

2024-05-01

Iron Curtains: A Novel of Germany, 1989

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IRON CURTAINS: A NOVEL OF GERMANY, 1989

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Dedication:

TO THE COUNTLESS BILLIONS WHO STRUGGLE EVERYDAY TO BE FREE

IRON CURTAINS, A NOVEL OF GERMANY, 1989

by

JOHN G DODSON

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department Of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2024

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Iron Curtains Preface

Introduction

This master's thesis, presented as Part 1 of my novel, *Iron Curtains*, is the result of personal experiences that occurred in 1989 and cover a creative and cathartic process that spanned more than 35 years. The novel is essentially complete, consisting of four parts, Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall, and clocks in at about 150,000 words. At the beginning of this journey, I discovered not only a passion for creative writing, but an emotion at a level that I had never experienced for anything else. I knew I was achieving a grand purpose for myself, and throughout that journey I healed and discovered myself, and creative writing. I had a story to tell that, perhaps if done well, could change lives.

Of course, when I started on this path, I had no idea of its purpose. I had no idea what the result would be and how this story, and others I am working on, would become so powerful part of my being. The characters of this and other stories that I hope to tell are truly alive in my brain. They have complete and full lives that are not told in the novel, but that to me, are fully authentic. Their journeys through the landscape became my journey, and many of the thematic elements were influenced by my own questioning, suffering, and healing.

Summary of the Book.

Iron Curtains is a story of four individuals in East and West Germany brought together by an espionage investigation and the revolution in East Germany which led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain on November 9, 1989. Their stories ultimately intersect as the year passes and culminate in an escape through a tunnel underneath the East German border.

There are four main characters and several secondary characters who help drive the story forward by their interaction with the main characters.

These main characters are:

Augustina Hermosillo (Tina), a 21 year old rookie Counterintelligence Agent from Tucson. She's arrived on a secret mission to investigate her boss, Nick, and finds herself in a tangled web of potential espionage. Her attraction to Nick and her desire to save him from his self-destruction gets in the way and, during their investigation of the suspect Markus Kaiser, they are led to a small little factory that sits just across the Iron Curtain, in a misty little river valley. They observe the factory from a hilltop on the west, and that's where Tina, armed with a camera, see Hans sitting in his office in the factory. She feels his despair and is drawn to the idea of contacting him and helping him escape East Germany.

Nick Torman – Tina's Supervisor and tasked with training her, something he does not want to do. He's a grizzled black operative, traumatized by a failed mission, taking the slow way out of life by drinking himself to death and flirting with the quick way out, his gun. He's surprised by Tina suddenly in his life and the magic she's having on him. He needs to protect her and heal. Nick is deeply involved in the twisted web Tina is investigating, and we don't know how deep until the very end.

Hans Jurgens – a retired East German Olympian, he has an office in the factory, but no responsibility, and he desperately wants to escape East Germany, taste freedom, and show them that they can't possess him and his family. He has a mysterious connection with the falcon that lives on the hilltop in the West. In spite of his guilt for not contributing to the revolution, he's being awarded a medal of high honor. Hans' journey takes us through the landscape of the 1989 revolution in East Germany.

Dieter Wolff - the party commissar at the factory and guards his power jealously, not only to appease the system, but because there is a secret tunnel underneath the Iron Curtain that begins with the “dungeon door” in his basement office. Dieter suffers from greed and the fact that he renounced true love for the little power he has. The tunnel was being used only to smuggle fine food ingredients so he could craft wonderful recipes for an Italian restaurant in the West owned by his forlorn lover, Markus. But now they are controlled by a mysterious Russian KGB Agent using them to smuggle Soviet gold bars out, and blood diamonds into East Germany.

And the secondary characters:

Inge Jurgens - Hans’ wife, an independent spirit who also wants out of East Germany.

Markus Kaiser - Dieter’s lifelong lover, runs the smuggling operation in the West, to appease Dieter and plan for their life together if he could just get Dieter to walk through the tunnel one time to freedom and love.

Capt. Tom Smith - Nick and Tina’s boss, he’s an untrustworthy officer who is also possibly involved in the smuggling operation,

The Ice Queen - she’s out for revenge against Nick, for the failed mission that cost her young daughter’s life. She has her eyes on Tina as a way to make Nick suffer.

Sasha - a peregrine falcon who has a nest on the hilltop on the West German side of the border. She flies at will over the area, inspires Hans and Tina to move forward with a crazy plan to bring Hans and his family through the tunnel to freedom.

One of the most interesting things I’ve pondered is how these characters came into existence over the lengthy period of writing and what they meant to me, and their role in the story.

It began in a short story, *The Paper Factory of Brotherhood*. My goal was to show the falsity of the failed Socialist system, by having Hans receive news of an award when he actually made no contribution to the cause. Dieter represented the irrational oppressor, and Sasha represented freedom.

Sometime later I began to explore the ideas that would bring in Nick as a force of change but that he, like me, was suffering, trapped inside his own walls of trauma and an alcoholic self-destruction. He needed to be set free and, inspired at the time by Native America natural philosophy, I brought Tina into the story as a messenger of change and the basic theme of the book took shape - that the problems we have as humans, and as nations is because we perceive ourselves as separate from each other and separate from God and Nature. That we've built walls to keep ourselves divided and that true salvation and freedom can only be achieved by tearing down all those walls.

I don't know if I've achieved my objective, but Tina attempts to tear down Nick's walls, save his life, and set Hans free. Unintentionally, Nick and Tina fall in love, but military regulations and pride keep them from coming together in Love, and their final wall stands to the end.

Influences and Reasons

Write about what you know. – John Gardner

I know that most writers create autobiographically, utilizing their life experiences, the memories to create characters and situations. John Irving, one of the biggest influences on my own writing is well-known for “autobiographical tropes” having characters in his stories “involved in high school wrestling, the author protagonist, the single mother, the missing father, the loving stepfather. It's set in Exeter, N.H.” (Ledermann). Many of his characters struggle with sexual

identity, several of his books feature transgender woman, including my favorite, *The World According to Garp*, and *The Last Chairlift*, his most recent (Irving was married to a trans woman). Irving draws from his experience to build real characters who, although they may be in more extreme circumstances, and highly disguised, are a part of Mr. Irving's soul and lifelong journey.

Keeping this in mind, I wanted to make sure that the use I made of my own personal experiences was well disguised in character and that it was less personal and detailed. That “the me” inside of Nick Torman, the protagonist of *Iron Curtains* is unrecognizable as me. The freedom to create also brought license to “turbocharge” characters and situations, setting the story free from my own experiential limitations. Because the reality is, my adventure is pretty boring when compared to Nick's.

As a result of drawing autobiographically, there is a little bit of me in all the characters in *Iron Curtains*. The factory that is central to the story was a real building sitting just on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in a tiny little valley split by concrete and the Saale River, which I visited on several occasions in 1988 and 1989. The falcon that is featured prominently, originating from a lifelong appreciation of birds of prey, as well as the fact that they were a fixture in the landscape of Germany.

Seeing a falcon flying or sitting in a snow covered field was one of the sharpest images that I brought back home with me from my military service. This was a source of satisfaction in creating this novel, the ability to pull the feeling I have about the majesty of birds of prey which, when mixed with situations, plot, and characters, allowed me to add the bird to a story in a significant way, where she became a thematic element, and describe how special I think they are, without coming out and directly saying it.

Irving is also famous for writing the last line of the book first, “I write endings first. I write last sentences – sometimes last paragraphs – first. I know where I am going. I write collision course stories.” (NPR Staff Writers) Later, Lynn Neary, in another NPR interview covering his new release at the time, *Avenue of Mysteries*,

I always know where it's going. I'm writing toward a sentence, usually to much more than a sentence, to many paragraphs, close to a last chapter — it's like a piece of music that you're writing toward: This is how it sounds when I get to the end. Because I wouldn't know how I'm supposed to sound at the beginning unless I knew how I was going to sound when I got there. (Neary)

Knowing this from a long time ago may have influenced me, I'm not sure. It does seem a natural way to commence. When I begin to write a story, I definitely know how it will end. I usually know the first scene as well. Some of the “creation drive” of the narrative comes from the need for me to take the characters from A to Z, solving problems, and hopefully skillfully incorporating theme, drama, and style.

I like reading large canvases with complex structures.

As a lifelong reader, I've always experienced a profound beauty in books. Indeed, they were part of the shelter I found from the pain and trauma of just trying to be a kid. As a young child, possessing those thin tomes on my bookshelf, in my room, was a very safe and comforting place. I read all the time, often to escape my current situation. If I was asked what I wanted as a gift, it was a specific work. I always know what is next on the reading list. *Hardy Boys*, *The Great Brain*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* stand out from the ages of 8 to 12. Even at that age, the formulaic nature of Franklin Dixon's teen investigators was apparent. The problem solving adventures of Tom Fitzgerald, so skillfully set in the late 1800s, the serial and fantastic nature of

Narnia was engrossing. Later I moved on to adult fiction and heavily read King, Tolstoy, Tom Clancy, and Irving.

Ironically, I left those writers behind and haven't read them for decades, primarily reading nonfiction, and then jumping joyfully back into fiction and novelists like Barbra Kingsolver, Cormac McCarthy, Larry McMurtry, Gary Shteyngart, Chuck Palahniuk, Junot Diaz, and many others prescribed by the courses I took. My choices now tend towards higher quality literature rather than action-packed page turners or thrillers. What characterized these latter writers as a whole is their contemporary nature and their critically acclaimed writings. Also, although never much of a fantasy reader, I did sneak in *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and the *Dune* books, as well as "hard" science fiction by David Brin and Stephen Baxter.

If anything was clear, I tended towards longer novels, and enjoyed more *War and Peace*-sized tomes. In spite of what some have said about the size of my manuscript, especially for a first novel, and that "most people don't read doorstep epics anymore" (Rinzler), I set out to write a longer novel, and have never considered length to be advice I should take.

In Stephen King's *The Stand*, his only novel that I read more than once, we have at least 4-6 main characters whose stories intersect across that apocalyptic background as they seek to survive the plague and follow their literal dreams to the bad man or the good woman where, in spite of their many refusals of the call, they follow at times to their own destruction and death.

Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, perhaps the greatest novel ever written, was a huge influence. Pierre Bezhukov, Nastasha Rostova, Col. Bolkonsky, even Napoleon, and the war. All these intersect and come to a fateful conclusion. Themes of modernization in Europe, of the war that is love and marriage.

I loved the broad landscapes and great passages of time. In particular I loved the narrator who came in to tell us the story, or the backstories of the characters. I have always wanted more detail than normal. Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas. “Unlimited in size, novels are capable of conveying the minute texture of life in all its fullness.” (Sloane 64)

According to Morson, Tolstoy focuses on the mundane, seemingly inconsequential events of life and relates them in a way that makes it difficult to discern their unifying plot. By doing so, he was deliberately undermining the expectations of conventional narrative, which he believed “impose[d] too much order” (145).

Although it is not entirely inconsequential, there are perhaps mundane details in *Iron Curtains*. For example, one evening while washing dishes, frustrated and angry at their situation and their passivity, Inge breaks a dish in the sink:

“We’re not sheep!” she screamed one night, slamming the plate in the sink, long after the kids had been put to bed. Either her outcry or the sound of the dish breaking had brought Sofie out of bed. She tugged at her mom’s leg until she was picked up. Thank God for little girls, he’d thought, they could stop a fight dead in its tracks. Inge carried her back to her bed, tucked her in, and returned calmer to the kitchen.

“We will, *I will*, find a way, my love,” he soothed, picking pieces of shattered plate out of the sink. He waited for her response, breathing out the tension. She came and held him from behind, her head resting on his back. She sniffed back the tears. (p 121)

Of these great authors’ works mentioned above, what I particularly enjoyed were novels where multiple characters’ experiences and fates were twisted together. A chapter or part was

dedicated to one character, the next chapter to another. This is the exact structure of *Iron Curtains*.

I read John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, while sick in bed with the flu in the very same location that is Nick's apartment, where much of *Iron Curtains* takes place. The scope of *Garp* covers decades of his and other characters' lives, brings them together and apart in their struggle to define themselves and survive. There is tragedy and comedy.

When I set out to write *Iron Curtains*, I wanted landscape, I wanted a long length of time to pass in the story, a period expanded by preface, backstory, narration, and epilogue. I wanted plots and character motivations, even their time and place, to intersect. So, in that sense I achieved my goal. In *Iron Curtains* I brought four people and a falcon together over the period of a single year in time and space and during a period of peaceful revolution, setting seventeen million people free from the largest prison in the history of mankind. Indeed, a story worth being told.

Perhaps you'll find traces of those influences and style in *Iron Curtains*, where an omniscient narrator at times interrupts to give curious details about a particular place or thing, like the paper factory's history and how it came to produce the type of paper it produces. Or interrupting the present with some of Tina's backstory. One of my favorite scenes is about her run-in with the bullies in an alley after school one day in the 7th grade. I had even pulled that scene out from the book and made it a short story, adding narrative, dialog, time, and space, to fulfill an assignment.

Some of the storytelling is pure imagination. In this book, I needed a device to express thematic elements (the falcon representing freedom and nature) and to pull the parts of the story

together. I put her on top of the hill across the river and valley from the factory, the main location of the story. I had no idea if falcons lived up there, but it worked well.

Decades later, on a factfinding tour of the factory in 2023, quite late in the development of the novel, I drove up to that hilltop where the falcon had lived. It was quite a pleasant surprise when I came to the hillcrest and an enormous falcon flew out of the trees and across the clearing in which I sat. This occurrence, and there are others in the process of writing this book over almost thirty years was, to me, an almost spiritual confirmation that I was doing the right thing, that the story I was writing was important. And I know it was important to me.

Aside from a plethora of amazing writers somehow being an influence, I don't think I consciously copied anyone specific. My poetics. If you can call it that, developed over time, practice, and many rewrites.

Origin of the Story

The atmosphere of Germany in 1989, and the particular places featured in the story, come directly from my own experience as a US Army Counterintelligence Agent in charge of the tri-border zone between Czechoslovakia and the two Germanies. Seeing the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain fall, seventeen million people set free from the yoke of imperial and totalitarian communism, in a peaceful revolution, when everyone expected violence, told me a fundamental message about myself, that I too could be set free. Free from addiction, trauma, pain, isolation, fear, and alienation from my fellow man and God, whatever that is.

In 1990, I returned from Germany full of hope for the world to recover from its divisions. Unfortunately, in my own isolated illness, the recovery was not perfect, nor very long, and certainly not as magical as the fall of the Iron Curtain. In some ways it is still a life-long journey

of recovery and learning. I'm probably alive today because I found a deeper purpose and passion.

At that time, leaving the military, delivering pizza, and entering the university, two powerful images from those days in Germany remained in my mind, and they ultimately drove me to start writing a story. The first, that of the falcons in the fields, and the second, of that little white factory that sat just on the other side of the barriers in that tight, frozen valley that was on the edge of the Cold War. The factory was clean and well kept, painted white, displaying a prominent red sign with gold letters proclaiming the eternal brotherhood of the DDR and the Soviet Union.

“Ha! We won the Cold War, and you lost!” was my attitude at the time. My goal was to incorporate those two visual elements into a story that expressed the ironic failure of the Communist Empire at that time.

This book started then as a short story, some 10-12 pages, about a man who worked in the factory but had no real job, he just sat alone in an isolated upstairs office and was able to see across the wall to the hilltop in the free West.

That short story, written in 1995, became a well-structured and weak screenplay. I was a cinephile, a child of the VHS revolution and the birth of the Independent Film Movement. I had a big brother in an influential position in Hollywood and dreamed of making my story into a film.

The script came out at a perfect 108 pages with a natural cinematic structure. And it was a very rough piece of work because of my lack of creative writing experience or training.

After college I sold cars for a year in Santa Fe, NM, while working on the screenplay almost daily and telling everyone about it. I took myself to LA in 1997 with some knowledge of

how the whole movie business worked thanks to independent film magazines. Once in LA, I promptly decided not to show the script to anyone, nor speak of it, and that Hollywood was hideous and would chew me up and spit me out as the Concrete Blond song “Still in Hollywood” warns.

Ultimately, I was very unsatisfied with my artistic effort and shelved the story, beginning work on my second novel, *Tumbleweed Motors*, about a car dealership on the Mexican border. I knew about selling cars, crazy car salesmen, and how weird the customers act to hide their desire for a new car, and their fear of the salesman.

Also, unfortunately, my journey of self-destruction was not nearly over, and I ended up in Mexico, living on the edge and losing a lot of weight due to my extracurricular substance abuse. I had carried a printed copy of the *Iron Curtains* script to Mexico and did nothing with it.

Once an instructor in a two hour screenwriting class had said, “put it in a drawer for 10 years”. I effectively did that, but the story would not die. The characters, the plot, and the problems I needed to solve continued to live in my mind, and in there it simply would not die, nor did I attempt to kill it. I seemed to have an innate faith that somehow this mess of my life, and the story, would somehow work itself out. I had something to tell myself, that the challenge was tremendous, and at the end of the road was some form of personal victory.

Dissatisfied with the limitations of screenwriting, in June of 2011 I began to rewrite *Iron Curtains* as a novel to maximize word usage (and boy did I). I worked on the book mostly while on business travel, or waiting for my kids in karate practice, or gymnastics, much to my ex-wife's consternation as I was not a fully present karate dad, or husband. I also had a solo overseas assignment to Saudi Arabia in 2014 and 2015 and that was writing paradise. There is very little

to do in Riyadh as an expat, except go to the mall, go to the gym, swim, sweat, and for me, write. During that period, I engaged a professional editor and completed three drafts of the book.

In 2016, back from Saudi and writing outside my daughter's gymnastics classes, I hired another editor and found out that "while I have the chops" for writing fiction, I still had a lot to learn. Several more rewrites, flash cards for every scene, and printing off a hard copy occurred in this period.

I had had my eyes on a creative writing program and, with the intention of becoming a better writer, I entered the UTEP Online MFA program in 2020. Four years later, I do believe that I have refined my skills and am nearing the time to stop writing this story, publish it, and move on to the other stories piling up in my head (more about them later).

The final product is a 525-page novel of "Love, Freedom, and Treachery". It's a story of people setting themselves free from the personal and political walls which surround them. Walls used to protect ego and self-interest, walls that say we are separate from each other, God, and Nature. The setting is 1989 Germany.

On the journey of creation of this novel, of the many lessons I learned as a writer, the following stand out:

Virtual Continuous Dream. This is the experience the reader has and the reason we love fiction. We slip into the world we're reading about and create a constant flowing series of images and sensations that allow us to fully experience a story. It's what a reader craves. We want to live the story in our brains. In his essay, *Basic Skills, Genre, and Fiction as Dream*, John Gardner defines this experience as "the importance of physical detail is that it creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind" (Gardner 30), and that the author must be careful to craft in a way that;

(I)f the effect of the dream is to be powerful, the dream must probably be vivid and continuous – *vivid* because if we are not quite clear about what we are dreaming, who and where the characters are, what it is they are doing or trying to do and why, our emotions and judgments must be confused or dissipated, or blocked; and *continuous* because a repeatedly interrupted flow of action must necessarily have less force than an action carried through from its beginning to its conclusion. (Gardner 31)

Directing the Reader. Initially, not understanding VCD or much else about the art of fiction writing, I wrote to control the reader, over-describing characters, setting, and plot. Even telling the reader to essentially “look to the left because you need to see that river over there”, and “now look to the right because you need to see that rocky outcrop that is, in my mind, situated over there”. In some sense, it seemed to me that some of this writing came from screenwriting techniques of describing what the camera sees. But even so, it was simply “not trusting the reader” or allowing them to see what they wanted to see. I wanted the reader to see things as I remembered, to see things the way I wanted them to see events, objects, and people.

Plot by the seat of your pants. Story flows naturally within us. We know structure inherently, and storytelling and experiencing is in our hearts and minds. I was surprised at the first complete draft of the screenplay, how my plotting and character arcs followed that cinematic structure effortlessly. I suspect that this innate understanding also came from the fact that I consumed a large quantity of movies as a child of the VHS era, as well as being a life-long reader.

This natural structure, the mythic structure spoken about in many books, first introduced to me in Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* (given to me by a screenwriter), which is

pretty much a summary of primarily Joseph Campbell's, *A Hero of a Thousand Faces* and is evident in that book's Table of Contents:

Departure

1. The Call to Adventure
2. Refusal of the Call
3. Supernatural Aid
4. The Crossing of the First Threshold
5. The Belly of The Whale

Initiation

1. The Road of Trials
2. The Meeting with The Goddess
3. Woman as The Temptress
4. Atonement with The Father
5. Apotheosis
6. The Ultimate Boon

Return

1. Refusal of the Return
2. The Magic Flight
3. Rescue from Without
4. The Crossing of the Return Threshold
5. Master of the Two Worlds
6. Freedom to Live

There may not be a better set of stories that reflects this structure than JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of The Rings* series. Whether Tolkien intentionally created the structure in his stories, or perhaps was simply following already mythical structures, since much of the books are drawing from Nordic Mythology, is something that has been written about at length, perhaps even in doctoral dissertations, but is outside the scope of this paper.

Equally, in my writing, the structures seemed to naturally occur and there was some learning that the characters need to take a journey that, if they were not successful in, would result in either their spiritual, psychological, or even physical death. I do not recall a reference to this concept, but I certainly kept it in mind, along with the need to form a dramatic structure and walk with it to completion.

You can see in Part 1 of *Iron Curtains* where Nick receives and refuses the call to adventure. He's had enough, and there is a secret deal between him and Smith. Tina is going to mess that up.

But the writing was amateurish, and unpracticed, the dialog was unnatural and overinformed the reader and yes, I was over-describing everything, not trusting the reader to create a proper story in their own minds. Repetition was a problem. I never did any outlining and just ran the book in my mind, letting the scenes and plot flow naturally. This, in many ways, is a fine thing to do, let the story come alive and live in your head rent free, let characters and broad ideas drive the plot, let what comes out from your fingertips surprise you.

There were many plot issues that took years to solve just thinking about them. When the manuscript got to hundreds of pages and I was taking my time, sometimes years to rewrite, I found that several major plot points could not be solved.

Ultimately, I printed off the 400+ page draft and hefted it around when I performed *Kid Logistics*. Initially, I was inevitably doing a copy edit, because that's easy and fun, and then working on dialog and plot points as I came across them.

I hired an editor for \$2500, a very elderly gentleman, Alan Rinzler, who had edited *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and works by Toni Morrison and Robert Ludlum. He gave me great insight into several plot points and my writing style and deflated my ego by bearing the bad news that I was not successful in achieving the thematic element that I was trying to achieve. The good news is that I persisted, wanted to learn, and adjust, and did that. I also didn't take some of his advice – that it was “extremely difficult to write a story from 4 to 5 points of view” and “why don't you just write it in first person, from one character's POV?” Also, the thing about length.

In order to be able to visualize what was occurring in the story, I wrote every scene “title” and plot point on index cards and laid them out on a table. I took the manuscript and divided it into sections, marking each character’s scenes with colored sticky notes – pink for her, yellow for him, etc. I even placed the sticky notes at the same part of the page for each character – Tina at the top, Nick below her, and those other guys below him.

It was a great visualization tool and let me see how much story time a character had, as well as giving me the ability to work through each character’s interspersed scenes at one time, instead of moving through the characters in the order their scenes appeared. First her, then him, then those guys.

I hauled that printed, spiral bound manuscript for a year I think, finished with it, and went back to the laptop. I kept that dear printed version for several years. First it sat on the nightstand to remind me, then it was on the floor under the nightstand, then somehow got shoved under the bed where it sat for several years gathering a lot of dust. It was heartbreaking but it finally made it to the trash bin in 2020, lockdown Spring cleaning.

Those were heartbreaking days, divorce and bankruptcy filed for on the same day, May 15, 2020, the ex and the kids went back to Mexico, I went into a sober living home provided by the VA and into an outpatient treatment program. Time to start over again, the end of my first semester in the UTEP Online MFA program. And I had my book, and I was going to finish it, Damn the Torpedoes, Full Speed Ahead!

As I focused on learning in the MFA program, book rewriting was relegated to summer breaks and, in the Summer of 2021, I completed what I said would be my penultimate rewrite. I needed to rest those creative muscles. I was tired of the story and wanted to move on to write

new material. My goal was to complete Thesis I and II, go through a final summer rewrite in 2024, and self-publish in September of that year.

Well, here we are. Still on track for that although the potential for another year's delay is possible. Maybe not.

What has been submitted to satisfy Thesis requirements is Part 1 of the book, since the entire book could not be submitted. The book is the result of a 30-year journey of taking a couple of images in my head, pecking out my first willful creative piece of 10-12 pages, turning that into a screenplay, and then turning that into a potentially publishable novel. I hope the next novel does not take as long since I don't really have thirty years left, and I don't want to "Harper Lee" my writing career. I've learned a lot and hope to complete *Tumbleweed Motors* within the next two years. Mostly on airplanes and in Starbucks where I do my best writing.

When I think back to those first pages, I often wonder where in the hell the desire to write came from, and why I decided to do it. What made me think I could even write. Honestly, I'm shocked about the amount of time I've put into it, on a very sporadic, part-time basis, and I think that most people would have given up and moved on. Perhaps I am a little obsessive and compulsive but somewhere inside me was a belief that I could even create something worthy of the writers who had most influenced me. And, fundamentally, I was driven for different reasons to write "the kind of story I'd want to read".

Of course, I had been on the front line of a historic and inspiring event and the fall of those political divisions was a very appropriate setting for a story about the need to tear down walls.

Poetics and Style

On analyzing the poetics of *Iron Curtains*, I'm considering:

- diction (word choice)
- sentence structure and syntax
- nature of figurative language
- rhythm and component sounds
- rhetorical patterns (e.g. narration, description, comparison-contrast, etc.)

(Brundage 1)

In examining the diction of my characters, I do use some words and syntax that might give a reader a hint about the personality of the character. This is most obvious in the minor character of Capt. Smith, he's a southern good old boy, and cocky, over sure of himself. This is apparent in some use of dialect (ya'll and ah righ) and behavior like putting his feet up on his desk, chewing a toothpick, a stupid wink, and talking with a mouthful of food.

In describing setting, in particular that of the natural environment, I've used a more poetic descriptive style:

A gnomesque farmhouse nestled comfortably into a hillock on the western bank, so densely covered on three sides by tall pines and thick undergrowth, it seemed to have grown from the earth like a mushroom. It sat directly across the river from a small, clean, white factory. (p 13)

In the segment below, we can see a good display of my structural style of mixing character dialog, internal thought, and narration:

He had a good feeling that this time they might be issued a vacation voucher from the Free German Trade Union Federation. In any given year, about twenty-five percent of union members got one. His family hadn't for four years and paid for last year's vacation out of their meager savings. But, because of the time passed, their chances appeared positive this year - simple mathematical odds really.

“That would be so wonderful”, he sighed. “Should I even dare to ask? And when? He’s always in such a rotten mood.”

Throw me a carrot, please.

It was a small perk, he knew. He was just an outwardly loyal, mid-level manager, carrying out his duty. He was nothing but an obscure employee, in an obscure factory, tucked into a forgotten corner of a political nowhere, at the edge of their vast Communist empire.

