

A LONELY VISIONARY

"Sorry to bother you, but haven't we met before? Aren't you . . . what's his name?"

"I doubt you'd know my name," he said. "Nobody does these days."

There was a trace of bitterness in his voice, just enough to prod my curiosity. On the whole, he was quite an ordinary looking old man, around 75 I would guess, with a flabby face and a bald head. But there, right on the top of his forehead, was the painfully familiar huge purple mark resembling the outlines of some exotic land on the globe. Perhaps South America, or even India. . . . I could swear I'd seen him before.

We were sitting in a bar on Fisherman's Wharf, the most crowded spot in San Francisco, where you can run across anybody from this or the next world. California, as you know, has the reputation of a weird planet: if there are ghosts, this is their homeland. There is no way of knowing who you might see across the table. Was this fellow one of Hollywood's old faces, a character from a great but unjustly forgotten movie? He looked a bit like Edward G. Robinson, or someone from "The Untouchables."

"Have I seen you on television?"

"Yeah, sure, television." He was obviously annoyed. "Plenty of times. And even on the cover of *Time* magazine. All you people know here is television and *Time* magazine. And if by some chance your face doesn't appear on television for two weeks, you're as good as dead. Finished, forgotten, condemned to oblivion. Don't bother to recall my name, young man. I know, it's beyond your ability anyway. But don't say you don't remember the story. THE STORY! I am the one and only General Secretary of the Communist Party of

the Soviet Union ever to defect to the West. Does this ring a bell?"

To say I felt ashamed would be a gross understatement. I was devastated. How could I not recognize him? There he was in all his glory, Comrade Gorbachev, sitting right in front of me, drinking a vodka- tonic and in a very angry mood. That mark on his forehead. . . . What an idiot I am. Defection. How many times have I told myself never to speak to strangers in California?

Of course I remembered every detail of that spectacular affair, as if it took place yesterday. Was it fifteen years ago, or seventeen? No, it had to be more. Right, it was 1988, the last year of Reagan's presidency. It happened at the Gorbachev-Reagan summit meeting in Washington, D.C.: the "first Soviet couple" suddenly asked for political asylum right in the

Roosevelt Room of the White House. There was total confusion, complete chaos. Reagan first thought it was a joke and repeated it (off the record) to reporters—those crazy Russians with their black humor! But the couple insisted and refused to leave, hiding away from their own retinue somewhere inside the Old Executive Office Building.

Then there was great embarrassment and even panic: what about East-West relations? Above all, who the hell was going to sign the arms control agreement that was the whole point of the summit? Those damn Russkis! Couldn't they have waited until the deal was signed? Under pressure from Congress, Reagan's cabinet split over whether to accept the defection, and for a while the official version had it that the guests had fallen ill. The Soviets naturally offered to send their own medical team with intensive care equipment to set things aright, but the couple barricaded themselves in one of

