

Soviet Space

P.F. White

She waited until everyone was asleep, just like always. Doreen was a patient girl, and always had been. It wasn't easy, with three brothers and parents that were always busy, but she managed it somehow. At school parent-teacher conferences, while her mother sat stiff and alert as she awaited to hear all the assuredly bad news about her offspring, Doreen's teachers always had nothing but nice things to say about her. Doreen's mother always took this lack of criminal behavior as evidence of some clever scheme perpetrated by her children, and so would sigh and cluck her tongue at both the poor deceived educator and her own assuredly villainous spawn. The fact that none of Doreen's brothers ever got in trouble for misbehaving either didn't seem to factor into the equation.

Doreen also served on the Little-Lutheran-Leadership committee, always volunteered for bake sales, car washes and other after-school activities, did her homework, never talked back, and minded her younger brothers without being asked. In many ways she was an ideal young American girl that all parents would be pleased to call their own. Her only *failing*, which had been marked in ominous red letters on several report cards dutifully brought home, was in having too much imagination.

That this was regarded as a failing had always bothered Doreen. The grownups seemed not to mind when she was pretending to be a schoolteacher or a

flight attendant, dutifully lining up her dolls and toys in neat rows along with her brothers' G.I. Joes and Godzillas, and then giving them lessons or serving them drinks depending on the circumstance. But whenever she pretended to be anything really *interesting*, like a pirate with a peg leg or a knight in shining armor, well, that's when the notes started appearing on her report card. Because of this, Doreen had learned to keep her best make-believe ideas a secret.

For a while she had really struggled with this idea. *Good girls* didn't keep *secrets* from their family! Her pastor had even claimed that a bad enough secret could get you sent to *hell!* That seemed a bit of a stretch to Doreen, as she liked to think of her God as a lot more fun than *that*. It wasn't until her father had started taking the family to see movies like "*My Favorite Spy*" and "*North by Northwest*" that Doreen came across a way to both keep a secret and *not* get in trouble for it. When her brothers started watching "*Get Smart*" and "*The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*," well, that only sealed the deal: Doreen decided she was secretly a Soviet spy. They could be anyone, right? So why *not* her?

In her make-believe, Doreen couldn't pin down exactly when she had learned that she was not actually the second-oldest child of a modern middle-class family in East Detroit, but instead a secret Soviet sleeper agent cunningly deployed to investigate and report upon the seemingly ordinary lives of American capitalists. She decided that it had most likely happened by way of some hidden activation code, secretly disguised as an ordinary catch-phrase in a television commercial. That sort of thing was always happening on shows like "*Get Smart*", which Doreen began to watch religiously (if only to ensure that her Soviet superiors got a full report of the evening's episode later, of course).

And so it was, that Doreen found herself making her secret reports, late at night, on a broken transceiver radio in the attic, when the rest of her family had all gone to bed (and her homework was finished, *obviously*). The radio wasn't *actually* broken of course, that was just part of her cover story. More than likely the broken machine had been replaced with a top-secret and highly classified duplicate while her family had been away somewhere like church. Sure, the machine still *sounded* like it played only static, but that was just part of the ruse.

Doreen discovered that it was also nice to have a place to herself.

Obviously, she loved her brothers and her parents (most of the time anyway), but the fact remained that the house just wasn't that big. She shared a room with her older brother, Carl, and it wasn't nearly big enough for either of them, let alone both. Every other square inch of the house had been fought over long ago, but for some reason the attic always remained off limits. If Doreen *hadn't* been a Soviet spy there was certainly no *way* that she would have worked up the nerve to go up there by herself, in the dark, at night... but she had.

It hadn't taken long after that for her nightly transmissions to become a welcome routine. She would sneak away, quietly close the door behind her, and tiptoe across the creaky floor-boards of the attic (trying every time to make absolutely no noise, or risk waking her notoriously light sleeping younger brothers below). Eventually she would sidle up to the antique wooden chair beside the supposedly broken radio, turn on her little red flashlight, and fiddle with the knobs and dials until she found her "secret station".

The station was filled with static, obviously, just like all the others. Still, there was something peculiar about the static that had always made Doreen just a little bit hesitant to tune away from it. She couldn't explain it, (and always felt a little self conscious about that,) but somehow or another that radio station simply *compelled* her in a way the others didn't.

It would be at that point that she would bring out the snacks.

She learned early on that her snacks couldn't be anything too noisy to unwrap, or too messy to eat without being able to account for every crumb. The noise was on account of her brothers below seemingly possessing a sixth sense for the sound of a candy-wrapper crinkling. The mess was something altogether different.