The predominant fear among workers was that if you did ask for a vacation, if it really looked like you needed one—or worse, even dared think you deserved one - it would be denied. Like taking a lollipop from a three-year-old. They held them out like that and then pulled them back, just to remind people who was in charge of this workers’ paradise. (p 15)

This is a common structure in my writing. The first paragraph reveals the character’s initial thought and situation, a dilemma or problem. It’s Hans’ internal thoughts signified by the phrase “He had a good feeling” and then it continues to describe the situation and his emotive response, his hope, is expressed in a piece of spoken word. There is a key development in this sentence which is designed to evoke curious response in the reader, “He’s always in such a rotten mood.” At this point in the story, the reader has no idea who “he” is but is given the feeling that he’s not a good person to deal with, and that he holds the cards over Hans’ happiness. The goal is that the reader gets a bit of foreshadowing, and the curiosity to continue reading to find out who that man is, and why he’s so rotten, and what Hans can do about it.

Then Hans thinks to himself, an internal thought, a request for pity in this case “*Throw me a carrot, please.*” Internal thoughts are marked throughout the book in italics: This phrase

should communicate a couple of things, perhaps Hans' desperation through the word "please", and also, if there is a carrot, then perhaps there is a stick. Being thrown a carrot is not a nice thing to do to another human and certainly communicates that the carrot holders do not consider the carrot receiver to be on the same level.

These italicized internal thoughts are used as sparingly as possible and for the purpose of bringing the reader even closer inside the character's mind than the typical "He thought, she recalled, he knew, she remembered that", types of devices.

Here is another example from the same scene:

Okay, Hans thought, this is weird. I've seen plenty of these birds before, perhaps even this same one. But now our eyes are locked!

His heartbeat quickened. He took a step closer. His breath softer.

The bird, unruffled, did not break eye contact.

"Hello, again," his voice gentler still.

So strong, so powerful, and so close!

Such a remarkable animal, he thought, her dark eyes staring back. Tufts of tiny yellow feathers and skin surrounded her eyes and beak. Hans could see the finest details. Little flecks of crimson, blood from her breakfast speckled her downy beard. She tilted her head, like she was also curious. (p 19)

There are other devices in use throughout the full novel, which are not apparent from Part 1. One example is that the falcon, Sasha, opens each part, Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall ("Fall" also signals the fall of the walls). She has her own journey through the landscape and a typical year in the life of a falcon – finding a mate, reproducing, losing her mate in a scene meant to foreshadow the danger to the humans in the story.

Another device is the appearance on the radio, in later parts of the novel, of the hit song “Love Shack” by the B-52s. It is used to lighten a tense moment, but also the love that is possibly growing between Nick and Tina, as well as the central theme of the book – “Love, baby, that’s where it’s at.” The song floated near the top of the charts during that Summer and Fall and, as Top Ten radio will do, it could be heard everywhere.

An additional device that appears unintentionally is the usage of hallways and small rooms confining people, their need to transition through them to freedom, indeed there is even a tunnel that is where the story’s climatic scene takes place. Nick has to transit the lonely hallway of his apartment building several times, as does Tina, and together they find a valuable lesson of life and separation in the hallway. Furthermore, Nick has to walk down the hallway of his detachment headquarters, in a fearful, paranoid moment. At the end of that walk, he faces a dilemma that ultimately forces him to confront the truth about himself.

The major challenges that I faced over the years of writing and development was creating believable characters, placing them into believable plotlines, and carrying them to the final victory. In many ways it simply happened because I spent so much time, years even, thinking about the story and solving the problems that the story presented.

One of the main problems was how to connect Tina and Hans, there was an intensely fortified border and river dividing them and, at the time, no reason for them to come together. Initially, since she is a descendant of Apache Indians, she was going to shoot an arrow across the border into his window with a note tied to it. I thankfully never wasted time actually putting those thoughts onto paper, and I toned Tina’s Indian nature way down.

One day, looking at a picture of the scene (it was a real building), I noticed the dam that diverted water into the factory, and viola, a tunnel was born. Spices were being smuggled simply

to satisfy Dieter's passion, until one day it was suggested to me that something more valuable should be at stake and bang! The result was Soviet gold and Vladimir Putin, who was actually a KGB Major in the same area from 1985 to 1990.

Carrying further the idea of walls that need to fall, it is also expressed in the characters and their situations through the walls they have built to disguise their true selves from others and sometimes from themselves.

Tina is not as powerful as she thinks. Nick is not who anyone thinks he is. Hans is not as weak as he thought, Dieter is not as heartless as he thinks he is.

I think one of the most valuable exercises was simply writing and rewriting. It allowed me to improve my skills through thousands of hours of practice and to see structures and problems. I cannot express how many times a creative solution would pop into my head and significantly impact the story I was writing. Sometimes it seemed magical, serendipitous, true "Oh my God" moments.

For example, I had no idea in 1989 what kind of factory it was and making it a paper factory seemed to express the false nature of the system it existed in then, in 2006, with the internet at my fingertips, I contacted a German government agency and discovered that it actually was a paper factory. Today it is now a lonely museum. Information and pictures of it can be found starting here on Google: "[Papierfabrik Blankenberg](#)". I've visited the factory itself three times now, in 2006, 2014 and 2023. I've read much about it and have hundreds of pictures of it and other monuments and museums to the revolution.

In crafting this story, I've drawn from several years of personal experience as the lead Counterintelligence Agent in the area when the wall fell, my own personal experience with alcoholism and childhood trauma. I've read several books and countless articles about East

Germany and the history of the Fall of the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain. I've visited at least a dozen museums and interviews a handful of East Germans, including Christian Fuehrer, the pastor of the St Nicolas church in Leizig Germany, a powerful and peaceful organizer of one of the flash points of the revolution in 1989, the Monday demonstrations in Leizig that finally helped take the wall down.

A bibliography for *Iron Curtains* is below. Of those books, one of the principal influences was *Stasiland*, by Anna Funder. I had highlighted many quotes from the text that influenced my story, particularly when trying to understand the mind of the typical East German citizen in those days.

“Betrayal clearly has its own reward: the small deep human satisfaction of having one up on someone else. It is the psychology of the mistress, and this regime used it as fuel.” (Goodreads)

“People were crazy with pain and secrets.” Goodreads)

— Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall*

If I have gained anything from the decades long experience of creating this story, it is that I can learn to create something beautiful, and I can heal. There is still even an ever so slight glimmer of hope that the world can change and save itself by tearing down all the physical, moral, and spiritual walls, but unfortunately, I mostly doubt that.

My preference would be to see it as a limited streaming series, like on Netflix or Amazon. I may even attempt to sell it in LA.

My plan for this manuscript is to do a final rewrite and edit over the summer of 2024, and self-publish in September. Then move onto the other projects.

Following up on the publication of *Iron Curtains*, I will continue with the aforementioned *Tumbleweed Motors*, a story about Bobby Robbins, a gentle man whose head is 23% larger than average. His beloved Porsche breaks down outside El Centro, CA and he takes a job as a car salesman, but he is incapable of telling a lie. If he can win the Salesman of the Month contest, the \$5,000 spiff will pay for his car repairs and he's out of there. Little did he know he'd fall in love with the crazy people who work at the dealership, their community, and Marisol, a stripper with big dreams across the border at Senor Fuzzies, in Mexicali, the first woman to ever fall in love with Bobby.

I've written about 100 pages so far. Of course, the last scene is there, and it's beautiful.

After completing that book, I plan to write *Adios Amor*, a thriller about a DEA Agent going after his best friend who has gone rogue and is involved with a bloodthirsty Mexican Cartel. He tracks his friend to a dusty bar in Sinaloa and there meets a young singer, maybe the next Shakira, on stage. Of course, love, danger, and a harrowing escape are included in a story that has existed only in my head for about 20 years.

I know *Iron Curtains* is not a perfect piece of work, but it has been a tremendous part of my life. I do still dream of seeing it on a screen someday, my original goal. What is significant about this possibility is that the theme will simply reach more people. And, when I originally started writing this as a screenplay, CGI was in its infancy. The idea of having a falcon fly over the Iron Curtain was still a technical stretch. Now Hollywood can create whatever scene they want.

As writing this book has taught me, dreams come true, and often arrive from unexpected sources.

Lack of faith is the first wall that has to fall.

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Iron Curtains
A Novel of Germany, 1989

By John G. Dodson

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Bond and Free

Love has earth to which she clings
With hills and circling arms about,
Wall within wall to shut fear out.
But thought has no need of such things,
For thought has a pair of dauntless wings.

On snow and sand and turf, I see,
Where love has left a printed trace,
With straining in the world's embrace.
And such is Love and glad to be,
But thought has shaken his ankles free.

—Robert Frost

We all know success when we all find our own dream,
And our love is enough to knock down any walls,
And the future's been seen as men try to realize,
The simple secret of the note in us all, in us all.
-Pure and Easy, Pete Townshend

Prologue

0053hrs GMT 61'52'11'69/29'02'55'41, Soviet-Finnish border, December 24, 1986.

Bloody snow at night looks black.

Black snow surrounded Nick He dropped the small body he'd been dragging. His hand, the one without the gun, was soaked black. He rubbed it on his coat and held it up. Still black, just not dripping anymore.

Their tracks scattered and converged, circling around the trees. Her twisted little body, curls covering her face, her pretty white dress shredded and stained, lay lifeless. He looked away, grimaced in shame. Black snow.

One of the dogs lie nearby, panting out its last breaths.

Ringling ears smothered crack-pops of rifles and whizzing past bullets. Shots splintered wood next to his head, yanking him out of the daze. Dropping prone, Nick rolled against the thick tree trunk, aiming at the muzzle flashes. The dog's handler closed in fast, low. Two pumps

from his gun and the guard dropped right next to his dog, blackness spreading from what was left of his head.

Nick's ears screamed, gunshots ringing.

The battle, raging a few dozen meters away, edged closer to the barbed wire fence.

Over there!

Get over there! Across that wire, to the midnight black Suburban waiting on the Finnish side.

"Now or never!" he told the shocked woman at his side.

She only moaned, deep and overflowing pain, falling limp to cover her daughter's torn body, She brushed icy hair out of her daughter's unresponsive face, already turning blue.

Across the wire, Nick spied her husband, the KGB General, scrambling into the Suburban, barely a look back, unaware, or uncaring.

Captain Smith, his team leader, shoulder-shoved the old Russian officer's ass into the Chevy. Smith turned and threw down covering fire, popping off errant rounds back across the Soviet border. On the other side of the clearing, beyond the corpses of their extraction team, more wary border guards approached.

Persistent fuckers, aren't they?

Nick, still the soldier, on point, appraised the situation.

The General's wife sat in the bloody snow, cradling her baby's limp body, crying so deep and harmed. He shut his eyes to it. He shivered.

If I get out of this alive, that's a sound I'll never forget.

She threw her head back, her cry drowning the night.

Suddenly Smith took aim at him, popping off a couple of rounds. Nick dove for cover, surprised, as Smith jumped into the vehicle and slammed the door. The engine roared and the dark SUV slipped in the deep snow until its traction caught. Soviet bullets thumped the rear gate, shattering a taillight, and the vehicle dissolved into the night, down the dark road.

Hey that's my fucking ride, too!

Two more border guards cautiously circled the soldier's position about twenty meters east. Beyond, another patrol jeep barreled over the low, snow-blown ridge, flanking into the fight.

Alarms blared in the soldier's head. He had to go.

Now!

"Ma'am, I'm worse than dead on this side of the border. Time to go!"

Her eyes pleaded for help. Nick held out his hand, but she just turned to her dead child, shaking, her body shuddering with grief.

He calculated the odds of getting them both out of this alive

Big fat zero.

Nick pivoted west and ducked into a run, abandoning her. His soldier's heart grew cold and dark again, his now unlikely survival meaning more than hers.

He burst through the tree line and crossed into the small clearing.

Guards shouted, raised rifles, taking aim.

He zigged, zagged, dove through the cut fence, A piece of barbed wire slashed his face deep, just missing his eye. His hand snatched his cheek. Slipping, his feet struggling to find a hold in the snow. Black seeped through the fingers held to his face.

Three bounds up the incline, through Smith's footprints, he made the road. Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet nowhere in sight. A hopeful gunshot echoed behind, and he fired back aimlessly. A vicious snap slashed his leg, a lucky shot ripped into the meat of his thigh.

Unlucky for me.

Spun to the ground, the hit knocked the air out of him. Nick lay breathless, in the middle of the ice-packed road. He watched border guards converge on the lady, shouting harsh commands, their rifles trained on her indifferent silhouette. She just lay on her baby.

Is this it? This how Nicky ends?

He huffed "no!"

Nick grunted against the pain, rolling onto his stomach.

No, not this soldier!

Prone, with one good leg, he pushed across the elevated road. A final, desperate shove, he disappeared over the edge, rolled down the opposite grade and into the frozen Finnish swamp. He gasped, eyes wide, dying - like the dogs he'd put down only moments before. Echoes of shouting guards closing on the border.

"I hope they don't cross that line."

Not gonna wait to find out!

Huffing, he ripped the scarf from his neck, wrapping his bloody thigh. A small chunk was missing, but the blood flow was light, a good sign. Not arterial. Still, it throbbed like an ambulance siren.

"I'll fucking bleed out here alone before I freeze."

Alone, like the day I was born.

Testing his limbs, Nick stood, keeping low, concealed from the other side, he hobbled. He looked into the icy night, following the road Smith disappeared down.

Smith.

Nick's whole body tensed, holding in the scream.

FUCK!!!

"Fucking wrote me off! For dead! Everybody else is, except for the lady. Seems like Smith expended the whole team off to get the General out. Achieve the objective. Expended and expedited.

A quick body count. He replayed the bloodbath in his mind. Two double agents and three KGB border guards - five bodies and two dogs, dead, lay in black snow a few hundred meters back.

Six bodies, Nick corrected himself. The little girl.

Seven, may as well count the lady, too. If she wasn't dead already, there was an executioner's bullet with her name etched on it, and a pockmarked brick wall behind her.

The air above him began to throb like his leg.

Fuck, they ain't done yet!

He looked up into the impenetrable dark sky.

This chase ain't over.

An Mi-8 helicopter's blades beat down the frigid air, a sound he knew only too well. Hugging the border, its searchlight rapidly scanned the road he struggled alongside. Nick dove into frozen bushes until it passed overhead, its angry spotlight missing him by mere feet.

They had succeeded, in part. They had gotten the General out. That had been the mission - a KGB General defecting with his family, intelligence coup of the decade.

Yeah, what's up with these KGB guys? Same play in Afghanistan last year. But Smith just tried to close the loop. On me. On fucking me.

This section of the border was supposed to be quiet. One double agent had infiltrated the border guards a week prior. That was the easy part - the KGB controlled the border guards. The General had set that up, Smith briefed him. Late last night their agent had simply carried a couple of bottles of vodka to share with the troops, a gift from Moscow on Christmas Eve. Even seventy years of Communism couldn't squash the Holy Jesus holiday spirit. And no good Russian could turn down the cold bite of that clear liquid.

I'd take a bottle now.

All hell had broken loose when the extraction team and their "packet" crossed into the clearing, about a hundred meters short from the actual border. Floodlights snapped on and Wild, Wild West shooting followed. Nick had protected his charges, the wife and daughter, pulling them away from the extraction point, flanking them into the woods.

Two hungry dogs had come after them. His mistake, he'd fired first at their handlers, hitting one, driving the other into cover. Then he killed the dogs. One of them, too late.

He remembered Smith shooting at the border guards through his teammates. At least that's how it seemed. He wondered about that, Smith making a rookie mistake. Smith was no rookie. You don't shoot through your own team. He was exterminating the Russian double agents. No loose ends.

Why would Smith try to kill me? After everything I've done for God and Country?

There was no way to know who had struck whom with which bullets. Shoving the General into the vehicle, Smith fired at Nick and bolted. He thought about those shots. If it was true, it was a lame attempt. Smith would know the job wasn't finished. He'd come back.

To complete him.

Nick crept, staggered through the pitch-black night, shivering from the paralyzing arctic air and his own adrenaline, the good soldier inside him worked the puzzle. Black wetness from his cheek soaked his collar - cold, sticky where it froze on his face and neck. The leg throbbed weaker as his blood pressure sank.

He stumbled, slipped, and ended up on his back in a large bed of powdery snow.

So damn comfortable.

Clouds of heavy breaths rose into the dark night. A green boreal curtain of flickered above, massaging the night, teasing him. Relax.

Just stay here a while. The stars look nice. Enjoy the light show. It's Christmas.

Merry Fucking Christmas, Sergeant.

He was amazed he'd even noticed.

Stay here and die.

His hand searching, squeezing, he stuck his thumb into the leg wound. Sharp pain brought focus. Nick tried to picture the operational map from the briefing, the one that Smith had safeguarded in his pocket. Red marks showed the extraction point and escape route. He didn't remember seeing a town or farmhouse on that map. Just the compass mark pointing north, the Soviet border to the east. Nick looked west. Supposed to be a curve up ahead, away from the border.

Good idea.

Rolling over, pushing to his feet, the pain washed dizzy nausea through him. Trudging through the snow, he took a cautious peek over the top of the road. Nothing was going on back over there. Post battle quiet. Hush little baby don't say a word.

Ghostly quiet after the chaos of twenty minutes ago. He checked his body; the way people check their pockets for missing keys.

No, no other wounds.

Just the gash and the slash, both pulsing for attention. His ears still singing a high soprano. Hands, wet, black, sticky, but it wasn't her blood anymore.

I need a doc, a hospital, quickly, or at least a farmhouse, a car with a first-aid kit, he thought.

Pushing on, lightheaded, he marched forward, just like a good soldier should.

Yeah, I'd been a good soldier once, the best.

Exhaling the tension, he struggled along the leeward side of the road, always bearing west.

West is best.

A stop to listen, he peeked over the berm again. No noise, near or far. He used some bushes and pulled himself up the incline, out of the marsh. Feet soaked.

Fucking ice cold. Two, three hours in this freeze and I'll be a popsicle.

Two types of vehicle tracks engraved the snow packed road. Multiple thin ones, probably from those flimsy Finnish border patrol tin jeeps. And thick ones, from the big American SUV. Goodyear radials.

Fuck, I don't know, maybe Firestone.

His legs failed. The soldier sat down hard, drained.

More than drained. Dying.

Yawning, a fight for breath, the ringing in his ears droned louder. Dizziness joined in, vibrations dancing a tango in his skull.

Light and easy now, like he was levitating....

Stand up, soldier! Keep going!

His body refused. It lay in the road, surrendering, the buzz in his head roaring, the night painfully brighter.

Blinding headlights approached carefully, ice crunching. Nick kicked out his left leg, desperately seeking some traction.

Get... off this road.

Lights so bright. Maybe it was a Finnish patrol. Or maybe it was Smith, coming back to save him.

I kind of doubt that, motherfucker!

Maybe it was the Soviets, they'd actually crossed in pursuit.

To finish me off right here!

Burning headlights painted the steam floating off his body.

The vehicle stopped. Blinded, the only thing Nick could see were military boots advancing cautiously. Trying to sit, one hand searched for his sidearm, trying to see who it was, then he collapsed flat onto the road.

Smith hadn't been wearing military boots.

He shivered on the frozen road. Wet. Black snow. Dying.

It might not be a bad thing, you know. All over with, right here, now. Stop this buzzing. No memory of this horrible night. No more missions.

His eyes closed.

The good soldier's body and mind finally gave in, finding peace in oblivion.

Part 1 -Winter, 1989

I

Her young blood surged, her wings felt strong, eyes sharp, her mind in control. She vaulted into the indefinite gray, lifting on a weak thermal, wafting through the low haze.

A cry to the sky.

Her wing beats sliding higher, gliding gracefully, watchful, she hunted for movement in the fields, perhaps a small mouse, a scarce squirrel, or an even scarcer dove.

The frozen fog cocooned the misty little valley—in lower meadows delicate, on the hills a thickening cloud assertive through gaps in the treetops. The fog was a permanent fixture this time of year. It pushed down heavily, combining snow-covered fields with dark, gray-green trees and hills, giving the geography an oppressed form.

She drifted over her nest, empty at the moment. Snuggled against a small cleft, the nest overlooked a gentle meandering river and the concrete wall that divided the narrow valley. The falcon, now two years old, had yet to find a mate, but the time for that was coming soon.

Cruising east, she flew over the walls, guard towers, and barbed wire. On one side, all the trees had been eliminated, and these cleared fields, the Death Strip as men knew it, were her best hunting grounds. In some places nearly one hundred yards wide, no man except the occasional border patrol ever moved within. In the valley below her nest, the kill zone narrowed, squeezed

by the surrounding river and hills. On both sides of the barrier the hills were darkened by dense forest, bush, bramble, and brume.

Aside from the powerful partition, the only other sign of humanity was two buildings, one on each side of the border, both quietly inserting a little more mist from their chimneys into the smoky valley.

A gnomesque farmhouse nestled comfortably into a hillock on the western bank, so densely covered on three sides by tall pines and thick undergrowth, it seemed to have grown from the earth like a mushroom. It sat directly across the river from a small, clean, white factory.

The factory, on the eastern side, was an island in and of itself. Two kilometers from the nearest village, it stood on the banks of the Saale, a modest river with the Iron Curtain splitting the middle of it.

Gliding over her territory, she hunted any movement below. Eyes like binoculars, she could spot a small rodent from five hundred feet as if it were only five feet away.

Right there! A tiny mouse dug through the snow.

Tracking, wings tucked in, she dove, never losing sight of her target over the rapidly closing distance. In the final two hundred feet of her silent dive, she reached a life-affirming speed of two hundred and twenty miles an hour, the fastest animal alive.

Sometimes the prey felt her coming and panicked, trying to flee. The birds she chased knew instinctively to scramble and scatter—in terror and often in vain. A small mouse, however, could only slip down a hole or deeper into the snow. Sometimes she could dig it out, but many times she failed.

Not this time. Striking hammer-like, she made a successful catch. The doomed field mouse never knew what hit it. The falcon took off with her prey, squeezing out what little life remained

after the shock of impact. Flying higher, she sought a comfortable perch on which to break her fast.

In Europe, *falco peregrinus* was severely endangered. Its populations and territories decimated, like many other wild animals, by years of war and human advancement, but also by its own sensitivity to chemical pollution. High levels of environmental toxins had seeped into the food chain, weakened its eggshells, and challenged its eggs to mature to hatchlings.

In this particular spot, however, the immediate zone surrounding the Inner German border, the border between East and West Germany, the birds' recovery progressed much better. As a result of the political standoff, the area remained relatively wild, devoid of dense human populations, large scale development, and their impact. The East German Kill Zone was effectively a wildlife sanctuary and completely unintentional.

Biologists estimated a local density of one bird per ten square kilometers. Indeed, every kind of fauna were markedly higher directly on either side of the Iron Curtain.

This bird did cross the border at will, although she knew nothing of the war or ideologies that made men consider the barrier either good or evil. These walls, towers, and fences did not impede her. She held neither interest in, nor fear of, guard dogs or border patrols. She merely flew over them, from her hilltop nest in the west to her foggy hunting fields in the east.

2

Hans Jürgens, in his small, baby blue Trabant, slowly sputtered along through that same enveloping fog. He maneuvered slowly around a crumbling pothole, cautiously down the tattered

road. This was the final stretch to the factory, still half a kilometer away. Empty fields on the right lay before the wall. He shifted down hard, skittering around a dark corner dominated by a rocky crag. His thoughts drifted again to the hopelessly faraway dream of a warm summer vacation.

He had a good feeling that this time they might be issued a vacation voucher from the Free German Trade Union Federation. In any given year, about twenty-five percent of union members got one. His family hadn't for four years and paid for last year's vacation out of their meager savings. But, because of the time passed, their chances appeared positive this year - simple mathematical odds really.

"That would be so wonderful", he sighed. "Should I even dare to ask? And when? He's always in such a rotten mood."

Throw me a carrot, please.

It was a small perk, he knew. He was just an outwardly loyal, mid-level manager, carrying out his duty. He was nothing but an obscure employee, in an obscure factory, tucked into a forgotten corner of a political nowhere, at the edge of their vast Communist empire.

The predominant fear among workers was that if you did ask for a vacation, if it really looked like you needed one—or worse, even dared think you deserved one - it would be denied. Like taking a lollipop from a three-year-old. They held them out like that and then pulled them back, just to remind people who was in charge of this workers' paradise.

"Just maybe?"

Even so, he wondered how best to approach Dieter, his de facto boss, and Communist Party Chief at the factory, cheerleader of the proletariat, the common man, on this matter of an inconsequential vacation for his humble little family.

“Cheerless, really” he scoffed.

He recalled the gray beaches of the Baltic coast. At least up there? That far north, the summer sun was weak, but still warm enough, almost eighteen hours a day. When it wasn’t overcast and rainy. Evenings were lucent so late, and dawns broke early, allowing long days together as a family.

“To be sure, it wasn’t much of a vacation spot.” Inge had said it several times in different ways, so he wouldn’t forget.

“It’s not Ibiza or Mallorca.”

“But who on earth gets to go there, anyway? Those are unreachable exotics?”

“Only the highest ranking and best connected party members, my love.”

She’d shut the curtain on the view of frigid beach again for like the third time in an hour. Sat back on the bed and picked up the deck of cards, shuffling them briskly.

“You know there’s like four cards missing, right?”

“Ace of Spades, Queen of Hearts, King of Diamonds, Jack of Clubs. I keep track of them.”

“Why not us? We’re compliant and complacent.”

“We weren’t before. Maybe they know something.”

She threw the cards at him, they fluttered everywhere and that made the kids stand, laughing, picking them up. Who could grab more?

My love, it’s just politicians and famous social figures, writers, actors, athletes.” He made his voice sound like the reporter from the 6pm news. That made her laugh too.

“Only those critical and correct members of society are sanctioned to join the Communist Party elite at those prime vacation spots on the warm Black Sea, in the Soviet Union. Even then,

their extended families were figuratively held hostage back in East Germany out of fear that the vacationing *apparatchiki* would never return from Sochi or Novorossiysk.

“I do so hate that man and his stupid “news” program. Such propagandist horse crap!”

Hans eyes widened and he looked at Emiel. He wasn’t listening to her as he raced Sofie for cards.

“We were prominent athletes.” He reminded her.

A stone in the middle of the road brought him back to the moment.

Two weeks on the beach! Summer so impossibly far away! The audacity to dream! Oh, God willing, what heaven it could be, he began to hope again.

With luck, maybe they’d even receive a hotel voucher and not have to stay at a campground. The family would play all day in the surf, their pale skin tanning, even from the oblique midsummer sun. They’d eat so well at the hotel and, after the completely exhausted kids had collapsed in the other bed, asleep, and they’d quietly make love every night.

Poor Inge, he recalled. Often, she’d cry afterwards, breathless. He’d cry with her, sometimes quietly, alone in his heart. They rarely spoke of the reason anymore, but tears came for the lie they lived and told their children. Deceit about what was real and good in the world. His hope suddenly faded; the factory was just around the next bend in the road.

“Freedom was at our feet, Hans!”, she cried.

“It was betrayal Inge, treachery.”

Treachery because they’d nearly won their freedom once, a lifetime ago, their only chance evaporating, leaving them the rest of their lives it seemed to face their failure to escape this prison of the body, mind, and soul.

“The only thing that matters now is that we are together, my love. All we need to survive, it seems to me, is our love as a family.

Our love, our family Hans, is captive behind these walls. That’s why we dreamed.

“We were kids then, my love.”

“And so strong. Emiel, Sofie, give me my cards.”

Hans looked out the car window at the frigid dark gray winter and continued motoring. The car felt to him like it slowed, unwilling, begrudging to reach the factory on the first day of work,

“Happy New Year, it’s 1989. He gently patted the wooden dashboard. Trying to encourage the car, but not too hard. Carefully, he reminded himself.

