The Telenkovian Experiment

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Compete Text

Chapter 1

Senior pilot Johnny "I.B." Good boldly spoke into the intercom with a proud New Orleans drawl. "We will be landing in Leningrad soon. Please see that your papers are in order and that your seat belts are securely fastened."

"Why should I have my papers in order in a country where everything is in chaos?" L. Geoffrey Weinburg said to himself. He had earned his Ph.D. at the age of 25 and snatched a full professor post at Harvard Medical School by his thirtieth birthday. The track up to Chairman, Dean, then Associate High Priest was written in cyberspace and stone. The big Four-O and mid-life crisis were a lifetime away, reserved for the schleps who still had to sweat their way to the top.

Geoff wouldn't listen to anyone, and was well paid for being colorfully arrogant. "Cool," some called it. He didn't have to obey rules average people had to live by.

Still, Geoff buckled up, knowing full well that cutting edge American-made landing gear could still be challenged by the Soviet-built concrete strip, which had more potholes than the West Side Highway during a construction strike.

As the wheels hit the ground, Geoff's stomach churned. Perhaps it was jet lag, or maybe because he was alone this time. Wife, mistress and female graduate students were all a half-a-world away. His Russian hosts requested no more than two people from his lab, the soon-to-be-ex-Soviet authorities allowing only one visa to be granted.

Still, it was an adventure. And a time to meet Yakov again. Geoff and Yakov went through graduate school together at "the Rock," the ultimate biomedical endurance test of egos and sometimes character. Rockefeller University grads were the best in the world. Who else would be called in to examine a patient who provided a key to understanding Soviet Russia's past and post-Soviet Russia's future?

The confidential documents Geoff got in the mail hinted something big about this one. "An epidemic that could be bigger than AIDS," the report projected, using colored bar graphs to make its point more vividly visual.

It could be true, Geoff thought in the recesses of his mind. And it was "Top Secret." But that term was never taken seriously by ivy league tower geniuses. Geoff remembered how Susan Mautone "confidentially" told him in the early eighties that fifteen percent of the blood samples from West Point Cadets tested HIV positive. Whether it was true or not didn't matter. She was trapped by student loans, a bad academic average, and child support payments. Susan desperately tried to avoid death by boredom. And she missed no opportunity to share a secret, particularly if it could sexually arouse someone who could rescue her from a lifetime of cleaning test tubes and changing diapers.

But in 1982 Geoff's concerns were on getting himself into a top-flight post-doct program, and he could smell trailer park ugly beneath Susan's supermodel body. Besides, the fate of a few thousand, or million, military grunts never entered into Geoff's mind. The always-on-the-cutting-edge rising star of the biochemistry department was interested in molecules, not epidemics.

In the nineties, Geoff's skepticism of epidemic rumors was based in reality, particularly in the Soviet Union. No one, even the Russian academics, believed half of what was printed in the Soviet scientific journals. After all, this was a country that documented the highest number of ET landing sites in the world. Rumors of demons had driven terror into millions of Russian serfs before the Bolshevik

Revolution, and propaganda allowed unspeakable acts of terror to continue unchecked after the 1917 liberation. Misinformation was the way the Soviet Union conducted all its business, even in these new Glasnost times. "Secretly" bringing Geoff over to the Soviet Union on a medical fact-finding tour on a new epidemic was smart politics. What better way for the bureaucrats at the Communicable Disease Agency in Atlanta, the Ministry of Science in Moscow and an "unnamed" pharmaceutical company to get World Health Organization funding? The trick had been pulled off before, and Geoff would play his part, as cast.

Geoff imagined Russian customs to be like an Orwellian black and white late-night re-run. It was a lot more colorful than that.

The faded pictures of Bolshevik heroes were blurred in the memory of the customs inspectors who were more worried about biological survival than political ideology. With freedom came liberation, but also uncertainty. The unwritten rules were more complicated now, and particularly harsh for those who still needed rules.

Janitors at the Moscow McDonald's were paid more than neurosurgeons, and mobsters were paid better than anybody. The lifetime gratitude of a Medical Institute Director or a Cabinet Minister could be obtained with a canned ham. A roll of Kodak film cost $5, a week's wage. A 120-proof bottle of vodka cost less than a dime, and was drunk to excess by beggar and banker alike

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"Where do you live?" the customs inspector asked with a civil and even tone.

"Manhattan in the winter. Montauk during the summer," Geoff answered.

A look of forgiving disapproval, then another question. "What does the "L" in your name stand for, Doctor Weinburg?"

