

**Andrea Purgatori**

# **Four Little Oysters**

**Uncorrected proofs not for sale**

O Oysters, come and walk with us!  
The Walrus did beseech.  
A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,  
Along the briny beach:  
We cannot do with more than four,  
To give a hand to each.'

Lewis Carroll, "The Walrus and the Carpenter," 1871

I am he as you are he as you are me  
and we are all together.  
See how they run like pigs from a gun,  
see how they fly.  
I'm crying...

The Beatles, "I'm the Walrus," 1967

October 31, 2019

## Berlin

Markus Graf had been a spy. And as a spy he betrayed.

In that world of women and men who often live a double or triple life, which some call the Circus, no one has ever been scandalized by this. Betrayal is one of many possible occurrences. Like deceiving and killing. Or getting killed. And anyone who has been a denizen of that world knows how little it matters whether the betrayal is committed in the name of an ideal or for money, how far you hide or the time that has elapsed. Only three things matter.

The choice made.

The damage done.

The fallout.

And then there's always a bill to pay.

In Markus's case, he was given advance notice of the bill, so to speak, while in the Swiss mountains where he had happily exiled himself, at a distance of 30 years and 843 kilometers from the betrayal.

Precisely in that area of the Tiergarten Park extending from the Brandenburg Gate to the western quarters of the city, where the wall that had split Berlin and Europe in two once stood (another embarrassing memory from the past, of which the Germans had almost made even the dust disappear).

The last Thursday of October promised an early winter. Yet the man wrapped in a black coat, with a pink face and a round head snug in a woolen watch cap, had no intention of surrendering to the bad weather and giving up his lunch break. He had been waiting for that moment with impatience, ever since he had set foot in the office.

He went out for a walk along Unter den Linden at 1:02 PM, leaving behind the sound of the iron gate that closed under the eyes of a muscular Spetsnaz security officer in plain clothes. Then, with a pivot, he dodged a

Japanese couple who were taking pictures of the building and managed not to wind up in the frame.

Getting to the Brandenburg Gate normally took about three hundred and fifty steps and nearly four hundred more to reach the Red Army martyrs monument (habits are often tallied). But since he had always kept time by his appetite, that morning he was able to reduce the total to just over seven hundred steps, breathing heavily and looking straight ahead.

He walked in front of the pharmacy, then by the shop selling horrendous souvenirs of Berlin, then past the dark windows of the Quarré, the restaurant of the Adlon Hotel, which marked the west end of Unter den Linden and, on the Pariser Platz side, faced the Akademie der Künste, the Academy of Arts, and the US Embassy.

At that point he crossed the square diagonally, cleaving through a group of French tourists who were laughing as they listened to a neohippy poet in a loincloth reciting surreal verses while precariously balanced on his tricycle.

He merely glanced at them, then passed under the Gate's right arch. He crossed Platz des 18. März, bypassing the double row of stones on the asphalt indicating the perimeter of the Wall that no longer existed, and took Strasse des 17. Juni, giving the face of former American President Ronald Reagan engraved on a bronze plate set in the sidewalk a good stomp. Below Reagan was his famous 1987 exhortation to the then General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev: "Tear down this wall." A historical phrase, but one he was convinced would only bring trouble.

When he got in front of the monument, he skirted the stone base on which one of the two tanks kept as a tribute to the conquest of Berlin stood. He climbed the steps, took a sober look at that temple paying homage to the heroic past of his nation, walked around it, and, as always, placed a copy of *Die Welt* on top of the low wall that looked out at the park and sat his flabby ass on it. He then pulled a döner kebab wrapped in aluminum foil out of his pocket and opened his mouth to expose the gleam of two golden molars.

There, now he was finally ready to devour the prize his diabetologist let him have for keeping to the terrible diet he'd prescribed, and "end the month with a smile."

The man's name was Egor Abalin. He was the fourth highest political advisor to the embassy of the Russian Federation, he had just turned sixty-one and loved to eat. His diplomatic career was already waning without too many regrets. But not his hunger.

Ever since he had been assigned to the Berlin office, he had become a devotee of a certain Birûsk: a Kurd who hated Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and cheered for the PKK separatists.

Like many immigrants from among that persecuted nation, Birûsk had opened a döner kebab eatery. His was in Kreuzberg, just below the advisor's house. It was a smoky place that stank, but in his bulimic delirium, Abalin considered Birûsk a master of the sublime art of combining four slices of roast veal and the right proportions of peppers and spicy ketchup.