Before negotiating that final curve of patchy road leading to the factory gate, he rolled his Trabi to a stop on the narrow shoulder. He ratcheted the emergency brake (careful that you don’t pull it off!) and sat, engine idling, little blue gray clouds wheezed from the tailpipe. He stared out the windscreen to the frozen landscape beyond. The only sign of life he saw was the tip of a guard tower, but still, they couldn’t see him from there. At least he didn’t think so.

His knee pulsed. Always in the wet cold. Shifting his weight, the seat squeaking its protest, he stretched. Soft sunlight and blue sky peeked through the fog, quickly smothered again in its vaporous embrace.

Hans scratched the wipers across the windshield, got out and scraped the window with his gloved hand. Done, he stood erect, took a deep breath, and stretched his knee (careful you don’t tear it!). It had never perfectly healed after his fall. Or maybe it was his heart (careful!) that never perfectly healed, broken by their vanished dream.

This was his quiet time, a brief respite before facing reality. He tried to enjoy the final moment of another day, another year just underway, without the sight of that impassible wall blocking his life.

The river and the road flowed together around the bend to the factory.

No, that wall cannot stop that river!

He stretched the knee again, cautiously, and regarded the snow-covered fields guarded by black hills, blank fog blurring trees into the sky. A small brown shape at the side of the road broke through the monochrome pattern, drawing his attention.

“Hello” Hans said.

A falcon was perched on a roadside post not five meters away, staring directly at him. The bird had something in its claws. After a moment, it bent, tearing a bite. Hans warily lowered his leg from the stretch.

“Hello, little friend.” He cleared his throat quietly.

The falcon stopped feeding and looked at him.

Okay, Hans thought, this is weird. I’ve seen plenty of these birds before, perhaps even this same one. But now our eyes are locked!

His heartbeat quickened. He took a step closer. His breath softer.

The bird, unruffled, did not break eye contact.

“Hello, again,” his voice gentler still.

So strong, so powerful, and so close!

Such a remarkable animal, he thought, her dark eyes staring back. Tufts of tiny yellow feathers and skin surrounded her eyes and beak. Hans could see the finest details. Little flecks of

crimson, blood from her breakfast speckled her downy beard. She tilted her head, like she was also curious.

A distant motor revved. She tensed and leapt airborne, straight at Hans, passing low over his head. A strong brush from her wings stirred his hair. His eyes widened and he raised his fist.

“Ja wohl!” he shouted, breathless. Yes, indeed!

As he watched, the bird flew west through a drifting patch of fog. Then she banked a hard right across the border, disappearing into dark pines at the top of the hill.

Hans’s exhalations floated into the fog. He caught his breath. Lowering his arm, a quiet feeling fell over him.

That peace was shattered by the heavy rattling diesel, coasting slowly in approach. Hans faced the racket and found the gray Wartburg of Dieter Wolff looming.

Nervous, he lifted his foot again to stretch the knee, offering a restrained smile and feeble wave. Dieter offered a relaxed civilian half-salute and continued driving by. His dull colored sedan slowed at the final bend. Its single brake light (one was broken) blinked on. Hans could see Dieter eyeing him in his rearview mirror. The brake light blinked off and the car spewed a black fog of exhaust, disappearing around the curve.

Hans shivered in disgust. He spit at the ground and then looked around as if someone were watching.

“Well, he despises us, too” he said to no one there. “He doesn’t even try to hide it unless he’s on the stage.”

The magical moment was ruined. He stretched his knee one more time (careful, don’t tear it!), got into his car, gently shutting the door (careful, don’t break it!) and let down the emergency brake (carefully!).

Hans shifted and cringed, grinding his dear Trabant's gears. Roadside ice and gravel crunched underneath as he rolled forward, following Dieter's car into the gloom.

Approaching the gate, the mist tightened. Fat Johann Schmidt, barely awake at this hour and probably still pretty drunk, stood watch at the guard shack's door. Hans's coughing exhaust provoked a raised eyebrow.

"Ja wohl," the guard mumbled, lazily waving permission to pass. He then settled heavily back into his chair inside the shack.

By the time Hans pulled into the parking lot, Dieter was already at the building, peering back at him disapprovingly. Had Dieter seen his arm raised in joy at the falcon? Was it an act that could raise uncomfortable questions? He winced at the thought, certain people might interpret it as a rebellious act, as some sort of victory salute. His same arm twitched, he wanted to raise his fist again and shout at the top of his lungs.

Dieter turned away from Hans to examine the factory's freshly painted façade.

No small amount of the factory's resources went into maintaining his wall, keeping it nice and white. Indeed, the wall facing west was painted every three months, at a minimum. It was a weak paint though, white only for the countless coatings underneath. Above the main door, facing the border, a huge, bold-red banner proudly stated in large gold letters:

The Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic—

United Together Forever in the Brotherhood of Socialism!

Looking proud, Dieter craned his neck to better inspect the sign. A contented smile, he scraped his feet on the doormat and entered the building.

Hans got out of his car and started to gently shut its door. (careful, don't hurt it!) But then, in frustration, he pulled the door back open, slamming it as hard as he dared, wincing. Luckily, the glass didn't shatter. A biting gust made him tighten his coat and lower his head against the chill.

Walking to the factory door, Hans looked, neither at the white factory wall, nor the red banner, but instead over the border to where the falcon had flown. From here he couldn't see her.

Not wanting to draw undue attention, he lowered his gaze, and entered the dark factory. Again.

3

The alarm jolted the muddled morning. Unwilling to play, Nick smacked the snooze button and tumbled back into a murky, hung-over sleep.

The nightmare had returned. Running, black snow, dark night, pulling the girl. Her weight dragged him deeper in endless snow, dogs closing fast. Sometimes he woke in time, sometimes the nightmare won. This morning, gratefully, the alarm interrupted before it became bloody, full of pain.

The buzzer's renewed squawk hunted through Nick's fog, invading, demanding his attention. His hand found the off button. An unwilling eye opened and the first thing that came into focus was his handgun on the nightstand. A single, dark eye looking right back at him.

Funny, he thought, I don't remember taking it out last night. Then again, he thought, I don't even remember coming home.

He reluctantly sat up, picked up the gun and a cigarette. Flicking the safety on, he tossed it heavy back onto the nightstand. He fired up the cigarette, a satisfying drag, smoke following him all the way to the bathroom.

Leaning forward to urinate, he angled his head to keep the smoke from burning his eyes. At the sink he avoided the mirror, not wanting to see some aspect of his drunken father or disinterested mother looking back. But like everyone else, he couldn't avoid the self-inspection.

"Dude, beat to crap." he said, wincing from the smoke. Pretty bad today, he thought, the weary man looking back at him.

"Time to get sobered up, no?"

His reflection in the mirror, incriminating dark circles under the eyes, said it did not give a shit anymore.

Nick examined the scar on his right cheek. It didn't look like it was healing well. It felt like a constant reminder of his failure. He took a final drag on the cigarette, rubbed his tired eyes and the week-long stubble.

Not military at all, no fucking Sir.

The tossed cigarette butt hissed in the yellow toilet water.

He limped back to the bed, some stiffness in his thigh. Another cigarette, he blew out the first puff with distaste. The tobacco was stale.

He smoked in the dark, rubbing the scar on his leg without looking at it. He didn't want to see it. If he looked, it hurt more. Itched. His cheek too.

The studio was small by American standards, but large by European ones—about three hundred square feet. Tight and dark, smoky, and cozy, Empty beer bottles, many containing cigarette butts, sat everywhere: the kitchen counter, the desk, the dresser, coffee table, even on top of the TV. Its screen was severely cracked, spiderwebbing from a fist-shaped punch.

Books lie scattered in uneven piles, opened to where they had last been read. Three were pyramided on the nightstand, lightly dusted with ashes that had missed the bottle currently serving as an ashtray.

“You might say Cap, that being stationed alone is not good for Nick’s military bearing.” He laughed aloud then looked at the gun.

“Not that I’ve ever needed much in this line of work.” He picked up the weapon. It was the one thing he kept spotless, ready for inspection, or use.

He picked up a different bottle from the nightstand, peered down its brown neck to verify that it held no butts, tilted up, and swigged down the warm, flat brew. With a light, unsatisfying belch, he pushed the dying cigarette butt into the hole.

“Okay, fuck, time to go to work.” He limped back to the bathroom, unafraid of the mirror this time. Smacking his face several times, he turned on the water, lathered, and shaved. Wiping the steam off the mirror, he hoped for improvement. There was some. He flexed, his chest and arms rippled. His body still bristled with strength and potential, so much potential. Like I used to have, he thought. A couple of bones creaked and his neck double-popped when he jerked his head. He still felt rock hard strong, but the abuse was evident.

“Fuck it, still a bad-ass lethal weapon, baby. Good enough for *this* man’s army.”

His reflection no longer believed it.

His teeth brushed, he picked up a black stained mug. Yesterday’s coffee. Without consideration he rinsed his mouth with the cold java and spit brown foam into the sink.

“Need hot bean juice.”

He hastily made his bed, just throwing the covers over. He dressed in a wrinkled jacket and tie and searched around the floor for something,

“Where’d I toss that thing?”.

Behind another stack of books piled against the wall, he found the badge and credentials. He blew off a hanging lint ball, dusted the badge on his shirt, and grabbed his gun from the nightstand, weighing it in his hand. It was a good weapon, heavy, dependable - Army issue M1911 Colt .45. Nick hadn’t fired it in two years. At this point he only intended to fire it one more time.

“A substantially final solution,” he muttered.

He holstered the gun with authority. Grabbing another smoke, into the hallway, he lit up and walked down the long, dark corridor, past the doors of neighbor’s unknown. The further he walked, the less his thigh hurt.

At the building’s front door, he paused, checking outside. His defensive perimeter immediately extended down both sides of the street as he scanned for potential threats.

Coast clear.

The street was busy with morning buzz. People and cars moved with purpose. He detected no threats.

Bayreuth was an elegant town, but he didn’t think about it much. It had some infamy because of Hitler’s obsession with Wagnerian tragedy. Richard Wagner had built his opera house, the Festspielhaus, here, and Hitler had visited as often as possible. The Reichsführer had especially enjoyed the annual performance of The Ring Cycle, a seventeen-hour operatic marathon held over four days, about the renunciation of love in order to gain ultimate power. Mesmerized by the concept of cycles of destruction and rebirth, Hitler secretly suspected that ultimate destruction might be necessary in order to create a renewed, stronger Germany.

Bayreuth also fit nicely into the Führer's travel plans on the road to Berlin, a mere hour north of Nuremberg, where so many grandiose Nazi rallies occurred. Later, the city also fit nicely into the Norden bombsites of the U.S. Army Air Corp. Many hundreds of bombs were dropped on it in vengeance, solely as a statement, to destroy one of Hitler's favorite cities and punish the German Volk. Bayreuth had held no strategic importance but was left two-thirds in ruins anyway. Fuck 'em.

A short two-block stroll brought Nick to his office, upstairs from the MP station on a tiny military post a few blocks from downtown. A weird place, tucked away in the middle of the city, occupied only by a small engineering company and the MP Station. Like all U.S. Army posts, it was a holdover from World War II, taken over from the defeated Nazis.

Walking in, Nick barely grunted at the Desk Sergeant, then lumbered up the stairs to his office. He flipped through the two combinations on the gate, swung it open, and unlocked the vault door behind it. Everything here was double- or triple-locked - doors, desks, safes, everything. The theory was that anything could be broken into but, given enough locks as a barrier, someone trying to penetrate would be delayed long enough for detection and enough time for police or guards and dogs to come running. This elevated the risk of attempting entry and the likelihood of getting caught. A layer of protection, think about it carefully before you try, spy guy. Besides, the MP desk downstairs was always manned.

He entered the office, closed the door, and turned off the light that he'd left burning all weekend.

When was that? Yesterday?

No, yesterday had been Monday, a day off for the New Year's holiday. He hadn't been in the office for five days, celebrating the long weekend drinking, either alone in his room or alone in a bar. He shut the blinds and lay on the couch, one arm over his eyes, settling in comfortably.

"Special Agent Nick Torman," he grumbled, letting out a relaxed breath, "reporting for duty, sir."

Moments later, he was already snoring when his secure telephone unit, a STU-III, started its characteristic shrill. More bones cracking, Nick rose quickly on the first ring, awake and alert, and not missing a beat. He unlocked his desk drawer, pulled out a black key by the second ring, tossed it over his shoulder with one hand, caught it behind his back with the other, and inserted it into the phone just as the third ring began. He knew the drill.

"Special Agent Torman," he answered smartly. "This line is not secure."

"Go secure, Torman," a voice crackled through his earpiece.

Nick rolled his eyes and kept his sigh of disappointment from escaping directly into the mouthpiece. He turned the key, pushed a button on the top of the phone, and waited until the indicator light flashed green.

"Secure," he said.

"Nick! It's Smith." The scrambled voice came through strangely metallic. Almost everybody hated the STU-III for this reason alone, for the twisted speech it turned out. The delay as it ciphered and deciphered prevented easy communication—something that he and Smith did not practice anymore, anyway. Nick hated it because STU-III calls always meant real work, always bad news.

"Yes, sir. Good morning, sir," Nick answered facetiously.

“Cut the crap, Torman! Happy New Year. Glad to see that ya’ll are up and at ’em bright and early, like the professional soldier you are.”

“Hu-rah Captain. Working on a report, sir,” Nick answered, looking at the couch he planned to return to, about half a second after he hung up.

“I have something for ya’ll, Torman,” Smith said curtly.

“Sir, do you know what day it is today, sir?”

“No. What day is it, Torman?”

“As of today, I am three hundred and ninety-five days short in this man’s Army, Cap’n. So, *it is* a Happy New Year! My last year in your Army.”

“Well, good for you, baby cakes!” Smith mocked. “Now, Torman, ya’ll know that you ain’t short till you eat here and shit there. So, I don’t wanna hear that bullshit coming out of your mouth for another three hundred and ninety-four days, at least. Ya’ll still belong to us for another year and change, ah-righ?”

“Crystal clear, Sir.”

“Now, you need to come and report in. I got a nice little job for you. It’ll keep ya busy for the rest of y’all’s miserable days in my United States Army.”

“What?” Exasperated, his mouth opened slack, a strain growing tighter in his chest. His hand searched for the chair behind him to sit down. “Sir, the deal was caretaker duty.”

There was a silent and uncomfortable pause on both ends.

“Hey,” Nick continued, “I was promised no more missions after—”

“I know, damn it!” Smith yelled, “But look, this hardly a mission. It’s just gonna be a major time suck for ya, Chief,” he cackled in a weird way. Nick stared at the mouthpiece. “Call it a chance to leave your legacy. Be here in ninety, ah-righ?”

That was Smith's characteristic conversation closer. He said "ah-righ" all the time to gain agreement, but the cowboy in him always drawled it out slow and West Texas smooth, slipping over the "l" and dropping the final *t*.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, ah-righ."

Smith hung up, cutting off the protest and leaving Nick staring at the phone in his hand. The dial tone crackled.

"Fuck!" Nick slammed the receiver down hard. Then he shoved it even harder into the cradle, squeezing tightly, as if he could choke the living shit out of it. His whole body shook, he released the phone, and buried the tension somewhere—most likely, back into himself.

He picked up another cold, unfinished half-mug of old coffee. Nothing was floating in it, but over five days old he thought the better of it. He set it down hard, lit a smoke, opened the safe, pulled out an unusual looking hat from the top drawer, threw it on, then grabbed his keys and was out the door, slapping locks shut and spinning their dials. A white form sat on top of the safe.

Fuck them and my initials, it's my safe. He neglected to initial the form, that he'd opened and closed the safe. A clear violation of Army regulations.

Five minutes later, he was speeding down the Autobahn at 130 miles an hour. Driving fast but carefully, he stewed in his juices, performing routine counter-surveillance measures. An hour to to HQ in Nuremberg.

Nick hated going into the detachment headquarters, which he only had to do once every month, or two, at most. Being left alone was best and, as he'd just reminded the captain, that was part of their special arrangement.

His grip strangled the steering wheel as he aggressively passed two cars. His anxiety tightened the closer he got to HQ. He fired up another smoke and spoke with deep scorn into the rearview mirror, as if someone inside it were listening.

“That was ‘The Deal,’ Cap’n. No more missions after we fucked up the last one.” He blew smoke hard into the mirror. “That was ‘The Deal’”.

The rearview mirror did not reply.

4

Dieter entered, struggling with his heavy briefcase, trying to look like this was just another ordinary day. As factory leader, he knew many were watching. The workers, the guards and, he had to assume, some informants or other political spies.

We’ve done too good of a job, he thought, so many eyes watching. Even though everyone here at the factory was subordinate, he was certain they were keeping an eye on him. In East Germany, being watched was taken for granted, by everyone.

He laughed to himself, of the secrets he held under their very noses.

Well, if some part of their apparatus does have me in its sights, I have higher motives and more powerful people who will protect me. Even from them.

He’d been playing this game too long. And those powerful people could play with the East German state. Mr. Abramov had assured him. Nevertheless, at this moment, although his outward appearance was normal, inside he was shaking like a teenage boy on a first date with a condom in his pocket, one she had whispered, “Do not forget”.

Today was a special day, a delivery day. A package would come. Maybe awaiting his arrival at this very moment.

Special treats, exciting things, and, oh, the crime of it all!

He passed curt pleasantries with two production supervisors who'd been waiting inside the factory door. Always endeavoring special efforts to impress him, their ass-kissing made his stomach turn. But he had to play his role, a real actor in front of the camera! The look on his face, the one he practiced so many times, that he cared in some small way for their wellbeing and for this factory.

Begging off due to an important phone call from Berlin, just another big fat lie, he went below to his floor. The guard down there understood there were important matters to attend to and that he was not to be disturbed. Unlocking his private gate (to which even the guard had no key), he opened his door, and entered, double checking the lock on the gate and door. He rubbed his hands together to fight off either the chill or the thrill. He wasn't sure which.

A quick look around the office verified his solitude. He walked the quick five steps to the other door on the right, opened it, and there indeed stood the man, waiting, box in hand.

His friend looked frigid and sniffled, shifting his package to wipe his nose on his coat sleeve. He was older than Dieter, past retirement age, but his eyes sparkled brighter, as if he had an eternal secret to share. Always good news, or perhaps some juice gossip.

"Oh, joy, my dear!" Dieter said, pulling his friend in by the arm. "Come, come, do come in. You must be frozen!"

"If I didn't love you so much, Dieter!"

Dieter gave him a warm hug. They stepped to Dieter's desk, focused on the task at hand. Dieter opened his briefcase and took out a bulky package.

“My goodness!” his friend remarked. “So heavy today!”

“. “Their greed grows, I think.”

They peeked into the package. Three large bars of gold bullion, lay within, each stamped with a Soviet hammer and sickle and the letters *СССР*.

“So boring compared to what I bring.”

Dieter handed the package over to his friend.

“Yes, we’ve seen so much.” Dieter said. “I guess they like the trade. Easy, I think, considering the change that fool Gorbachev has wrought. That dupe risks it all!”

“Perhaps that’s the plan. Change?”

“We’re nothing but tiny pawns.”

“Well, Dieter, let’s see what I have for you today.”

Dieter did an excited little jig, tippy-tapping his feet, rubbing his hands together, licking his lips. His friend opened the box. They gazed in, like children opening a box of Christmas chocolates, a myriad of smaller packages within.

“Oh, the things I’ll do with these!” Dieter exclaimed, taking a big sniff of one of the smaller boxes. “Such a fine quality. My goodness, fresh black truffles, all the way from Italy too! Good work, my dear!”

“Ah wait till you see the *pièces de résistance*!”

He moved a couple of the larger items aside and found the small silk bag at the bottom of the box. As he drew it out, their eyes met, brightening with excitement. With both hands he carefully handed it to Dieter, who weighed it in his hand.

“Nice! Let’s see what we have here.” He untied the drawstrings, laying the bag on the desktop. Both leaned in for a closer look.

“Careful!” his friend cautioned. “Don’t let any spill!”

Dieter drew open the bag, exposing dozens of loose diamonds. They sparkled even in the dim light.

“Quite a large haul this time,” said Dieter. “It must be a couple million dollars.”

“Yes, Dieter, they, whoever *they* are, will be very, very rich.”

“Billions, when they’re done, I think.”

“And if we run? You, me, and little baggie makes three?”

“Bah! They’d cut our throats in a minute.”

“What on Earth are they planning?”

“All greedy fools, I think.”

The friend nodded in agreement. “Pawns - the lot of us, willing sacrifices to advance more important pieces across the board.”

“And Abramov? King or Kingmaker?”

“Another Russian Grandmaster it seems. Those beady eyes though, always looking around.”

“Two to four moves in advance, I’m sure!”

Dieter withdrew a small slip of paper from the bag, two numbers scribbled on it. The numbers signified the weight and count of the stones. He harrumphed.

“Millions! Well, I’ll do the count today, before the delivery. Hopefully, they’ve miscounted again. At least a chip we can keep for ourselves.”

“Do be careful, my dear. We’re so close. Let’s not let a tiny little stone destroy our dreams.”

“No, nothing gets in the way.” He pulled the strings closed and returned the bag carefully to the bottom of the box. He replaced the rest of the items on top and put the small box in his briefcase.

“He’ll be waiting for me when I get home. Like a wolf hiding in the woods behind my building.” Dieter shivered with fear and looked at his friend for help.

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry you have to deal with him.”

“Yes, he does terrify. Always ready for the kill, if needed. Snap my neck, slit my throat.”

“He wouldn’t!”

“It’s his predatory nature, I’m afraid.”

“Hmm. And once he is gone...viola!” Kaiser licked his smiling lips.

“Alla cucina!”

“My dear, our dream comes closer. We’ll be together again, I promise.”

Eyes twinkling, Dieter gave him a kiss on the cheek. He led his friend to the door and, once he had passed through, he locked it again.

5

Nick wound his way through the old town’s narrow side streets. Driving aggressively, he skid to a stop at the gate. The guard’s initial anger transformed into a locked up tight attention. When he recognized Nick the look of fear and respect on his face was easily visible. His commander watched from inside the guard shack, he looked stern as he spoke into a phone, nodding to the guard to lift that barrier.

Nick passed through and they watched him, the commander nodding, the guard’s eyes wide open in admiration.

Nick knew he probably scared the shit out of them. Guys like Nick who had tumbled through the grass on black ops kinda smelled scary to a new private.

Like a wolf would smell to a lamb.

“Christ, I hate this place,” he mumbled.

A final self-assessment in the rearview mirror. Satisfied he could pass a cursory inspection, Nick jumped out of the car and bounded up the stairs to the door of Detachment 5, 527th Military Intelligence Battalion, 66th Military Intelligence Brigade, US Army Intelligence and Security Command. A long name for what he thought it really was. Pausing, he took a deep breath, his hand tight on the door handle as it buzzed open.

“Shithole.” He pulled the door, his demeanor immediately transforming, new energy and confidence on display, his military bearing out front.

Always out front!

Their battalion motto. Nick took it seriously and was proud of it. But the problem was he felt it was a bunch of soldiers afraid to be “out front”. And he had charged way to far ahead in those days. Way back, another lifetime it seemed. Nick unconsciously touched the scar on his cheek.

Another guard greeted him mechanically from behind protective glass. He stared at Nick’s hat. Nick handed over his badge and gun through a sliding drawer. A quick inspection and the guard returned the badge, but retained the weapon, as was procedure. He put it in the safe and spun the dial. He passed through a form to sign, onto which Nick scribbled something that approximated a signature.

“Can’t have a loose weapon like me walking around here,” he said to the kid.

“No Sir, Thank you, Sir. Captain Smith is waiting upstairs.”

“Thanks, and don’t call me “Sir”. I work for a living,” Although his rank was classified and he wore civilian clothes, the guard had been giving him the benefit of the doubt. Nick let him know he was a fellow enlisted man, a real grunt, and to not mistake him for some jerked up officer. Please.

Nick winked and snapped up his credentials. The young guard, unable to hide his admiration, buzzed him through. Nick entered and the door's bolt sealed solid behind him.

Nick grabbed his forehead, putting pressure on the sudden pain, and the door slam boomed. His eyes shifting, he scanned up and down the passage. The light flickered dim. He wiped sweat from his brow and considered the door behind him.

The long hallway was empty. No sign of any other human being. Silence echoed. He his throat. Were they hiding behind the doors, ready to pounce?

He thought maybe the game was finally up. Maybe they had something on him. Maybe it was his drinking, or some damn procedure he'd defied, and they'd found him out. He scoffed at their stupid paperwork inspections.

"Why'd I come here like a fool, into their den?" he mumbled to himself. "Well, to hell with them. Bastard knows I got him by the balls."

Going up the stairs, Nick almost ran into the Adjutant on the landing, coming down. The nerdy junior officer's eyes opened wide. He gave Nick an overly cautious, wide berth. Fingering his eyeglasses nervously up the bridge of his nose, he glared and snickered, not even trying to hide his distaste. Everybody hated Nick here. And Nick knew it.

"Morning, Sir," Nick forced the professional courtesy.

"Morning, Torman. Captain's waiting. You're in some shit now, Chief!" the Lieutenant laughed happily. "Good luck!" He yelled, skipping away to safety, down the steps, two, three at a time, leaving Nick on the staircase. Nick looked with suspicion up the stairwell and listened, hesitating. He twisted the hat in his hand.

Too damn quiet. His scarred eye twitched. At the top of the stairs, he looked down the hall towards Smith's office. Nobody. No guards, no other agents, nor MPs were visible.

He walked toward the windows that lined Smith's office. The blinds were open, a good sign. He didn't think that they'd "execute" him in plain sight.

Smith, at his desk, feet up, was talking. A small girl was seated across from his commander. Not what he expected, Nick hesitated, suddenly curious. No, not a young girl, more like a teenager. She said something that made Smith throw his head back and laugh heartily.

Nick didn't think Smith had kids. He thought back to their conversations over the years. Nope, no kids. But some guys, like Nick, kept their personal life so completely separate and compartmentalized, so much so that it wouldn't have been surprising if Smith had some. Maybe she belonged to some other agent or analyst. Nick didn't know anyone well enough to know if they had wives or kids. They knew he didn't care either.

Leaning in, Nick saw that she wasn't a kid, but a petite young woman. Quite beautiful actually. Her long black hair was striking and her skin, cinnamon and smooth. He cleared his throat. Her dark eyes rested on him, unblinking.

Girls did that a lot, Nick thought. He knew he was attractive. Their eyes locked, but then she did something that Nick was unaccustomed to. It threw him completely off guard.

She broke eye contact. Casually turning back to Smith, she continued her conversation. Nick knew that breaking eye contact first was a sign of dominance. It subconsciously said, "I'm not interested" or "I don't consider you a threat". Girls didn't do that to Nick. They were generally interested. It was him, for two years now, that generally wasn't.

He couldn't turn away. Although admiring her beauty, his distaste for her was instant. Whoever's daughter she was, she looked like a stuck up little bi...

"Well, here he is now!"

Smith was talking, that much entered Nick's brain, but it took a moment to process. As hard as he tried to take his eyes off her, he could not.

"Hey! Over here, Nick!" Smith snapped his fingers rapid fire, his chair scraping the floor as he stood, a fox's grin spreading across his ugly mug. He was up to something and that was never good. Nick knew this from experience.

"Morning Cap'n," Nick glanced at him and then back at the girl. She smiled and stood.

She was short, maybe 5'1" at a stretch, 85 lbs., thin and well proportioned. Nick corrected himself, averting his eyes from her. Very well proportioned. Exotic came to mind.

The girl looked at Smith for reassurance and he nodded. She offered Nick her hand with a bright, honest smile. How could such dark eyes sparkle like that, he wondered?

