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THE SECRET MEETING OF THE SECRET POLICE

WE FOUND OURSELVES ON A DIRT ROAD that stretched off into the darkness. Long lines of cars were parked on both sides, their paint and side mirrors reflecting our headlights as we approached.

"Who is here?" I said.

"Everyone."

I looked over my shoulder to Vasili in the backseat. "Everyone in the secret police?"

He nodded. "We have called a secret meeting."

Sergei looked into the rear-view mirror as he drove. "A secret meeting of the secret police?" he said.

Vasili pointed, saying not to worry, the *dacha* is safer than any other. "It belongs to the Colonel General," he said. "We will be able to talk freely there."

Sergei had eased up on the gas. "I do not know. A secret meeting?" The cars blurred by on both sides of us, like the walls of a tunnel. "There could be spies," he said, "spies and double-agents. With so many people, who is to know who belongs and who does not?"

"We have employed the buddy system," Vasili said. "Everyone was told

to bring two buddies. Before the meeting begins, we will join hands. Anyone left out will be shot."

I turned in my seat. "And we are your buddies?" He smiled by frowning. "This is good," I told Sergei. "It works. The buddy system. It began with Stalin and Lenin."

"And Trotsky," added Vasili, "though he did not understand." He checked his watch. "Now, Sergei, if you do not stop in the middle of the road, we will be right on time."

SERGEI, VASILI AND I STOPPED inside the mudroom, unable to push through any farther. Agents were everywhere—in the kitchen, the dining room, even spilling out of the bedrooms and onto the back deck.

"The Colonel General is starting," a man at the far door called back to us. He listened for a moment, then, receiving the Colonel General's words through another intermediary a little further on, and turned with a chuckle when he had the first of the news." The Colonel General says while the imperialists have used computers for years to increasing power and effectiveness, Mother Russia at first treated them like fancy typewriters or expensive adding machines."

I nodded, reaching for Sergei's shoulder. "It is just like you told me. The capitalists are always having you buy something, thinking it is something else. When really it is the same thing sold twice, a calculator and a typewriter."

This was not exactly what he had said, but it was what I liked to believe. That afternoon, before Vasili brought us to the meeting, Sergei and I had argued in the car outside of Housing Authority Complex #332. He believed it would one day be privatized and renamed Sunshine Manor, as if it were an imperialist hotel on the beaches of Ibiza. "It will be purchased by a private developer," he'd said. "Or no, a consortium of private developers who together will form a Delaware Corporation." I saw this only as what it was—absurd—but whenever I argued he would wave a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* in my face. He had found the paper in January, while searching the hotel room of a visiting American businessman. Now, some seven months later, it was bloated from use, its pages stained by the rings of the teacups and vodka glasses he drank from while studying its propaganda. I knew not what to do. We had been soldiers together. He was my best friend.

Vasili slapped Sergei on the back, snorting in agreement at what I had

said. "Yes. The Americans will do anything for a dollar, even drill a hole through the earth and sell it as, how they say? A doughnut."

There was great laughter at this, all around. It was like it had been in the sixties and seventies and even the eighties, when we still thought we were winning. But then the man at the door was calling back to us again, asking for Vasili.

"The Colonel General," he said, "he wants you."

Vasili acted as if he had expected nothing less. He smoothed down the front of his jacket and moved through the parting crowd. Sergei and I shared a quick look of surprise, and then we followed him before the bodies of our comrades could fall in behind him like a wall.

The Colonel General stood in front of the fireplace, and welcomed our friend with a hug and a kiss on both cheeks. "This, comrades," the Colonel General announced, "is the man who has saved our way of life."

Vasili looked appropriately abashed. He raised his hands over the crowd's clapping and hoots of approval. "Please," he said, "please. Had you been given my most recent assignment and learned what I learned, it would be you up here talking, not me."

He was so humble; I realized then that he was a great man, perhaps a future Secretary General of the Party. It was what I had once secretly dreamed of, when I was a child under Stalin. But this had changed when I got married; then my dreams were only for a larger apartment, or failing that, for my wife's father and brother to fall asleep with their backs to us more often, allowing Liliya and me to make love.

"Gorbachev can't be trusted!"

"He works for the CIA!"

"Please, please!" Vasili was bouncing his hands in the air. "You are right, all of you," he said. "We have our reasons to be suspicious." I turned nodding sharply to those agents around me, as if I had heard all of what my comrade had said and believed it and nothing more. "But only recently have we learned of a technology Gorbachev covets and hopes to implement," Vasili went on. "It is a technology that will take your job, and yours — all of yours," he said, sweeping his hand across the room. "It is a technology that will be the end of the secret police as we know it."