At that moment in the park, within thirty meters, there was only a twenty-eight-year-old Dutch babysitter, Angelica Joos. She was pushing a baby buggy carrying Sophie, the nine-month-old daughter of a broker and an interior designer from Basel, past the hedge that separated the monument from one of the tree-lined avenues.

Angelica was the only one to notice the man wearing a baseball cap with the brim over his forehead, sunglasses, a black bomber jacket, and holding a plastic bag in his hand. He was approaching Abalin.

For a moment she looked away to see if little Sophie was sleeping. That was when she heard a bang.

It seemed like a firecracker, she would later say in a statement.

But it wasn't New Year's Eve.

## Flims, in the Grisons

That same morning, Markus had come down the steps of the spa at seven forty-five sharp. He wore a white terry cloth robe with the Waldhaus Hotel logo embroidered on the breast pocket.

A few minutes later he was lying on the massage table, eyes closed and belly down. In another hour, or hour and a half with shower included, he would go for a nice walk to the frozen Caumasee. Maybe after indulging in Claudia's tongue or her sex. She was lover number two among the four with whom he spent his time in that fortunate season of his new life.

Ambient music, which Swiss hotels now used to excess, driveled through the speakers embedded in the wall. Conference halls, elevators, corridors, restaurants, saunas, swimming pools. Markus found it irritating. Little by little, however, he had learned to tolerate it.

When he felt the door opening to let in a cool gust of air, his mucous membranes caught wind of Claudia's lavender scent, which preceded her touch on his back.

Like every morning. But not that morning. Markus waited in silence.

The scent of lavender lingered, but nothing happened.

So he opened his eyes and turned his head.

Claudia was seated beside the glass and steel table, on which the creams and ointments were lined up. She was staring at him.

Markus watched her. She was the perfect embodiment of that type of Swiss woman who, according to his reckless theory, you can only meet at an altitude of higher than twelve hundred meters: a mix of naturally smooth skin and muscle tone that drove him crazy.

He smiled at her.

“Is the lily of the valley oil finished?” Strangely, Claudia did not answer.

Then Markus sighed and twisted slightly, resting his left elbow on the massage table. Surprised and intrigued.

Despite his fifty-seven years, he was in excellent shape and liked to show it off even with trivial movements. Small satisfactions of regular weight training.

“What’s wrong, Schatzi?”

Claudia kept staring at him for a while longer. In silence. Then she said what she had to say. In two words.

“I’m pregnant.”

Markus hoped he didn’t understand. Indeed, for a moment he even wished someone would raise the volume of that insipid ambient music rattling from the speakers to full blast.

The point is that he understood very well.

“You’re what?”

“I’m going to have a baby, Willi. Yours.”

It had snowed the night before. The air was crisp, full of oxygen. The only sounds were the intermittent cascades of white flakes that the branches couldn’t hold.

His deerskin after-ski boots, oiled the way he liked them, sank with a crunch into a ten-centimeter layer of snow with a light creak. A feeling that had always put him in a good mood.

But not that morning.

Markus pulled straight up to the revolving door of the Waldhaus Hotel but decided he would enter from the door next to it, used by skiers to take the stairs leading to the *Skiraum*. Naively, he hoped that by reversing the order of habits the wheel of bad news would start turning the

opposite way.

But that's not how it was.

The negative signs were even in the dense air of the large hotel lobby that smelled of wet snow, kitchen steam and leather boots, as always heated with Helvetic generosity.

And yet on that morning Markus found the heat really unbearable. As he approached the wooden reception desk, he began to unbutton his overcoat.

Kadof already had the stack of newspapers, but his face, shining from some sort of aftershave, wasn't his usual one.

At times even the Swiss can't hide what they're feeling.

"Good morning, Herr Lang. Today the barometer is on our side," he said enthusiastically, but without overdoing it.

"That's right, Herr Kadof. Fresh snow and high pressure," Markus replied mechanically. "It's about time."

And he took the newspapers.

But Kadof reached out with his other hand immediately.

"There's this for you, too."

He was handing him a twenty-by-twenty-centimeter commercial envelope and at the same time he wouldn't let go of it.

Markus understood why immediately. That was the first letter stamped with German postage stamps that he'd received in thirty years. That is, since he had moved to Flims and purchased a beautiful penthouse in cash in one of the most exclusive buildings in the middle of the dense forest of the Waldhaus, which at the time had allowed him to become a member of the hotel, and in a sense to turn Kadof into a direct employee.

In any case, he pretended not to dismiss that malicious gesture. He even clung to the possibility of a mistake, even though he knew that the concierge of a five-star hotel in Graubünden is almost never wrong. Especially if he graduated from the hotel school in Zurich and has a forty-year career under his belt.