"Mr. Torman, I'm Special Agent Augustina Hermosillo, Sir." She pushed her hand closer. He practically scowled.

"Okay, Augustina," he said, surprised at his own timidity, gently reaching for her hand, "It's Nick...and I'm not a 'Sir', he is," he said, nodding at the officer. She shook his hand firmly, with confidence. Her hand rested tiny in his, like a child's.

"You can call me Tina, everyone does, I mean, it's easier. Anyway, I'm excited we'll be working together in Bayreuth, Nick. It's an honor. Captain Smith tells me that you're the best. Ever."

Now Nick was positive, He didn't like her. He dropped her hand like it was hot. Smith guffawed. Nick suddenly understood what Smith had meant on the phone when he said, "time suck".

"No, no. Impossible," Nick said, eyes wide, shaking his head. "You promised, Tom, er, Captain." He looked at the girl. Tina, he reminded himself. She looked confused, maybe a little

hurt by his negative reaction, but then her eyes steeled. She looked at Smith and Nick's eyes followed. Smith took her cue.

"Nick, meet Tina," He opened his arms wide to include them both. "Nick, Tina just graduated at the very outstanding top of her class from the CI Agent course at Huachuca. She's been detailed to Det. 5. I have further assigned her, at my discretion, to your supervision at Bayreuth Resident Office for the remainder of your time in the US Army, unless the needs of the Army dictate otherwise. That is something, Nick, I don't foresee happening for the next 395 days."

Nick explained to her, "That's how long I have left to go before I get out, from today, exactly." Tina returned an "I can't wait" smile and nodded.

"Well," Smith continued, breaking the uncomfortable silence, "I figure we could grab some chow and then we'll let ya'll guys go on your way, ah righ?" He gave Nick a come-along slap on the shoulder and stepped out of his office, turned back to him, and grumbled under his breath before walking away, "What's with the fucking hat? Shit's classified."

Nick looked at the hat in his hand, then the new girl, and didn't move. From down the hallway, Smith looked back at Nick and Tina, eyeing each other.

"C'mon, troops, let's go make small talk!" He turned and left them alone. After a "you first, no, you first" dance, Nick allowed Tina to pass. He stood there stumped, trying to figure it out.

He wouldn't have a chance to complain further or convince Smith to change her orders. Their commander was already halfway to the cafeteria and not stopping. Tina followed, but turned back and gave Nick a "Come on!" wave. Strangely enough, he did not hesitate to follow her.

There wasn't much small talk at breakfast. Nick, the hat sat prominently atop his cranium much to Smith's chagrin, slouched back in his chair, pissed, brooding. Tina listened, eager rookie on her face, as Smith explained between bites. The new co-workers avoided eye contact. Nick was not thrilled, and she wasn't attempting to hide her own disappointment at his rejection.

"Order of Battle, so to speak," Smith continued, chewing on a bite of buttered toast, "This is a year-long transition and training program. Nick will impart all of his broad Counterintelligence experience onto you and..."

"Only what's necessary for this assignment, Cap," Nick interrupted. "Strictly on a need to know basis."

"Well, like I said, I'm excited." Tina looked at Nick for some encouragement but got none.

"Don't be," Nick said, a swallow of coffee, staring hard at Smith. "We are, after all, only Defensive CI. Hopefully, you won't get too bored".

"Defensive?" Tina asked, appearing concerned at Nick's tone which is what he intended, to concern her.

"Look, rook. No thrill ride, nobody getting killed," he explained. Her upper lip curled, pissed. Nick thought it was incredibly cute. "Defensive," he continued, "as in bland. Boring. Routine. As in not Offensive, no James Bond happy shit," Nick looked directly at the captain.

"Chief will tell you all about it, Specialist," Smith seemed to pick the most appropriate moments to use rank to put someone in their place, "and Chief Torman will continue to support HQ on any operational requests, per SOP, Standard Operating Procedures."

"I know what SOP means, Captain," Tina said.

Smith raised his eyebrows at Nick, and then continued, "I want things kept tight and professional, everyone and everything tip-top, ready for inspection or mobilization, per SOP. Got

it?” That was definitely directed at Nick, who nodded ever so slightly into the bottom of his empty coffee cup.

“All the forms filled out per regulations, Sir!” Nick gave an ironic half-salute to the officer.

Fucking SOP, fucking tip-top.

Breakfast was over. Smith returned with them to the front door of his office, dismissing Tina to recover her bags downstairs.

“A guard will help you.”

“No, sir, I got ‘em. They’re mine,” she replied, leaving Nick staring angrily at Smith. Finally, he had him alone, leaning in close.

“What about our arrangement, Tom?” he growled in Smith’s face, gritting his teeth, barely suppressing his rage.

“Back off Nick, things change. The Deal’s still on – no talk about the border op, and you get out nice and clean. Honorable discharge, full benefits. The Army keeps it under wraps.”

“And you don’t get court martialed for murder!”

“And neither do you,” Smith reminded him. “Hey, it’s a win-win. I took the initiative, and it got messed up, but you know, we got our target out. Double agents were terminated on the spot. Neither of us is rotting in a Soviet prison. You got a medal and big promotion out of it, remember?”

“You did too. They’re both classified. We can’t even put ‘em on.”

“Looky here,” Smith went on, his wiseass grin bantering, “I gotta put this little rookie girl somewhere. It’ll be good – you’ve been flying solo going on two years now. That’s bad for you. Do this one thing for me and you’re out clean. As long as your head and drinking don’t get in the way.”

Nick's eyes shifted down at the remark.

"Medical says you barely got it under control."

"Six people got waxed up there, Tom. Our doubles, three border guards and the, and the," he choked the words down. Then he confirmed, "395?"

Smith looked at his watch, "394.5, Chief. Just be the professional soldier you always were. Still the best agent I ever saw. Shit Nicky, I don't know why you're giving it up. One bad job and it's all quits, right?"

"It was three bad jobs, Tommy."

Smith's jaw worked overtime with a deep breath.

"Yeah Nicky, put that fucking hat away."

Nick broke his angry stare, resigned. He dropped his eyes to the floor.

"Show her the ropes," Smith went on, "keep her nose clean. She's bright, enthusiastic, and full of energy. She'll maybe wanna push things 'round little bit."

"Right boss, like I used to, huh?" Nick smiled falsely and turned down the hallway. Tension fluttered in his chest. Being responsible for someone else wasn't on his agenda, but he had no choice. That was life in the Army and that's why he was getting out.

"You know, Tom," Nick stopped halfway, "I'll take your fucking trainee. Won't fuck her up one bit, either way. You just keep her out of your games. You wouldn't want any cats clawing out of that bag before I'm gone, now, would you?"

"That's 'The Deal'," Smith told Nick's departing back, "and one more thing, Nick, keep your stick outta that tail."

Nick halted before heading downstairs. His shoulders drooped, worn out by this man, he lowered his head in disgust. "Tom, that is not even something..."

“Oh, I seen y’all checking each other out. Looky-looky! You think she’s hot. She thinks the same of you. You didn’t see that wiggle?”

“On the contrary, boss. I think that we hate each other. It was extremely obvious, right off the bat. A bad start.”

“It’s in the eyes, Nicky, it’s all in the eyes.” Smith winked at him. Nick realized where he’d picked up that stupid habit.

Gotta stop that stupid wink.

Smith continued, “Both y’all were trying not to look, she’s just a better poker player than you. Keep it professional Nick, no love games. We know you’ve been alone a long time, don’t drink too much and go making a bad decision.”

“You’re still watching me?” Nick snorted in revulsion. “You’ve put that rookie bitch here to watch me?”

“Negative Nick, she’s being trained as your replacement. Directly or indirectly, Nick, I’m just taking care of my assets. So, keep it pro, SOP, and tip-top. No grab ass in my unit, huh?

“My personal life is none of your fu...your business. Anyway, I don’t want anybody. Nobody wants my broken ass either. Hot or not, I won’t babysit a little girl.”

“Right, ever since Russia, Chief? Let’s just make sure it stays that way.” There was a pause at the mention of that country, almost a mutual moment of respectful silence.

“Ah righ?” Smith confirmed.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Well, ah righ.”

Nick walked downstairs, burying his disgust. Smith knew of his contempt. Nick didn't have to tell him anymore. A more senior officer had counseled Nick before to just try not to look like he wanted to snap Smith's neck, even though he physically could.

"What the hell, Tommy? She was not checking me out." Nick pondered. Yeah, okay, she was "eye candy", but really just a young girl. A cold little bitch at that, a real hard charger, Nick could tell. She wasn't going to let something stupid like love, or sex, with him, or anyone else, get in her way.

"Huh! A better poker player?" His steps echoed down the stairs covering his mumble.

For goddamn sure Smith had instructed her to keep tabs on him. For sure, no doubt. Sometimes that guy was an idiot, Nick knew. Still, he'd take the advice, try not to infect her with his short timer's attitude, and maintain a cold, professional relationship.

Nick knew when he shut down people took it personal though, figuring he didn't like them, which he generally didn't. It was always the beginning of the end, and this relationship had barely begun.

6

Sitting quietly alongside Nick, Tina hid her sigh of relief. She was in. They'd bought her "innocent little girl" rookie cover story. Only two people knew the real reason she'd been sent here. She was one of them. The other, Mike Jones, was a two-star General extremely high up the dark ladder of Army Intel.

Their car weaved through lunchtime traffic and then onto the autobahn. Looking out the window, first the city, then the countryside, she gazed in wonder as she imagined every soldier did upon arrival. 1230 hours, her watch said, she'd been in the country for 17 hours and, doing the math, figured it was 0330 hours at home in Arizona.

Something like that. A dim light on her grandparents' front porch. The little casita, the dark, dusty street, sitting quiet in the final hours before dawn.

The rapid acceleration onto the autobahn pushed her deeper into the seat. Trees blurred and Tina tensed, grabbing the armrest tighter, observing the orderly German traffic at breakneck speeds.

When a car passed on their right, Tina took the opportunity to assess Nick. She sensed he was doing the same to her whenever he looked into the side mirror/ It was what came natural for CI Agents, assessing each other inconspicuously. It was innate - they had been trained to constantly evaluate the opposition. In this particular field of work, Tina knew from her training, the opposition meant everyone. Trust no one.

And Jones had drilled that in, to not trust Nick, or anyone else.

Ultimately, trust was not an option when it came down to guarding the nation's secrets. The history of espionage was replete with husbands and wives, friends, lovers, and co-workers, betraying each other and their countries, for love or money, for ideology, or just simply because they thought they could get away with it. Pure ego run riot.

Indeed, suspected espionage was exactly, and what she was here to investigate,

"It's really sad, actually. the betrayal of the United States, by CWO Nick Torman." Jones had been tapping a standard US Army 201 file, but there was another folder underneath it, Tina saw, with a Top Secret cover sheet on it.

"Identify his network and infiltrate it. As deeply as possible." He stared at her uncomfortably long.

Her mission was clear. Identify and meet with the Confidential Informant. Develop sources, identify network members, identify goals and hostile intelligence operatives.

Damn, real James Bond shit.

Tina measured Nick discreetly. Okay, she admitted he was very attractive. Okay, like *Oh My God hot!* really. Her eyes fixed on his superior strength and the muscular definition that popped through his clothes. What made it more intense was the way he carried himself. His black operator not ever to be messed with physicality.

Another car passed, another quick glance. He had this amazing chin, full lips, and the bluest of blue eyes.

Stop it!

Her gaze flitted involuntarily over his features, then she stopped, determined not to look at him that way again. She knew what she was here for, and how important it was.

She'd seen the slight limp walking to the car, nothing in the file. Exceptionally intelligent and self-aware, just like it said in her briefing. She liked that in a man. More than anything.

Jones also told her that that, strangely enough, outside of a tiny black operational circle, the US Army didn't really know Nick. There was no record, nothing about him, not a thing after his training, same training she'd had. Hence, her assignment.

Jones stood, stared down at her, both hands on the desktop, "Climb into the black box. Dig around. Find shit. Don't get caught. If you do, we'll deny that we know you and that this mission exists."

She tracked as other cars zoomed past, like bats out of hell they drive fast here. A nasty scar disfigured Nick's right cheek, some kind of accident, the wound curled dangerously close to his right eye. Nothing in his file about that either, not even his official photo had that scar. Okay, that picture was seven years old and although you could see the resemblance, Nick had clearly been working hard, and living hard. Fighting hard. Somewhere,

She saw him squint. He needed glasses. Either he didn't know it or hadn't admitted it yet. She loved guys in glasses, ever since high school.

Mr. Roberts, "Tim", as she had covertly thought of her high-school physics teacher, had worn glasses. Married twenty-seven years old at the time. Tina was fifteen, younger than all her classmates by two or three years.

Of course, nothing had ever happened between them, she'd never given a clue of her desire. A good man, he'd never revealed his secret attraction to her, like she had fantasized he would.

That schoolgirl crush had been her forever-kept secret. Never told a soul, especially any of her so-called friends. Always admiring him cautiously during class, the way he moved, spoke, and smiled, the way he wrote on the chalkboard, even watching his nice butt when his back was turned. She carried those observations home with her. But they were her secrets, and she took them to bed with herself, literally.

Alone in her dark bedroom, she had imagined, as many young girls will, of things they might do together, of the intimacy they might share. Him on top, what it would feel like when he entered her, looking in her eyes as she pulled him deeper. Something in Nick reminded her of him, something that she liked, a lot.

Stop it, pendeja! What are you doing?

She hated that name. It basically meant bitch. No one was allowed to call her that. Not anymore.

But for real, what are you thinking?

Mr. Roberts was a kind, good man. Not like this guy. There was something wrong with him. Aside from corrupt, criminal maybe. It wasn't just that scar. He was covering up, something broken inside. Nothing in his file after Special Forces training. That's what brought him to their

attention, Jones had said. He was a ghost. But all you had to do was look at him and you could see the fatigue. He'd been wound up so tight on black ops that now he was exploding, just in slow motion. General Jones said couldn't access any info anywhere internally and couldn't compromise the operation by asking around. Maybe Smith might know something, he said.

She could feel Nick's huge ego exuding, but no amount of hot-shot attitude could conceal the damage. Whether or not he was engaged in espionage, well, that remained to be seen. His file had been thin.

"Weird. Way too thin." Jones said, handing her the file with Top Secret stamp in big red letters on the cover.

Don't let your handshake, don't bite a nail.

"Like beyond black?" she asked Jones, feeling the mystery of this Nick.

Another car blew by another discreet look that she felt was lingering.

Stop it!

Mind made up, she cut off all possibilities. A strong woman, she was not going to be interested *that way*. She had not joined the Army, gone through all that training, constantly proving herself to people who didn't believe in her, to do something so stupid like fall for some guy, get distracted, and off mission. Besides, he's broken, he's a jerk, he's your boss, and you have him under investigation.

It hadn't been but an hour ago, in the Captain's office, that Smith had told her *sotto voce* that Nick maybe had a grudge against the Army. That

"Grudges led to sloppy operational security and then to security leaks, negligence, or outright espionage. Ah right?" He chewed the same toothpick and put his feet up.

"You think he's a spy?" Tina had asked, equally intrigued by Smith's play.

“Nah, no way!” he laughed, weird like. “I’m just saying he could be a serious security risk. We haven’t seen anything beyond emotional instability, and way more than a little bit of drinking. But keep him close. Look for indicators. Get into his mind. See if he’s up to something. But this is unofficial. Off the books, so to speak, ah righ?” That’s what he’d said.

What Smith didn’t know...

She remembered Smith’s reaction when they’d first met, same as many men, eyes crawling up and down. Creepy. Men got to be annoying. Best to keep all of them at a distance. That’s what a tough girl has to do, Tina thought, otherwise they get the wrong idea and are all over you. Inconspicuously, she looked Nick over again, trying to guess his age. Maybe thirty, very tired though.

She’d just turned twenty-one in Basic and had wisely not told anyone (like her Drill Sergeant). No reason to bring any special birthday presents down upon her trainee ass. Special gifts like getting dropped for extra pushups or being called out for extra laps. She didn’t need additional motivation from her favorite Drill Instructor, Sgt. Brian “Gimme more!” Lemoire.

Her body, small and tight, bristled with energy, hardly an ounce of extra fat, athletic definition. Her martial arts practice ran deep, and she was currently running five to six miles a day. She loved it, the pace, the wind, the effort, and the rhythm of her feet striking the ground. She had her 10k down to forty minutes. Good, she was proud of it, but not good enough. It needed to be closer to thirty-five.

Yeah, a run right now. That sounded great, after sitting on three planes for what felt like two days, then the office, and now this car. Tina stifled a yawn. Stretching as much as possible without being obvious.

“Jetlagged?” Nick had noticed.

Oh, he does talk!

“Not too bad. A lot of sitting and waiting.” She stretched out her arms and rubbed her neck. Her hands found their way into her hair, and she began to let it down. Nick’s gaze followed. A quick glance from her and he went back to the road.

“What are you, like 4’11”, 85 lbs.?” he asked.

“5’1”, 90,” she answered, irritated, tired of everybody’s first question. Still, her answer embellished the truth. Only a tiny bit.

“Oh, that’ll make *all* the difference,” he smirked. Ignoring his jest, watching the countryside speeding by, she twirled a thick strand of hair in her fingers. An annoying habit, playing with it for comfort. In more stressful moments, it got chewed on.

Jet-black, silky, growing back nicely, below her shoulders again. Last year it had hung down to the middle of her back, but she cut it short two days before Basic Training, determined not to let the Army do it for her.

She’d sold those dearly departed locks to a wigmaker. She gave the money to her grandmother the night before she left. She liked her hair this way though. It looked particularly good pinned up with her reading glasses on – almost like a teacher. She thought of herself that way sometimes, a teacher, but not of children, of adults. She could show them how their premises were often false, based upon warped prejudices or false perceptions of reality. So far, she’d kept this talent hidden throughout her short time in the military.

“White, brown, dark green,” she shared an observation.

“Hmm?” Nick asked.

“White, brown, dark green, the only colors I see.” She motioned to the countryside zooming past. Heavy dark forests divided by fields not completely blanketed with snow. Barren, just

frozen brown topsoil and the dead-corn-yellow stubble of last fall's harvest. Frost clung to the naked branches of the deciduous trees and to any patch of earth that did not get direct sunlight. She saw another falcon, the second one already, sitting in a snowy field, watching, waiting. She pointed to it but said nothing.

Five feet into the verdant pines it was darker than night. Amazing. Not even light moved within the evergreens. Cold moisture floated between the ground and the overcast sky, itself a river of gray.

"Yeah, some of the gray end of the spectrum too," Tina added, glad to have broken through their wall of silence.

"Stays this way for a while, months sometimes. Eventually the sun will come out. Everybody drops what they're doing, goes outside, and just stands there facing it, eyes shut, soaking up the rays, what the gray took away."

"I'll miss the sun, I think."

Nick looked over again without saying anything. A moment passed.

"Where'd you get the pakul? she asked, noting the hat.

"You know what kind of hat this is?"

"It's worn by the mujahedeen. The counter-insurgency group we're supporting in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Sort of unofficial type of stuff if you ask anyone."

Nick regarded her momentarily.

"Don't know shit about that," he said. "Got this at a flea market in Hamburg."

Tina didn't believe him. The way he'd held it, the way Smith eyed it. Like it had been fought for. Like it had been earned.

He cleared his throat, “Smith probably told you I was a head case. Unstable, some bullshit like that?” As if he suddenly decided it was their turn, he punched the gas and passed a semi-truck.

“Something like that. But that’s just his opinion. I’ll reserve judgment based upon your actions.”

“I’ll extend the same courtesy to you, then. But take Smith with a grain of salt, ah righ?” Shifting up, he blew by another speed-blurred car.

“So, where you from?” he asked.

“Not far from The School actually, south Tucson,” she answered, looking back at the car they had just passed. Their speed was amazing. The speedometer pushed 220 kilometers per hour, about 135 mph. Very nice, she thought, I can’t wait to drive.

“Rough neighborhood,” Nick commented.

“Yeah”, she agreed, “guns, gangs, and drugs. You’ve been there?”

“Nah!” he laughed. “I mean, of course I went to The School, but they warned us about that part of Tucson. “Off limits”. ‘Ghetto’ was the term they used if I recall correctly. So no, I stayed outta there. Stuck close to the barracks most of the time anyway. But the desert out that way, I loved it, hot and dry, and, you know, the storms, those cool and violent thunderstorms.”

“Yeah, I love it too.” Her homesickness notched up. She’d hardly had any time after The School to see her grandparents before shipping off.

“The School”. USAICS, the US Army Intelligence Center and School was at Ft. Huachuca, about 70 miles south of her house. Counterintelligence Agents and other Intel types trained there year ‘round. They also ran counter drug trafficking operations with the DEA and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. It was good, real world practice for the trainees, chasing

Mexican drug traffickers and illegal aliens round the border zone. Part of every agent's training involved a three-night stint out in the desert with Ground Surveillance Radar teams, stalking cross-border movements.

"You know what I love most about it?" she asked rhetorically, "It feels like I could run forever out there, especially at dawn." She sighed, for home, completely opposite from this place that she'd just landed in.

Desert colors were so different from these dark forests and gray clouds. Back home she had dusty browns, thirsty greens, and the bluest of big blue skies. The lack of vegetation gave the landscape a harsh, severe edge. You could see the hills, plains, and arroyos more sharply. Dry, bright air that seemed somehow purer, cleaner.

She recalled the many treks she'd taken out Huachuca way with her grandpa. They'd just pick a spot on the horizon, some distant hilltop, and start running. Lizards scurried out of their way. Roadrunners scampered across their path. Eagles and vultures floated overhead, curious.

"What are you, Mexican?" Nick intruded.

Another predictable question, "Apache, Chiricahua, Cochise branch. What are you, white boy?" she asked defiantly.

"Whoa! You're pretty quick on the draw! Yes, me pale face from Lost Angels, C-A, born and died."

"What do you mean died?" Now she knew for sure. This guy was broken.

"Figure of speech, that's all," he gave her a wry, cute smile, probably the kind he thought girls loved, she figured. showing them some vulnerability.

What a jerk. I am not going to encourage this.

Her gaze turned out the window.

“Wait,” he continued, “is there a story there somewhere, Little Miss Cochise?”

“I am one of his great, great, grandnieces,” she said proudly.

“Wow, really? Hey, that is something special! But didn’t they all die up there in those rocks?” Nick referred to the Dragoon Mountains. Visible from The School, they lay on the eastern side of the same broad desert valley in southern Arizona. They were not high mountains, but dramatic for the large granite outcroppings slicing through the range.

“Up in the Stronghold? No, they fought long and hard, but in the end, they gave up and went to the reservation, for food, for drink. When Cochise died, they buried him up there. The location was kept secret, lost now, forever.”

“On his terms in the end?”

“Yeah, like forever free, huh?”

“Good plan.”

“Our people left the rez - two, three at a time, in the middle of the night, south, across the border. In my grandfather’s day they migrated back north to live on the same land they had been hunted off, but this time returning as illegal immigrants.”

“See, you are Mexican!” Nick bantered. Tina stayed quiet. He continued, “Okay, so you lived in South Tucson, played around the Dragoons and what, you were drawn to The School to prove to the world that you’re a badass little orphan from the hood?”

This really pissed her off. Probably because he was right. Time to change the subject.

“Does everybody here always drive like this?”

“Yup, the only way to fly.” He pushed the gas a little harder if that was even possible.

She could see that he maneuvered with high confidence. There was a Germanic order to the flow of cars. Everyone followed the rules, stayed in the right lane, passed on the left, got back over to the right, precise, and very, very fast.

“You should see when they wreck.” Nick added. “Piles up hundreds of cars, jams traffic for miles and miles. A real mess when people crash.”

“Like you and Smith?” she ventured.

“Smith?” He raised his eyebrows. “Nah! Me and that guy, we love each other! We’ve been through some real tough times, some real good times together. He’s a real good man and a real good Captain. Ah right?” The sarcasm was undisguised, not a bit of honesty in his voice. Not even a weak attempt.

“I don’t believe you, Nick.”

“Yeah, well...” Hitting the gas harder, he rocketed past another big truck.

Tina thought back to this morning’s short, tense interaction between the men. They had each other pinned down in some genuine psycho-trench warfare, but why was her big question. Smith was losing confidence in Nick, said he couldn’t be trusted anymore. She hadn’t even met Nick yet, and Smith was already setting him up. A ruse? Throw her off track somehow? Hmm, Captain Tom Smith. Tina took a mental note.

Instinct told her, strangely enough, that Smith was a man she couldn’t trust, even less than Nick.

The way Smith looked past you, like constantly checking whether someone nearby could possibly overhear. It reminded Tina of the time she’d gone with her grandpa to buy a used car at Tumbleweed Motors. The salesman kept doing that, looking everywhere except in their eyes,

nodding his head. Grandpa had walked away after barely a minute. At least Nick, when he made eye contact, held your eyes.

“...that guy and I...,” Nick continued but Tina interrupted.

“You know I was at the bottom of the stairs. I heard everything. You should know that that most definitely isn’t going to be an issue.”

“Yeah, can you believe that shit? I was *totally not* checking you out. Last thing on my mind! Geez, what a dick!” Nick looked out his side window, trees and fields speeding by. “Hey, I mean, I know that I’m a great looking guy and all,” he laughed at his own joke, “but we’re gonna keep it professional, okay? Like he said, and like we both know is best.”

“We have a job to do, Chief, and I’m here to learn from you. Just that I’d say that if we don’t hate each other very soon, we’ll be on the right track, no?”

“Ok, right. So, tell me this, Little Miss Cochise,”

“If you keep that up, we won’t last very long at all.”

“Oh, sorry, a bit flippant at times, I’ve been told. So, Tina, how’d you fast track the Agent course? I mean, what are you? Nineteen? Twenty?”

“Twenty-one,” another frequent question, but proud as she was, she tolerated it. “I graduated at twenty from U of A and took the military aptitude tests, same as you. They said with my scores I could do whatever I wanted in the US Army. I wanted to go Counterintelligence all the way. The best way to control the Army was to enlist.”

“Control the Army?” he scoffed. “Have fun with that.”

“If I had gone in as an officer, who knows where I would’ve ended up, but when I enlisted, CI was almost a guarantee.” “What did you mean by “died there”?”

“Yeah, well L.A. can be kind of a desert too.” He groaned, probably remembering something. “Crazy you can feel alone in a city packed with people. My mom spent a lot of time at parties with actors, musicians, running around drinking, sleeping around. My dad just drank and smoked, ran his business. They both left when I was around eleven years old. Mom figuratively, Dad literally, which was probably a good thing. He needed to go away so he wouldn’t hurt anyone anymore. I found the beach. I found books. I grew to like the solitude.”

“Did you? I didn’t have my parents with me either, Nick, so I know. It’s hard on a kid when they aren’t there to love or be loved.”

Nick shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. She noted the reaction. This conversation had become too personal. She just brought that out in people. After a few minutes they started talking about their real issues, not even realizing it. Like they felt some kind of connection to her, some kind of trust. She assumed it was her honesty, her authenticity.

“Well, there’s no real love in this world, Specialist,” he told her, “Not that I’ve ever seen. None at all.”

Tina watched him. He squinted into the traffic, the long scar on his cheek merging into young wrinkles, stopping barely a quarter inch from his eye. Whatever happened almost took it out. Focused on driving, a deep scowl furrowed his face, like he was drifting in some unpleasant memories.

Despite the fact he was her target, she felt a surprising sympathy. This guy was painfully alone. Is that what this job does? She had a sudden idea that she could help him.