"Nothing I'd repeat in mixed company," Geoff replied.

From the officer, a look of puzzlement. Then determination.

"Lorie," Geoff said quietly, remembering the painful days of his childhood before gender-neutral names were acceptable in the boys' locker room.

The officer smiled, silently enjoying his final say in the cultural joust.

At the end of the hallway - a five foot ten supermodel with platinum hair down to her waist. She looked like she belonged in Malibu, not Leningrad. On the sign around her neck, "MISTER Weinburg." Behind it, some medical anatomy Geoff would be very interested in examining.

She didn't speak. Just smiled. All the way to the airport exit. There, in a BMW rebuilt with VW and Ford parts - Yakov.

"Geoff, good to see you...."

Yakov's handshake was firm, his eyes vibrant. Geoff's hair had gotten shorter over the years. Yakov's was longer, a beard added to complement it. Around his neck, a choker, perhaps Cherokee, maybe Siberian.

"How are things?" Yakov asked.

"Good, good," Geoff replied. "You look, good. Good."

"You look good, too. Good to see you."

They exchanged stories about the past, some rehearsed and some re-composed on the spot.

It was a long ride to the Korinska Institute. Geoff talked about how the American empire would crumble soon after it devoured what was left of the crumbling Soviet empire, and how the Malaysians would make a windfall killing after everyone went bankrupt. "But, one day the rats and cockroaches will take it all back again. The most intelligent and underestimated creatures on the fucking planet," he concluded.

Yakov smiled. "Rats in Moscow were even bigger than in New York, and twice as bold." He sighed, then put an envelope in Geoff's lap, labeled "Top Secret." Yakov added his own qualifier - "FOR REAL," and he meant it."Geoff, YOUR government said that WE have a communicable health problem. The truth is that we ALL have a GLOBAL EPIDEMIC, God help us."

Yakov never used the word "God," except when trying to go one-up on a Woody Allen one-liner. Geoff read the contents of the envelope, slowly and carefully. It contained a photograph and some lab work. Some of the data was within normal range. Most of it was too far off the scale to be anything except laboratory error, he thought.

"Yakov, the name here is Sergei. An ex-farmer. Ninety years old. I thought that our index case was patient number 123,556. Named Nicholi. A construction worker."

"He uses a lot of names. Claims to be many ages. Sometimes he's an old man, sometimes a young woman. It's like he became a whole group of people. Like ghosts of a whole community of dead people take turns using his body."

Yakov was direct, cold, and scared. The remote research institution they drove into didn't make Geoff feel any easier. The imported security gates were originally designed by Texas Instruments to keep Russian spies out of Niki missile bases. The guards were top notch professionals, the best six-figure mercenaries the Russian government could buy, and the most loyal military soldiers they could find. No Rambo wannabes or Afghanistan burn-outs.

The interview room could have been anywhere in the upscale industrialized world, generically comfortable and impersonal. A wooden table, three chairs, a coffee mug, and railings along the side with notches which could hold coffee, chairs and restraints, as required. The noise was "white," like the walls.

An old man was brought in, mumbling in Ukrainian. His body could be blown over by a breeze from an open window, but his eyes were bright blue and blazed with the fire of passion. He looked angrily at Yakov, then inquisitively at Geoff.

"Boris," Yakov said. "My friend wants to hear your story. Tell him your story."

The old man asked for a cigarette. He coughed, blood spewing from his mouth, his limbs shivering in the 90 degree mid-summer heat.

Yakov reached into his pocket, retrieving a pack of Camels, unfiltered and unopened, the only brand the old man liked and trusted

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"He needs oxygen, not a fucking cigarette," Geoff said in his usual understated authoritative tone.

Yakov gave Boris a cigarette. "His body doesn't obey the rules anymore."

The Ukrainian asked Geoff for a light, with a piercing stare. Yakov pulled out a tin match box, gold plated with a skillfully crafted relief of a Roman interspecies orgy. He put it on the table. As Boris reached out, Geoff pulled it away, but not before the old man had snatched a match.

Boris struck a match on one of his three remaining teeth and lit up. He took a slow, deliberate draw, holding it in long enough for the smoke to penetrate into his gnarly fingers. With a second drag, he grabbed the match box from Geoff's clammy fingers, and crushed the tin box into bits, smiling as he let the metallic dust fall into a thirty-cent plastic ashtray.

"Vodka," Boris demanded.

The Orderly accommodated his request. The door was locked, the security system on full alert. Boris nodded. Yakov turned on the tape recorder. The story began to flow through the old Ukrainian's six-inch mustache, his hauntingly clear diction unimpeded by a mouthful of missing teeth and partial paralysis of his left jaw. Yakov translated. Geoff listened.