"For me?" he asked with an air of surprise.

"*Jawohl*, Herr Lang. Indeed, there's your name on it."

Two events so destabilizing and so close together convinced Markus that it was definitely not a good day. But he took the envelope anyway, and even sketched out a smile.

"Thank you."

"At your service, Herr Lang."

As Markus returned to the door, Kadof leaned back over the desk to work with pencil and eraser on the room lists.

It kept getting hotter in the lobby, and to Markus it even seemed that the envelope in his hand was burning.

Once in his penthouse apartment, he immediately entered the bathroom, turned on the light and looked at himself in the mirror. It was not exactly a sight to rejoice over. It seemed to him that the skin on his face had suddenly shriveled.

He took a kleenex out of the box, trying not to stare at that image, and placed the envelope on the sink.

The three 55-cent postage stamps with former Chancellor Helmut Kohl's big face on it had been issued by the Deutsche Bundespost in 2012. Above was the stamp of the Berlin post office, dated October 29, 2019. Two days earlier. And the name and surname of the recipient – Wilhelm Lang – as well as the address of the Waldhaus Hotel had certainly been typewritten.

As Kadof passed it to him, a glance was enough to notice. The smudges around the letters were typical of an inked ribbon. And in 2019 who would type out an address on an envelope, ignoring the list of Microsoft Word characters from the A of Abadi to Z of Zapfino, which even the most basic software offered with a couple of clicks?

The sum of those details worried him even more.

And the first and only thought that came to his mind was Greta.

An automatism he thought he'd repressed.

He wasn't wrong. She had always loved provoking him with that type of challenge. She claimed it was part of a secret game only the two of them could play.

But the game dated back to many years ago. Thirty. And anything could be expected, not least of which that she was at it again, sending him a letter where no one was supposed to know he was hiding.

Markus considered her a dead and buried chapter of his previous life. True, he'd left her from one minute to the next, without even the courage to tell her he would be leaving her and leaving Berlin and disappearing from the world. He imagined that for this very reason she initially hated him, then erased him from her memory forever.

But no. And this brought him back to a mountain of guilt and repressed feelings. Because Markus had not only betrayed as a spy, he had also done so as a man.

Everything happened towards the end of the third year of their affair, when the roles between them had suddenly reversed. And it was Greta who chased after him desperately, after two years of him pining for her to



love him.

But by now they had become entangled in a whirlwind of mutual suspicions and turning back was impossible. Before she started seeing him, she'd been infiltrated by the secret service into the West with the task of seducing two Bundestag parliamentarians and extracting as much information as possible using her sexual skills, which, in Markus's opinion, she employed spectacularly. And this had bewitched him from the beginning.

As a result of that mission, for as long as they remained together, against one of the stricter but also more frequently broken rules prohibiting sexual relations between agents, he hadn't been able to answer one of the doubts that tormented him: Did Greta fake her orgasms with him, or were they real?

That doubt, together with the stories she told him about the habits and practices her past lovers either had or endured from her, threw him progressively off balance, to the point of making him so jealous that he always looked for confirmation that her exes were no match for him.

The difference, he told her every day, rested on feelings. In the sense that he loved her desperately, while they had used her as if she were a high quality erotic toy.

To aggravate the matter, Greta had told him in the beginning that in order to justify those trysts consummated through repetitive sex, she always had to deceive herself. She needed the illusion of experiencing as special something that was anything but. And once he became aware of this, she stiffened, distanced herself and eventually disappeared.

Then there was the other doubt that Markus couldn't allay: Did she consider the affair with him a self-deception on a par with the previous ones, unable as she was to control her continual mood swings, which disoriented and hurt him?

So, after two years of being left and taken back at least once a month, and after having consumed himself with doubt and jealousy, Markus decided to leave that selfish and self-centered woman who was consuming him. Just when she would have liked to stay together for the rest of her life.

But the times of love do not always coincide and the causes of every missed coincidence should be shared equally. Something Greta wasn't used to accepting. In fact, she had begun to dump all her negativity on him, accusing him of being ready to seduce every woman he met, without realizing that she was thus slowly and inexorably pushing him away.

Finally, along with the worm of jealousy that had moved into her

head, Greta had made the most serious mistake: humiliating him at work, which she did very well, praising other agents to lower him to a level of mediocrity that, she was convinced, would have allowed her to hold him tighter.

In short, love and psyche follow tortuous and sometimes destructive paths even among spies. And as a result, even flowers (those that Markus often gave her, a scarce commodity in East Berlin) lose their colors and make the water in their vases smell fetid.

But those weren't the only reasons he left.

