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REPORT FROM DRESDEN

Samuel Rafael Barber

There is so much work to be done that Vladimir and I are out of our minds as we sit at the large, square table we have been forced to share on account of the lack of tables suitable for our purposes, here in Dresden. There are newspapers to be read, articles cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. There are books to be read, pages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. But mostly, there are reports to be read, passages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. To say nothing of the many reports to be written after selecting the most vital passages, in our own estimations, to cut and staple and sort and duplicate and mail. It has come to our attention that the city's table shortage might be coming to end, but Vladimir dares not trust the source of this information, nor do I dare trust the source of this information either.

There are thousands of reports on the table before which Vladimir and I sit, day after day, I taking the occasional break from my diligent work to expel nervous tension with a crossword puzzle, Vladimir choosing to interrupt his nervous tension and diligent work with the periodic snack. Vladimir does not snack like a normal person, however, as he insists on eating an entire meal when most would be satisfied with a banana or something of the sort. He snacks every other hour, or so. Without deviation, Vladimir eats a ham and cheese sandwich and an entire bag of carrots and a pastry injected with some sort of custard during his snack, also taking sporadic sips from his canteen. I am suspicious that in this way he has been smuggling vodka into the workplace, drinking on the job. As far as I can tell, the drinking has yet to affect his work. I have contemplated writing a report on the matter, still, for it is a serious violation of protocol. But I cannot verify this hunch for I am smuggling vodka into the workplace in my canteen, drinking on the job. As far as I can tell, the drinking has yet to affect my work. So the alcohol I smell on his breath may originate from my own. It is hard to know for certain. There is so much work to be done I cannot be sure.

There are at least two thousand four hundred and sixty-three reports on the table. In all likelihood, many more. I counted them, once. I cannot be sure how long ago this would have been. For a time, Vladimir carved a notch into the table when a

day passed, and I carved a notch into the table whenever a new report arrived. At first, I would fill in a notch with wood shavings when a report had been read, passages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. Following two weeks of this patterning and after comparing the rate of reports arriving at the table to the rate of reports departing from the table, I stopped bothering. The markings remain, here, on the large, square table, though they are hidden by the thousands of reports as of yet left unread and uncut and unstapled and unsorted, unduplicated and unmailed. Not that consulting the notches would be of much use. The notches now cover the whole table we are pretty sure, since they covered the table before The Pile grew and obscured their intent, making it impossible to distinguish Vladimir's notches from my own. I hope you are paying close attention. This is all crucial.

We did not expect to carve notches into the table for such a lengthy period. It was almost a sort of joke, originally, is the thing. Dresden is a backwater job (as you know) and we each expected to serve at this post for only a brief time, as we continued following the trajectory of our careers. My trajectory being upward, having joined the service four years ago and yet so quickly assigned to Second Chief Directorate followed shortly by the appointment to Directorate S. Superiors appreciating my loyalty and dedication, peers envying my ambition. The best thing about Vladimir, my favorite thing about Vladimir, is that he does not envy my ambition. Vladimir does not envy my ambition because his trajectory is downward, as he is in the twilight of his career. His life has been dedicated to country, but it is almost over, now, and so his career must also end soon. He is awaiting his retirement orders any day now. Just as I am awaiting my promotional re-assignment orders any day now. Perhaps you are aware of the delay. Vladimir opines that the entire intelligence structure is affected, not that I would idly speculate in such a way, for my faith in the state remains unshaken.

It is true, however, that we were told our respective orders would be arriving "any day now" and it is also true that many weeks have passed since then. Vladimir and I began carving notches in the table not long after we first received the good news. Now they say the reports must continue to be read, pages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed, in the interim, while we wait. This does not inspire Vladimir and me. In fact, it infuriates us. I know this because Vladimir has taken to muttering filthy things under his breath as he goes about his work, just as I have begun to mutter mild criticisms of bureaucratic inefficiency as I go about mine. Unfortunately, our orders arrive disguised within reports as a precautionary measure in the event of attempted sabotage by the West. They even go so far as to adopt the sort of language typically found in the reports, language neutral in

tone and devoid of imagination. They expect that our familiarity with reports, after all this time, will help us quickly identify the coded orders embedded within. So it is impossible to immediately distinguish between the reports containing our orders and the reports with demographic information or Western mail-order catalogues or phone installation instructions or any of the other material which, day after day, week and week, Vladimir and I read and cut and staple and sort, duplicate and mail.