“Well, love is either everywhere, Nick, or it’s nowhere,” she said gently. “Sometimes it’s a choice we make.” Resuming her gaze out the window at the beautiful landscape, frozen gray, she saw another falcon looking for lunch. She felt Nick’s stare linger on her.

Whereas Dieter Wolff had gone downstairs to his basement, Hans had climbed two flights to the second floor. Odd, he thought, that Dieter officed in the grungy depths of the building, while Hans occupied the top floor with a view.

Ages ago, during the factory's first generations of owners, Hans's office had been the General Manager's office, though originally much larger. After the war, the communists divided the entire floor into more equitable rooms with thin walls, all currently unoccupied, except for Hans's little office all the way at the end of the hallway.

Dieters' office, a storage area for decades, was in the basement. When Hans was just a baby Dieter had chosen his dank corner of the darkest part of the factory as his exclusive territory. All other functional offices were upstairs on the ground floor - supply chain, accounting, maintenance, secretaries, assistants, and production managers. Only Dieter occupied an office in the basement. Only Hans occupied an office on the upper level. No one dared visit Dieter in the basement, and no one ever thought to visit Hans upstairs.

During his first few years of employment, Hans felt weird spending his days alone upstairs. When he'd initially arrived, Hans thought to inform someone of the obvious mistake. But then he assumed it was for some good reason, so he endured in silence. Over the years, his solitude became comfortable. He had his view of the river, the fields, of the fences, walls, and guard tower and, on the other side of that barrier, a sliver of hillcrest and the sky above. The view itself was reason enough to stay isolated and never complain.

Hans cherished it and, although lonely at times, he no longer wished to join those comrades in offices below. He now thought of it as his floor. Besides, he had several secrets. And it was easier to keep them, isolated, up here on the second floor.

So, please. Please, just leave me alone.

This morning he'd walked down his long hallway to his door. He entered, hooked his coat and his hat, and set his attaché case by the side of his desk. There was his dusty desktop and dusty phone, his view out his window, his wall, his guard tower, his river, his field, and his hilltop.

None of it really is mine, though. Is it? It all belonged to the State. Doesn't it? Even we belong to them.

At his desk, he put his head into his hands and let out a heavy sigh.

Somehow, I'll make it through another one of "their" days.

In the distance, he imagined the falcon's cry. He looked hopefully out the window while rubbing his knee. And, inspired afresh, he took out a rough piece of paper folded into quadrants. In one of the sections, he began to sketch the bird.

He often drew for fun. Sketches simple and small. This one he'd eat later, considering what Dieter had seen. Always careful not to leave his drawings lying around, the easiest way to dispose of them securely was to simply consume them.

He massaged the knee absentmindedly, feeling a deep dissatisfaction today for his life being wasted. Not a trivial subject for 8am, but one that often preoccupied despondent moments. The wall too, reminded daily that escape was hopeless. Their one chance had passed. They would have no other.

Rather ironic really, he worked within yards of freedom. Inge and the kids were forbidden, without special permission, to even get within a thousand meters of the border, including the factory. Many of the workers' families had never seen where father, brother, sister or mother, aunt, uncle, or cousin toiled for the Revolution.

Indeed, the closest Inge and the kids ever came to the border were those joyless New Year's Eve parties that the administration hosted in Rudolfstein, up the road, two kilometers distant. The most recent of these parties had taken place just three nights prior. They had arrived as late as it was socially acceptable to the little inn reserved for the occasion.

"Look," Inge pointed to some people leaving. "Don't you work with them? They're leaving already. It's barely 9pm."

"I suppose they are using their kids as an excuse to escape early." Hans watched the accountant and his family pile into their car.

"We have kids too, Hans!" She pointed to the back seat. Emiel waved jokingly, Sofie peeked over her blanket.

"Look," Hans said, "We can make it until midnight, don't you think? While they sing the Internationale? Then we'll slip out the back door before the heavy drinking starts."

"Aren't you very sleepy now, children?" Inge asked.

"No, mommy, I want to party!" Emiel laughed and Sofie giggled with him.

"Well. it is a new year after all, one must hope." She acquiesced "Okay, until I absolutely can't bear it anymore and then I'll give you both a knock in the head to put you to sleep!" Inge made to reach into the back seat, provoking more excited laughter.

"Look," she nodded in the direction of the corner of the dining room, an area sort of blocked off from the families by the way the tables were arranged. "There, look at them."

Hans looked. It was Dieter and Schmidt with beer and shot glasses.

"Dieter and that Schmidt will be the last to leave. They are already drinking like fish. Maybe we can just leave now. Do you think they'll notice?"

“Even if they don’t, everyone is watching everyone else. Either they are trying to leave early too or trying to kiss Dieter’s fat Party Commissar ass!”

“Bring me a drink and a shot my dear Hans.”

Unfortunately, several senior managers were watching the door, and then Dieter found them about 1130 and ordered a round.

They did manage to leave just after the midnight countdown and the Internationale. It was insultingly uncomfortable. The kids couldn’t even hold their heads up, so exhausted. But Dieter had been right there and even grabbed Inge for a New Year’s kiss on the cheek.

“Hans we have to leave now, we’re all dying from exhaustion.”

All three were asleep when they got to their house. Hans carried them in, one at a time. He chuckled at that sweet memory from three nights ago, looking out his office window at the wall.

Twelve feet high, it was topped with razor sharp concertina wire. Rumors about failed attempts always reached people’s ears. Over the years, untold numbers had been shot trying to get across in Berlin or other parts of East Germany. As escape attempts increased, the border grew in height and sophistication. Even the occasional guard tried to escape from time to time, so they were rotated often. Lethal men, they had shoot-to-kill orders too, against potential escapees and against each other.

The information was nebulous. Statistics were not published. The official party line claimed zero attempts, because no one actually wanted to flee this worker’s paradise. These fortifications were to keep the West out, to protect East Germany, to prevent the evil fascists from getting in. This was the lie they’d been told for twenty-eight years, really Hans’s entire life.

Funny, he realized, the guards around this factory and its little part of the border had remained the same for years.

Why weren't they ever rotated?

Hans looked down to the guard shack over by the front gate. Schmidt, out of his chair now, leaned casually on the doorframe, smoking. He kicked the frozen mud at his feet, bored perhaps. Inside the guard tower, two heads were silhouetted behind the dark glass, clearly not observing their sector. It even appeared to Hans that one guard was leaning back, resting, maybe even asleep.

Dieter Wolff certainly did not control them. The district border guard commandant held that role. He should have run a tight ship, and surely a higher authority oversaw him. So, there was something strange about these lazy guards. Off, to say the least.

Hans knew from years of watching that, when they rose from their repose, one would come down from the tower for a leisurely patrol of the perimeter, all the while smoking. If it was cold, the tour quickened, still trailing blue-white smoke the entire way. If the sun was out, maybe both guards would come down to enjoy a touch of warmth, before returning to their monotonous overlook.

From here he could see Johann Schmidt snoring in the shack. The tower guards had come down together, a clear violation of protocol. They tightened their coats, lit cigarettes, and strolled through the packed snow around the perimeter, leaving the front of the factory unguarded.

Now! Now was Hans' moment! He stood, threw his office chair against the window, shattering glass. He kicked the hole bigger, climbed out onto the window's ledge, judged the distance to the wall, and in 3, 2, 1...spread his arms wide and leapt for freedom. Flying higher than ever before, he saw the guard's mouths agape, one aiming his rifle too late. Off the top of the wall, Hans did a forward handspring, a piked salto with full twist over, and stuck the

dismount in the West! At least a 9.8! He presented to the judges and cheering crowd and was met only with snowy, frozen silence.

He sat back down. He knew how to vault, damn it! But no, had never known how to fly.

It occurred to Hans, yet again, that if he were alone, unmarried, childless, that he could somehow make a run for it during these idle guards' most slumberous moments. If only he'd the means to really get over that damned wall! He'd even sketched hypothetical wall-climbing, body-launching, self-catapulting devices.

He'd eaten those silly sketches too. Regardless, how would he erect any such device while lazy guards and hungry, not so lazy attack dogs, watched nearby?

He picked up the picture frame on his desk, a single tear chasing his smile, then he held the frame to his heart.

He was not alone. He loved them dearly, more than any freedom. He would not risk their safety on some crazy escape attempt. Although trapped, he would never, not ever, leave them behind.

Before the walls were raised, people ran easily. The initial barricades were of lower height and limited effectiveness, people, even soldiers ran through and jumped over the barbed wire. The walls were improved, people tunneled under, were smuggled in cars, climbed over, had even flown in a balloon. Whispered rumors told of hundreds who'd lost their lives and of thousands arrested and imprisoned for attempting, plotting, or daring to even imagine escape.

Rumors too, from time to time, of scientists, military, actors, writers, and athletes, like he and Inge had once been, who'd made a run for freedom. Succeeding where Hans and Inge had failed. When someone famous made it across, the government painted them as criminals, punishing the relatives, the friends, and loved ones left cowering behind.

A persistent and pervasive propaganda, the defectors were flawed members of society, and the DDR was, nevertheless, better off without the garbage sullyng the people's revolution.

Massaging, he dug his fingers into the scar above his knee, his Medial Collateral Ligament (careful you don't tear it), still itched on occasion. A dense scar, thicker than it should've been. If that East Berlin doctor had only been more competent, his technique a bit more modern, it might've healed smaller, less knotty. The itch came with the cold, wet weather, the worry.

Yes, they'd had their one chance before. Maybe the one shot that everybody got. But Montreal had been a lifetime ago, someone else's lifetime it seemed, and their fantasy of freedom had been nothing but a young, enraptured couple's lovely, adventurous, and lost dream.

8

Dieter Wolff pecked away happily at the typewriter, shut in his basement office. Many important matters demanded attention today, finishing touches on the year-end reporting, and the initiation of the new annual reporting cycle were of primary concern. As always, he continuously worked diligently to make sure that the impressions of his superiors were correct and positive.

Thusly, he produced a superfluous amount of paperwork regarding their detailed progress towards fulfillment of the current Plan (nearly always almost achieved, except for the ever-present, persistently uncontrollable, and unforeseen, resource constraints caused by unknowable forces elsewhere within the supply chain). He reported meticulously on the status of worker morale, which was always excellent and enthusiastic towards Plan achievement (in spite of the uncontrollable, unforeseen, and unknowable).

In addition to Plan progress and the spirit of the workers, today he had the unfortunate task of reporting on disciplinary action to be taken against a worker who had violated procedure. Well, it wasn't so much a procedure, but the spirit of socialist brotherhood that he'd violated. It

was always something like that, although this time, in this particular case, the discipline required was unfortunately, per Dieter's recommendation, going to be most severe.

This important duty was not taken lightly. Why, in the past, cases he'd specifically initiated had been seen at the highest level of State Security with his name appended as the reporting agent. He took no small amount of pride by the fact that there had even once been a case of sedition in the earliest days of his career. The suspect, in collaboration with the capitalist enemy, and on the verge of being arrested, had mysteriously disappeared one night, evading capture. Had Dieter's secret role in the disappearance been discovered, he himself would have hung from the gallows. Well, more likely he would've been shot. One to the back of the head kneeling before a ditch, or several through the heart, standing against a wall, the preferred, more honorable way to be dispatched.

It remained one of his blackest secrets, a veiled dark stain on an otherwise unremarkable and uneventful career. No one at Stasi HQ suspected what had really happened. That Dieter had saved the man - the purpose, and reasons therefore, remained forever since secret, hidden. The truth, that Dieter had banished the man, mere moments before his obligatory report set the wheels of the State Security apparatus in motion towards its foregone conclusion, remained forever obscured.

The words that had been spoken, the actions taken had not been forgotten, but indeed forgiven. Their bond of love so strong that when they'd stood at the door to bid farewell the pain had not been as strong as now.

Marcus was the one who'd had a hard time making eye contact.

"Go then," Dieter told him. "Look, I hold the door for you." They'd been at this same door in his office, what everyone thought of as "The Dungeon".

“I can’t hide anymore Dieter. I can’t live this lie any longer.” Marcus held his hand, the other arm around his shoulder. He gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Maybe someday things will change. We won’t have to hide our secret ever again.”

“Come with me,” Marcus begged. “Come be free with me.”

“Everything I am is here my dear. And I still believe in the revolution.”

Marcus pulled away and moved into the doorway that Dieter no longer held for him.

“You’ll turn in the report direct to Stasi? Protect yourself?”

“Yes, of course.” He would turn Marcus in to State Security for his betrayal. “And we’ll meet here?”

“As often as possible. I’ll stay true. I’ll even bring you some treats!”

“Alla cucina!” he said with a broad smile, but turned his head down, wiped his eyes and tried to stifle the sobbing but could not.

Marcus only said, “Goodbye my dear.” And he turned and left, the door closed.

He’d given the man a way out and the man had taken it, disappearing into the West, into the so-called freedom that he craved so desperately. No one thing had ever hurt Dieter more than this betrayal.

But that had been twenty-five years ago. They had been young, naïve, in love, and full of faith in their opposing systems, cocooned by media control and a lack of knowledge about the reality of life in the West. After all, in the 60s, the differences between East and West Germany were not so pronounced. Everything had been destroyed by the war and both sides had to rebuild economies, lives, and families.

Things had changed since, Dieter knew. Technology was more influential in the West, speeding life up. Television channels and radio stations were ubiquitous. Their signals could not

be jammed completely in the East. People trembled in their darkened homes and apartments surreptitiously watching corrupt western programs and whisper-listening to decadent western music. In spite of the damage to society and their brains, and in defiance of the surveillance vehicles patrolling the streets preventing citizens from turning their antennae westwards, they succumbed.

Newer communications technologies were inevitably advancing into the world. He'd even heard news of a machine that could send a letter electronically, something called faxing. But, notwithstanding the changing times, he remained ever persistently vigilant for threats to the young citizens of the East who, if not protected, could capitulate to imperialist influences, to the crumbling remnants of pre-Marxist-Socialist Western society. Or, in cases of insanity or near-insanity, he helped the German Democratic Republic to protect their society from the threats of certain notions which drove people into overindulgences against their socialist brethren.

"Biological and psychological impulses," Dieter muttered snidely, disappointed with this comrade, the subject of the current report before him. His fingers, twitching, hovered over the keyboard.

"There is no place for individual, selfish love in the Socialist paradise to come," he repeated a phrase heard or read many years before, but the word "love" he said in a way that betrayed his derision for the emotion's weakness and, if he'd been honest, he'd have admitted, its unattainability for himself. The word came out sounding slightly nasal and elongated. "Looove," he said, with a snickering scoff. Fingers firm, he resumed pecking at the keyboard.

His personal responsibility for building a modern Socialist paradise lay upstairs, on the factory floor. That was the only thing he could control and influence, and he liked to think that

he managed it with a soft hand that, at his will, converted into an iron fist, whenever and wherever necessary.

He maintained positive and open relationships with workers and administrators, but made sure they knew the surrounding boundaries, the physical and moral boundaries that he must enforce. Dieter's actions over the years, his successes as he saw them, had perpetuated an authoritarian atmosphere of veneration, with a heavy dash of fear. The message was that he, and the State by extension, was not to be trivialized or disrespected.

He maintained order through glances of disapproval, with suspicious note taking that he let others see, and through the ghost of the past he brandished as a weapon. At times he put on an emotional show, letting anger fly at factory meetings, blaming that man's betrayal of his comrades. Dieter let the workers surmise something terrible had happened to the man, that an unspeakable punishment had been carried out.

The whispered rumor was that this man had gone into Dieter's office, and had neither been seen from, nor heard of, since. Dieter knew this tittle-tattle and enjoyed it, using it to foment fear, rouse respect, and augment the air of uncertainty. Let them imagine his bones lying in the dust of Dieter's dungeon, behind that locked door inside his office.

Dieter had used these tools effectively to construct his kingdom. He maintained rule over his domain, holding it as his own, despite the changing times. And, although Dieter did not quite have the zeal to be so active any longer, he did have to maintain appearances, hence the voluminous typing and reporting issued forth from his office.

His written observations, he imagined, were certainly treated with incredibly special care, even reaching high levels where they were well regarded for their profound insight, overall quality, and depth. Little did he know, and less could he have believed, that his reports did not

reach those high levels at all, and were not regarded, either well, nor poorly. The truth was that no one paid attention anymore. Yet even so, those reports kept coming forth from the Groma Kolibri typewriter registered to Dieter Wolff.

The security of typewriters in East Germany was paramount - each was registered to a specific person. And this machine was so important to his career, as his primary tool of production, that Dieter lugged it home daily. That he did so in a case about three times larger than the machine's slim profile went unnoticed.

The bag was so large because of those other things he carried back and forth as well - unauthorized, illegal things. And, due to his feared and respected status at the factory, no guard would ever have dared to check Dieter's typewriter box. Besides, in his mind they were his guards, protecting his workers, his factory, and his border.

Although Dieter knew that his career as a Stasi informant and his rise in the East German Communist Party had peaked long ago, before being assigned to this dark, forgotten corner of the East German border, he approached his job with a steadfast German seriousness and a Stalinesque enthusiasm. After all, as he reminded his comrades constantly, they had an important contribution to make to the proletarian revolution being fought and struggled for all over the world.

"Who knows how far our factory's paper has reached and who might have used it? Why, perhaps even our Dear Comrade Erich Honecker and other very important party leaders use our fine paper for themselves!"

When he'd said that at a factory meeting, a small, unfortunate, and miscalculated laugh hiccupped from one of his comrade workers. Dieter had not missed from whence it came. He

looked over the tops of his eyeglasses at the accused, softly clearing his throat. He made a tiny note in the margin of his speech, the insubordinate's name.

Every other comrade remained silent, humbled, as was to be expected. Those sitting near the guilty sought to distance themselves, even if only by millimeters, from their luckless comrade who'd tactlessly found at the expense of the State and the Party leadership, humor in Dieter's comment.

Those who made jokes or unkind remarks were noted, and if one made too many, one could end up in prison or disappearing altogether. Perhaps they needed a reminder, Dieter had thought at the time, finishing his note, clearing his throat again, and resuming his speech. Another report to type.

It hadn't always been this way for the factory, just a small building lost in a forgotten part of a crumbling system. Certainly, three hundred years was no long history by European standards but, initially rising from the ashes of the Thirty Years War in the early 1600s, it had served its purpose well, first to its royal owners, and then to the State. Many of its employees had fought and died in the two World Wars. The paper it produced had often been used to print things that even the press operators couldn't read because the script was in English or Russian. Regardless, the factory workers had always maintained a certain amount of pride in whatever they did, mostly because German workers will do that, even as the world disintegrates around them.

There was an institutional pride then, despite the losing effort, that the paper manufactured by the factory had been used to print leaflets that were dropped over US and British troops during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. The leaflets were printed to persuade the Allies that it was hopeless, that the war was near over, that it was time to surrender and to go home, by Christmas, Peace on Earth, Goodwill towards men.

This same product had gone to the eastern front, written in Russian, of course. Unfortunately, that specific load of pamphlets had burned to ashes when the Junkers Ju-52 tri-motor cargo plane delivering them was shot down over eastern Poland in August of 1944. All the unfortunate crewmembers perished along with the propaganda that proclaimed the futility of continued resistance as Nazi victory over the Soviets was so obviously and so inevitably imminent.

The war's end left matters in quite a state of confusion as destruction and chaos overran Nazi Germany. People and power needed time to straighten themselves out, and so the factory lay idle for three years. The brief hope that the region would end up on the US side of things, having been part of the American defense sector for several weeks, was abruptly settled by important men at a large conference table in another country and by Soviet tanks pushing farther into the Blankenberg Valley, closer to the autobahn, and the city of Hof.

The lines had been drawn and, in this case, the line went down the middle of this tiny, tight valley, down the middle of the Saale River, leaving the factory in the eastern sector. That was where it belonged. The State of Thuringia became part of communist East Germany and the people's fate was sealed. Their people's revolution would be permanent, whether they wanted it or not, until the final victory.

Ever since then, the factory belonged to the State. It existed not of its own accord, but only as part of The Plan. Its fate in the hands of unknowing but nonetheless well-intentioned men.

Time changes all things and, in 1949, an economic development committee in East Berlin, advised by a truckload of Party economic analysts, determined that the most efficient use of these types of factories would be to help the State achieve its five year plan in the development and production of sanitary tissue for human waste disposal. Toilet paper, that is.

In the 50's, in support of this effort and to address production goals in the face of the consistently uncontrollable, unknowable, and unforeseeable supply shortfalls, the East German government commanded 25 paper mills to convert from the production of writing paper to the production of toilet paper. Dieter's factory was one of those mills.

The conversion required a complete retooling of the factory, removal of the printing presses, unnecessary so far from Berlin's control, and the installation of more specific pulping and rolling machinery. The Economic Development Committee, advised by the Socialist Unity Party's political advisors, performed miraculously detailed calculations based upon the average caloric intake of East German citizens, which had been valiantly computed by the State Ministry of Health and Nutrition. This launched careers, fellow bureaucrats showered promotions and medals upon them.

Further, the economic analysts had determined, under consultation with the State Ministry of Waste Management, that this average caloric intake caused the typical East German citizen to use the bathroom on average of 1.248 times per day. Lower than the typical Western German citizen who averaged 1.443 bowel movements per day – a difference not lost on the Ministry of Propaganda which proclaimed this due to the superior diet and physical conditioning of its citizens (and not due to lower levels of nutritional intake caused by inferior food distribution and higher relative poverty levels).

Dieter had sat in one of the most important decision-making councils, listening carefully to engineering and economic arguments he barely understood, yet skillfully pretended his interest. He just knew it meant potentially more personal power. A group of three engineers stood at the front of the room, charts displayed on the board.

“So, currently”, the short, bald bespeckled one began, “there are 16.85 million East German citizens going to the bathroom 1.248 times per day, which adds up to 21.02 million lavatory visits daily, meaning 7,675,510,000 bowel evacuations on a national scale per year (multiply by five to complete a Five-Year Plan).”

The tall, Frankensteinesque engineer continued, “We at The State Department for Physical Optimization, where we proudly manage training for Olympic Athletes,) have determined, in various laboratory tests on live subjects and in a more in-depth analysis of the relevant statistical data of the two previous Five Year Plans, that a total of six toilet paper squares is the maximum necessary to achieve a successful wipe and that an average of 3.53 wipes was needed to achieve the desired level of cleanliness. Thusly the average toilet paper roll of 150 squares was calculated to dispense 43.91 wipes.

Dieter accidentally chuckled here, something which provoked a dangerous glare from the District Commissar. “Most unfortunate indeed.” he later admitted, standing at attention in front of his superior’s desk.

The inaccurate math was lost, even in a room of economic engineers and analysts. The missing 1.42 paper squares per roll was later erased by one Guenter Klaus, low-level assistant in a Berlin back office, who always was looking over his shoulder, and the grave error was never calculated into any subsequent Five-Year Plans. This tiny blunder, in fact, snowballed throughout the years into millions of lost toilet paper rolls, more than a whole factory’s lifetime production.

One missing factory’s output aside, the national production requirements amounted to a tremendous expanse of toilet paper necessary to keep the population docile (this word “docile”

was, by the way, only used at the highest levels of the Supreme Committee, and with delicate discretion, for they too had to wipe their butts).

These numbers in mind, it was only necessary to reverse engineer the amount of production needed on an annual basis in order to achieve the current Five Year Plan. Of course, there were uncontrollable, unforeseen, and unknowable problems. First off, usually people needed more than six paper squares times 3.53 wipes and you couldn't exactly tell them to use less for the sake of their comrade. This caused an obscure engineering group of a State Product Design committee to reduce the size of the toilet paper square by 1.13 cm² in order to achieve the plan. Several major promotions were awarded to key Party members who claimed credit for this innovation.

That would have been a manageable solution to a serious problem and would have enabled successful plan attainment, except for one thing – nobody had worked into the National Toilet Paper Plan the unforeseen “Urgent Resource Requisition” imposed by the Soviet Union to provide 42.35 million rolls of toilet paper annually as a contribution to the Communist International's effort to spread the spirit of Socialist brotherhood all over the world. Whispered rumors said that the encouraged toilet paper rolls were destined for comrades fighting on the front lines against the capitalist hordes. Places where it was undeniably needed more than in East Germany - Korea and China in the 1950's, Cuba, Latin America, and Vietnam in the 60's and 70's, sub-Saharan Africa and Central America during this current critical 1985-1990 plan.

The real problem, however, was that the toilet paper production being diverted by the Soviets to those urgently needful comrades on the front lines of the class struggle never actually made it past the Soviets. It was, this so valuable resource, sent straight to Moscow where, after being further pilfered at various stages of the distribution network, only 25% of the requisitioned

paper arrived on shelves, hence the famous queues of anxious Muscovites waiting outside the stores, a phenomenon reported on only in the West.

To give the Soviets the benefit of the doubt, the actual toilet-paper-pilfering did not start with the Soviets; it commenced right on the factory floor. Dieter Wolff himself was given a “production sample” of two rolls every day, which he took home in his briefcase, much more than an old man living alone needed. And while the guards did not dare search Dieter when he left the factory, they did search almost everyone else. It was a game, all smoke, and mirrors, because they never found any contraband toilet paper - the pilfered production was actually purloined from the delivery trucks once they rounded the bend in the road. The guards themselves poached as well, and their searches of people was more than just a show. They were making sure that no one took that which belonged to them. Such details were below Dieter as his responsibility was solely concerned with production, not distribution.

“Our goal is met,” he’d proudly told his boss. “How many asses it wipes is far beyond our control. As much as we’d like to control the entire process.” He remembered how closely his boss had stared at him at that moment. An uncomfortable silence, and the District Commissar made a note in the margin of the report he had in front of him. Dieter never received another promotion, or accolade, and that had really been his purpose, to stay exactly where he was, in a toilet paper factory completely lost and forgotten.

Sitting pensive, Dieter considered the last line of the report he was writing. It was always a shame when a worker or one of their family members had to be reported to the Regional Stasi Headquarters. Probably this person, the subject of this precise report, would be taken away at the end of the day, not arriving home for dinner. Perhaps the wife would become anxious when her

child asked why Daddy wasn't home yet. Dinner might be left cold, and the poor wife would spend a terrifying night alone, sleepless in bed, wondering.

Oh please! Such dramatics!

At least, Dieter hoped, the Stasi would give her a courtesy call to alleviate her fear, or increase it, as the intended effect may have been. If the man were lucky, they'd only hold him for two or three days while he was questioned. If he were unlucky, they might pick up some of his family members too. It depended upon the case, the level of submission required, and the quality of remorse for failing the revolution that was initially demonstrated.

Perhaps something different could be done this time, something milder, Dieter hoped. His preferred method was when the State Security agents retrieved a child from their school and kindly took them out for hot chocolate, or an ice cream, depending upon the season. The child always enjoyed that and went home to tell their parents about the nice men in gray suits and thin black ties. The parents always appreciated the subtle message. Yes, that would be a good way to handle this particular case.

Well, it certainly wasn't up to him to choose the method, he just did the reporting. Still though, Dieter thought, fingers paused above the keys, hesitating in the final deliverance of fate, it did start with him and this report, after all.

The sudden doubt surprised him. A distasteful and weak thought, he shoved it right out of his head and his stubby little pinky finger lashed out and struck the period. The typewriter dinged in agreement as he shifted to a new line and typed his name. He pulled the paper out, signed it and affixed his office stamp.

There. Done.

Without further consideration, he prepared to move on to the next case, also a delicate one.

Hans was the only comrade who never stole any paper for his family's comfort. Not that it was comfortable paper, by any means. Though it certainly was better than the old newspaper rolls available in stores, it still left a person itchy in that sensitive spot. So, for theft of toilet paper, Hans suffered no guilt.