Markus opened the cabinet, took out the nail scissors, and holding the envelope firmly with a kleenex over his fingers (he had already sown too many prints with his fingertips dampened by the tension) cut a strip of a couple of millimeters along one of the edges and pulled out the contents.

It was another envelope, this time addressed to Markus Graf. His real name. The identity that thirty years of exile should have consumed to the point where it was erased from the memory of those who had known him when he was a young, ambitious and ruthless captain of the German Democratic Republic's secret service. The Stasi.

But no. That typewritten address on the envelope proved that Markus Graf had not died at all to make room for Wilhelm Lang.

Markus Graf still existed.

He opened the minibar in the living room, poured himself half a glass of Platinum vodka, and downed it in a single gulp, even though he hadn't eaten yet. Then he returned to the bathroom, opened the second envelope and understood everything.

Inside there was the cover of an old EP record: the soundtrack of the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour*.

On the cover was a sky of colored stars with the record's title forming a rainbow and a photo with John Lennon dressed as a hippopotamus, Ringo Starr as a rooster, George Harrison as a rabbit, and Paul McCartney as a walrus.

Legend has it that the walrus is the bearer of misadventure.

But there was more: a zero with a diagonal cut through it, drawn with a black marker.

And as soon as he saw that symbol, Markus felt dizzy. As if the life he believed he had freed himself of forever was slamming into him at full speed. His first life.

*Walrus* was the craziest project he and Greta had worked on at Department E of the Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung, the division of the Stasi for espionage abroad up until the day the wall fell and he escaped.

And in the obsolete code of the East German agents and the KGB, the secret service of the former Soviet Union that used the Stasi for its dirtiest operations, the zero with the line through it meant only one thing: emergency.

After Claudia's announcement, which had nailed him to the spa table, that was the second destabilizing event of a day he could now begin to consider frightening.

The third was delivered to him via CNN, with images from the Tiergarten Park (before the usual outbursts against the Iran of the ayatollahs from the US president's mouth, pursed like a chicken's asshole): there were pictures of advisor Egor Abalin's corpse on the little wall behind the Red Army martyrs monument.

So, first: Greta knew the identity behind which he had been hiding all that time.

Second: she had discovered his refuge who knows how long ago.

Third: she had sent him that envelope, knowing at least two days in advance that something serious would happen in Berlin.

Fourth: To get him to move his ass from Flims, she had chosen a symbol that he would decipher immediately.

In fact, strange as it was, the zero with a line through it, the cover, and the dead Russian went together perfectly. And Greta knew that only he would be able to understand "how" and "why."

Markus thought quickly.

To save his second life and what he had built, he absolutely had to find out why she had decided to pull him by the hair into a crime that from eight hundred kilometers reeked of spies settling scores between them.

Sure, he had abandoned the Circus in the worst way: on the lam. And he had betrayed in the worst way: stealing the service's black funds. But what was the point of involving him in that business now?

Although it was cloaked by the highest level of secrecy, there were at least half a dozen people who knew what Walrus was.

Without counting the four kids who had been selected to be guinea pigs, and were now grown men and women who had never understood why they'd been trained to kill like machines.

So why him then?

He picked up the room phone and called the reception.

Kadof answered, unctuous as always. Suddenly Markus hated him.

"How can I help you, Herr Lang?"

"Book me the first plane to Berlin and the train connection to Zurich.

First class. Single seat, near the window.”

“And the return trip?”

Markus let out a sigh.

“Open ticket, Herr Kadof. Open.”

(...)

November 9, 1989

## East Berlin

A sudden pothole and the white gold earring rolled on the mat, glittering to the right of the driver's seat.

At that moment, the light blue Trabant 601 was almost at the intersection of Rutnik Strasse and Reusch. The way Markus should have taken to reach the service headquarters entrance. As he had done every day for seven years.

He was not entirely sure if it was Greta's, or even she had lost it the night before while they were having sex in a dark courtyard on Tucholskystrasse, behind the new Synagogue, where she lived.

By now their affair was petering out and Markus had stopped watching her with the attention he had once dedicated to her. In any case, he thought it was better to make it disappear. So he bent over to pick it up.

But as soon as he got back up, two women were crossing in front of the Trabant's snout. He braked suddenly, so as not to hit them. They were two secretaries he'd noticed several times in the cafeteria.

Especially the blonde. With her thin ankles and carefully shaved legs. Unusually shaved, because the razor blades they sold in the store reserved for service personnel would have cost her at least a couple of nicks per shave. Whereas that smooth skin of hers had to be the result of some imported product, which few could afford in East Berlin.