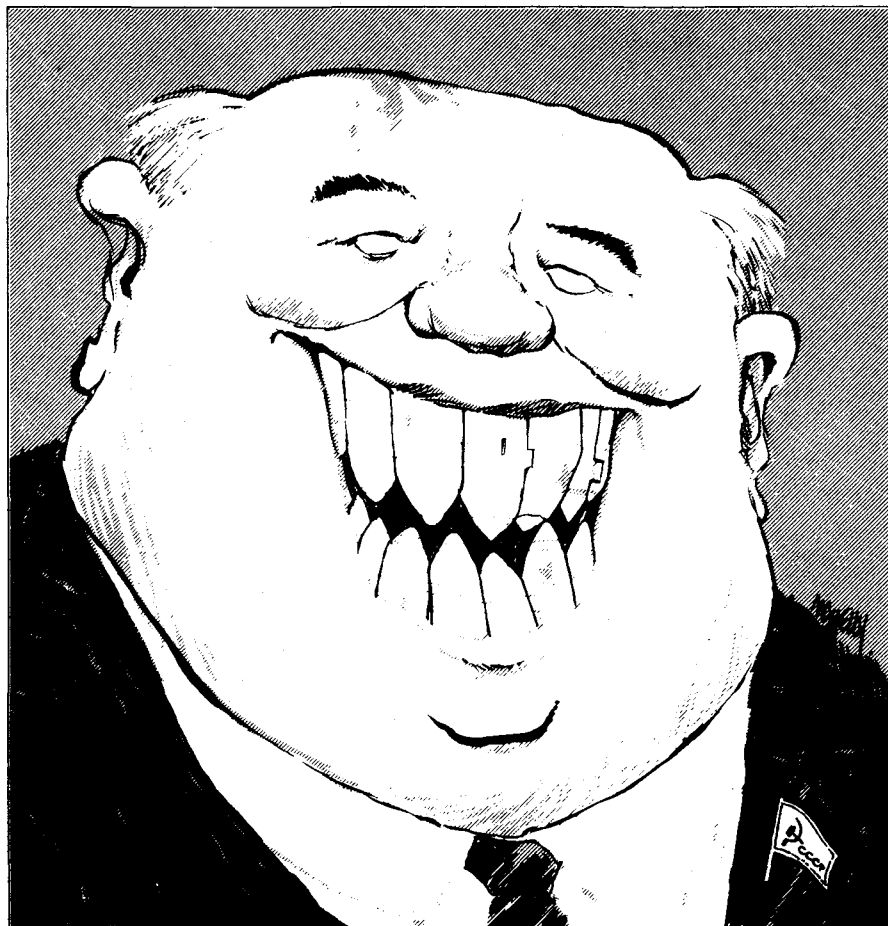
the OEOB offices together with Nancy, who came to negotiate a peaceful solution.

Meanwhile, the press got a whiff that something really big was going on, particularly after a security guard leaked the story to the *Washington Times* for \$1 million. Infuriated by the cover-up, reporters demanded explanations and practically besieged the White House. Nobody could get in or out without being closely examined by the reporters. A huge crowd gathered outside, blocking all traffic, and grew into the thousands by sundown. The bets were one in ten that the couple would stay.

By morning, seeing the cat was out of the bag anyway, the Soviets claimed their leader had been abducted and they threatened to retaliate. Both sides went on nuclear alert, but a showdown was averted just in time: the defecting couple, pale and trembling, appeared before the press, hand in hand, and confirmed that they had indeed "chosen freedom." This is how the world saw them on the news that night.

For a while, they were all over the place, on every talk show and news hour. They were incredibly popular. There was a pop-song, "Gorby's Gonna Stay," by Huey Lewis; there were T-shirts, badges, even a fantastic docudrama called *Escape from the Kremlin*. Gorbachev was played by a magnificent young blond with blue eyes and a California suntan, though his role was secondary to that of his wife Raisa, played by Jane Fonda, who was clearly the main figure in the Kremlin and the mastermind of their escape—done, as she convinced the slightly dull but honest Gorby, to save humanity from nuclear holocaust. All he had to do was knock off a few of his colleagues from the Politburo, which he did in style. The ending was truly touching: the two of them, young and beautiful, appear on the steps of the White House before a jubilant crowd. I was quite moved the first time I saw it.

But then came the presidential elections with their usual razzle-dazzle and our "first couple" soon became yester-



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day's news. Somehow, they never did explain properly why they defected. Surely not because of the swimming pools Reagan had shown them during a helicopter ride over suburban Washington.