Reel 1

Tasha used all the strength of her frail, ninety-eight pound body to carry a crate of handpainted dishes into the community hall, a weather-beaten barn we once called the church. She was wearing her Grandmother's Easter dress, three sizes too big this year, two sizes too small last season. She looked up at the blue sky through the hole in the roof, then knelt, then crossed herself at the wooden crucifix carved into the North Wall. She slowly rose, then set the table for the most important dinner the village of Telenkov would share in the winter of 1932.

The table was a workbench, and the floor belonged to the field mice and the rats as much as us. It was unusual for us to share dinners on special occasions with anyone except family. But it was a special occasion and, whether we wanted it or not, we were all part of one family in Telenkov in that year.

Tasha's soul never seemed right for her body. She always felt that her breasts were too big, or her hands were not big enough. She never let her long, black hair flow down her back in public, and never in the company of men. She was always concerned about appearances, even in the worst of times. The real reasons were reserved for herself and her Creator.

Tasha insisted on setting out the dishes and candlesticks that somehow survived three Czars, a World War, the Korinski uprising of Spring, 1917, the Bolshevik revolution of Fall, 1917, and a civil war that lingered on in the Ukraine till the Fall of '22, even though they tell me the history books say it ended in '20.

It was late March. The air had started to thaw in February, a gift from a South wind that had caressed the Steppes, after a cold snap that had lasted since before Christmas. But the ground was still hard as a rock, and the green of Springtime was still frozen in our frostbitten imaginations. As was Nicholi's skill with a hammer and nails.

"I'll fix the roof right this time. I went to school to be a carpenter, and I'll be damned to hell if winter will beat me again," he said, as he repaired the roof for the third time that week. Most anyone walking on two legs, and a few creatures who walked on four, could have done a better job than Nicholi. But Nicholi was the village carpenter, and even if we didn't respect his position, we admired his persistence. He was born to the woods, with a growl of a bear, the front teeth of a badger, and a mustache thicker than Stalin's, a fact in which he took much pride. No one was more determined to convert rotted wood and rusted metal into shelter. Still, we flinched with pain and shivered with cold as he continued to hammer as many nails through his palms as into the roof.

Of course, someone had to argue. This time it was Johan. "We could be using that lumber for firewood." He was six-foot-five, clean-shaven even on the coldest winter days, and as overweight as anyone could get in Telenkov. He naturally appointed himself Mayor. No one else really wanted the job. The Polish-French businessman found his way into the Ukraine after the 1917 revolution, then wouldn't, or couldn't, leave. He never told us why.

Johan didn't talk much, but he screamed a lot. He didn't really understand that in Telenkov we expected people of the lowest character to be in the highest political positions. Maybe that was why we always had rotten rulers. Maybe it was just something about being Ukrainian or, as were supposed to now call ourselves, "Soviet."

"The wood you wasted trying to fix these roofs could heat ten houses for a week. That's two hundred and thirty thousand kilocalories of heat. Do you know how much heat is in two hundred and thirty thousand kilocalories?" Johan continued. He tried to convince us with more mathematics, a lingering effect of the days when he was an investment banker. But no one in Telenkov cared about banking or understood much mathematics.

"The horses," Sergei grumbled. There wasn't an inch of skin on Sergei that wasn't covered by hair, except on his head, which he always kept covered, even in private, so I was told. "We could have used the horses for meat this year. They were getting old and had no more than one or two more winters left in them, anyway. If I get my hands on whoever stole them, I'll kill him."

Elena looked down. As Sergei's wife, she had to do what he commanded, especially in public. What she did at the corral gate a few months earlier was brave, and smart. Elena was one of the most beautiful women in Telenkov, but always thought she was the ugliest. Her eyes were big, making her face look small, but her soul was bigger than life.

Elena hoped that the hay and winter grass in the bluffs would be enough to sustain the village horses, and that the animals would have enough sense to hide from people until cold weather and hot tempers blew over.

Elena told only her two most trusted friends about the hiding place she found for the horses, the faithful beasts who even the always-angry Sergei loved more than any other people in the village. But, like vitality, poverty and character, secrets were valued in Telenkov, and well kept. Or so Elena hoped, as the supply trucks from Moscow continued to come through the Ukraine empty, and return overloaded with supplies.