Was she the lover of some Stasi director? Or was she doing a member of the Politburo? And how risky would it be to make a play on her?

The two women planted their eyes in his face, frightened.

Markus smiled slightly. And only then did he notice that the blonde had a plastic basket with a Bakelite telephone in her arms. Meanwhile the other struggled with a portable typewriter – portable, so to speak.

It was a quick exchange of glances. Then they carried on. And Markus immediately shifted into first, turning on Reusch.

It was four-thirty in the afternoon. Again, the radio was broadcasting the recording of the press conference held two hours earlier by the government spokesman, Günter Schabowski.

Pressed by Riccardo Ehrman, the Italian news agency ANSA's Berlin

correspondent, on the measures decided to keep up a regime that had been fraying fearfully for weeks, and without realizing what he was about to provoke, Schabowski had let slip a phrase that rippled across the Democratic Republic like a deadly earthquake.

“Today we have decided on a new regulation that makes it possible for every citizen to go out through the border posts,” he said, distractedly reading the sheet he had brought with him.

“Starting when?” the Italian journalist prodded him.

“As far as I know, starting now,” Schabowski responded.

That was why the sidewalks were full of agents and employees were hastily walking away, carrying things with them, like the two women he had almost run over: a lamp, a painting, an ornament. As if a general every-man-for-himself directive had been issued in anticipation of an imminent enemy bombardment.

If on the one hand the confusion could facilitate his plan, on the other there was the risk that a crowd of Eastern citizens would funnel toward the checkpoints, besieging them. Which could make the government change its mind.

In short, Markus realized that he had to reach his office quickly to get what he needed, before the situation got worse and became uncontrollable.

But at Hoenerweg, a small dark dirt road wedged between a park and a row of buildings, he suddenly saw Yuri leaping into the middle of the street to stop him with his hand.

Strange that he was there too, and above all on foot.

Markus pulled over and lowered the window, slapping two hands on the glass. The only way to slide it into the Trabant’s worn window guides. Then he gave a quick glance to the right and left.

The flow of people continued non-stop.

Markus decided to play the role of someone who had been surprised by events. For an agent of his level, playing the fool was not the best thing to do, but with Yuri it was advisable to keep a low profile.

“Colonel Grishin, what’s happening?”

Yuri locked his eyes on him as usual, cold as the blowing wind.

“Haven’t you heard the radio?”

Of course he had heard. He rushed over there because a chance like that might never happen again. And he wanted to take advantage of it, he had to take advantage of it. He had planned everything for months and Schabowski’s sudden slip was an invitation to hurry.

“But where are the security guys?” Markus asked, continuing to play his part.

“There’s no time to talk, Captain. Now do what I tell you. Go to the minister’s office. Behind the desk there’s a wardrobe, inside you’ll find a safe. Open it with these.”

Yuri took out a ring with three keys. Markus understood he was

trapped. Badly.

“That’s impossible, Colonel. They’ll arrest me.”

“Nobody will arrest you, because the guards have been warned, the office is empty and the minister is at the Residentura. I had him summoned on purpose.”

Taking orders from a KGB officer was not usual, but it could happen, given the Stasi’s position of total subjugation in the service of the Great Soviet Mother.

In any case, with Yuri contradictions were unacceptable. Much less questions about why the minister of state security had been called out of his headquarters under false pretenses so Yuri could get his hands on the minister’s safe. The act, he thought – assuming they didn’t just take him out before he even got to the room – could have him spending the rest of his days in Hohenschönhausen, or maybe in Potsdam, in the former SS prison, with its filthy three by one and a half meter cells.

“Memorize it. This key in the bottom lock, three turns to the right. The second in the top, seven to the left. The third one in the middle, two to the right,” said Yuri. Then dial the knob over the six letters of his last name.”

“Mielke?”

“It’s not original, but who cares. Open it, look for the project file Walrus and bring it to me.”

“We have a copy in the Department safe,” Markus said, hoping that the information would help him avoid the deadly risk looming in his path.

“It’s disappeared,” Yuri cut him short.

Markus couldn’t imagine how that might have happened. Getting into the Department offices was in itself very complicated. Then stealing one of the only two copies of the Walrus project, was absolutely impossible. At least until then.

“Disappeared?”

“Yes,” Grishin answered dryly, with a tone that precluded any further questions. “Now repeat the sequence of the keys.”

## West Berlin

For about ten minutes, Mrs. Schneider’s right arm was raised in mid-air, in the swan position. Dr. Leo Kaspruk kept her engaged by talking about the dazzling sun lighting the beach on which she was ideally lying with her eyes closed.