"You see," the old man now told me, "by the time we left for Washington, my reform was in a state of chaos. You may remember that it had three parts: *perestroika* (restructuring), *uskorenje* (acceleration), and *glasnost* (openness), and they were designed in precisely that order. In reality, we did achieve dramatic *uskorenje*, but we did not quite manage to pull off the *perestroika*—and all this, mind you, in an atmosphere of complete *glasnost*. Now, can you imagine what that meant? Who needs *uskorenje* without *perestroika*, when *glasnost* allows every fool in the country to see it? It's like pedaling a bicycle without wheels, faster and faster, in the middle of a jeering crowd. And why, you may ask, did we fail? Because, on the one hand, the Party wanted only *uskorenje* and did not want to hear anything about either *perestroika* or *glasnost*. On the other hand, the military and the technocrats wanted *perestroika*, but nothing else, while the people were all for *glasnost*, and to hell with *perestroika* and *uskorenje*.

"So, it is easy to see that, given this correlation of forces in the country, we finally got *uskorenje* of *glasnost*, instead of *uskorenje* of *perestroika*. Although it might have pleased the people, it was certainly bad for the Party and the military and, therefore, very dangerous for me. On top of that, there was this damned arms control agreement with Reagan after which there was no hope for *perestroika*, while we stuck with *uskorenje* of *glasnost*. I simply could not go back home after signing my death warrant.

"But how on earth could I explain any of this on a talk show or news program? Usually, I would barely have enough time to introduce the Marxist idea of basis and *nadstroika* (superstructure), and the show would be over. Yet, without any such explanation they simply couldn't understand that *uskorenje* of *glasnost* is just a *perestroika* of *nadstroika*, or should I say, a restructuring of the superstructure, while real progress is impossible without a *perestroika* of the basis. So I gave up. Raisa would chat with them about fashions and diets, and I'd just smile and nod."

"Wait a minute," I protested, "there were some serious TV programs in those days."

He smiled sardonically.

"Yeah, sure. Serious programs. I did find one, on prime time, one hour for all subjects. Ridiculous! I needed at

least four hours, like at the Party Congress. But even that was better than the talk shows. Two wizards were leading the program: Mr. Indeed and Mr. Neither, Jim and Robin. Good evening, Jim. Good evening, Robin. They were doing all the talking. Who were they? Did they read Lenin? Did they know about basis and superstructure? No, but each had his own opinion. Very polite, very democratic: you have your opinion, I have mine. Idiots! I don't have opinions, I have knowledge. I told them what I knew. Do you agree, Jim? Neither do I, Robin. Indeed, Jim. Indeed, Robin.

"It was even worse with the so-called experts! They never argue, but if your opinion differs from theirs, they simply ignore you. Well, they say behind your back, he has a chip on his shoulder. He is a defector, isn't he? How can a defector be objective?

"Amazing, isn't it? When I was General Secretary, these very same people were all for 'talking' with me, for 'understanding' me, for 'building bridges' with me. Yet the moment I started to live among them, free to talk, they stopped being interested in understanding me, or talking with me, or building bridges. Am I different just because I am here?

"When I was General Secretary, they called me 'liberal,' they found me 'charismatic' and 'well-educated,' they praised my every word. Now, I am 'undemocratic,' 'dogmatic,' and 'unpleasant.'"

"Why didn't you write another book?" I asked.

"What's the point? You either write for a wide audience, and then it's trash, or you write seriously, and then nobody reads it except those who 'disagree' with you. I did write three volumes, explaining everything, but I still don't have a publisher. Anyway, Raisa wrote a book for both of us, *My Life in the Kremlin*, and it was a best-seller. Don't misunderstand me: I'm not complaining. We're quite rich, we have a nice swimming pool. But I wanted to explain. Except nobody would listen . . ."

He was getting drunk and maudlin. I looked around. A couple of elderly joggers passed by, wheezing and coughing—the last survivors of a twentieth-century craze. On the waterfront, a group of naked girls were noisily protesting against equal rights for women, as they do every day. All around us, a festively dressed crowd was eating fresh crab and shrimp.

"Do you regret what you did? Would you go back? They'd shoot you if you did, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But at least they remember me. And will remember, not

like here. Anyway, what's the difference? I'm already buried alive."