We were told that it was an emergency situation. That Comrade Stalin needed all the food the Ukraine could produce to build a Socialist Paradise. Comrade Stalin was not someone to be argued with. We feared him more than any other Russian, maybe because his roots were not Russian, a public fact we were not supposed to know. We were more frightened about what had happened to us, and why God had

allowed us to keep living in a winter when there was so much dying everywhere else. Perhaps a special torture awaited us at the hands of Stalin on earth, and the devil in hell. But some of us, like Anna, always knew that it was better to do, rather than to be done to. And we all had to be ready for the guest who was coming.

Our guest was, in title, the Bolshevik officer in charge of our village. In reality, he was a mirror that reflected our souls. His fate, and ours, would depend on how dignified we could appear, and how courageous we could be.

Anna folded up fragments of what used to be silk Parisian undergarments into napkins, placing them under the polished forks and spoons. Tasha was not happy about her family treasures being window-dressed by someone with Anna's reputation and unofficially recognized profession. But Tasha realized that Anna knew when to provide for a man's needs, and when to not satisfy his desires. Tasha also realized that if we fought each other, the only winners would be the Soviet authorities and the Ukrainian winter. Besides, Anna was part of the communal effort to keep Telenkov alive, whether we, or she, liked it or not.

No one knew where Anna had come from, or whether she was motivated by lust, love, or a will to survive. Maybe it was all three at once.

More mumbling built up into more arguing. It was always the same, even in the "good" seasons after 1922. We would complain about too much rain, or too little rain, often at the same time. We complained, worried and argued with God, something the atheists were very good at. But some of us just kept working.

By the time the table was set, Nicholi had patched up the roof, the way HE wanted it fixed, ignoring how many kilocalories of heat he wasted. The lumber belonged to him more than anyone else, anyway. It was scrap wood, taken from what was left of the Soviet Army wagons that had been stranded in the village. A very large number of wagons mysteriously broke a spoke or an axle when they came into Telenkov, and Nicholi was very skillful in making fixable wagons look unfixable to suspicious Bolshevik officers.

The duty-bound soldiers who volunteered to remain behind waiting for repairs rarely returned home to Moscow, Kiev or Leningrad. If they did, they brought back no news about what was really going on behind closed doors and downward-looking eyes in Telenkov.

Telenkov was one of the most popular unknown villages in the Ukraine. What really happened that winter could only be understood from the heart. From a Telenkovian heart. You see, we were a simple people. A practical people. And tied to the ways of the land. Or maybe we weren't...

Easter came early that year. We weren't supposed to be Christians, now that we were liberated from our bondage to the Church. To the militant Soviets, it was my birthday we were celebrating. To the more intellectual Bolsheviks, we were celebrating a Festival Day from "pagan" times, when the Ukraine honored God and the Earth at the same time, something that we still did, despite Father Dimitri's threats about going to hell with the other pagans, a term which included Jews, Moslems, and sometimes Roman Catholics. His long hair and beard made Father Dimitri look like a Saint, when you obeyed the commandments he passed down. His bloodshot eyes threw fire at you when you defied his authority. Father Dimitri's power over us came from two sources. He was one of the only people in our village who could read, and the only one who claimed to have God's mandate behind each of his opinions.

What we believed about any Deity didn't matter anyway, especially then. We came to Church to pray with each other, not to God. You came with an open heart, a dedication to better yourself in the future, and a set of cotton balls inside your ears so that the painful off-tune singing of the person next to you didn't drive you insane.

Finally, the table was set and all the decorations were in place. According to tradition, the wind whisked the consciousness of those who had faith into the realm of the Spirits, and those who did not have faith into the world of imagination.

Visiting our feast were the ghosts of many uninvited, and unanticipated, Spirits. We still had meat on our ribs, a situation which was not so in the other Ukrainian communities which had been starved to death by February. Why were we allowed to survive when so many others died? Were we blessed by God, or did we make a deal with the Devil to save our bodies, losing our souls in the process?

Finally, someone mentioned the one word that was on our minds. "Major Rusmonski." It was Elena who had the courage to break the silence this time. "Will he be with us today?"

All eyes turned to me. It was my job to deal with the District Commander. We had an election and took a vote. It was a split, half for and half against. As the town worrier, and the person who knew the Major best, it was left to me.

"Well, is he going to be here or not?" Johan asked, his authoritative eyes showing a fear that he had never revealed in public before.

There was a knock on the door. I knew it would be coming, and that things between us and the Major would never be the same again once we encountered who, or what, was on the other side. It was Judgment Day on Earth, for ALL of us.

I found myself remembering how things came to this, hoping to understand why, so I could prepare myself for the fate which I had inflicted on the only real friends I ever had.