He had, however, his own special guilt, not for his failed and still undetected attempt to defect but related directly to his day-to-day job at the factory.

Typically German, Hans was a diligent and punctual employee, always performing the task to which he'd been assigned. Always on time and he never left early. Only five sick days in over ten years.

Madness!

And so it had been for years. Every day, Hans sat and looked through the dirty window, out over the walls and river, beyond the guard towers and barbed wire. That slender view of freedom all he had. The forested gray and green crest on the other side looked exactly the same as any other hilltop, but it was "over there", it was the West, and it was free.

Hans sat daydreaming about the past and the future. Remorseful for the past, little hope for the future, and none for the present. The only moments he truly owned were those with Inge and the kids. The only thoughts that moved him forward was his slight hope that someday things would change. He pondered his desktop, unblemished by work. Wherever his hands touched, outlined by dust.

Madness!

Fog blanketed the top of the hill where that falcon had flown. That same mist beaded his window. Droplets racing down the glass offered distraction, a silly game. Which would win?

Later, when the sun went down, those mists would freeze into snow, gentle flakes darkening winter's early dusk. Their repetition was a reminder he'd have to return the following day, week, month, and year, to this madness.

Some days felt like they'd never end, like he was trapped in a grainy French film, every character suffering alienation, watching the rain, the droplets roll down the window. Other days had large gaps in which he could not recall a thing. Today was one of those days feeling trapped in a cage, when he became acutely aware of the passage of time. Passing painfully slow, still only 1pm. Three hours remained until it was socially acceptable to leave.

Generally, sitting here every day in this windowed box was tolerable. Pretending to have some control over his life, deluding himself effectively, he believed he was the reason the factory failed to meet its production goals. His benign sabotage was deeply satisfying. He refused to give anything to the State that held his family prisoner. At other times, the boredom, the guilt, the wasting of his muscles and mind was unbearable. Dying slowly within, he was beaten down, a convict cramped into solitary confinement.

Such was the compromise. He did the exact opposite of what his comrades assumed. Oh, they treated him with respect and deference in the lunchroom, if not for his position and tenure, then for some faded memory of the glory, the medals he and Inge had won, the true tragedy of which no comrade really knew.

When asked what work he did upstairs, he just said, "Oh, the numbers, you know". After a few years, they stopped asking, or merely asked, "How are the numbers?" Hans answered, always projecting proper socialist pride, "fine", or "good", even an occasionally optimistic "excellent", then moving on to pleasantries outside of work. Besides, no one genuinely wanted to

speak of the factory, no one but Dieter that is, and he himself never asked Hans about those numbers.

That man had ruined this morning's encounter with the bird. That man without friends or associates as far as anyone knew. Hans knew that Dieter sat alone in his dungeon office, the entire day constantly typing away, preparing Plan Achievement Status updates, or Worker Morale Status reports. Dieter was like an annoying fly, his presence only ever felt outside his basement, in order to disturb, and make them all feel less than, in the disguise of promoting the Party's purpose.

"Dieter-fucker," Hans whispered ever so quietly, checking the door and walls, as if they had ears.

Dieter was so full of enthusiasm - for the plan and the daily, weekly, monthly, annual production goals - that he covered up for everyone else's lack of enthusiasm all by himself. Well, that was his job, wasn't it? As the SED Representative to the local committee for State Factory of Brotherhood #527, Dieter was cheerleader and jailer. He was the one to fear for his ability to destroy lives. Dieter could not be trusted by anyone yet demanded trust and respect from everyone. Probably only the guards were on the same side, and they had no real power or mind. They just played their role as soldiers.

Hans heard that Dieter had ferreted out people years ago when the wall had first intersected their lives. He'd either put them in prison, or took their jobs, leaving them unable to find other work, thusly destroying their lives and futures in a country where, hypothetically, there was no unemployment. Some people, well, at least one man according to the rumor, had gone down into Dieter's office and never returned. A whispered truth. That his bones were still there, catacombed behind that other door.

Even today, at the end of the 80's, people were hounded for their political beliefs, mostly people of formal or informal social influence - writers, artists, and actors. They were potentially dangerous because of their influence on the masses. Athletes too, like Hans, had to be protected as shining examples of the excellence which the State produced. That was exactly why he'd been placed in this factory, he presumed, under constant vigilance.

Perhaps, Hans thought, I should be grateful I'm here and not in Berlin, or some other large city. Closer to the center, the repression was worse, the Stasi were thicker. The consequences they delivered were more pronounced.

Yes, we're lucky. Far away in this lonely little shithole.

Tucked away inside this veritable fortress, the anxiety and guilt over Montreal ate at him. His shame, his betraying of the revolution that was shoved so hard down their throats.

He crumpled up the drawing, another stupid idea. He tossed it to the trashcan not three feet away. It bounced off the rim to the floor. A heavy sigh, he rose from his desk, picked up the balled paper, backhanded it, completely missing the can this time. It was almost a sign from God. that it was better to eat the evidence. Picking it off the floor, he popped it in his mouth and chewed slowly, like it was a bovine cud.

His fear of taking further action was another source of shame. Why couldn't he just be a man and take up arms? Fight for his rights? His family's freedom? Why did he have to hide his treachery? Why did they?

"Jeder nach seinen Fähigkeiten, jedem nach seinen Bedürfnissen. - From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." The motto of the masses that was shoved down their throats.

Yet, every day he gave nothing according to his ability and received everything according to his need. Those masses of comrades, the proletariat, supported his life and his family. Nothing in return. Although only he and Inge knew the secret of their betrayal.

Why, in certain times and in places undocumented but not forgotten across the realm, people guilty of even lesser crimes, like Hans, had been categorically taken outside, blindfolded, hands bound, marched up to a ditch or a wall, and shot in the back of the head. Millions had suffered the ultimate consequence across the Soviet Empire, sometimes at the irrational discretion of a maniacal dictator, or through the ambivalent machinations of a political system that strove instinctively to preserve itself. Although the grand majority of that suffering had occurred over a generation ago, the fear pervaded, exactly like the fogs haunting his window.

They waited like satiated lions lazing in the afternoon heat under shady acacias on the savannah, watching. The gazelles grazed, trembling, wary a feline yawn could turn into a growl, a pounce, and a throat-ripping chomp. Hundreds of thousands of Stasi agents and their informant, predator lions, scrutinized their citizen prey, making them twitch in their homes, in their workplaces, on the street corners, and in their schools.

Hans's eyes grew heavy. He dozed, an easy thing to do after drawing all day, his fanciful plans for a courageous family's escape. Unnoticed, a ray of sunlight he would like to have seen, waxed among the clouds, until overwhelmed by a flurry. Pleasant dreams of Inge and the kids flickered subconsciously. Nodding gently, head resting, chin on chest, the pencil rolled out of his loose fingers. He breathed deeply, peacefully. Finally.

He woke suddenly, it was unusually quiet. He looked out the window and saw guards strolling around the corner of the building, each smoking two cigarettes, one in each hand. They held no weapons, no dogs on leashes.

Now, this very moment!

Hans jumped out of his office and crossed the hallway, throwing open the door to the other office, his balloon sitting ready, the roof hacked out to the sky, no guards or comrades ever aware. All arranged carefully just in case such a moment presented itself. He brushed off some snow, checked the air tank, lit up the flames and the balloon filled, such pretty colors! He climbed into the bucket, loosed the stay rope, and flew! Flew so high! The guards raised their heads, mouths agape, a barking dog jumped futile. Hans flew right over the wall, a double half twist out of the bucket and he landed gently in the grassy meadow in front of that little farmhouse. Little children came running, laughing through the grassy meadow, the falcon flew in to see. A newspaper reporter stuck a microphone in his face; he said he'd go back and get his family soon, but for now, just the taste of free air.

It's spring on this side! The sun is so bright!

The phone killed his dream.

“RING RING!!” it demanded. He jumped to his feet, gasping awake. The chair fell over. He stood to attention, staring at the device, astonished. It hadn't rung in years. Five, at least.

He looked to his window as if someone, somehow had been looking in, had seen him dozing, calling to wake him. He half expected to find them in the office, accusing him. He imagined cameras never detected before, eyes that had been watching all along.

10

“RING! RING!” the black phone rattled in its cradle, insisting. Hans perceived its resolve and, shutting his eyes, he took a deep breath. Lifting the handset slowly, a cobweb stretched from the mouthpiece to the base. He wiped at the silky filament and put the phone to his ear. The

tiniest spider scurried, escaping down the spiral telephone cord, furious. It launched itself on a new strand to safety, its home's reconstruction now required.

“Hallo?” Hans's voice cracked. “Um, hallo? Jürgens here.”

“*Ja*, Comrade Wolff here,” Dieter's static riddled voice curled through the line. Hans's eyes sorted his conscience, searching for an explanation for the call. No need to look deeply, he thought, I know the reason.

“Ja, Comrade, Hans Jür., um Comrade Jürgens hier,” he cleared his throat, taut with dust and distress. “What can I do for you?” Of course, he used the formal “You”, which, when written, was capitalized - “Sie”, and signified the superior level of the person being addressed. A grammar fossilized in the German language, this pronominal form was not ideally suited to a modern communist, egalitarian society, yet it persisted.

“Ja, Hans,” Dieter's ubersweet voice dripped, like syrup, oozing through the earpiece. “You must come to my office immediately.”

Dieter, of course, used the informal “du”, which was not capitalized, and signified the familiar “you” or, in this case, the inferior level of the person being addressed - adults to children, professors to students, Party bosses to their guardianships.

“What you have been doing...it has been noticed,” Dieter drooled.

Hans gulped, hearing those fatal words, “It has been noticed.”

“Do come down directly, please.” Dieter hung up.

Hans lowered the handset, the telephone cord curled back into its previous coil, a homeless arachnid got busy.

Hans paled and, feeling faint, he sat, staring aghast at the phone. Hurriedly, he leaned over and threw up into the wastebasket. There was his balled up sketching again. Wiping his mouth,

tissue trembling, he looked at the phone and twisted to the basket again, vomiting the remaining bile in his stomach.

He stood, straightening his clothes, composing himself as if for a firing squad. The inevitable had arrived. Now it was his turn. Feed the machine.

If only I could have warned her. It's my turn to feed the machine.

"It was only a matter of time, I suppose."

He peeked out into the hallway. It seemed longer, danker, and impossibly lonelier.

Yes, fate was inescapable. He'd known for years he'd be caught. Somehow, someday, someone would discover his sabotage. He'd been throwing figurative dirt into a well-oiled machine and jamming it up for years. The bell finally tolled, and it tolled for him. He stepped out of his office, leaving his hat and coat behind, he turned out the light and locked the door, and shuffled to the stairs.

His sabotage, the failure to live for the achievement of the Plan was simply treason. Sitting in his office, dreaming out the window, plotting escape, even just hoping for a better life was simply treason, selfish. Turning the dark corner at the top of the stairs, descending into Dieter's lair, he feared he'd never see his family again or, if he did, it would be far into their hopeless future.

What would Emiel, his son, look like as a 25 or 30-year-old man? Inge at 55 or 60? Sofie, his precious baby girl, all grown up, a beautiful young woman upon his release, those years missed by Hans, him barely a memory to her? How would his imprisonment ruin their lives? One hand found the handrail, almost blind with terror, the other reached out for the wall. His feet shuffled in conditioned discipline towards his fate, towards the dungeon below.

At the bottom of the stairs, another hallway led to the office of SED Representative Dieter Wolff, his door behind a locked gate with its own guard. Hans scanned the guard's face, a desperate search for sympathy or forgiveness.

Unlocking, the guard did not make eye contact, only a sly grin perhaps mixed with boredom, as Hans carefully stepped by and nudged the gate open. The guard flicked a switch, and a dim bulb illuminated Hans's unfortunate destination, at the end of this final, cold, wet hallway.

The guard still refused sympathetic eye contact, sniffing, his nose running in the damp cold, he wiped with the back of his gloved hand. Hans continued down the hall towards his conclusion. He squinted against the overhanging light bulb, naked, it blazed too bright, beyond its wattage.

Rather meekly, Hans tapped on the heavy, dark wooden door safeguarding Dieter's office. The knock's echo faded down the hallway. Nothing happened. The guard paid no attention, just sniffled again. Feeling small, Hans rapped a little harder, a little less meekly. He reached for the doorknob then stopped. A radio within, softly playing an approved station's classical music, was turned off. A chair scraped, a drawer shut, brisk and efficient steps approached. Hans cleared his throat and brushed a clingy cobweb off his dark blue sweater. Stuck to his fingers, he wiped it absentmindedly on his pants.

The door creaked inward, slowly at first, then quickly pulled wide to reveal Dieter's smiling face. A pleasant twinkle sparkled in his eyes, evidently fueled by a joy to destroy, a delight in the deliverance of a well-deserved fate.

"Ah, my dear Hans Jürgens! Do come in!" Holding the door, a flick of his hand invited. Hans inserted himself cautiously into the office. Dieter's unexpected hand alighted upon his shoulder, causing a shiver underneath Hans's sweater.

“Do sit down, Hans, please. We have an issue of significant importance to discuss.” He applied a moderate, but insistent pressure to Hans’s shoulder, leading him to the chair.

Completely defeated and wracked with fear, Hans gagged on whatever was left in his stomach. He spied Dieter’s wastebasket alongside the desk.

“Yes, a matter of great importance,” Wolff reiterated.

“It has been noticed,” confessed Hans, nodding, pale, mumbling, anguished, echoing what Dieter said on the phone.

Hans thought of satiated lions lazing in the sun on the savannah, gazelles not far distant twitching nervously at their every move.

“Why, yes, Hans, it has been noticed. And I presume you suspected this would happen, someday.” Dieter drew a thick file out from the desk drawer.

My file.

“Well, yes, dear Comrade Wolff, truthfully I didn’t think it would’ve, that it could’ve, gone on forever.” His head hung low; his shoulders rounded.

Dieter slammed the desk drawer shut. Hans flinched, unseen by Dieter. What evidence must that file contain, so bloated with incrimination? He hastily searched through the last fifteen years in his mind. No drawings ever carelessly misplaced, lost, neither of the wall-climbing ladder machine, nor the catapult (his most ridiculous, really), nor the balloon soaring aloft. That one had been pretty.

I ate every one of them immediately! Could they read my mind?

Only to Inge had words ever been voiced about their secret past or dreams for the future. And this morning’s chance encounter with the falcon? Could this have been seen for what it really was, a cry of triumphant resistance?

It was just a stupid bird that got shit in my hair, I'll tell him! I was so angry at it!

Or did they finally know the truth about Montreal?

Oh God! Where is my love right now?

Had the Stasi already rounded up her and the kids? Were they suffering this very moment in similar dungeons, under bright lights?

The burden crushed him deeper into the chair. Dieter noticed, annoyed, probably disdaining Hans's weakness. He fingered through some of the pages, a little overdramatically.

Hans sat straighter, his posture injecting strength. As he watched Dieter preparing to toy with him, an unexpected wave of resolve flowed into his being. They could take everything, but they could not take his mind or his heart.

She was a beautiful bird!

Even if this were the end, somehow victory would be his. Even if he spent his final days rotting in a cell, he would not say, "I failed". Wasn't that really what he was doing upstairs anyway? Rotting, failing? So why not simply switch floors, leave his lonely office, and enter Dieter's dungeon permanently, with pride? He sat straighter, hands resting on his knees, feet firm on the floor.

"Yes, Hans, it has been discerned, and by people *very* high up indeed," Dieter carefully eyed one of his fingernails, annoyed apparently by an imperfect cuticle. He exhaled a slight, antipathetic sigh and continued. "It has been noted that your contribution," he snickered on that word, "to our progress in forming a model communist society has been very, shall we say, ahem, consistent for many years," he indubitably enjoyed the sardonic double meaning of his words.

Please, get to it!

“And yes, you shall finally get what you deserve.” Dieter stopped, leaned back, hands folded across his chest, and stared at him over the top of his glasses. Maybe, Hans imagined, Dieter was disappointed. The game was over. He’d caught his prey, but in the process discovered an ugly truth. Indeed, Dieter didn’t look so hungry anymore.

Uncomfortable heartbeats passed, the silence growing lengthy. Hans tried to cough into his hand. Nothing but a weak, dry gasp respired. The chair felt hard on his ass, cold. Continuing his fingernail examination, Dieter waited. Hans shifted, trying to find some comfort, preparing to take what was coming. His hands shook, as likewise did his heart.

“Na ja, my good man,” Dieter continued, “You must get your due. Please, allow me to be the first to...”

Hans looked with courage into Dieter’s eyes for the first time. He sought verdict but found only the rather large jowls of the overweight man jiggling as he spoke, his thin reddish-pink lips against soft, milky skin. Overweight is so unusual in East Germany, that was the peculiar thought that arrived to Hans at the very inopportune moment when Dieter began voicing his verdict.

“Let me be the first to congratulate you!”

Dieter Wolff struggled weightily out of his chair. Smiling proudly, he spread his arms broad as if he wanted a hug. Hans didn’t budge from the safety of his chair.

“To congratulate me?” he asked, astonished. “But I don’t deserve, I haven’t done anything...” he stammered, confused. Dieter really must know what he did up there, isolated on the 2nd floor. He must know.

How could he not know? All these years?

“Yes, congratulations! Dear Comrade, you have been designated by the Central Committee as a model citizen of our Republic! A New Socialist Man, shall we say? They are bestowing an

honored medal of heroism – the Vaterländischer Verdienstorden, the Patriotic Order of Merit, onto you, no less! Our dear Comrade Hans Jürgens!

“Well, I, uh, I...”

“Apparently,” Dieter continued excitedly, “your previous contributions to East German gymnastics, and of course your contribution to the success of this fine factory, are highly esteemed and being viewed with a great deal of Socialist pride! Very high up,” Dieter stuck out his fat, knobby hand to shake Hans’s. “Of course, you must share the fruits of your efforts with the factory though.”

“Um, yes, of course,” Hans was astounded. What efforts? The question reverberated inside his head.

Dieter came around the desk and lifted Hans, stunned, out of his chair to receive his hug of appreciation. Fearing a Soviet-style comrades' kiss, Hans turned his face away, this way and that, avoiding those fat, milky cheeks, and thin pink lips.

“Such a tragedy when you got hurt at the Olympics,” Dieter continued. “You were so close, nah? And poor Inge right by your side, nah?”

“Yes, sad, no Gold for me, but we made it back here, safe and sound.”

“Now, you must keep this to yourself though, this surprise. The award won’t even be given out for some months yet. You can do that, no? Our little secret, hmm? Not even your wife, hmm?” he winked conspiratorially. “Now, who knows when the ceremony will be, and we don’t want to get the staff all excited yet. You know how it goes. It will take months for those paper-pushers to deliver the damn medal! Rumor is that someone high on the Committee will bring it down, maybe even Comrade Honecker himself. You were after all, one of our greatest athletes.”

“Oh, not so great. I hardly think so. And so long ago.” Hans let Wolff guide him back to the door, the light pressure on his shoulder unnecessary, so badly he wanted to leave anyway.

“Ah, but my dear Hans Jürgens, the State never forgets, hmm?” He held the door open for him, “Now run along, take the rest of the day off and get home early to that beautiful family. I’ll clear it with the guards, so they let you out.”

Dieter shut the door, rather abruptly, in his face. Hans retreated, dumbfounded, down the dark, wet hallway, his tension deflating with each step. The guard, wearing the same non-emotion, let him out of the gate, still made no eye contact. Hans made no attempt to disguise the certainly confused look on his face. Upstairs, shuffling down the hall, he looked behind himself several times, shaking his head.

He slumped at his desk. The last fifteen minutes had drained him, his emotions rollercoasting from fear to disbelief to relief. The strange wrenching aftertaste of bile lingered in his throat. Something was wrong.

Was this the way that Dieter played his cat and mouse game? Toying with him before he pounced in for the kill.

No, it was undeniably too absurd. Clearly “They” knew nothing of Montreal. How could they? Neither had ever uttered a word to anyone, not even to their children, so young, or to their parents, so old.

But had she let it slip? Had she? No, she would never have said anything to anyone. Ever. She also sat trapped in fear.

He’d never even told Inge that he had no productive tasks at work, that he did nothing day in and day out.

He'd finally tell her, tonight! He'd sit her down and reveal that for ten years he had not accomplished a single productive task.

"I've just sat in his office, day in and day out, being paid, receiving promotions, vacations, and medical care. Twiddling my thumbs, drawing pictures, dreaming, sleeping, I failed to lift a single finger to further the revolution.

"Bravo!" she'd say and give him a huge hug, he imagined. "It's absolute treason my brave man!"

"Yes. But they must know? So high and powerful."

Bah, they are using you, in some twisted way, as a desperate symbol of the revolution's success. So, they ignore the reality of their past and the present. They disregard you, the common man, the purpose of the revolution and blindly chase each other's coattails into their Party's idyllic future."

"Hush my love, the kids, "he'd tell her. Then later they would make their sweet, passionate love. She'd see him as a hero, not weak.

Clouds smoked off the hilltop over there. Maybe no twilight snow this evening, Hans thought, relieved. Patches of blue sparkled behind black-green treetops.

Unfortunately, the bird was nowhere to be seen. He'd hoped to see her fly again before he went home to hug his wife and kids.

No, nothing is moving over there.

Back at his desk he looked at the phone, that ring that had just sent his life off in an unplanned direction. A tiny spider busied itself in the coil of the cord. Hans leaned back, placed his hands over his face, and began to cry, and then to laugh, and then to cry again.

The ice was chipped, but certainly not broken. The last fifteen minutes had passed in cold silence. Tina took in the countryside. Nick remained focused on the traffic as they cruised along briskly, not backing off their speed. Tina looked at her watch.

“Twenty minutes and we’ll be there,” Nick let her know.

He pulled out a cigarette. Her glare made him put it away. A few moments later he extracted it again and put it in his mouth, leaving it unlit. She let him squirm. His fingers tapped, fidgeted, his left knee bounced like a wind-up toy. No way was she going to give him permission.

He reached twice for the lighter. The second time he turned on the radio instead. The announcer was finishing up the news from Bayern 3, a regional pop station, the rapid-fire German too complex for her.

“My new home, huh?” Tina asked.

“For a couple of years, I guess. Army’ll keep you pretty mobile as it is.” The cigarette bobbed with each syllable.

“Really?”

“Sure. Non-stop. Temporary duty assignments, training, mission support, stuff like that, something exciting if you’re lucky. If that’s what you’re looking for.” He rolled his eyes.

“Sure, something exciting,” she said quietly, her eyes shut momentarily, taking a deep breath to center herself. This wasn’t going to be easy, digging through his attitude.

“So, Honor Grad, huh? Me too,” he finally said. “What else?”

Her eyes opened calmly. “Interrogator. I applied immediately for the course. They let me in.”

“Wow, tough course, no bullshit kinda guys.”

“And girl.”

“You finished it?”

“Honor Grad. Also.” Proud of herself, a lot of people washed out. It took real metal.

“Okay, anything else?” Nick frowned; the cigarette was lowered.

“DAME – Defense Against Mechanized Entry, that was easy.”

“That’s the lock picking course, right?”

“You could say that.”

“Evasive Driving?”

“Yup, but I’m not a good driver.”

So no honor grad there?

“Two wrecked cars”

“Well, they are wrecks anyway”

“Haha, you got that right!

They shared a nice laugh.

“Any languages?”

“Well, Spanish, of course. A little German - I’m working on it. And you?”

“German, Russian, a little Urdu. Well, I gave up the Russian a while back. Anything else I should know about you, Miss Hermosillo?”

“Uh,” she shared, “Black belt, 3rd degree, Shaolin Kung Fu.”

“Is that a warning?”

“Oh no, no!” she laughed. “I just work super hard at it. Proud, I guess.”

“Of course. Well, I’ll make a mental note not to mess with you. Maybe someday you can teach me a few things.”

“Well, it’s a bit more than just a few things, Mr. Torman. More than just brute force, isn’t it?”

“Touché. So, you a Grandmaster at Chess too?”

“Queen takes King’s Bishop and checkmate.” Tina gave him her best cute and innocent little girl look. It worked, disarming him.

He cleared his throat.

“No, but I have played a few games,” she finished.

His Urdu comment, she wondered. Was this a purposeful clue? Was he feeding her info? She knew it was the language of tribal Afghanistan. Not a whisper in his file about that at all. And that hat.

Who is this guy?

Moments passed in quiet discomfort. Tina bit her lip. She struggled to find a way to connect. The man sitting next to her was tempered steel.

And I’m just a little girl, she thought. Oh my God, what do I do? This guy looks like, I don’t know, something from a Tom Clancy novel.

No wait! I can do this. They picked me for a reason. Because I’ve proved myself! I’m real steel too!

She took a very deep breath, hidden, of course.

A car passed and she took a chance glance at him. Behind his façade, he wasn’t getting real with her. That was to be expected, revealing your true self was not a typical personality trait of a Counterintelligence Agent. And this guy, they hadn’t prepared her at all. He was the real shit, she could tell, real James Bond kinda shit.

Oh my God, pendeja...

She looked at him closely. Her partner. Every tendon, every muscle and nerve bristled, just casually driving at a breakneck 130 miles an hour. An extremely deep physical strength, ready to explode, but that was just one layer. His test scores had been higher than hers. He almost got kicked out of the agent course for insubordination, snoring repeatedly in class it said. Yet he finished top of the class. She wanted to know more. The I-don't-give-a-shit ruse was a great diversion.

Mission aside, she needed to know him. Everyone needed to know any person they were in close proximity too. She'd felt some trust at the first glance and – he did too, that's what Smith had mistaken as lust.

I think it's not real lust. I hope that's right.

She knew from the street that when someone wasn't real it was because they were afraid. Fear meant trouble. Los Vatos Locos, the gangbangers that had terrorized her neighborhood, were full of false bravado fueled by liquor and guns. They could smell fear.

And Tina had been afraid, any decent person was. The Vatos' little sisters, led by the brutish Patti Velazquez, had their own girl gang going. They'd smelled Tina's fear for weeks and finally came after her. Once was all it took. Tina wouldn't ever forget.

A skinny seventh grader, Tina sported shiny new braces and no breasts, just some tenderness down there. Patti was beefy, a butch ninth grader with a mullet haircut, and a big, wrinkly, black mole on her chin, sprouting curly hairs. Thick, black-rimmed glasses framed her glaring eyes. Barrio anger fueled her path to juvenile delinquency.

The gang had chased Tina down after school, cornering her just two blocks from Wakefield Junior High, the worst in Tucson. Tina slipped in the loose alley dirt. Patti's wrestling punch knocked her breath out. She easily doubled Tina's fifty pounds. The second punch split Tina's

top lip on her braces, the red squirt surprised them all. Patti sneered at the smell of blood, held Tina down and leaned over her, zeroing in a thick gob of spit dangling from her mouth.

Tina was sandwiched between Patti's knees, her head immobilized. The spit landed on her left cheek, warm and gooey. Even now, ten years later, the memory made her stomach turn. One of the other girls, Tina thought that it was Marci – they'd been best friends in 3rd grade – who kicked sand into Tina's face. It mixed with the blood, spit, sweat and tears, to form sticky mud.

Funny thing, it wasn't the dirty, gooey saliva that set Tina off, it was the tiniest speck of dust that landed in her left eye. Hurt like hell, felt like a rock. It brought her to a boil.

She couldn't budge. Patti's intent was clear and her weight on Tina's chest pressed. The thug's fat ass and thighs had her trapped. Patti leaned over, hocking yet another loogie from somewhere deep inside her nasal cavity. Struggling for some way to get loose, Tina discovered that somehow her right leg had wriggled free.

