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3005 words

## Slide Show

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*"For God's sake! -- quick! -- quick! -- put me to sleep – or, quick! –  
waken me! -- quick! -- I say to you that I am dead!"*  
Edgar Allan Poe, The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar

A crowning achievement of Russian espionage was the placement of a tiny bug in the frame of one of the pictures on the wall of the operations room of NATO's International Military Staff (IMS) headquarters in Brussels. Even though the room was swept for listening devices several times a day, the Russian bug was a marvel. It was nearly invisible and immune from heat signature and RF tracing. It continuously sent video images and audio feeds to an intermediate relay point in Serbia and from there to the SVR Institute in Moscow.

The biggest payday for the bug's installation was the arrival at the IMS operations room of an encoded message from the U.S. Department of Defense. Upon receipt of a video of the printout, the SVR did not understand at first either the contents of the message or its significance; it consisted of just eighteen lines of margin-to-margin garbage. Then SVR cryptologists, assisted by experts from other Russian spy agencies, were eventually able to decipher the first line, whose encrypting was different from that of the rest of the message. It read: *"Location coordinates of seventeen underground nuclear missile installations"*

Presumably, each of the following seventeen lines identified the location of a secret NATO installation in Europe where missiles armed with nuclear warheads were deployed, aimed at points in Russia.

There was great excitement throughout the Russian political and military circles. If Russia could eliminate NATO's interception and retaliation capabilities by destroying the seventeen installations, doing so would leave the United States and its allies undefended against a Russian first strike. All that was needed was to identify the locations of the sites.

But then a difficulty arose: after weeks of strenuous efforts by many experts, the code used to encrypt those seventeen lines could not be broken.

The problem was placed in the hands of Grigori Zaporski, a man in his forties regarded as one of the stars in the SVR organization. Grisha, as Zaporski was known, had a mind that proceeded by intuition instead of logic. Following his intuition allowed him to often solve problems that baffled his more rigorously trained colleagues. His boss, an old KGB insider, laid out this work plan for Zaporski:

“Grisha, I'm locking you up in a room with a keyboard, a link to our supercomputer Rybina, a printer, a cot to sleep on and a bathroom for your hygienic needs. You'll be brought good meals and an endless supply of vodka. You are not to leave the room until you break the code of this crucial message. The future of the Motherland depends on you.”

“But Ivan Dimitrovich,” replied Grisha, “I may not be able to break this code. Others have tried deciphering it for weeks, and failed. Please, have pity on me!”

“Your success record demonstrates that you are the right man for this mission. And, on a personal level, working in isolation is not such a burden for you. You are divorced, have no children, and I'm informed you have no social life. All you do is chain smoke, drink like a fish,

and listen to sad songs. I'll give you cigarettes, vodka, and a record player and any music you request – Tchaikovsky or Alla Pugacheva, or whatever else you choose. No books or newspapers, no radio or TV, though. Nothing to distract you from the task at hand. I'll have you driven to your apartment to get your clothes and brought back here this afternoon. Your work starts today!”

Grisha placed his hands in front of his face so his boss would not see him cry.

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Many days later, as Grisha sat stonily at the dinner table downing one glass of vodka after another, he started to feel numb in his face and arms. He became increasingly confused. His vision clouded. He tried to get up from the chair, felt a sharp stab of pain, lost balance and fell to the floor. There were noises outside his room that he could not hear. He uttered a choking cry and fainted.

When he came to, Grisha was lying on a stretcher in a brightly lit room, with several people wearing surgical masks hovering around him. He had IV lines inserted in both arms and, although he could not turn his head to look, he could hear beeps indicating that he was connected to monitoring devices. He was no longer breathing on his own, but was hooked to a respirator.

One of the people tending to Grisha, a woman whose features were vaguely familiar, inserted a bag full of a colorless liquid into one of the IVs, and drops of the fluid began coursing down the line and into his arm. Grisha experienced a burning sensation, and then no longer felt anything.

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When he regained consciousness, images of past events began appearing before Grisha's closed eyes. The first picture was a bit confusing. It was blurry, dark, and without boundaries. It

was accompanied by a sound of slurping loudly, but Grisha could not see what he was doing because his face was buried into something soft and warm, from which emanated a familiar smell. Whatever was trickling down Grisha's tongue was immensely pleasurable, and he felt satisfied.

At the same time this strange picture appeared behind Grisha's closed eyes, a delicate probe inserted in the back of his skull transmitted an image of the picture to a monitor behind the stretcher and to a program in a computer system designed to enhance a picture's quality.