“Do you feel hot,” Kaspruk asked.

Even though she was sitting on a green velvet armchair, Mrs. Schneider shrugged shoulders to find a more comfortable position on the sand. Her forehead was wet with sweat and she began to rub her left hand

on her skirt.

“Yes, very hot,” she said.

“Does it bother you?”

“No, I like it. I always went to the seaside with my father and we had a time together.”

Indeed, Mrs. Schneider had a relaxed expression. Whereas Dr. Kaspruk didn't. He was distressed by the sound of the motors and indistinct voices that not even the double-glazed windows of his office on the second floor of the building at 5 Jülicher Strasse could block out. And in the middle of the hypnotherapy session he got up to go to the window and peer out into the street, leaving the woman's unconscious on the beach where he had led her after putting her in a trance state.

He drew the curtains and continued speaking.

“Can you feel your right arm?”

The people looked euphoric. Many were honking their horns.

“It feels like it's outside me, like something external to my body,” Mrs. Schneider said.

“And is it a pleasant feeling?” Kaspruk asked without turning around. Leaning over, he could see the stream of people and cars heading toward the junction with Bornholmer Strasse, then turning right toward the railway bridge, beyond which was the checkpoint that marked the border between West Berlin and the neighborhood of Pankow, in the East.

“It's strange,” Mrs. Schneider said.

“Is your father there? Can he see you?”

“No. I'd like to look for him, but I can't get up.”

Tears began to form under her closed eyelids. Kaspruk sat back down in the chair in front of her.

It was already getting dark and they weren't even in the middle of the session, but what was happening out there was terribly more important than Mrs. Schneider's motionless arm in swan position and the sad memories that her unconscious had trapped deep down until then, preventing her from accepting her father's death.

Outside, the fate of a mind control experiment was being played out through the most ambitious hypnosis ever, to which he had dedicated the last nine years, attending Milton H. Erickson's lectures from Los Angeles to Phoenix, specializing in the Department of Psychiatry of Cambridge, and finally traveling across half of Europe.

At stake out there was his future as a psychiatrist in the service of the Cause.

“Now I will count from ten to zero, and slowly she regained possession of her arm, wrist, hand and fingers. Finally you will be able to move it and when you feel like it, you will open your eyes again,” he said, trying to maintain a calm tone of voice despite the agitation that had come over her.



“Ten.”

He had heard Schabowski’s words on the radio, too, in that damned press conference. Then he had seen the ARD images on TV and guessed what they would provoke.

Now all the effects were dropping down right at his front door.

“Nine...”

He had immediately thought of the boy. ONE was only seventeen years old and had been one of the most receptive of the selection since the beginning of the treatment. His conditioning level was excellent, so what was about to happen should not have any effect on him. But the problem was the survival of the entire project.

“Eight... seven... six...”

It was above all the future of the ideal, to which he had chosen to consign himself out of political conviction. And of the regime that had believed in him, secretly commissioning that experiment. The two things merged together, forming whole to which he had dedicated himself as to a child.

“Five... four... three... two...”

But after Schabowski’s words, would everything he had built collapse? Was everything about to fall, driven by those people running towards the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint?

“One...”

He wanted to go out. Right away.

“Zero.”

Mrs. Schneider began to slowly lower her arm onto her leg and gradually opened her eyes by batting her lids.

“How do you feel?” Kasprik asked.

“A little confused.”

“It’s normal. Your arm?”

“It’s heavy,” Mrs. Schneider said, moving her joints.

“What happened?”

“What do you remember?”

“I’m not sure, nothing very clear. But I’m sweaty.”

“That’s normal too. But we have to break for now. There’s too much noise outside. Let’s save it for the next session.”

Mrs. Schneider got up and ran her fingers through her hair. She picked up her purse and coat. She felt a little groggy.

Kasprik was already going toward the door.

“I didn’t understand much,” Mrs. Schneider said.

“The important thing is that the trance worked. There’s plenty of time for you to understand,” Kasprik said, letting her out.

“Goodbye, Dr. Kasprik.”

“Goodbye, Mrs. Schneider.”

Kasprik squeezed her hand and closed the door, then quickly went to

the window, moved the cabinet under the sill, bent down, peeled off the baseboard and pulled out the rag in which he had wrapped his Makarov 9x18 mm.

The cartridge was full.

He put it in his belt behind his back. He replaced the baseboard and cabinet, took his coat and gloves, took a flashlight out from a drawer, put it in his pocket and checked his watch.

He had time to spare. He could go to Humboldtthain Park on foot and get a sense of the situation.

Then he put out the light and went out.