How she swung it up so high and so fast she didn't know. She knocked Patti upside the head and then leveraged her leg around her chest as she spun out from underneath. She would never forget the look of surprise on Patti's face as her thick-rimmed glasses flew into the dirt. Tina put all of her weight into it, flipping positions with her, until suddenly Patti was on the ground and Tina was on top.

Patti laughed, disbelieving, her wide eyes narrowed, and her lips tightened into a fuming white line. She bucked her hips off the ground and Tina rode cowboy-style, trying to stay on. Times up! Her tiny fists hammered Patti's face, neck, and ears, pummeling her.

"Never again!" Tina screamed. She landed a good fifteen punches until she saw Patti crying through the blood, not so tough after all. Tina stopped, satisfied, chest heaving for oxygen. Looking up at her in shock, Patti bawled at her troops.

“Get her now! Get her off mu-muh me!”

The pack circled in. Tina saw the hairy mole. It was gross, like a raisin. Kids bigger than Patti had teased her about it since, like, forever. Reaching down, Tina pinched as much of the hair as she could and, looking in her eyes, she yanked. A chunk of mole peeled off with the snatch of hairs. Patti’s howl echoed down the alley and into the dusty lots beyond.

Still gasping for air, Tina stood, eyeing them, daring the other girls. They backed off, wary. Collapsed in the dirt, Patti rubbed her bloody chin. Tina found the crunchy, hairy half mole in her fingers and flicked it at Patti, disgusted. Then she kicked dirt in her face.

“Don’t ever forget this, pendejas.” Tina said calmly, wiping her hands on her jeans. That was the last time she ever used that word on anyone but herself.

She picked up her books and walk-skipped down the alley. The desert sun felt good, hot on her dirty, sweat-soaked neck. Her upper lip throbbed, swelling, but in a noble, respectable way. Tina turned the corner quickly, before the sobs shuddered her little frame. Blocks away, finding grandma’s embrace at the screen door only made her tears worse.

Patti didn’t ever forget, and she never bothered Tina again. She and Marci, regrettably, did graduate onto more violent episodes and the inevitable tragedy. Sadly, Marci was killed in a drive-by shooting off Speedway Boulevard in 1986 at age 18, leaving her 1-year old son as survivor. Patti had been driving Marci and two other Vatas Locas to a showdown with a rival gang of bitches. One girl in the street was killed and Marci caught some return fire, as did a three-year old in the house behind them. Three dead, the city raged. As the adult driver, Patti was found guilty and sentenced by a very harsh, all-white Arizona jury to 35 years to life.

Chief Nick Torman had showed no fear. He was fidgeting with the lighter again.

“Can you at least crack the window and make it quick?” Tina asked.

“Yeah, thanks.” Nick sat up happy, easing his foot off the gas. He sparked the lighter, then stopped, pointing up ahead with it.

“Check it out! Smell-um!”

“Smell what? I know - they stink,”.

“No! SMLM, Soviet Military Liaison Mission, “smell-um” because they stink like shit.”
Punching the gas, he forgot about his smoke, tossing the lighter onto the dash.

“Oh yeah, sure.” Tina knew from her training that the SMLM was part of an international agreement allowing a small amount of official Soviet and Allied military observation of the opposing force’s movements on each other’s side of the border. The agreement was designed to reduce tensions and it had effectively done so over the last 40 years of Cold War. It prevented any surprise troop buildup or misunderstandings that might lead to war in central Europe, intercontinental ballistic missile launches, the destruction of the entire planet in general, and life as we know it specifically.

The MLMs of each nation occupying Germany - the US, Soviet, British, and French, were basically legal intelligence gathering missions and they kept close track of each other, from a guarded distance. On this side of the border, the Soviets drove around in plain vanilla sedans clearly labeled “SMLM”. They played hide and seek with US personnel who were tasked to report their movements and prevent them from getting too close to any restricted areas.

“Four years ago, one of our guys was shot by a guard while he was taking photos of a Soviet installation. The Soviets just let him bleed out on the ground. Hate these fucking guys!”

“Major Nicolson, yeah, I remember,” she said.

Nick suddenly pulled out his .45.

“Jesus Christ” Her eyes got huge. She hadn’t seen a weapon since Basic Training and hadn’t expected to see one now, not so soon. She didn’t like handguns either, another reminder of the Vatos, the older ones, like Patti’s dead brother and cousin. M-16s and M-60s, those big guns didn’t bother Tina, they couldn’t be hidden, but handguns reminded her too much of the hood.

“Yup,” Nick confirmed, “time for some harassment.” The SMLM car, seeing them closing in, peeled into the left lane. Nick stayed right on their tail, too close. It didn’t look like the gun’s safety in his mind was on. The speedometer approached 150 miles per hour.

“Jesus!” Tina braced as Nick zoomed mere inches off their rear bumper.

“Nah, this is about the most fun we get to have out here! Ever since Nicholson, we’ve got explicit orders to harass and scare the shit out of them.”

“Well, let’s do it!” Tina grabbed hold of the door and her seat. The SMLM car pulled recklessly to the right, Nick raced alongside and waved his sidearm at them. The big Russian officer’s eyes grew wide. The driver flipped them off, long and hard.

“How rude!” Tina exclaimed, laughing. It was kind of like being in the hood, she imagined, the gangbanging she had wisely and gratefully never done.

Edging closer, Nick threatened the Soviets with a hard swerve, dangerous at such a high speed. The Soviets veered slightly, but stubbornly held fast. Nick jerked the steering wheel and the cars danced again. The Soviet driver struggled for control, then recovered, accelerating hard again.

“Ok, game over.” Nick slowed, letting the SMLM car advance into the distance. As it departed, a uniformed arm popped out the passenger side window, leaving them with another middle finger.

“Wow! That was fun!” Tina loosened her grip on the door and seat. Watching Nick closely, she wondered. Was this a real mission, or some reckless bravado meant to impress a new rookie? Or was this part of the dangerous instability she was sent to investigate? Reaching onto the dash, she grabbed the lighter and handed it to him. That was when Tina noticed the car trailing them 100 meters back. She’d been expecting this vehicle. It was right where it was supposed to be. Following. Her contact.

Nick holstered his weapon and lit the smoke.

“Just part of the game,” Nick continued, hyped up, cigarette bouncing tight in his lips, ash falling into his lap. “Fucking Soviets ruining Russia and half of Europe, driving it into the ground, and destroying a thousand years of culture over some stupid words and ideas.”

“Words and ideas are just a way to gain power,” Tina offered, leaning forward to look in the side rearview mirror again. The dark blue sedan was still back there.

“Did you see it too, our tail?” Nick asked her.

“I guess, I mean, maybe they’re just going the same direction,” she whispered, playing dumb.

“Nah, been on us since we left HQ.”

“Really,” Tina said. “Who are they?”

“No idea. But don’t let them see you looking around, you’ll give it away.”

“Oh, okay, sorry. First time.” She hated playing stupid. So much.

Nick waved off her apology. “Words are power, yes indeed,” he said, coming back to the conversation. “Almost home,” he notified her, taking the exit suddenly, making their tail correct itself at the last second to keep following. They glided off the autobahn and slowed below 100 miles an hour for the first time in nearly an hour. Tina exhaled the built-up tension.

“Fun driving, huh?” Nick watched the rearview mirror.

“Racing, more like it. When do I get to try?”

“When I can trust you.” Nick replied. Unseen, she rolled her eyes.

“So,” she probed, “How long have you been in?” She took a discreet peek to their rear. Still there.

“Eight, one to go,” Nick answered.

“You’re really going to get out?”

He checked his watch, “394.4.”

“Can’t wait, huh? Why?”

Nick grimaced, the subject evidently off limits. A lot was going to be off limits, for sure. But if she could gain his trust, he might give up a clue. That itself could take months. Patience was the key. Another uncomfortable moment passed.

“Okay, well,” she continued, “I just want to tell you again that I’m excited to be working with you. He said you could’ve been the Army’s top agent if you wanted.”

“Who said that?” he scoffed, knowing already.

“Captain Smith, or whatever his real name is,” she planted a seed, hoping he’d read it as, “I’m on your side, not his.”

Truth was she’d just lied about who told her. The man’s real identity was classified, of course. She wasn’t sure of his real name either, but Major General Jones at INSCOM, the Intelligence and Security Command, had tasked her on this mission. Before flying over here she’d spent two full days in a stuffy briefing room with the two-star general.

“Yeah, whatever his real name is, Smith’s full of shit,” Nick said. “I hate to disappoint you, but I’m most definitely not one of the best. I’m also semi-retired. Staying as far away from the

game as possible until my time is up. You'd have been better off assigned somewhere else. Munich maybe, Det 15. See, out here in the boondocks nothing goes on. That's my Order of Battle, my SOP. So, keep your head down and stay out of trouble. That's what I'm doing for the next year. We agree on that, and everything will go just fine. I'll show you the ropes, and then you can play Super-Secret Jane Blonde Agent Girl after I boogie. Sound like a plan?"

"Boondocks!?" She waved her hand, exasperated, to the east. "We're like twenty, thirty miles from the East German and Czech borders! Hundreds of thousands of enemy troops are poised, right on the other side, just waiting to attack."

"Well," Nick explained, like he'd rehearsed this before, "they've been waiting 44 years to attack. And their Order of Battle is to blow right past us and conquer all of Germany. It should take them about three days at worst, or best, depending on whose side you're on. Our wartime mission," he continued, "should 'the balloon go up', and this is classified SECRET by the way, is to get in our car and boogie as fast as we can to Belgium, join up with our unit, and establish Rear Area Operations Control. If we even make it outta here, and for us that's a big if, and if there is anything more than Rear Area ashes left to get to."

"What do you mean, 'if' we make it out of here?"

"This close to the border? A few seconds warning at most is what we'd get. Hardly time to pick up the phone and yell "INCOMING!!" before their artillery flattens us."

Her burst of laughter stopped him. She couldn't help it, the way he held up an imaginary phone and screamed into it, veins bulging on his neck, the scar on his cheek an angry white river on his red face.

"Just think about that when we get to our office. That building is dialed in on some Soviet artillery officer's task sheet. Our wartime mission is a joke."

This looked like more of the resentment she had been briefed on. Another note taken.

Nick continued, “But actually, I don’t believe there is going to be a war, not here anyway, maybe somewhere else, like the Middle East. Oil is more interesting to those guys up top, both sides. Besides, in this man’s army it’s the small stuff that’ll get you or someone else killed.”

“Like playing chicken with SMLM?” she asked.

“Welcome to the Cold War, Little Miss Cochise.”

They shut up. His eyes grew distant, slipping far away again, to another time and place. Then, turning the corner, driving parallel to a tall brick wall, he shook it off.

“That car you think is following us is probably nothing,” he told her, “Just an agent’s paranoid delusion. We tend to see things where they ain’t.” Turning left, he pulled up to a heavy black gate manned by an American soldier. The dark sedan continued on.

“See? There they go,” Nick said reassuringly, drawing up to the guard.

What they failed to notice, however, was the white Mercedes, the other team watching them. This was not Tina’s contact. It had stopped at the end of the block, its driver and passenger intent on Nick and Tina, watching as they had been since Nuremberg.

Any agent worth her salt knew that plain old observation was key, and Tina continued to assess every twitch made, and every word uttered, by Special Agent Nicolas Andrew Torman. Yes, he was tense, wired tight, but so far, she wasn’t exactly seeing what she’d been sent for - paranoid guilt and shame attached to blind ego and hatred for the Army. Her search for clues, however, had only just begun.

12

The soldier lifted the gate and Nick threw him a casual salute. A small installation, covering about half a block, it was home to a company of combat engineers and a Military Police Station.

Nick drove to the far corner, about fifty yards, to where a nondescript two-story building sat in isolation.

“This is the MP station; our office is upstairs. Welcome to the Bayreuth Resident Office. Home, least until they toss you somewhere else.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding, unable to hide her smile, “take me in. I’m genuinely thrilled to be here/ Seriously Nick, I’ve worked so hard, for so long, to get here.

“Yeah, let’s get started. We have a tiny report to send out. SMLM sighting.” He winked at her, and she smiles, getting out of the car.

Inside, Nick introduced her to the MP Desk Sergeant, Bradley Clague, flattop haircut, blond, fit and handsome, bright blue eyes, twinkling together with a nice warm smile. He had pretty much the same reaction as a lot of men did when they met her, eyes widening, scanning quickly up and down, trying not to be obvious. He buttoned it up swiftly and maintained his military bearing, like the professional soldier he appeared to be. Tina appreciated that.

The first floor looked like any police station, a front desk, elevated, and a small office for questioning off to the side, an equally small holding cell in the opposite corner. Upstairs though, the CI office was, for all intents and purposes, a vault. A wrought iron gate with a combination padlock guarded a solid metal door bearing a dial combination and spoke handle, just like at a bank.

She watched over his shoulder as he spun the combination locks. Nick paused, glancing at her as if deciding whether she could really be trusted. He returned to entering the combinations, efficient, well-practiced.

“I’ll give you the combinations later,” he said, spinning the heavy vault handle.

“I already memorized them,” she said, throwing him one of his own winks. He replied with a deep frown. “Kidding. Well, ahem, just the first one.”

Inside the vault-office was a telex, for secure written communication, and the STU-III, for secured voice comm. There was also a small word processor and a document shredder, standard for any office that handled sensitive or classified information. Two desks, the small one would be hers, both hopelessly dirty, papers, dust, dirty coffee cups. No computers, just typewriters.

A tiny window gifted an insignificant slice of gray daylight. Nick hastily straightened up the couch. It had a body length depression in it that Tina did not fail to notice.

Showing her the supply cabinet, Nick took out a blank form and typed up the report. Finished, he ripped it out of the word processor.

“So, this is a Telex, it’s secure too, let me show you how it works.”

She let him belittle her momentarily. They had given her a brief on it at INSCOM. The telex and STU were how she would communicate with the Major General, her case officer, the MG.

“Our office s a soundproofed vault!” she said.

He gave her a serious look and then that stupid wink. “Defense against signals intelligence collection.”

Nick looked up the transmission code from a book n the safe, the only Top Secret document they actually had in the office, he informed her. And they transmitted. One minute later and a response came over the telex. Tina approached, but Nick slipped Smith’s response quickly into the shredder before she got there.

“What did it say?” she asked.

“Ah, nothing, just “Receipt confirmed”. Nick hurriedly shut off the telex. Tina noted his attempt to keep information from her. The link between Smith and Torman, however strained, was unmistakable.

“Ok, done here. Let’s get you to your hotel.” Nick gathered his coat and moved to the door.

“Uh, hotel?” Tina verified,

“Until you find your own place.”

“My own place?” she perked up. “No barracks?”

“Yup, tiny apartment, no barracks.” Nick winked at her. “We’re not allowed to live with or fraternize with the troops. ‘Sensitive duty assignment’.”

“I could do without barracks after 10 months of training.” Tina smiled at that. “And the troops inside them too!

“Sometimes they aren’t the brightest.”

“Well, I wasn’t interested in sex, or romance, and sometimes they just didn’t get it. I wasn’t there to party. She knew, even from high school and college that, she was so focused on accomplishing her goals they got turned off.

“Well, you can’t blame them for trying, look at you.”

“That’s the first stupid guy thing that you’ve said to me,” she turned away. Strangely enough, she liked it, but hoped he wouldn’t do it again. If he did, she’d just have to shut him down too.

Men, boys really, were not on her priority list. Not since Mr. Roberts. No one else had ever measured up for more than an occasional sexual release. And of those occasions she generally regretted giving in to desire and was left disappointed.

If there is a man who knows how to satisfy...

They drove over to a small pension a couple of blocks away. The white sedan followed discreetly, unnoticed by either Nick or Tina. Once checked in, Nick helped her up to her room, setting down her bulky duffel bag with a huff. This time she allowed him to help.

“So, no need to unpack this,” he said, kicking the big green canvas cylinder. “We don’t wear BDUs here,” Nick was referring to the standard camouflage Battle Dress Uniform. “It’s strictly civilian clothes on this assignment.”

“Civies! I don’t have a single thing to wear!”

Nick, somewhat overdramatically, pulled a fat envelope out of his coat.

“And now, Specialist,” his eyes twinkled playfully, “the Army has seen fit to supply your poor broke ass...er, behind, with two thousand dollars for clothes. Do you want to go shopping now or later?”

“Two thousand dollars! Shopping? For clothes? What girl would delay that?” She offered a high-five, he slapped it hard, and they headed out the door.

Nick walked her to the “Fussgangerzone”, the pedestrian shopping district downtown. From a safe distance outside she timidly peeked through the glass into a couple of stores.

“Nick, I’ve never had this much money before.” She wanted to send it home. He walked up to a store’s door and held it open, a gentlemanly gesture that she did not think him capable of.

There were too many options. He made the first selections and took them to the register. All appropriate professional attire for investigating and looking like a government agent.

“So, no party dresses?” she asked mischievously.

“Regulation says “Female Agent formal attire limited to one (1) dress, small, black, semi-sexy and one (1) pair of shoes, black, heels permitted. “You never know,” Nick told her, “Someday we might have to spy at a party.”

“Your attempt at humor was weak, she rolled her eyes and then burst out laughing when he held the dress up to himself and checked in the mirror, lips pursed. He looked huge next to the skimpy cloth.

At least he was loosening up some, she thought. The angry “rip heads off” killer inside Nick was, well, not fun hanging around!

“Doesn’t everybody here know we’re Army CI anyway?” she asked.

“Sort of, but we do whatever we can to confuse them. Take that car that was following us. We let them because we need to ID them too.”

“Who were they?”

“I don’t know. East Germans, Czechs, Russians maybe.”

Tina’s eyes grew wide.

“Don’t get excited. Somehow, they get hold of the graduation list from The School, check on all of us, let us know that they know who and where we are. Hey, who knows, maybe they’ll broadcast a welcome message to you over Radio Volga. SIGINT will let us know if they hear your name.”

“Radio Volga?”

“Soviet propaganda, that and the Iron Virgin, the East German Mistress of Propaganda, they use her to broadcast code to agents in the West.”

“Wow.” She tried to play it cool, but butterflies fluttered in her belly. A lump rose in her throat. She really was in the action, on the front lines of the Cold War.

Two hours later they piled into her room, arms straining with shopping bags.

“Right, Tina.” He dumped her bags and went back to the door. “I’m going to take my leave of you for the rest of the afternoon. For sure you’re jetlagged anyway. See you at oh-730.”

“How about 0500? PT?” she asked, hopeful. He looked at her, puzzled, like he had to remember that “PT” stood for Physical Training. He laughed and gave her a fist-bump on her on the arm.

“You go get ‘em, Specialist! Hu-rah!” He winked again. She hated his stupid winking habit already.

Turning away, he left and didn’t look back. She pushed her disappointment aside and looked around the small room, her luggage and shopping bags dominating the space.

Poking through a suitcase, she found what she was looking for and disappeared into the bathroom. She came out dressed in jogging clothes.

“Jet lag, my ass,” she said, approving of her reflection in the mirror, before exiting the room.

Down on the street, Tina turned away from downtown and started her run through the north Bavarian town. Old World charming, she loved it immediately. The novelty of the place added an extra boost of energy. She focused on her stride, taking care on the unfamiliar streets and sidewalks. Soon she was heading down a quiet country road. Surprisingly, she found herself thinking of Nick and not in the way she’d intended.

Okay, she thought, he’s very intelligent, good looking, sure, but borderline crazy. She’d heard that this job could do that.

He’s a broke down horse,” Smith had said this morning, “just observe him, take his best, toss the rest.”

What a jerk.

He also warned her to be careful and report back any unusual activity or behavior. Ironically, the MG’s instructions regarding Smith were almost the same.

“You want written reports?” she asked Smith innocuously.

“Nah, just keep a close watch. You’ll see why. Soon enough.”

Tina noted the twitch in Smith’s right eye. She’d seen it twice already but wasn’t sure if it meant “information creation” or, in non-technical terms, a lie. When people lied, they usually gave off a telltale sign, an aversion of the eyes to the lower left, an itchy touch to the nose or mouth. She remembered this from the Interrogator course.

Frowning, it pissed her off that these thoughts were jamming her head on the run. She wanted peace of mind. She pushed harder into her run, but the thoughts continued their banter. She remembered breakfast this morning, the tension between these men, Smith lying, Nick an angry puzzle, volatile layers of truth. Nick said he didn’t want anything “to happen”. Yet he’d leaped into the game of chicken with SMLM, a chaotic danger that finally seemed to wake woke him up.

He truly hated the Soviets. She supposed this was his service programming, but it seemed to run a little deeper than normal.

“What I know for sure,” she told herself, kicking her butt into high gear, “I’m not gonna let ‘nothing’ happen. I’ve got a job to do.”

Uncover spies, hinder, and neutralize threats to US Army personnel from Hostile Intelligence Services. That was her job. If he didn’t want the work anymore, well, she still had her mission. If she could build some trust, get him to open up, then time would bring out any evidence of espionage or criminal activity. Whether it entangled Nick or Smith, or both. Maybe this estrangement they displayed was plain subterfuge, to confuse and throw anyone off track.

“Unless he *is* just a loser,” she huffed, rolling her eyes. But no, that felt wrong. He wasn’t a loser. He was, was....something else.

She looked at her watch. Felt the pain of the run, breathing in the trees. A strange feeling grew in her belly. Somehow, she was meant to be here - at this time, in this very place. Meant to make something happen.

This is irrational!

She rejected the notion of some kind of fate. But it came right back. A feeling like she was approaching her destiny. Well, whatever it was, whatever twists in the road, in the mission, she knew she was made for this.

Stay focused and on point.

Winded, an hour later, a good runner's burn inside, she finished. She was stretching in front of the hotel when a pleasant old man, crusty-old really, walked by and tipped his hat.

"Welcome to Germany, Augustina," he said, his Slavic accent heavy, curling, his smile gentle, eyes twinkling.

The code phrase! Her heart, still pounding from the run, skipped a beat and thumped harder. Her muscles tensed, a fight or flight reaction, but she stood frozen, stunned. The old man strolled casually away. He stepped off the sidewalk, tipped his hat to her again and stepped into the street. She was meant to follow.

An engine revved, tires squealed, a blur of heavy metal flashed.

A woman screamed a warning across the street. A blue BMW swooshed past Tina and slammed into the old man.

Like a doll. That was the only way to describe how his body flew. She watched him fly head over heels, hat and cane scattered to the ground. The strangest thing, his shoes flew off. Landing headfirst into the side of the building, his skull splattered like a watermelon. He was already, mercifully, dead by then.

Several more bystanders screamed.

The BMW slowed, stopped, nobody got out.

The same car from the autobahn!

Tina leapt after it as it jumped from the curb, slipping on its own rubber. Too fast! After half a short block she broke off her futile pursuit, repeating the license plate to herself before it disappeared. Her heart hammered, fueled by the adrenaline pulsing through her veins.

She bent over, hands on her knees heaving for air. She rapidly scanned other cars and pedestrians, windows, doorways, there was nothing else suspicious. The shadow watching from inside the white Mercedes was too small to draw her attention.

“I’ve don’t have a clue what to do!”. She walked over to the body, already crowded with witnesses. She didn’t want to get too close. A lot of blood and what looked like brain tissue dripping down the wall, soaking the ground next to his crumpled body.

Gross! What a mess. Poor old man. So dead.

It was the first dead body she’d seen outside of Marci’s funeral. She hoped it was the last one.

Sirens approached. An elderly lady cried openly in a doorway close by, unable to turn away.

Sad as this was, Tina’s contact had just been taken out. Now what, she wondered?

The Polizei arrived with the ambulance. The medics cleared space around the body, graciously covering it with a dark blue tarp. The police started interviewing witnesses. Tina described all she’d seen. She was a new soldier she explained, just arrived today. Her shaking hands and voice, she hadn’t needed to fake that.

One cop fished a wallet out of the victim’s pocket. Tina stepped in closer, and the cop didn’t care. The dead man looked old world. But the name...Cole? Hamilton Cole. That was not a

Slavic name. An American, the cop knew of him, he'd been in the area for decades. The ID didn't exactly match the face, but there wasn't much of a face left at this point.

She realized that this was clearly a hostile action meant to take out her contact. To prevent information from being shared, to warn those who might pursue, or to warn her, from digging deeper. The next question was how to keep Nick and Smith from finding out. She referred the police to the phone number Jones had given her in case of emergency. Seemed like this qualified.

"What a damn mess already!" She looked at her watch. "Twenty four hours in country!" Alone, sucked into a vortex of solitude, her only lifeline six thousand miles away.

Maybe she was wrong? Was it just a hit and run? There had been no immediate threat to her, just a kind looking old man, some retired agent they'd assigned to open the line of communication locally. The last thing she wanted was to look like an eager young gun seeing ghosts (and spies) where there were none. In the end, however, she ignored her instinct and went against her training.

As soon as she got a chance, she'd message the MG. But she couldn't tell her new partner. Nick was the closest person, presumably on her side, and she had to keep this a secret from him.

This was her first mistake as a rookie Counterintelligence agent..

13

Earlier, dropping her off, Nick had seen the blue sedan, but had given no indication. Same car they'd seen before. Checking his rearview mirror, he noted the license number and continued casually on his way. He'd something better to do right now anyway, a good old friend to call on.

Stopping at a store, he bought a six-pack of beer, a pint of vodka, and went straight home. Walking down the hallway, he stopped at his neighbor's door. He didn't know the person, had never seen anyone go in or out. Nick heard light classical music from a radio inside.

An abrupt wave of deep depression washed through him. Stepping closer, he touched the doorframe. He shook it off, blaming his sudden blues on the long day. He still hadn't processed the sudden intrusion of a rookie, one with a very strong personality, into his life. And he was thirsty.

At his door, setting the beer on the floor, digging for keys, he unlocked, pushing the beer in with his foot. Still standing in the doorway, he cracked the vodka's seal, taking a big guzzle. He popped open a beer and chugged half. The liquor soaked in. He shivered, the wave of alcohol spreading through his bloodstream. The fire was lit. He tipped the vodka back again, took another pull and chased with beer.

"There. All better." Nick slammed the door on the empty hallway. He situated himself on the couch, with the booze, a book, and his smokes. It would be an early night. "War and Peace" had been on the top of the pile, and he was more than halfway through it. He began reading and stopped, pensive.

Those cars were everywhere in Germany, a common color too. Worried he would forget in his haze; Nick reached over and wrote down the plate number. He rubbed his eyes and focused on the book, stopped after a few lines, and drew heavily again from each bottle and lit a cigarette.

A hundred pages later, all the liquid finished, smokes getting low, Nick dropped the book and drunkenly said, "More". He stood, swaying for balance, managed his shoes and coat, and left.

A lot colder out now. The crisp air cleared his mind somewhat as he wavered down the dark streets. A biting wind carried frozen drizzle. He braced, chilled. Pretty buzzed, he'd have admitted, if you'd asked, and if he'd felt like answering, but by no means drunk, not in his mind.

Anyway, he never used “drunk” to describe this desired state. Drunks were dirty street bums, like his father meeting his fate passed out on the train tracks near skid row in downtown L.A.

“You’re a fink.” his dad always would tell him before a smack, a punch, or as he was snapping his belt. Nick didn’t even know what a “fink” was, but it wasn’t good. Fuck that guy, Nick thought. Nothing but hate, never gave me a hug, never even played with me, except the time he played Dirty Harry with mom and me.