Her father and mother had both warned Doreen about the myriad horrors that could ensue should a single crumb of uneaten food find its way to the floor. In her household such things as ants or cockroaches were treated not as a minor inconvenience, but as a serious personal affront against both man and God. A spilled drink, or a trail of crumbs leading to the television, would result in not just immediate punishment but a lasting shame upon your name and legacy. Doreen's older brother Carl had once spilled a whole can of soda on the kitchen tablecloth and the row that had resulted from it was so frightful that the siblings had vowed never to speak of it again. There was also a long standing rumor among Doreen's cousins that there had

once been an entire other branch in the family tree, but that the members of that branch had committed some cardinal sin of messiness (like breaking a wine bottle on carpet), such that the remainder of the relatives had been forced to excommunicate them from the family forever.

Carl, when asked about it, simply called Doreen's father a "Petticoat Fascist With Delusions of Capitalism" and tried to steer the conversation towards another man named Carl, who had apparently written a book that he couldn't stop talking about. Doreen didn't really understand any of that, but she did like how passionate her brother got when he started talking about it.

Fruit was a good choice for a late night snack, a fact confirmed by Doreen's teacher, Mrs. Khan, one day when Doreen had stayed after class (for the purpose of asking a few *very important* questions regarding seemingly innocent facets of American life). Mrs. Khan had at first been slightly at odds with these strange, heartfelt little chats... but eventually warmed to them to the point where she looked forward to her nearly daily clearing up of confusion about the differences between Grape *Jelly* and Grape *Jam* (while a serious little girl dutifully recorded her answers in a cute red notebook). In Doreen's opinion, this sort of individualized attention only partly made up for the way that Mrs. Khan had allowed Claire Oddenbocker to show off pictures of *her* baby brother for an entire class period, but Doreen had only been given five minutes during the morning announcements for the pictures of own youngest brother.

But none of that mattered tonight. Tonight was an important night, and so Doreen had been patient, had been good, and had been very alert. She had prepared her snack well in advance (a bowl of sliced apples, which Mrs. Khan considered especially good for late night snacks,) before completing her homework, doing her chores, helping her brothers and mother with their own tasks, and seeing her younger siblings off to bed. Eventually it was her own bed-time, and she lay quietly for a few hours while she waited for both Carl and her parents to eventually settle off to sleep.

It was later than usual, but that was okay. Tonight was an important night, after all. The things she had learned today were still fresh in her mind, and she had been thinking about them ever since Mrs. Khan had decided to have her little heart-to-heart chat with the class regarding the larger state of the world.

Doreen settled into her little chair, took out her little snack, and fiddled with the knobs on the broken radio until she found the right channel. It was static, like always, but it was the *right* static. Doreen cleared her mind, munched on an apple, and eventually took up the little microphone so she could make her report.

"Dear Comrades," she whispered. Doreen knew well and good that all Russian people called each other "Comrade" all the time, and so was always sure to include that as part of her transmissions.

"I'm afraid I have some sad news tonight...."

She let that sink in for a moment before continuing, her own mind still very much in turmoil.

"I've decided I am going to run away from home."

As usual, there was nothing but static on the other end.

"I'm sure this news saddens you to hear, as my reports have no doubt provided you with valuable insight into the minds of the American people. Still, I'm afraid it has to be done..."

She breathed deep.

"I... Today, at school, we learned about a thing that the teacher called... M.A.D., I think? Yes, yes, that was right. Em, Aye, Dee. It stands for 'Mutually Assured Destruction' and it's the idea that, well...."

She paused a moment to speak clearly. Her father was very strict about that sort of thing, and often made his children pause and take a deep breath before speaking their minds.

"The idea is that our lot and their lot... the Americans and the Soviets... we all have all these bombs pointed at each other. One day soon someone is going to get mad and decide to fire one of them. When that bomb hits, all the other bombs get shot off... and after that... well, we all end up... dead."

She decided to eat another apple slice before speaking again. It was a big thought. She remembered Mrs. Khan's face when she told the class about it. Her teacher had looked like she wanted to cry, but also knew that she had to say what she had come to say. Doreen liked her even more for that, and it made her really *feel* the importance of her teacher's words.

"Not just the soldiers I mean," clarified Doreen, *"but everyone. All of us. Me and my brothers, my mom and dad... everyone. Apparently, you- I mean WE are as much to*

blame for it as anyone. Both sides won't back down, and one day, soon, I mean... Well, once it starts... that's it."

She ate a few more apple slices. There was a sound from below, a toilet flushing. Doreen couldn't hear any footsteps, but after a little while there was a sound that could have been a bedroom door shutting. She waited a little longer. Eventually, she spoke again, even softer than before.

"I can't be a part of that. Really, I can't. I... I asked my dad about it today at dinner, and he and my older brother Carl got into a fight about it. They were shouting about how we had to defend ourselves, or... I don't know. They were into it. They BELIEVED in it... you know?"

She shook her head, quietly, in the dark.

