

Rudi Aksim
Box 86
Carp Ontario K0A1L0
613-839-2990
rudi@aksim.org

Working Lunch

It is never good news to be invited for lunch by the boss, so Jérôme was concerned when Maureen said they should have a meal at the Cathay House. The way Jérôme thought about it, they were more colleagues in the executive group than boss and subordinate. But Maureen was, actually, the Assistant Deputy Minister at the Agency at Arms Length. The Agency lives in the McTavish building, a square cube with rows and rows of tiny square windows that squats on the banks of the Ottawa River.

Jérôme was sure he was going to be let go, and he started to think about retirement as he walked out of the building. .

"Hello Cheryl!" said Jérôme.

He met Cheryl in security at the building entrance. He had always liked Cheryl. She had been a member of their group, had retired three years before and was now back at the agency as a consultant.

Cheryl stopped and looked him full in the face. "Hello Jérôme!" she said. "How's the consulting business? Still double-dipping?" joked Jérôme. "This consulting thing is really great!" said Cheryl, slightly too loudly. "When they ask me to do something I don't want to do, I say, 'I'm not sure I'd be really good at that. Let me help you find someone good.'"

"We should have a coffee sometime," said Jérôme. "I'm off to have lunch with Maureen."

"I need to go see Maureen," said Cheryl, touching his shoulder with some affection. "Tell you what, Jérôme: Let's have a coffee together some time. Some time when I have my hearing aid in."

"I'm too young to retire," thought Jérôme.

At the Cathy House, Maureen was interrogating the waiter about the shrimp. Jérôme studied the Chinese horoscope on the place mat. "A horse: charming, generous, gentle and pessimistic," read Jérôme.

"I won't taste ether on the shrimp, will I?" asked Maureen.

The waiter shook his head from side to side, quickly and emphatically. "No, Miss."

"Haven't been called 'Miss' for a while," chuckled Maureen. "What's your sign? I'm a monkey."

"Mischievous, vain, clever," read Jérôme. That seemed about right.

They had ordered hot and sour soup, Moshee chicken and shrimp in black bean sauce. "You know, General Tsao's chicken was something invented for the North American market. Like fortune cookies," said Maureen, who had been everywhere and passed for an expert on Chinese food. As she spooned the soup the little thin-gold medallions on her bracelets flashed and the big gold rings were prominent against the darkly tanned skin of her fingers. "Duck based," she said.

"It's good," said Jérôme.

"Chicken makes a better stock," said Maureen.

At the Moshee chicken Jérôme made an engineering error. He over-filled his mandarin pancake and it broke apart in his hands. "The trick is to take the

appropriate amount," said Maureen. Jérôme felt inadequate, and was angry with himself as if he had fallen into a trap.

"You're not thinking of leaving us, are you Jérôme?" asked Maureen suddenly.

"Uh oh," thought Jérôme. "Here it comes."

"Er, no," he said.

"Are you sure? Quite sure?" asked Maureen.

"Well, I haven't been thinking about it," Jérôme lied.

"Perhaps you should," said Maureen, who was leaning forward and looking intently into his eyes.

"I really like this job. I like the people I'm working with," thought Jérôme. "I don't want to lose this job. Where would I go?" he asked himself.

"I have been thinking about leaving," Jérôme said after a moment. "Just now."

"Oh have you?" said Maureen.

There was silence for a minute or two as Jérôme attempted another mandarin pancake and Maureen investigated the shrimp. Jérôme picked at little bits of bean sprout on his plate.

"Whatever could we do to induce you to stay?" asked Maureen, still looking at him with a strange concentration.

Jérôme looked up. What was this?

"Our new government was to be sure that we are comparable to the private sector. So we can keep and attract talent." Jérôme wondered which teenager in the Prime Minister's Office had explained the policy to the deputy ministers. "There's no reason we can't make, er, accommodations to keep essential personnel in place."

"You know," said Maureen, reaching out to touch his hand with her bony fingers, "that I regard you as essential, Jérôme."

"Ah, accommodations?" asked Jérôme, wanting to pull his hand away but not daring.

"Well, yes. You know, the kind of thing. A bonus, perhaps. Maybe to wrap up a successful program, like infrastructure spending. Bonuses are very fashionable these days. Look at Atomic Energy." Maureen sketched a number on the coarse paper napkin. The number was the equivalent of Jérôme's annual salary. The ink from the felt-tipped pen spread through the paper and the number quickly became illegible.

Maureen crumpled up the napkin.

Clearly this part of the conversation and the lunch was over. Yet Maureen had not moved. She was still sitting up straight, leaning forward and looking at him seriously.

"What is she expecting?" Jérôme wondered. "What? What?! I can't be"

"Maureen," began Jérôme, "You haven't been thinking of leaving us, have you?" Maureen sat back with a contented smile. And, not long after, Jérôme was not surprised to see that Maureen had received a huge bonus. There were even questions in the House.

883 words.