelman’s mom from my grip, and now there she was, buoyant, arms and legs churning powerfully and purposefully toward a ladder hanging down from the stone

boulevard and into the river. She grabbed the lowest rung and then turned to me.

“Professor!” she shouted. “Professor, professor, grab my hand! Reach out to me!”

Still shocked from the icy cold, I waved my arms and bobbed up and down as I swallowed more water and hacked again and again.

“Help! Help!” she cried. “Help this man! Anyone!”

The tiny pensioner appeared over the railing and looked down.

“Help this man!” she shouted up at him. I looked at them, my senses not yet fully recovered, the strong current of the river starting to pull on me more noticeably.

“Get the police!” she cried. “Bring someone!”

But the pensioner instead removed his hat, his scarf, his galoshes, and then his pants, coat, and shirt so swiftly I could hardly believe his deftness. He edged his ancient body to the rim of the ladder and dove in headfirst after me. I shrieked. He surfaced seconds later and started breaststroking my way. I panicked. He was clearly going to save me. And then what? Ruin! I gathered myself and kicked under the water to help the current carry me along, and then I let myself bob under the waves ever more often so that he and Babushka Perelman at last despaired that I was lost. I heard them shouting and crying in the distance as I drifted away and then went under for too long to come back up.

What a day of wretched reversals! I emerged somewhere kilometers from St. Petersburg drenched and freezing. It took some doing to restore myself, and I was in a foul mood for the entire afternoon.

I hovered outside the Perelman apartment in time to overhear their evening debriefing. His mom was so devoted that, quite after reporting the drowning disappearance of the tweeded professor, warming herself, and returning to the apartment for fresh clothes, she had returned to the hunt for the windowpane repairman. Amazing! If only this Grisha knew what a mother he had. It gave me a pang that I was going to kill her so soon.

It seemed there was only one Solitary Pane man in all of St. Petersburg. He freelanced to everybody. Though Mother Perelman ascertained, after reaching him directly by bribing the teenage clerk of Clearly Russian Baltic Windows, that he was actually at home playing backgammon with friends and therefore technically quite free to do repairs, he could not, in good conscience, violate his published rule of requiring one week’s notice because

his distribution partners at the window stores would feel misled and mistreated and would not send him any new business. It made no difference, he assured her, that she had managed to reach him directly, because the shop where she learned his contact information, whether through skullduggery or no, would be found out following an inquiry by its competitors and would thereafter be viewed by them as benefiting from special dealings with him to their detriment. He was immovable. Nothing could be done till the following week, in order to avoid injury to his Most Favored Distributor contracts.

Grisha was angry for several minutes upon hearing the news, not with his mother but with the annoyance of having to sleep through a week's worth of nights suffering from either the terrible cold in his room or the discomfort of the living room sofa. He did, however, applaud the sound logic and principled consistency of the windowpane man.

His mother suggested that they move his bed into the living room for the week.

But just then something occurred to Grisha that made him laugh out loud so infectiously that his mother joined him. "Capital! Capital!" he declared. "A terrific idea, Mummy. Instead I shall go to America to present my work. They've been asking me to go. Why don't I just make the trip now? I'll be back in two weeks, and the windowpane will be fixed."

She clapped, and then he clapped, and they both laughed riotously and enjoyed their good fortune of having thought of such a fine solution. They merrily ate dinner, and then he sat at his computer, emailed the fellows at Princeton and MIT, compared deals on Expedia and Kayak and booked his trip for the next day.

Bliss! An entire fortnight in which to kill his mom! I could take my time, study the best approach, do her in, and then make easy and leisurely work of the evidence. The only pitfall to avoid was making too much noise so as not to alarm the neighbors, but that was cake.

III. The Murder

I walked around Multiparty Prospekt thinking of the best way to do the job. The extended time window and solitude afforded so many options that I quite had to concentrate and start eliminating ones that might at first seem feasible or amusing but which were less practical than others.

It took me a solid day and night of noodling and cafes and the baths on Greater Rus Square before I arrived at the conclusion, but once I did, it was so obvious and easy that I not only rejoiced but also had to chuckle at my earlier blindness.

I would gas her to death.

Huzzah! So simple. Gas heat means gas. Open the line, turn it up when she is sleeping, and her own locked windows do the rest. She'll be deader than Nicholas II before sunrise, and she'll never be the wiser.

I don't mind telling you, I felt so relieved that I immediately took myself out to Davidoff's, where I plonked down Beluga, Sevruga, blintzes, and an entire bottle of Bollinger Blanc de Noirs. That put me in such good spirits that I went straight to the Kirov, splurged on a box seat, and watched Coppélia. Afterwards, I found myself hopping along the Freedom of the Press Prospekt, leaping into the air and humming and turning pirouettes and twirling around streetlights like Gene Kelly and singing "tra la la, she will die tonight, so she will tonight," to tunes from Delibes and Gershwin and everyone else.

Soon, before realizing where my merry feet had taken me, I found myself on the up-all-night Bohemian end of town, and in my flush I was drawn like a butterfly to the allure of the open and raucous cafes of poets and fashion photographers and whoever else knows who else, in a way I have not found myself to be for quite some years. An old salty CEO and I fell in together drinking a bottle of Starka vodka, which tasted rather delicious, and before long we were singing each other's praises in matters of business and the heart and exceptional insight on aluminium exploitation.