For a time, once the table had been covered with notches but before the table became covered in reports, we proposed, discussed, debated, and ultimately voted to only read and cut and staple and sort and duplicate and mail reports pertaining to our orders. But this was a short-lived exercise for the reason provided above, not that you can tell from its permanent placement on the wall to my right and to Vladimir's left underneath a brief heading that more or less codifies the means by which Vladimir and I will propose, discuss, debate, and vote on future topics and/or avenues of inquiry pertaining to but not strictly limited to orders, reports, treatment of our clerk Skip, and our apartment. This last clause is in dire need of revision, however, since we no longer share an apartment. Not long ago we decided to abandon our official quarters so as to indefinitely reside at our workstation, the large, square table we have been forced to share on account of the lack of tables suitable for our purposes, here in Dresden. We do this so we need not ever stop processing reports. We do this so we need not remain in our stations, here in Dresden, any longer than need be.

The Pile (as we call it, though Skip has tried to take credit for the coinage on more than one occasion, proving beyond any doubt that he is deserving of scorn) makes it very difficult to fill out a crossword in peace, what with its reports sliding around and falling all about, what with its reports perpetually flirting with the edges of the table. The Pile taunts us with the omnipresent threat of spilling its contents upon The Pile of Spilled Reports Awaiting Cleanup on the Floor (as we call it, it pleasing us greatly that Skip has yet to claim credit for this moniker). I understand that The Pile makes eating a ham and cheese sandwich and an entire bag of carrots and a pastry injected with some sort of custard similarly difficult, for Vladimir has offered such a complaint on many occasions. I have tried to empathize with Vladimir's frustration by explaining my own difficulties in filling out a crossword puzzle under these perverse conditions, but he only insists that I stop whining with a dismissive shake of his head, as he is too busy whining about his own difficulties (eating the snacks that are really meals he chooses to call by another name since Vladimir does not snack like a normal person) to empathize with the likes of me.

I am doing my best to succinctly state my case. It is all such a mess, thousands of unsorted reports not meant for haphazard placement upon a table covered with notches and ink stains and carrot fragments. The natural habitat of a report being a filing cabinet or cardboard box. But there is a scarcity of filing cabinets in Dresden and a scarcity of cardboard boxes in Dresden, too. It has come to our attention that these shortages might be coming to end, but Vladimir dares not trust the source of this information, nor do I dare trust the source of this information either. This promise was made in a report received so long ago that neither Vladimir nor I can offer more than a vague approximation of its postage date. If pressed, one of us might feign certainty using an assertive tone of voice which seeks to convey it quite clearly first came into Skip's possession several months ago, at the very latest. This promise was made in a report ordering us to "maintain [our] great efficiency" and "continue [our] esteemed lives of service to country by preserving the safety of the motherland through due diligence and perseverance." Thereafter, we decided to stack the reports methodically. To alphabetize them, even. This amendment to our protocol was proposed by Vladimir, discussed, debated, and ultimately voted on by us both, and written on the wall to my left and Vladimir's right.

In those halcyon days before the carving of notches and the birth of The Pile and the abandonment of our apartment, we were preparing for the eventual arrival of a filing cabinet or cardboard box. Both Vladimir and I were on the same page (metaphorically speaking and not, of course, on the same page of the same report) when it came to the importance of organization within any and all bureaucracy. But the more I reflect, now, the more convinced I become that I was duped, then. The plan was sabotaged from the start, the table deluged with so many new reports (we now refer to this episode as The Great Deluge) by the time we had expended so much time and effort meticulously sorting the original batch of reports into stacks, destroying the order we had imposed, giving rise to The Pile, an entity of almost unimaginable height and girth.