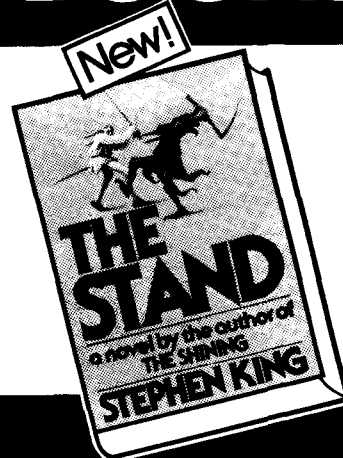
"Why haven't you tried, then?"

"I have. But they don't want me back precisely because they have a good memory." He looked at me and smiled: "Don't you read the papers? They are about to sign another arms con-

trol agreement with the Americans."

Indeed, there had been something on television the day before about a new era of "absolute frankness and honesty" in the United Soviet Republics of Europe, but I hadn't paid much attention. Who the hell cares about those damned United Republics? □

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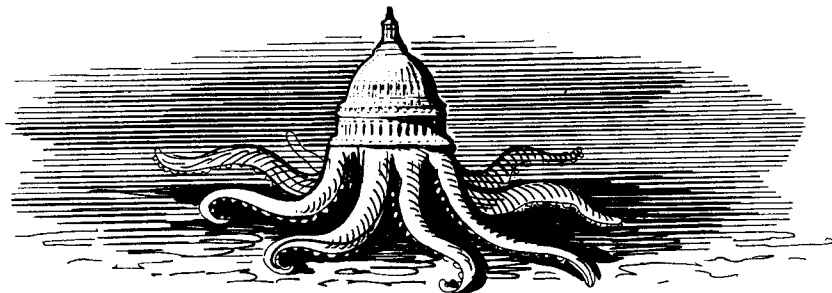
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A WORLD APART

During the Senate Judiciary Committee's hearings on Robert Bork, Alan Simpson of Wyoming got to musing about the Saturday Night Massacre. (Come on, come on. You remember. That was the outrage that occurred in 1973 when special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox was fired and Attorney General Elliot Richardson and his deputy, William French Smith, quit.) In Washington, said Simpson, "we have only been talking about it for fourteen years. . . . Fourteen years. This is a curious place. If you go out in the land and say, 'What were you doing on the night of the Saturday Night Massacre,' a guy will say, 'What are you talking about?'" Not so in Washington, Simpson said. He moved his mouth close to the microphone and talked softly. "In this town when you say, 'What were you doing on the night of the Saturday Night Massacre,' they say, 'I was just finishing shaving. I was going out to dinner. I will never forget it my whole life. I went limp. My wife and I talked and huddled together and had a drink and just shuddered in shock.'"

Simpson caught the trend exactly. Folks in Washington are different. They have cut themselves off from the rest of the country, and they're glad they did. Their minds are absorbed by completely different matters: who said what on "Brinkley" last Sunday, who's up and who's down at the White House, what Rosty's got in mind for the kitchen utensil industry in the trade bill, etc. If you have to ask who Rosty is, you're either not from Washington or you live here but will never make it big. People in Washington know who Rosty, Henry, Novak, Meg, Elliott, Gorby, Tip, Tipper, Lou, Liddy, Jody, Mary, Cap, Lee, Brad, Ralph, Marlin, Lesley, and Jeane are. Sting, Alvin, Pee-wee, Pound Puppies, Bono, and the Littles—you might know these names, but most Washingtonians would have to ask.

Washington is increasingly insular,

arrogant, elitist, power mad, addicted to luxury and mindless political combat, and, worst of all, downright hostile to the non-Washington masses. That's today. Now imagine Washington if the trend continues, and there's no reason to think it won't. From the window of my Washington office, I used to monitor the entrance to the Palm Restaurant, a mecca for power lunchers. Month by month as the mid-1980s wore on, I began to recognize more of the people eating there. They were Washington expense account junkies—Administration officials, lobbyists, journalists, consultants, think-tank heavies, Capitol Hill aides. Few normal people. In 2007, there won't be any real folks at all dining there, the Washington types having driven them far, far away.