It was well past seven in the morning when we departed the café, and I walked just a few blocks away to Brasserie Rasputin for strong coffee and rolls so fresh I could scarcely believe they were baked. Reenergized, I continued towards the middle of town and suddenly found myself at the steps of the National Library. All this time in Peter and I had neglected to visit! Well, it was all too much to resist, and I entered straightaway and proceeded directly to the stacks. What happy memories I had here! To be among them revived my spirit, and I lounged in a chair to read an old scientific journal that was still collecting dust and appeared untouched since my previous visit. Soon I was asleep.

I woke up still sitting there when the old docent came to warn me the library was closing for the evening. By this time, the ferocious headache that had been brewing since the night before arrived unimpeded, and my skull throbbed so fiercely that I immediately sought the comfort of my bed, where I stayed and relied on hot water bottles and cold compresses and aspirin and boiled cabbages for the next two days.

It was then that I could put my celebration behind me and return to the inspired work of planning Perelman's mom's demise.

After a brief analysis of the building's gas infrastructure, I took a tour of the underground passages nearby

to make my schematic more complete and to ensure that I would be piping the richest, A-grade gas into the Perelman home. No need to make her suffer needlessly from a foul smell. Next was an assessment of the apartment's own pipes, which required me to wait for Babushka to vacate the premises for a couple of hours.

A leisurely stroll and a salted pretzel helped me clarify the resolution to the only remaining essential problem, which, in the end, amounted to no more than a matter of convenience, but still, it was a question of doing it right. The gas would need to leak after she was deeply asleep. This meant I either had to crouch in the closet until the right time – an experience I preferred to avoid repeating – or find another way. I lit upon the idea of a timer to make it work at just the right moment, and, voilà, my task was clear.

I found a series of timers online and compared their reviews, narrowed the list to three, went over to the Walmart on Market Glasnost Prospekt to pick them up, and came home to run experiments. The Bauschbacher Perfekt Zeit 2400 from Germany was the most reliable and soundless, and the only remaining step was to fashion the automated robot hand to turn the gas valve and open the cupboard door to release the fumes. I hummed a fugue from Rachmaninoff and ate some Chinese takeout while I beveled and bored and trued up the shafts and gears and fake fingers. A battery of tests in temperature-accurate conditions yielded consistent results. For dramatic effect and some celebratory fun, I dressed myself in a black hat and long black cape and played Mozart's Requiem while I walked somberly around my room and smiled.

The next day, I lingered outside the Perelman apartment wearing a trenchcoat and smoking a Camel. Grisha's mom stepped out right on time, and I went upstairs and into her kitchen. I affixed the device – which I had dubbed the Vapor Wear in a tongue-in-cheek moment over the days of its assembly – and set the timer for 0300. Then I walked briskly to the Café Russe and sat down for a cognac and a toast to Ludmila Perelman. I allowed myself a tear and raised my glass. I had come to think of her as something of a worthy adversary.

I barely slept. My mind was filled with excitement and plans for disposal of the woman's large frame. I rose early and went over to the apartment. The suffocation of gas was overwhelming. I immediately pushed open the windows in the kitchen and living room and then twisted off the gas spigot. Nothing could have survived. Babushka was certainly not roused from her sleep by my noise.

I entered her room and confirmed her condition. Mouth agape, eyes bulging, body already cooling. Totally dead. I went back into the kitchen and ate a cookie. Now for the disposal. I sat for a minute to prepare. I noticed a particularly unfeminine pair of shoes next to the sofa. Hmm. So Ludmila had a gentleman caller? Not bad for the old bird. I munched another second and then sat up boltright. No, that's wrong.

I lunged into the hallway and opened Grisha's bedroom door. He was lying on his bed, ramrod straight, gazing

at the ceiling, dead as a Macedonian.

Horrors! I had killed him, too!

IV. Coda

The time since that morning has been pitiless.

Grisha had despised his visit to the U.S.. He gave his paper several times in just a handful of days at Princeton and MIT. His achievement was acclaimed, and they made rich offers to stay and research. In an email to his mom, he explained his resentment toward them for having rejected him for years and having turned about in so facile a manner as soon as he had made the Poincaré breakthrough. Such talented people should have recognized his gifts earlier. Grisha felt more let down, he reported, by their easy reversal than he had ever been made to feel by their rejections. He decided not only to decline their faculty invitations but also to cut short his trip and return to Russia. His email contained a fleeting reference to his considering letting them sweat it out while he took his time to decide what to do, but it was hard to gauge if that was serious or just his private humor.

Grisha's early return had cost him his life and me my education. But the worst followed. As word of his proof spread, and as it came to be verified through the grinding work of his peers, his fame grew. Academies around the world sought his time and attention. Students sought his guidance. The Fields Medal and Clay Prize committees sought his attendance at the ceremonies they held in his honor. After all, he was the first and only Clay winner in the history of the prize, and the other Fields medalists all publicly declared his success to be unique and superior to theirs. Eventually the press picked up on the enormous scale of his discovery and besieged his doorstep.

My life has become a nightmare. I must stay in this apartment pretending alternately to be Grisha and his mom, rarely leaving, refusing visitors, shouting through the door to make them go away. I must decline all appearances, all explications of the proof, all acceptances of prizes that may require mingling with experts. They will see Grisha. But I will not be him. I will not be able to do the math.