I initially blamed our clerk Skip for this oversight, whom both Vladimir and I detest for he is middle-aged and content, not wanting to leave this place for a promotion as is my goal or leave this place for retirement and death as is Vladimir's. Skip's only purpose, so far as Vladimir or I can tell, is to wheel in fresh reports using the little grocery cart he undoubtedly stole from some supermarket he frequents (or used to frequent if he is concerned its employees might suspect him of having stolen a grocery cart for the purpose of wheeling in fresh reports and wheeling out reports to be mailed) for Skip is not an enterprising sort. Skip could never steal

a grocery cart with the guile required of a valued asset. I have contemplated writing a report related to Skip's probable thievery of the grocery cart, but as you surely already see, we are really quite overwhelmed, at the present, with our work. In light of the available evidence, it seems natural to project my feelings of hostility upon Skip, and to consider him a possible culprit in the sabotage of our organizational mission. But I am also beginning to suspect Vladimir.

I am beginning to theorize, if only while muttering mild criticisms of bureaucratic inefficiency as I go about my work and Vladimir mutters filthy things under his breath as he goes about his, that Vladimir engineered this entire amendment to our workplace constitution just to spite me. He knows, after all, that I require a sterling report from my time here in Dresden to maintain my rise through the ranks. And having descended through the ranks as quickly as I have ascended through them, Vladimir is under no such stipulation, being sufficiently confident (it would seem) that his mediocrity in this post will only strengthen the case against him and expedite his retirement and death. What a traitor Vladimir just might be. He has mentioned entering politics "to keep busy during that brief time in the life of a civil servant following retirement but before death" and it is true that the requirements of character and conduct, in that sphere, correspond with his declining scruples and sense of hygiene.

Now, I anticipate your skepticism. I anticipate a likely retort. You might find yourself asking, with a tone expressing only the most barely veiled condescension: what sort of behavior would provoke this level of confidence in the deception of a colleague? Well, I might find myself replying in only the most patient manner: a looming suspicion first made its presence known once Vladimir crudely insisted Gogol is surely to be considered a Russian when the master's categorization as Ukrainian seems obvious. If this affront to good taste is not satisfactorily convincing, let me edify your concerns by briefly explaining the peculiar circumstances which led to our permanent relocation to the large, square table we now call home. Back when we cohabited in the apartment, back when he violated our television agreement, the ninth amendment to our workplace constitution written on the wall to my right and Vladimir's left.

We were assigned government housing some months ago. The apartment suited men of our means. Let there be no confusion, I do not mean any disrespect. We each had a separate bed, sharing a toilet and television with two channels. You are familiar with the details of such accommodations, surely. Men strive to be free. Men strive for agency, for power. And so we would often disagree over who had the authority to preside over the television remote. I made the case that since we

were of equal rank and since I was assured to be promoted in a short while, I was essentially Vladimir's superior and thus the natural choice for Governor of the Remote. Vladimir made the case that since we were of equal rank and since he had been demoted on many occasions (demoted more times than I had been promoted, even) he was essentially my superior and thus the natural choice for Governor of the Remote. Since each proposition, discussion, debate, and vote resulted in a 1-1 stalemate, we eventually proposed, discussed, debated, and voted successfully to pass an amendment codifying the impossibility of ever coming to any kind of definitive determination on the matter and forbidding future proposals, discussions, debates, and votes regarding the ultimate television authority since we were pretty sick of it all, by then.

We felt that official closure, of sorts, was needed following the tense days devoted to proposing, discussing, debating, and voting. Days which had swallowed whole all remaining time after the reading and cutting and stapling and sorting, duplicating and mailing. There was no watching of television during this time, only discussion of how we might go about watching television in the future. Discussion of how this precedent would shape how our children go about watching television, how our children's children go about watching television.

This period of détente was all too brief. In no time at all, we realized that the programs which interested each of us most frequently overlapped in time slot. If our constitution would not save us, we realized another sort of compromise was needed.