I admit to ambivalence and hypocrisy on the subject of Washington. I grew up here and have no intention of leaving. I remember when Washington was referred to derisively as a "sleepy Southern town." This wasn't so long ago, the 1950s and early 1960s. Well, it was a better place then. It was more livable, and people who came to Washington with a new administration or as Capitol Hill aides often returned home a few years later. Now nobody goes home. Something happens to them when they get here, something right out of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. It's as if large pods are put by newcomers' beds at night. By morning they've been taken over, heart, soul, and mind. By 2007, the pods will be triumphant.



At ground level in Washington, Ronald Reagan changed nothing. The irony of his presidency is that the more he railed against Washington, the more he made the city a magnet. Reagan didn't reduce the size of government. Even the odious Small Business Administration has survived. What Reagan did was glamorize Washington for a new breed of people, conservatives. Thousands have flocked to Washington, and they don't want to leave, ever. A good way to get the fisheye—it's happened to me many times—is to tell a young conservative who's interested in journalism that he or she ought to head for the hinterlands for a few years or maybe for life. They tune out that message. And now even *TAS* has come to Washington. And Irving Kristol.

Twenty years ago, Tom Wolfe wrote a great piece about working stiffs in New York City called "The Big League Complex." Cab drivers, doormen, waiters, delivery men, and cops there think they're tough and smart and better than rubes from the boondocks, and act accordingly. They think this because they live and work in a fast-paced city, the Big Apple. A similar complex is spreading like impetigo among the drones of Washington, especially journalists and congressional aides. A reporter may be doing a story on how Gramm-Rudman affects funding of Urban Development Action Grants and along the way run into a senator who calls him by his first name. The reporter's self-assessment soars. He thinks he's in the big leagues. Likewise, Senate and House aides figure they've arrived because they know the intricacies of some awful piece of legislation. Senators and representatives know their first names, too. In truth, busy work is engulfing Washington. There are now several hundred separate subcommittees in Congress, each holding hearings and churning out reports. In 2007, there will be more committees, more hearings, more reports. The illusion is that all of this is accomplishing something. The press completes the circle of self-

importance by reporting on the hearings and citing the reports. Okay, there's some valuable work done, but only a little. Twenty years from now, the new mindset will have settled in: I do things that get in the press, therefore I am important.

Washington wasn't always the national center for electoral politics. Reagan ran his campaigns for the Republican presidential nominations out of Los Angeles. Jimmy Carter ran his out of Atlanta. In the 1988 presidential race, nearly all the campaigns have headquarters in Washington. Bruce Babbitt of Arizona has a big contingent here. Al Haig's campaign office is next door to the *Washington Post*. Jesse Jackson doesn't live in Washington, but his campaign staff does. And who is drawn into presidential campaigns these days? Mostly people in Washington. In the off-season, they work in Congress or as lobbyists or in a think tank. When the campaign starts, they join. Presidential campaigns have become a Washington industry. In a few years, Washington will have a monopoly on the business.

For congressional candidates, particularly incumbents, Washington offers one-stop shopping. Media consultants were once spread around the country, but the best ones have migrated to Washington. A recent example is Ray Strother, a very skilled operator who produced Gary Hart's TV spots in 1984. Pollsters have proliferated in Washington. Richard Wirthlin came with Reagan. Paul Maslin and Harrison Hickman are the hot new Democratic pollsters. Naturally, they're in Washington. Most significant of all, Washington is where most of the money is raised these days. Every night, senators and representatives have receptions that draw high-dollar lawyers, lobbyists, and envoys from political action committees. Checks are written. There's nothing illegal or immoral about this. It's just that it would be nice if members of Congress raised their campaign dough back home. Anyway, my fear is that an ineluctable force is at work, causing all pollsters, media

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