Nick’s current destination was the dark, fusty, smoke-filled Keller Bar. Instead of his normal route, though, this time he took a quick detour. Just to check out the security situation. All quiet there, no suspicious blue BMWs lurking around outside Tina’s hotel. Her room was dark. He didn’t see the Benz parked across the street, two dark shadows inside too.

Walking briskly, the crisp air cleared his head. He straightened his coat before dropping down the stairs into The Keller. The downtown bar was in the basement of an old building, across from the train station, around the corner from the pedestrian zone, at the edge of a dark alley. It had served as a bomb shelter in past, more desperate times.

Quiet inside tonight. Good. The usual table of fat girls in the corner, drinking and smoking heavily. They’d given up on Nick a long time ago. It wasn’t personal. He wasn’t friendly to them or anyone else.

Frankly, the place could have been full of people partying, time of their lives, and he still would’ve kept to himself, ignoring them all. One of Nick’s unrecognized idiosyncrasies was that he needed to be somewhere people were living life. He was scary looking too, his ready to kill body and face. He gave off such a negative vibe that the message was clear to any potential girls or guys that wanted to share a drink or a laugh.

Cuz, you know, when I drink alone, I prefer to be by myself.

“George Thorogood, Bad to the Bone”, he told nobody, staggering to his usual stool, the soft cushions squeaking their welcome. The magic man who dispensed oblivion stood ready behind the bar. An ashtray was placed in front of Nick without a word. A beer and a scotch joined the party. He tossed back the scotch, chase it, grimaced and lit a smoke, all in good rhythm.

Nick kept his eyes down, at his hands, the cigarette, the ashtray, the drink. A new scotch appeared. He stamped out his cigarette, fishing for another one. He saw his own scowl in the mirror and turned back to the drink.

A third scotch appeared next to the new one.

“No, I don’t think...” he slurred to the kind gentleman. Out of focus, the bartender nodded encouragement, nudged the glass towards him. Nick steadied, lit his smoke, and tossed back the second scotch, more beer, then the third shot, in quick succession. He coughed on that last shot.

“Done,” he surrendered, slapping the usual twenty on the counter. He slipped off the barstool, slid across the room, skidded up the steps, and smoothed on out the door.

Darker now somehow, the city lights seemed dimmer. Nick propped up against the portal and tried to button his coat. Like looking through a tunnel, the distances, the streetlights, passing cars and pedestrians were blurred.

“Fuggin’ buttons go in the goddamn holes,” he gave up, holding the coat closed with one hand, keeping the other warm, buried in a pocket, switching them when the cold struck his deadened nerves.

Wobbling in the general direction of home, he felt a brief sense of peace, confident of his place in the world - oblivion had arrived.

“Ah, nice,” he slurred. That was the last thing he remembered. Still functioning, his body moved homeward, disconnected.

The next thing he knew, Nick was back in the snow at the border struggling to keep up with Smith and the General, pushing the woman, pulling her daughter. Floodlights exploded white bright. Warning shots advanced. Guard dogs, dismounting from jeeps, leaped eagerly, bounding hungry through the snow.

Nick faltered. The guard's jeep approached rapidly, the dogs faster. Covering fire erupted from the Finnish side and his two agents fell in the crossfire. Nick's instinct engaged the border guards. He should've shot the dogs first. In the cracks of gunfire, the dogs leapt and growled. The little girl shrieked, and the mother wailed.

Nick woke screaming, his bed drenched in nightmare, sweat and alcohol. He'd blacked out. Again. No memory of making it home.

He rubbed his eyes and began to sob. Choking it down, holding it in. He lit a shaky cigarette and buried his head in his hands.

Something was in the room, watching him, he could feel it. There was his gun, just in reach on the nightstand, barrel pointed right at him. Its big, unblinking eye, observing, waiting. Patiently.

He didn't remember taking it out. Reaching over, he spun it around so its dark eye could no longer see.

Christ, why did she have to show up now? It was the last thing he needed. Nick recalled Smith's earlier telex, the one he'd shredded. "Keep AH out of action."

So, Smith was watching everything. If he was so concerned about her safety, why assign her to him? Was there some secret plan between Smith and Tina? An affair or something?

"Nah! That would be a joke," Nick laughed. Smith was too old and happily married, Tina was too level-headed. "They just met yesterday, didn't they? Maybe he's setting her up?"

Smith had done it before, recruiting him the day he finished Yale, getting him involved too soon, too deep. How a kid like him ended up operating for two years on the Pakistani/Afghan border and then to Russia itself. Operator's dream come true. Yeah, it was a rush, frontline fighting the Cold War. For the medals, for the glory. Then people died.

"Nah! Bullshit, having her watch me. I've got more shit on him than he's got on me. He won't win this game...I'll find out." Secrets couldn't be kept forever, he knew that. What he'd forgotten were his own dark secrets, trapped within for too long.

"No more missions. You promised, Smith, you fuck," he muttered desolately to the empty room. The sound of the now frozen drizzle outside stinging at the window.

Oblivion. He rested.

14

The inside spoon, Inge lay tight within Hans' arms, legs tangled together, trying to keep warm. Bodies melded together, he couldn't feel where she ended, and he began. They were one. He held her closer. It felt great, wanting what he had in his arms.

Hard to pull away, Hans rubbed his eyes, moving gently, leaving her warm sleep undisturbed. The bed creaked, he rose and padded towards the kids' room. The clock on the kitchen wall crept close to three am. The kids were in deep slumber.

They had separate beds, but Sofie, almost three years old now, always moved over to her big brother's bed, not only for warmth, but because she loved him, and he loved her. They loved each other absolutely, as little brothers and sisters do up to a certain age.

Hans smiled at their beauty and a small tear escaped his eye, watching the innocent sleep they shared, he padded quietly closer to their bed. Sofie breathed peacefully, curls tussled about

the pillow and in her face, her fat red lips and blushed cheeks relaxed. One small hand touched Emiel's shoulder and the other held her security blanket, her "binkie" as everyone called it.

The day would come too soon when Emiel no longer wanted his little sister there. He'd complain, push. She'd have to go back to her own bed. Well, maybe three or four years remained. How would that contribute to Sofie's eventual loss of childhood innocence? Suddenly, the unconditional love you shared has vanished. Something has happened to him, something has changed, and you have no idea what. He just doesn't want you so close anymore.

Poor little children. Hans moved a curl out of Sofie's face, her cheek so soft. Emiel, starting to look like a bigger boy, sighed deeply and turned away, onto his side.

Why do they have to lose this sweetness?

Assured they were safe and snug, he returned to bed and slipped in delicately next to Inge. She re-cuddled up next to him.

"Feet!" she moaned. Cold from the floor, he angled them away.

Hands behind his head, he stared at the ceiling, thinking of yesterday's absurdity. He hadn't even told Inge yet. Just nuts! The Patriotic Order of Merit, absolutely insane! Using him again as a prop, a showpiece, just like when they had competed.

The worst part, the most ridiculous part, was that he let them do it. He sat passive, like a lamb. Too afraid to tell them to take their award and shove it up their collective...

"Dieter-fucker!" Inge had whispered at the sink two nights ago. It was she who had coined his nickname. "So fat! Nobody here is fat like that!"

"Well," Hans said, handing her another dish to dry. "Maybe it just seems that way because we are so fit." He squeezed her tiny butt.

“Bah, we scrape by like everyone else!” She racked the dish roughly, but not hard enough to break this time.

Yes, Hans and Inge were thin, like many in this economy, but Dieter was the one who was fat. It was disgusting, how he practically considered himself royalty. Where did he get the food, after all? Even so, how unhappy he appeared to be. His only joy was found in making others miserable.

He bring misery Hans knew, if he knew how badly, and for how long, Hans and Inge had wanted escape. How they had tried and failed in Montreal.

Inge stirred. Her thin body was even stronger than when she'd been an Olympian. It had held up well against the stress of life and motherhood. Lots of women lost things when they had babies, lost their bodies and some, understandably, lost their minds.

Inge, however, had thrived through the whole ordeal of pregnancy and childbirth, like she was training for something. Of course, she'd gained weight, but against the Party's guidance she'd breastfed and, well, there was no other way to put it, those babies just sucked that fat right out of her.

For years, while Hans worked, she stayed at home, worked out hard, ran, and swam. One day Hans had jokingly asked her what she was getting ready for. She didn't answer, the kids were playing right there. Instead, she just nodded in the direction of the border. Maybe he should start doing some pushups too, she teased, grabbing his waist. He took her advice and that's when he started working out in his office.

Other times she got, bitter, holding it in. Hans worried during those phases that she would simply crack. Like two weeks ago, when out of nowhere she had snapped.

“We’re not sheep!” she screamed one night, slamming the plate in the sink, long after the kids had been put to bed. Either her cry out or the broken dish had brought Sofie out of bed. She tugged at her mom’s leg until she was picked up. Thank God for little girls, he’d thought, they could stop a fight dead in its tracks. Inge carried her back to her bed, tucked her in, and returned calmer to the kitchen.

“We will, I will, find a way, my love,” he soothed, picking pieces of shattered plate out of the sink. He waited for her response, breathing out the tension. She came and held him from behind, her head resting on his back. She sniffed back the tears.

“We must find a way again, Hans. Just to show them.”

“For the kids, my love.”

“Of course, dear. For them first.”

Now, her tight body next to him in bed, he was sorry it was so early in the morning. He would’ve liked to turn her over and make love right now. It was the one great outlet they had, a fantastic sex life. It was the one thing that the State could not possess.

“They can’t have our love,” she’d told him many times, “so why do we give them our lives?”

Hans took it personal whenever Inge broke down like this. After all, it was his failure that trapped them. Her latest outburst had started another round of desperate sketching and eating of sketches. His own workout sessions in the office grew more intense. But the fantasies of escape which he crafted just didn’t have the magic their first plan had.

Foolish plans. Their only chance had passed. A lifetime ago. They’d been mere children then. Now they were adults with young children of their own. And they hadn’t travelled to the West for some twelve years. Now it was hopeless, pure fantasy.

When they'd been younger the escape fantasy had made sense. As top athletes they had more freedom, even treated like royalty, and travelled to the West. But not anymore.

Oh sure, they were still fit and could have made a run for it. Except for the walls, the landmines, the guards, and dogs. And how could they run with little children?

Dieter, the fat man who held their life strings in his hands, that man could not have run fifty meters if his life depended upon it. But of course, he didn't want to run, things were just the way he desired.

So, like sheep indeed they sat, afraid to act. Then one day Emiel's cough started. It began as a little scratchiness, a need to clear his throat. Over the last two years it had gotten worse, better in the summer after vacations, worse in the winter. They developed some home remedies.

Christmas time this year, a non-event in an officially atheist country, had been a terrible ordeal, his coughing could not be soothed. The doctors proclaimed it "occasional minor asthma".

That was accepted until Inge pointed out the pollution from the nearby power plant and the correlation to the cough on dry days when the rains hadn't washed the air. Hans also detected a relationship with the cough on days when he and Inge were particularly, even silently, distraught, their unhappiness higher than normal. So, they double masked their true feelings.

Of course, no dissatisfaction was ever voiced in front of the kids. Kids went to school with other kids, they chatted about home life, they played games, they spoke to teachers, and they took part in the Young Pioneers. You couldn't risk them innocently carrying your opinions to suspicious, watchful, and waiting ears. Everyone knew the story of little Pavel Morozov, the 13-year-old Soviet boy who informed on his father, was then murdered by his family, and martyred by the Soviet government. This lesson was also not lost on any cowering parent. Or grandparent. Or child for that matter.

Then one day last week Sofie complained that her own throat felt scratchy. The tiniest little cough escaped, just the way it had started with Emiel. Inge gave Hans that look, the tension rose, and then Emiel started with a deep wheeze that almost took them to the hospital.

Lying in their bed, Hans's thoughts floated through the dark house, out the window, and into the front yard, down the road through the village, to the factory on the other side of town. Their village was relatively clean, but the nearby pollution was only half hidden and wholly toxic. Maybe she was right, that the pollution was affecting them. He thought about the air they breathed, the water they drank from the tap, and the shower they bathed in.

The environmental degradation was ubiquitous. Industrial smokestacks belching and hissing, sickly ponds holding all varieties of noxious concoctions, some fenced off on industrial complexes, some out in the open, all probably leaching their poisons into the air and water.

Hans cursed his sturdy German soul that tolerated the destruction, holding up under such tremendous pressure. But Inge had always refused to accept this as their fate. Everything about her wanted out of here and had since 1975.

Hans wanted to please and give her the best life he could. For her, that meant freedom. The kids were blissfully ignorant, of course. Hans wanted freedom for them too. For himself, well, he thought, well, he didn't care so much anymore.

He moved the bangs away from Inge's eyes with a soft finger. Her face was so peaceful. As beautiful now as she'd been at fifteen, when they'd first fallen in love. Even after two kids and the effects of the oppression.

Now, nearly 30, she hated seeing pictures of herself, complaining that she looked old. Hans saw no difference. She was still his young beauty. Closing his eyes, he remembered the wild ecstasy of being young, falling in love, and winning championships.

Discovered as six-year-olds, they each possessed a superior physical ability. The State funneled them into the training and education regimen of professional athletes. They were taken from their families and boarded with teammates and coaches. The battalions of child athletes ate, trained, and studied together. They were barracked like orphans. Their families came for controlled visits and the children were given occasional and infrequent passes home. They knew even less freedom than the average citizen of their strictly controlled society.

Trained like animals, they were tracked into disciplines based on body type and ability, some as runners, some weightlifters or ice skaters, gymnasts, other swimmers or boxers. The East German Gymnastics and Sport Federation drove them through body breaking regimes. They gave everything and the State took it – four to six hours a day in the gym, the remainder in class. Free time was hijacked by Party functions, Young Pioneer meetings, or recruitment events. No time to breathe, to live, or to just be kids.

Of course, there were perks – a better diet and better access to material goods for their families. Young and innocent, they knew no better and even embraced the system with pride. Their bodies grew, strengthened, and blossomed, and their victorious performances were rewarded.

They excelled and advanced, leaving teammates behind. They started competing at an international level. This was when they saw how different things were on the other side. Sure, there were material differences. They'd seen glimpses before on the few western movies or TV shows that they had been exposed to. Different cars, clothes, houses, and music - those things were obvious.

Even before he ever traveled to the West for a gymnastics tournament, he had become aware of the differences. Hans once had a cousin who had visited from Munich. He drove a Mercedes

that was, according to the local party machine, lent to him by the West German government as a propaganda tool - normal people could not have such a car, even in the West.

This cousin had also brought cans of Coca-Cola as gifts. The empty cans remained proudly on his parents' fireplace mantle, on display, as if they were museum pieces.

But no, it wasn't the material goods that attracted them, that made them suspect the truth. What drew them in, and caused doubts to rise, had been the simple happiness on the Western faces, the contentment coming from the hearts of opponents and fans.

Whether another gymnast, a hotel clerk, or the people watching in the stands, there was a noticeable difference between East and West. The sensation grew. Something was missing in their lives, a discord which consumed them. The model imposed on them did not fit their new perceptions.

Perhaps that dissonance was what had eventually brought them together as lovers. They had found the means to cross this mental barrier keeping them from each other. But then again, maybe it was just pure hormones and persistent charm.

Finally, one day at the end of a competitive season eyeing each other from shy distances, it happened. The team was standing in line waiting to board a plane to a Warsaw Pact Friendship Games event in Bulgaria. Inge's shoulder bag broke their bashfulness. The strap failed and the bag flopped to the floor. Hans was close, she knew, two athletes behind her. She later admitted her hesitation was purposeful, hoping he'd finally move out of his shell. Hans did, gathered up her bag, handing it over with a nervous smile.

"Thank you," were the first unremarkable words that Inge spoke to him. Finally standing before her, clumsy and nervous, Hans had replied "Always". He had meant to say "Anytime",

but his heart had been racing. Inge took the word “Always” at face value, seeing truth in his slip of tongue.

They chatted about something, some nonsense they could never recall when reminiscing. Later, when they reached the stage of holding hands; secretively, their romance forbidden, they finally dared even discuss their true emotions about their bankrupt lives in their “Worker’s Paradise”.

For the first time in their young lives, they’d found another trusted human being. This deep confidence and common dream of freedom bound them together. Their love flowered. They decided for radical change, to make a statement to the State that selfishly consumed their bodies and souls.

One evening, Inge led Hans quietly by the hand into the stairwell of a Paris hotel, whispering.

“You want to kiss me, don’t you?” she asked.

“Of course I do, you are so beautiful!”

“You can have me Hans, forever if you want.” She pulled him closer.

“If we could be free my love, out of this trap.”

“We can run!” She took him down another flight of stairs. “Yes, we run!”

“Right now?” Hans looked up and down the stairwell, fearful of being overheard.

She stopped, held him close, putting her hands on his shoulders, she gave him deep, dear, sweet kisses.

“Yes, now we run my love, out the front door! We find help before they find us!” Now it was Hans who pulled her down a few steps until she faltered.

A door a few flights upstairs opened and then slammed shut, steps approaching rapidly. They moved down another flight, looking up the stairwell as the person exited onto the floor just above them.

“No, they won’t even let us out of the hotel! We need a plan, and not a good plan, but a great plan!” she said, eyes and smile sparkling. Mischievous, he remembered.

Embracing, sharing excited kisses, they became partners in crime. Families and careers would be left behind. Teammates and coaches would be shocked. A purely political act, an international incident, the press would eat it up. The State, indeed, the whole world, would take notice. Others would follow. Maybe the world would change. Alone in the stairwell that cold February evening they felt something extraordinary, the same danger others felt deciding to run. Excitement and righteousness overruled risk, their impetuosity, their strong, young bodies, and their growing love.

The Olympics came the following year. They both had strong chances. Conspiracy energized their push to excellence. To avoid attention, they kept their distance as much as they could bear. Across crowded coliseums and gyms, cafeterias, and residence halls, they found each other’s eyes. Amidst the crowds, they watched each other, knew what they were working for, and kept their sights on the calendar.

The plan was simple. Win their categories. Walk off “the stage” as Gold Medalists. Maximize the impact of their political statement. They’d depart the Medal Ceremony, walk into the American or Canadian locker room, and plead for asylum.

A year of hard work, doubts, and fear, crawled by until it finally came, the day they’d win their freedom. But Inge, like all other gymnasts, was obliterated by the phenomenal performance

of the Romanian miracle, Nadia Comaneci. The East German team placed third, bronze. No problem, the planned defection only slightly less dramatic for not winning Gold.

Then came Hans's turn. He was close, so close. Only one more solid vault needed.

Lying in bed now, staring at the ceiling, he rubbed the knee. It never would fully recover. Sometimes the deep, itchy pain was real, other times it was a phantom. Massaging the tendons, he recalled that singular moment when they'd been most necessary, most needed. Like a reliable old friend, the kind you thought you could trust with your life, until the day comes, and he fails you and inexplicably doesn't show up.

Every step he'd replayed countless times. He'd pushed too hard off the horse. The heat of the crowd had somehow altered the atmosphere inside the huge Olympic gym. Maybe he hadn't stretched properly that morning, maybe it was just his knee's time to fail after years of stress and athletic abuse. Maybe he'd been too nervous, knowing their plans. Fear had won. Hans had lost. He hadn't believed.

He'd thought this for years. Until finally realizing one day that, in spite of their detailed and well-conceived plan, he just hadn't imagined what victory looked like. No points of reference, just ideas, no concept of how that very freedom would feel. So, He had failed to follow a fundamental principle of his training – *See it, Feel it, Be it* -. He'd been impossibly hard on himself ever since. No second chance would ever appear. Never.

He'd flown off the vault slightly high. His body twisted and flipped. His mind screamed. He was going to land badly.

No thoughts of lost medals, only of Inge, the only thing he cared about. Twisting, turning, he braced for impact. His feet hit the floor. White light exploded in his mind. He collapsed to the blue mat, screaming red pain. The crowd gasped.

The launch off the vault ripped his anterior cruciate ligament. His unbalanced landing ruptured both lateral and medial menisci.

“Inge!” his cry echoed through the breathless gym. Teammates rushed to help; spectators and sportscasters murmured concern.

“Hans!” She fought to reach him, but teammates and coaches blocked her will.

Struggling, he stood, then buckled. The leg flopped unnaturally, inadequate to support his weight. His mind sought refuge from the pain, and he fainted. A medical team whisked him off the floor.

Not until four weeks later in a Berlin hospital did Hans see Inge again. When the nurse finally left them alone, they collapsed into each other’s arms. They cried, not for their failure, not for his pain, but for their lovely love that would somehow endure.

Any further flirtation with notions of defection became impossible. They would never tour together again. Hans was finished physically. Inge was finished mentally.

Fully recuperated and coaching young hopefuls, his heart never really got back into the sport. That did not go unnoticed by certain decision makers who’d been hoping for a valiant comeback story. Good public relations. A legend of resilience and recovery was needed for the Moscow Games in 1980. Hans’s resurgence would allow the State to parade the mental and physical superiority of the New Socialist, East German Man, stimulate the revolution.

The State was sorely disappointed.

Then, Inge’s subsequent lackluster performance at several meets also did not arouse confidence from those same decision makers. Suddenly, one day, she was no longer on the team.

“It’s gone, I’ve thrown it away!” she cried, but Hans dug the medal out of the trash.

“Then they win.” He handed it to her. It wasn’t the country that it represented, he convinced her, but her individual achievement, and if she threw that away, well, then the State had final victory.

They married two years after Montreal, a week after Inge turned 18. Later that year, at a special Party ceremony in Berlin they officially retired from gymnastics, Heroes of the State. They played along with the charade. They made no effort to continue as coaches in order to advance the national team’s younger members generating more bureaucratic disappointment and secret conversations.

They asked to be allowed to move near Inge’s parents. The State acquiesced, knowing deep inside itself that it couldn’t force anyone and expect optimum performance.

Ultimately, a chance for freedom was lost to fate, Hans and Inge made the decision to be free inside their love. This quiet love they shared would be their resistance.

Inge’s parents died soon after the wedding, her father of old age, her mother shortly thereafter of a broken heart. They never saw their grandchildren. Hans’s parents lived in Leipzig, and that was the one reason Hans agreed to take the consolation prize “job for life” at the paper factory, 90 minutes away. They’d settle down, start a family, and lead a normal life.

It took longer than they would’ve wished, four years until Emiel was born, another five until Sofie arrived. They hadn’t tried to get pregnant since. They slipped into a typical domestic life, their secret desires for freedom always becoming more severe in the long struggle through cold, gray winters. Lives brightened in the summers.

He’d tried previously to get them a trip to Bulgaria or Yugoslavia, somewhere warm. The denial is always the same - too valuable a contributor to the Plan to let go so far away.

Two years after Montreal, an Olympic coach defected, taking one of the young female stars with him. Secret lovers, they'd made it out. The irony was painful.

Since then, they, like thousands of others, had been placed in a "close hold" category, not to be let out of the country. The State could not continue to have its international prestige thrown in its face by its best and brightest. Active measures were put in place to ensure that these types of seditious and treasonous acts did not spread like the cancers that they were.

And so, they remained, ensnared behind the Iron Curtain, just two, then four, among seventeen million East Germans and hundreds of millions of Warsaw Pact citizens. The imprisonment made worse through Hans's daily submission to the factory, tucked into that funny little thumb of border that split the little river valley in two, entrapped by the walls of that Iron Curtain.

But hope lived - things were opening with Walesa in Poland, Gorbachev in the USSR. The East German leaders however, as everyone knew, would never allow change, would never release their grip on power. These damned Nazis who'd mutated into Communists would hold on until the bitter end. Like Hitler in his Berlin bunker, dragging millions with him into hell. Again. Any change in the DDR, if it ever came, could only be for the worse.

There were continued and persistent rumors of lock ups and harassments, disappearances, even deaths. Fears of midnight knocks at the door, being escorted away, a family too afraid to protest left behind. So confident and prideful in their control and of your passive submission that sometimes the message arrived most modestly via a meek green or light blue postcard in your mailbox, telling you to please kindly report, for example, the following Wednesday at 330pm to Room #121 at the Regional Headquarters of the Ministry for State Security, the "Stasi", as everyone whispered.

Careers of prominent artists and actors were ruined, writers refused further publication. Qualified people were unable to work any longer as auto mechanics or hotel clerks, or factory managers. Families were torn apart by accusations and imprisonments. People were broken physically and spiritually by the State, with its ubiquitous undermining, and constant, buzzing oppression.

Others suffered quietly, angry, resigned like cattle, doomed to keep their heads down and bear the burden for the rest of their lives.

Single and without kids, an impetuous youth, he would have found the courage to make a break for it. Sure, he could have survived in East Germany alone, but he had wanted out, to show them that they had no right to do this to a person, that he was not a piece of their machine.

But he was very gratefully not alone and thanked God for that. As long as they were together, despite Inge's pressure, he was quite sure he'd take no risk to endanger them. His drawings, well, they were just futile, hopeless fantasies. He'd never take any real action, and he just couldn't see any other way over that wall.

"Yes, I thank God," he thought. He believed fully, in God, whatever "It" was, and that he could trust in Him.

His faith was newfound, blooming a few years ago - a dirty pamphlet found in the gutter, something that should never have been there - a criminal pamphlet asking if he had hope.

"God's love is eternal", the muddy paper said. Hans looked around, up and down the street, no one was there.

"The kingdom of God is within" It struck him like a hammer, and he shoved the paper deep into his pocket, looking furtively, seeing no shadows in nearby windows, no one standing on the street. It was a piece of paper meant for him. He looked up into the sky and laughed at himself.

“Of course, up there.”

That was when he understood that he did have hope but, like many behind the Iron Curtain, he kept it quiet, not even sharing his nascent convictions of faith with his wife.

Well, he hoped to bring it to her. He pulled the loose blanket onto her shoulder. Maybe someday, maybe soon.

Thinking again of the falcon, the connection he'd sensed yesterday. He and the bird, as one, for the briefest instant, a twinkling. Was it a sign from Nature? Or perhaps, Hans swallowed hard, a sign from God?

He decided at that moment to try something he had never done before except silently, alone in his head. Such a shame, hiding this noble act. Slowly, careful not to disturb Inge, Hans brought his hands from behind his head, clasped them at his forehead and closed his eyes. This prayer came easy. A simple one, for freedom, for himself and his family, even for his poor comrade citizens.

It was that short. His eyes opened. Never very good at praying, never knowing what to say, still a sense of serenity grew. The way to peace and freedom would come from Him, if not physically, then certainly spiritually. Of this, he was sure. Breathing gently, eyes heavy with sleep, Inge's warm frailty cuddled into him. The kids lay safe and warm in the next room. Floating across the border of unconsciousness, the cry of a dreamed falcon followed Hans into slumber.

Vita

John G Dodson is an American Citizen currently living in Cartagena, Columbia with Lola, a Colombian yellow-crested parrot. Fluent in Spanish and German, he's lived in Mexico for over ten years, Germany for three, and Saudia Arabia for two.

John was a US Army Counterintelligence Agent in Germany form 1987 to 1990 where he served as Special Agent in Charge, covering the tri-border zone between East and West Germany, and Czechoslovakia. He draws from much of his experience during that time to craft his debut novel, *Iron Curtains*.

By day he is a software sales executive and Executive Director/Founder of The Supply Chain Health Consortium, www.healthforall.earth.

At one point, John also sold cars to survive and pulls observations from those days into his second novel, *Tumbleweed Motors*, due out someday in the near future of 3 to 5 years.

He loves reading and sailing and dreaming about making the world a better place. His intellectual interests range from global health to the science of consciousness, history (a lot of the Congo lately), biology, and cosmology with a dash of armchair quantum physics.

John thinks Peru might be his next temporary home, as he continues his nomadic journey across the universe.