It was like a giant rock had fallen from space, silencing us beneath its weight and gravity.

“What is it, Vasili?” It was Sergei who was talking, and sounding more curious than afraid. “Speak to us of this technology.”

Vasili did, but first he waited, as if considering the possibility that the word, once spoken, would wake Lenin in his tomb.

“It is called the Internet,” he said.

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, my wife and I stood in a line that stretched for three blocks.

“You do not understand,” I said. “It could be very dangerous.”

Liliya stepped forward, and I stepped with her. “Dangerous?” she said. “What danger? From what you tell me I could read the newspapers from America.”

I grabbed her arm above the elbow and pulled her close to speak into her ear. “Why would you read the papers from America?”

She shook my hand free and spoke louder, though I had whispered. “To know what is happening there,” she said. “Only by knowing what is happening there can I understand what is happening here.”

An old man turned around to face us, having heard my wife’s foolish talk. He stood two spots forward, wearing a brown overcoat that was pulling apart at one shoulder.

“Listen,” I said, still speaking to my wife with a whisper, “this Internet, it will have a surveillance system. Vasili said it will be like all the thoughts in your brain, all your wants and desires, will be filtered and reported to the government. The state will use this information to its advantage—it always does. And so if you do not see the danger in that, then I do not know why I tell you this.”

My wife stepped forward in line. I stepped with her.

“It will put me out of a job,” I said finally. “Will you like that? I will wake up one day and be a postman. Do you hear?”

My wife would not answer. The only one who would listen was the old

man in the brown overcoat. "What is your name?" I said, my voice a bark that spoke of my profession. "Tell me your name and address, where you live!"

He turned back around, and my wife looked at me as if I had shot him.

"What?" I said.

She pursed her lips, stepping forward with the line. After a moment she asked, "You could do the shopping from this Internet? Without leaving the home?"

"Yes," I told her. "I believe so."

"Sausages? I could buy sausages?"

"Everything," I said, though with little remaining patience. I did not wish to discuss it anymore, least of all in public. "You could buy everything, but this is only so the capitalists will be convinced to bring the system into their homes."

The woman directly in front of us turned round and asked, "What is this thing you speak of? This Internet that lets you shop from the home?"

My wife leaned forward and whispered in her ear, and while she did I looked to all the others, to the front and to the rear, who seemed only to be interested in us. There was no point in hiding it anymore.

"I married an enemy of the state," I said. "Do you see? Can't you hear? She wishes to read the papers from America, and to buy sausages without even leaving the home."

"It would be better than being all day in a line," my wife said, to which the woman in front of us nodded, adding that it is impossible to do all the cooking when you are doing so much of the standing. "And we must work in the factories and at the home," she finished, to which the old man in the overcoat swatted the air, saying, "Bah! This *glasnost*, bah!"

I glared at Liliya, though she would not acknowledge me. "I should have married Kari," I muttered. "The simple girl from across the hall, when I was a child. She needed help in the bathroom, but was very loving, very warm. With her I could have made a happy life. How she loved my mother's cabbage."

My wife stepped forward and I stepped with her. Then finally we were

at the front and I was asking what we had been waiting for. It did not matter. There was none left. "But you may have this ticket," the woman behind the counter said. "It allows you to stand in a different line tomorrow, one for the people who stood in this one today."

"And what will be at the front of that one?" I said.

"If you are lucky," she told me, "not another ticket."

My wife turned to me, then, and before she walked off, not even waiting for me to join her, she said, "Sausages. What I would give for just a pot of sausages."

SIX DAYS LATER, it was my great honor to place the knock on President Mikhail Gorbachev's door while he vacationed at his *dacha* in the Crimea.

"Who is it?" he said.

And I answered, "The State Committee for the State of Emergency in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

We heard footsteps across the wooden floor, and then the door swung open on the President, who held in one hand the treaty that would soon grant the union's fifteen republics their independence. He looked at the four men gathered behind me, among them his chief-of-staff, Valery Boldin. "I did not authorize a State Committee for the State of Emergency," he said, and Comrade Boldin nodded slowly, as if this was a most regrettable oversight. "What do you want?" The President retreated to his desk, where he lifted one of the five phones arranged there. It was dead, just like all the others. He turned to us. "*What do you want?*"

Comrade Boldin stepped forward, pulling a twelve-page document from his attaché case. "A signature, Comrade Gorbachev, that is all." He laid the referendum on the desk. "It declares a state of emergency, and authorizes several reform measures. It is needed. If you were not so sick, you would understand."

"Sick? I am not sick."