## East Berlin

The confusion increased at the Ministry of State Security's gigantic complex of buildings and Markus managed to park his Trabant where twenty-four hours earlier they would have strafed him with a burst of machine-gun fire: in front of Haus 1, the offices of the Stasi leadership. And that of Minister Erich Mielke. The Ogre, as almost all the citizens of East Berlin called him. He had listened in on their phone calls and conversations in homes littered with hidden microphones. In thousands of cases, it was a prelude being interrogated and arrested.

For the first time, Markus walked through the building without paying attention to whose path he was crossing, and the indifference was reciprocated. However, while climbing the stairs to reach the second floor, he felt his breathing quicken. Yuri's assurances had not convinced him. In the service areas, the corridor leading to Mielke's room was like death row's last mile: having to walk it could mean condemnation or disappearance, certainly the end of a normal existence.

That is, if you could consider existence in the East normal even for a privileged person like himself: father who died a war hero and mother suffering from Alzheimer's, whom he had to take care of. A communist of proven political fidelity dedicated to the repression of every opposition and opponent, in the name of the supreme good of the German Democratic Republic. A model officer and a model agent, above all suspicion, who for years had secretly cultivated only one goal: to escape from there.

He had come within a hair's breadth of realizing his plan. But now the mission Yuri had assigned him was about to upset everything.

But refusing could block everything too.

The regime was about to fall, but not the KGB. And Colonel Yuri Grishin never joked. He had personally gone out of his way and if Markus didn't show up at the Residentura with the only remaining copy of the Walrus dossier in his mouth, he would have tracked him down by any

means at his disposal, despite the chaos. And from what Markus knew about him, it would end very badly.

Even through Yuri was officially the KGB's number three man in Berlin, he acted as if he were number one. And, unlike his superiors, he came from the army. Perhaps from some special forces unit. In fact, he never separated from his Makarov PB6 P9, tucked into a holster he wore under his left armpit.

He did not seem to have a dark past to hide, though Markus would have sworn he had taken numerous people out in his day. But he had always done so with the conviction that, for an elite soldier like himself, obeying an order never posed any ethical problems.

One afternoon, after one of his meetings as a liaison officer between Department E of the Stasi and the KGB, they had gone out for a beer together.

It was Yuri who had made the proposal, which was unusual for him, and Markus had asked himself if that unscheduled meeting did not hide the intention to extort some details from him about the Walrus project. But even if he wanted to, he could only have revealed part of it to him because everything was compartmentalized.

But no. It was just the desire for beer and talk. And for the first and only time, Yuri had let himself go a little.

He told him that in Moscow he had a wife and a daughter, that he really liked American movies about corrupt power. And they both laughed at this (Yuri just a hint, of course), because in the East movies were a forbidden commodity, like pop and rock music. But Yuri had also promised to get him some under the table, Markus never followed up on the offer so as to avoid any traps.

While he listened to him, he carefully observed Yuri's meaty hands. Made to strangle, he thought. After all, what else could a KGB colonel incapable of emotions do?

A sinister sense of emptiness hovered in the corridor leading to the wing where Mielke's office was.

Markus entered the secretary's room. Deserted. He passed by the kitchen where the minister had breakfast prepared each morning (eggs, fruit juice, coffee and toast, arranged on a tray in a maniacal order). Deserted. Just like the antechamber, the realm of the powerful Mrs. Ursula Dresdo, the minister's grim personal secretary, known for her arabesque silk shirts.

He then walked slowly over the wooden floor, which creaked with every step. The walls lined with wood panel seemed increasingly narrow and the wooden desks seemed like unbreachable obstacles.

At the back, in front of the door, the two armed guards in plain clothes were staring at him as if they had seen an alien coming toward them. They were the only humans left on the abandoned planet Stasi.

Should he blindly trust what Yuri had just told him, or would it be the end of it everything? That is, the end of him.

The first guard made it so Markus didn't have to think further.

"Five minutes. Not a second more," he said.

The second opened the door and showed him the fingers of his hand: five. Markus walked in.

Mielke's room was large and rectangular. On the right there were windows overlooking the main entrance of the Haus 1 and the courtyard. The desk was placed on a garnet-colored carpet. There were some sheets on the desk arranged neatly, two folders and three telephones, two black and one white. Behind the blue velvet armchair, stood the eight-door wardrobe that Yuri had described to him. He had consumed twenty seconds. His breath had quickened even more. But at that point it would have made no sense to give up. He opened the two central cabinets and found the safe. He took the ring with the three keys out of his pocket. He put the first one in and gave three turns to the right. Then he inserted the second and third keys. He dialed the knob to the six letters of the minister's name: Mielke.