Some context: I have never expended much body heat, and so do not sweat or stink unless I experience a prolonged interval between baths. Vladimir, on the other hand, expends an incredible amount of body heat (I have contemplated writing a report on the matter). Vladimir is a sort of space heater of flesh and blood. You can imagine the quantity of sweat, then, and the implications of this sweat. In exchange for Vladimir receiving my allocated bathroom time Monday through Wednesday and Friday through Saturday, I received an additional two and a half hours of weekly television time for use whenever I liked. I did not tell Vladimir this then (though I have since done so out of spite) but I always considered the exchange a lopsided deal in my favor since Vladimir's increased dedication to personal hygiene improved my life to no small degree, in and of itself.

This excoriation of his bargaining abilities might have been my last articulated message to him, in fact. We are no longer on speaking terms even as we have

never been closer together, in some ways, at the large, square table covered with thousands of reports and thousands of notches, his lack of personal hygiene nauseating me, the discharge of vomit from my mouth in response to the nausea nauseating him in turn. Gross, you might find yourself mumbling in response, and while it certainly remains within your purview to respond in this way, your absolute attention is of the utmost importance, now. Here is my story's key twist. I am going to ask you to focus intently on what I am about to say, but do not mistake my insistence for an impolite gesture.

You see, Vladimir eventually stopped bathing during my allocated bathing times while simultaneously refusing to let me enjoy my rightfully bargained surplus of television. It seems grossly unfair, in my estimation, that he reneged on our compact without maneuvering through the proper constitutional channels. I have proposed, discussed, debated, and voted on many constitutional amendments wishing to officially designate Vladimir's refutation of our freely negotiated deal a traitorous act. But no matter the expertise with which I prepare my opening remarks, or the number of times I have forced Skip, our clerk, to revise my closing statement, I am never able to sway Vladimir. Each vote ends in a 1-1 deadlock, though I am optimistic that this might change in the near future. I was a skilled orator in school. It was one of the skills that most impressed my superiors, back before I had even been assigned to the Second Chief Directorate, back when my capacity for verbal fireworks mimicked the articulateness of my written word. I was told this vital aptitude was an important component of the assorted criteria considered for my assignment, here in Dresden. But the very skills so crucial to the work are crippled in their exercise.

Our conditions are not so great, it is true, but times are tough in Dresden, as they are in Moscow, and so we understand. There are "economic externalities" to consider the reports tell us and I tell Vladimir and Vladimir tells me and both of us tell Skip whenever he complains about the stench emanating from this table of ours. And so I hope you will exercise a similar understanding when it comes to my breaking protocol, here, in sending a report outside of the designated channels. I was fearful my other pleas weren't getting through, you see. This is the seventh time I have explained all this. I would like to think I am improving, refining my technique. This is unknowable. Nor does it matter much, I suppose. We hear that the wall may be falling soon, and it worries us, Vladimir and me. We trust the sources of this information, is the thing. We need reassurance. But most of all, we need Vladimir to be punished.

On that I hope men of our stock can agree, since you have now read my full report.

Which you must have done since you are reading these very words right this second. Unless you skipped to the end for some inexplicable reason, deciding that the effort and sacrifice on behalf of the greater good made in the preceding pages wasn't worth your time, deciding a quick skim could possibly be sufficient when it is always the context that is most crucial. I grow weary of this writing, nervous as I am that it will come to nothing. Little has changed from the reports that have failed to elicit a response from your department on the previous six occasions, in terms of content. But I am sure you have read the whole thing, just as I am sure you will address The Vladimir Problem (as I call it), on this occasion. Perhaps his punishment might be received in the report with the orders he is expecting, the ones allowing him to retire and die. Perhaps my own orders can be included as well, the ones with my promotion and reassignment elsewhere. But if you skipped the majority of my report and are short on time, I kindly ask you to revisit the paragraph prior to this one, at least. All essential facts are contained, there. I eagerly anticipate your report on this matter. Meanwhile, we wait and the table waits and The Pile waits and Skip waits, after Vladimir and I give him a dirty look and he flees elsewhere with his grocery cart filled with fresh reports, for our orders.

Major Poroshenko

18 of June

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next