The chief-of-staff smiled politely. "You have serious health problems."

"Health problems? You're mad. All of you."

Comrade Boldin picked up the referendum and held it out for Gorbachev.

“If you do not sign, Vice President Yanayev assumes control. The troops are already on the move.”

Gorbachev started for the door. “Where is Raisa? What have you done with my wife?”

But with a look from Comrade Boldin (it was clear he would not sign) I stepped forward and punched the President in the solar plexus, taking all of his air. Gorbachev slumped to the floor, the treaty falling at his side. One of the agents hurried over and pressed a napkin to the President’s mouth and nose – chloroform. A second picked up a black briefcase he found resting against the foot of a chair.

“Bring that,” Comrade Boldin said, closing his attaché case on the referendum. “It contains the launch codes.”

Gorbachev was now as limp as a newspaper made wet by the rain. I directed a final agent to get his feet, and then squatted down to pick him up at the shoulders.

“Let’s carry him into the living room,” I said. “There is a TV in there.”

THE NEXT MORNING, the news agency TASS announced that Yanayev had assumed control because Gorbachev had “serious health problems.” It was also announced that all demonstrations and strikes were banned, and that the media were under government control. It was not, as they say, a slow news day.

I was not with Yanayev in Moscow when he received the call from Boris Yeltsin, who apparently had been on the phone all day with a number of world leaders, even the Americans. But I did learn what the Vice-President said – “We don’t accept your gang of bandits!” – when Yanayev called Gorbachev’s *dacha* shortly thereafter and I mistakenly took the initiative to respond to the ringing.

“Who was supposed to arrest Yeltsin?” Yanayev yelled. “*Who?*” he said. “*Who has forgotten him and bungled the coup?*”

I looked at the TV, which was tuned to CNN. Yeltsin stood atop a tank, calling on the Soviet people to rise up in solidarity against our take-over. Twenty thousand people were gathered before him, pushing in amongst our troops. Soon that number would swell to five times that, among them my wife and the evidence of her infidelity – my comrade, my partner.

“Sergei?” I said, just realizing it myself.

And then I understood. Of course Sergei. Sergei who saw nothing wrong with Public Housing Authority #332 becoming Sunshine Manor. Sergei who probably wanted to invest in computers, not shut them down. I dropped into a chair beside the small table that held the phone. I knew I would die whether or not the coup was a success. I had reason to fear both sides. It had been on my recommendation, after all, that Sergei had been assigned to lead the team of agents entrusted with Yeltsin's arrest. He was good with a knife. I wondered where he'd hid the bodies.

I gave my apologies to Yanayev, and said I accepted full responsibility. Then I returned to the sofa in the living room. President Gorbachev sat beside me, eating a cup of applesauce with a plastic spoon I had given him. It reminded me of my own apple, one which Vasili had brought back from his recent assignment to Washington state and given to me before our secret meeting. It had sat untouched in my jacket pocket all week, growing soft and bruised. I ate it like this, silently cursing myself for not having realized its condition until now.

"What is this Internet?" I said, after a few bites. "Is it really what they tell me?"

"It is the future," the President said. "We cannot ignore it any longer, so we had better embrace it."

"And people will really use it?" I said. "They will expose their political leanings, their sexual deviancies, and send mail that can be intercepted without their even realizing it? You are telling me people will do this, not suspecting the technology will be used against them?"

Gorbachev licked at the last of the applesauce. "People will use this technology," he said, gesturing with his spoon, "and they will pay as much as fifteen-hundred *rubles* per month for the privilege. Yes, the state will be able to police its citizens for only *kopeks* to the *ruble* what it costs today." He looked to the TV for a moment and saw Yeltsin atop the tank, now waving the old aristocratic Russian flag to the crowd's delight. "It will be like the olden times. If there is dissent, it will not last. We will be able to kick down doors without even leaving the office."

I shook my head, and fell back into the cushions of the sofa. Time had passed me by. I knew this. I was now looking at myself like a memory.

"And then there will be phones," Gorbachev said, speaking to me like a great mystic. "Phones," he said, "that people will carry with them at all times. They will be connected to a system of surveillance towers, allowing the police to know where you are even when you are quiet and alone.

It is amazing what the future holds, Yuri, and how the people will embrace it." He turned to me, then, adding tenderly, almost apologetically, that if there is a new fascism, it will not be the result of a bloody coup. "It will be paid for in monthly installments," he said. "Do you hear me, Yuri? Monthly installments."

I nodded weakly, looking back to Yeltsin on the TV. It was more of the same and I was already too late. So I sat there, waiting for the knock.