Grisha's mind displayed another picture a few moments later. The transition between pictures was abrupt, as if one had been pushed away to make room for the other. The new one was sharp and bright but everything was high above his eye level, and the ground – covered with brown pellets that crunched when one stepped in them – was only a couple of feet away.

Someone was holding his hand and dragging him along. To his right, a fence separated him from whatever was on the other side; he heard noises like dog barks, but deeper and more threatening. Grisha raised his head and looked at his companion. It was Aunt Marina, of whom he only had a vague memory, since Marina had died when Grisha was in his early teens. In a didactic monotone, Marina was explaining something to Grisha which he could not hear or perhaps did not understand. A phrase stuck out, though: “the next building houses the nocturnal animals.” Grisha, curiosity aroused, started to ask a question about the meaning of “nocturnal,” but the image cut out abruptly.

The next picture elicited a vivid recollection. Grisha, twelve or thirteen years old, was on holiday, crouching on the ground at the edge of a saltwater lagoon that opened behind his other Aunt Katya's summer home in Sochi. He was with his younger brother Misha and an even younger kid from the house next door. Grisha's brother had captured a small turtle and the other

kids were watching intently as Grisha held a small pocket knife in his hand and was trying to remove the turtle's shell and expose the innards of the frantically wiggling animal. Grisha felt a pang of guilt, as he was aware that his inquisitiveness was making him do something that bad and contrary to Socialist morality. Some distance away, a woman was shouting, beckoning the next-door kid back home. The picture dissolved before showing the incident's resolution.

Several other pictures followed at periodic intervals. Grisha, in the back seat of a gray Lada, making out with Nadya Arkhipova, both of them grunting and jostling awkwardly, pretending to have a good time. Grisha, posing for a high school graduation photo with his mother clutching his arm possessively. He, in his twenties, swimming in the calm waters of some coconut-encircled beach. Getting married one August in a stifling Russian orthodox church. Doubled over with pain at the onset of appendicitis. Doubled over again, this time in anxious concentration, in front of a computer screen, working on one of his first code breaking assignments.

The pictures suddenly stopped and Grisha felt as if he was falling back to sleep.

He was still semiconscious as he heard, pounding inside his head, a few words from the woman who dispensed the anesthesia: "He needs to be put back quickly in a coma, else he will die. We'll try again when he has gotten some rest."

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When he emerged into consciousness again, new pictures began to display behind Grisha's eyes. These were a little different from those in the earlier set. The first showed him as a toddler, crawling on the floor of his apartment, fork in hand, trying to insert it into the electric socket, finally succeeding, and getting a very painful shock. Next, he was five or six and was just fitting in the last piece of his first jigsaw puzzle, shudders of self-satisfaction coursing down his

spine. Then, he was squatting on the sand building an impressive castle, moat and crenellated towers and all; again, completion of this task was making him feel happy and accomplished. Later pictures showed him giving an address to his high school graduating class; watching the stained-glass windows in St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum during his honeymoon and trying to figure out the wavelengths of the lights reflected by the various panels; enjoying the charming Dream Garden in Abakan, in his last vacation together with Tanya; crying on the shoulder of his best friend after Tanya walked away from his life; at work at the SVR, trying to decipher a stubborn cryptogram as he grieved; having a medal pinned on his lapel in recognition of an important decrypting success; smoking and drinking liquor in his now bachelor apartment while listening dourly to Prokofiev's ballets. Darkness.

“The bug we planted in Zavorski's room shows he had made progress towards breaking the code, but we did not get there in time to interrogate him before he had his stroke. How many times do we have to go through this charade of putting him in and out of a coma before we can recover the information?” went a harsh male voice, which he recognized as belonging to Ivan Dimitrovich. “He had gotten something shortly before he had the stroke, but never reported to us what it was.”

The anesthesia woman replied in a defensive tone: “I don't know. The technology is too new. The genius that discovered a way to translate electrical pulses at the optical nerves into visible outputs never learned a way of controlling the generation of the pulses, and was unable to direct the appearance of a particular image. As it is, we'll have to wait until a clue to his last few hours crops up by itself.”

“But it could take years for the images we want to pop up!” protested Ivan.

“Not that long. People about to die have important memories of their lives flashing on the optical nerves for about thirty seconds, just before passing. We can keep a dying man in a medically induced coma and bring him back for a minute or so to the verge of death, so that fresh memories will keep flashing, over and over, for brief periods of time. There are only so many discrete sets of events that are important enough to be brought back. Sooner or later this guy will give us what you want, or else will start repeating himself and going back to his infancy.”

Ivan then continued, bitterly: “Give it to Zavorski to try to escape responsibility by having a stroke...” There was more back and forth between him and the woman but Grisha was again lost in the grip of the coma.