The safe door went clack. It opened.

Markus checked his watch: he had three minutes and ten seconds left to find the copy of the Walrus project and leave.

He looked inside the two cabinets at the top. Nothing. He searched quickly in the other three compartments. There was no sign of the project, but each of the papers that passed through his hands was potentially worth a fortune: information on ministers, generals, wives of members of the Politburo, actors, actresses, even a file on Erich Honecker, who had been removed from the office of president a couple of weeks earlier, and who would nonetheless not have appreciated what had been collected about his private life, that of his wife and her vileness.

He also saw a sealed yellow envelope with only two words written on it: EXTERNAL RESOURCES. Markus opened it. It contained a sheet with the codes of the numbered currency accounts opened by the Stasi at three Swiss banks. And the total worth: 21 million dollars, including francs and pounds. A stroke of luck he could never have imagined. Markus put the paper back in the envelope and the envelope inside the safe. But only for a few seconds. Then he picked it up, took out the paper, folded it in four and put it in his pocket.

He closed the safe and the wardrobe. He rummaged over the desk and in the drawers, took some sheets of paper with a letterhead, stamped the minister's seal on them, and pocketed those too. Finally, he checked the clock: four minutes and forty seconds.

Out clean.

Greta had seen the Trabant and waited for him in the parking lot.

Despite the cold, she had left the office wearing only her gray suit and white blouse, which she alternated with her major's uniform. The cut of the skirt was decidedly poor, but tight enough to do her body justice. She stood there and with a disgusted frown observed her colleagues frantically leaving the buildings, taking away the objects of so many desires they had repressed until Schabowski's fatal announcement.

Even though she wasn't wearing make-up, and Markus had stopped desiring her, there was no doubt that she was a beautiful woman.

Markus met her gaze from afar and understood that she would be the other great obstacle to the realization of his plan: she was his woman, she knew him in his most hidden folds and she would never miss any detail of his behavior. That's what she'd been trained for.

He armed himself with an adequate smile and joined her.

"Seems like they've all gone crazy," he said to anticipate her.

"They've gone crazy, because they know what they're facing," she said. "It's called betrayal, it will cost them dearly."

There was a moment of silence.

Markus filled it by thinking about the move he had to make to shake her and get away. But that wasn't possible.

"What were you doing in Haus 1?" Greta asked, staring at him.

"Looking for Storch, to find out what we should do."

"The general is at the Department."

"Really? I thought I saw him go in there."

"Are you going crazy too?" Twenty-four hours ago you wouldn't have dared to even go through that door," Greta said, staring at him. "Anyway, what do you think we should do?"

Her tone was more suited to the rank of major than to the woman with whom he had had a secret relationship for three years. But for Markus it was understandable. He knew her well, he knew she was upset by what was happening. Even though she was always very, even too careful to control her emotions.

"I think we should go and secure the Department's archive," he said.

Greta nodded. This time relaxing the muscles of her face.

"Orders are different. Anyway, let's hurry."

The sun was going down. And with the sun, the percentage of possibility that Markus would carry out his plan. But there was no choice.

He gave a useless glance at the Trabant, then followed her.

Greta walked half a step ahead. And she was in every sense.

"What was wrong with you last night, Markus?"

"Nothing, why?"

"Is there another woman?"

Markus believed that the imminent collapse of the socialist dream to which Greta had devoted herself entirely was the only thing that

tormented her. He forgot that he had a woman in front of him capable of changing subject and mode in the space of a minute.

“What’s the matter with you now?”

Greta stopped, turned, looked him in the eyes.

“So tell me why you didn’t come.”

Suddenly the hundred meters that separated them from Haus 15, where the Department was located, had an unexpected and unpredictable kink.

Discussing orgasms at such a time was completely surreal. But, as is well known, the female psyche follows inscrutable routes even in the most extreme situations. But that afternoon Markus had not taken it into account. He was too focused on his priorities.

“What did you say?”

“That there are two possible explanations, since I know how that dick you’re so attached to works: either you were with someone else before me or you were afraid of getting me pregnant, because you want to leave me.”

Greta guessed two out of two. And once again she was showing her superior sensitivity: one of the qualities, the sex above all, that had made his head spin when he met her.

But at that point Markus would have preferred the whistling of the enemy’s bombs on the Stasi headquarters so he could disappear in the general stampede rather than discover what else that woman who wasn’t a spy by chance could come up with. Because he wouldn’t know how to respond.

So for now, he lied.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Deny it if you want, anyway you’re a born liar.” It was fairly true.

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