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Grisha had no idea how many times he saw excerpts from his life appear and disappear, or how many periods of induced coma and brief flashings of consciousness he went through. But one of those times, just before he sank into unconsciousness, a triumphant shout rang close to his ears: “That’s it! Look at it! He broke the code and then burned the paper with the results, the traitorous bastard!” From those words, Grisha realized that other people were somehow viewing the images his mind was generating. The people torturing him were his SVR colleagues trying to retrieve from his mind what he had discovered but failed to share with them. Dutiful as a SVR spy as he was, he resented the violation of his privacy and his very self, and had a short flash of anger before passing out.

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The next set of images had only four pictures. In the first, Grisha was writing something on a piece of scrap paper, a triumphant smile on his lips. The second picture showed him standing, bent over a long table with the piece of paper in one hand and a pointer in the other. On

the table there was a very large map of Europe; Grisha would read from the paper, and move the pointer over the map and set it down at a particular location. The third picture showed Grisha gazing at the map fixedly and shaking with emotion. It was followed by another picture of a still trembling Grisha using a cigarette lighter to set afire the piece of scrap paper in his hand. The show ended abruptly, as always, leaving Grisha with no clue as to what had come next.

“Damn him!” bellowed, far away, his nemesis Ivan Dimitrovich. “Can we ever get to see what was on that paper before he burned it?!”

The anesthesiologist replied in a calmer tone than on previous exchanges. “I think we have him now. His death memories are now focusing on the time just before his stroke, probably the minutes between the moment he wrote what was on that paper and the start of his final drinking bout. I bet one of the next times we wake him he will show us what was on the paper.”

“I hope you are right, Natasha.”

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The next break from Grisha’s medically-induced coma came almost right on the heels of the preceding one. It was as if Grisha’s jailers were keen on getting the information they sought right away, not caring if, in so doing, they would cause Grisha’s immediate demise. Perhaps due to his remembered anger, Grisha had a few moments of full lucidity before images resumed. And in those seconds, it all came back.

He had broken the code by focusing on relationships between groups of characters, instead of working on each one separately, as everyone else had been trying to do. Through this leap of intuition, the geographic coordinates of the seventeen sites had revealed themselves and he had checked them on the map, writing each on a piece of scratch paper. More than half of the missile sites were near large population centers: Warsaw, Riga, Budapest, Dresden, Athens,



Bucharest, Ankara, Amsterdam, Bordeaux and Barcelona. Those stupid Westerners had put their citizens at risk of annihilation by placing the missiles where they did. An attack against those sites would spread radioactive clouds that would kill civilians by the millions, not counting the fatalities that would occur when the Russian missiles leveled the other NATO military installations throughout Western Europe. He of course had signed up for an activity that could well result in some loss of life, but nothing amounting to genocide.

Grisha had dropped the pointer, as if stung by it, after he located the last site at a point near Manchester. If he turned the list over to the SVR, the Russian leaders would not hesitate to use the information they had gathered to obliterate the sites and slay millions of innocent people. He had a duty to defend his country and did not mind seeing the West defeated, but mass murder on that scale was beyond political allegiances. Could he live with himself after helping carry it out?

He needed time to work these things through. He needed a smoke. He had brought a fresh cigarette to his lips and, in the act of lighting it, had impulsively drawn the lighter's flame to the piece of paper with the sites' coordinates, incinerating it. He had made no copies of his findings, but the methodology remained locked away in his head and he could reproduce the results if he decided to do so.

He had returned to the dining room table, seized a near full bottle of vodka, and begun drinking nonstop, wondering what to do. He was torn between allegiance to his country, on the one hand, and trepidation at the massive loss of lives that disclosure of the location of these sites would likely entail. Also, he feared arrest, which he was sure would come sooner or later if he did not reveal his findings. He had failed and would be severely penalized.

Then came the numbness and the unbearable pain.

Still awake from the coma, Grisha contemplated again the likelihood of giving the missile site information away through his near-death image of the intact piece of paper. Should he let that happen? Could he depart life carrying all those deaths on his conscience?

Never, he finally decided.

Mustering strength he did not know he still had, he began thrashing about wildly, dislodging IVs and hardware connections, and ripping away the tube that went from his mouth into the windpipe and out to the ventilator.

The anesthesiologist and two orderlies battled for a few seconds with the dying man and subdued him, whereupon she injected a full dose of propofol directly into a vein on his neck. Too late. Grisha whimpered and was gone for good.

There was a smug expression on the dead man's face, not unlike the one he had assumed when, as a child of five, he had completed his first jigsaw puzzle. No more revealing deathbed images would ever surface.

The Russian military would have to try finding, if it could, some other means of deciphering the message. But not through him.

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