"I realized that I can't deal with that. I can't support them, just like I can't... well, I can't support YOU. The Soviets, I mean. If my teacher is right, I mean... then you are also to blame too, huh? I mean-"

She was interrupted. There was a sound. It was faint, at first, but it was there and it was coming from the radio. Doreen couldn't risk turning the volume up, and so she pressed her ear against the speaker. At first it was just static, but eventually she heard it again.

It was a voice.

"Ello? Comrade Door-eenski? Do you come in, da? Da? Comrade Door-eenski?"

At first she was terrified. He sounded *exactly* like one of the Soviet agents from the television! If a voice for the part had been pulled directly from her brain then it wouldn't- couldn't *possibly* sound any different from what she was now hearing. It was almost cartoonish. Strangely, that made it easier to deal with. That made it manageable. She was, after all, a Soviet spy.

"This is Comrade Doreen," she said quietly.

A length of time passed. She wanted to speak again, but for some reason she didn't. Who *was* this strange voice, after all? Could she be in danger?

"Comrade! It is good to hear your voice again, we were having some worry, da?"

Doreen didn't know what to make of that and so she just said: "Da?"

The voice chuckled over the line. The sound was warm and full, sounding like it came from a man with a thick black beard and a large fur hat. It sounded mysterious, but also jolly. She liked the sound.

"Comrade, please, are you still sit?"

Doreen looked around. The attic was dark, vaguely threatening, and filled with boxes and old furniture. No cameras though, she was sure of that.

"Yes, I mean: da," she said.

"In attic, da? You sit in attic, make broadcast, da?"

"Uh... da?"

Doreen didn't remember ever saying where she was broadcasting from... but if she really *was* a Soviet Spy, and the radio *had* been swapped out... well... it made sense, right?

"Good. Is good! I listen to broadcast every night, Comrade Door-eenski. Is good broadcast. Much better than Earth television, I think. So much dancing! Are you dancing, Comrade Door-eenski?"

"Um... not right now?"

"Is good," said the voice, matter-of-factly. *"Is counter-revolutionary, is dancing. No good."*

Doreen smiled at that. Her mother had told her a very different warning against dancing, but the attitude was the same. Grownups just had something against dancing, it seemed.

"I listen, Comrade," continued the voice, *"Every night I listen. And I do what I can, da?"*

"Da," said Doreen, then quickly added: "Wait, what?"

"I do little thing, you know? I make so teacher listen when ask questions, stay late to answer them. I make so brothers not fight so much. Little things, da?"

"Da..." said Doreen, unsure as to what exactly this man was saying. In *"Get Smart"* the evil scientist called "The Brain" had managed to control people with a secret microchip implanted in their head. She doubted that even "The Brain" could keep her younger brothers still enough for something like that though.

"But this... this you ask is big thing," said the voice, *"Very big thing, Comrade Door-eenski."*

Doreen stammered: "I... uh..."

Doreen thought a moment, remembering what her father had taught her

about speaking with purpose, with confidence. She took a deep breath, just like she did when she talked to him.

“What are you talking about, Comrade... What exactly did I ask you for?”

There came the chuckling again, warm and friendly, but also strangely repetitive. It reminded her of the canned laugh tracks on television, seeming disconnected from the actual conversation.

“You ask to stop both Soviet and America from killing whole world, yes?” said the voice. *“To stop bombs and death. To stop M.A.D. That is what you ask.”*

“I... I didn't...”

She thought for a moment. Absently, she reached out and munched on another apple slice. She *had* asked for that, hadn't she? And wasn't saving the world *exactly* the sort of thing that the characters on TV always did? Still, there was something about it that didn't quite sit right for her...

“Won't they know?” she asked, suddenly. “I mean... If you *do* stop them... won't they know?”

She wasn't sure why she asked what she did. It felt like she was talking about things she only understood in the most abstract sense. Her brother, or her father, would have been able to get straight to the heart of the matter, she knew that. But they weren't here. She was. And she *was* a Soviet spy, right? That had *always* been the game, even if she wasn't sure *who* she was talking to. She wasn't sure of a lot of things in her life, really, but still: she persisted all the same.

“They will not know,” said the voice. *“If I do this, they will think all along that they can blow up whole world whenever they want to. Kaboom! Ha-ha! ...but really, Comrade, they cannot do this. You will know this, and I will know this, but they will not know this... it is... secret, da?”*

Doreen smiled into the dark. Somehow, it didn't seem quite as threatening as it once had. Secrets could be *good*, she had learned, and spies, even Soviet ones, kept their secrets.

“It is secret. *Da*,” she said.

“Good, good,” said the voice. *“But, Comrade, you must also do something for me if I do this. Is understood?”*

“What sort of something?” asked Doreen suspiciously.

"You must keep up transmissions. You must do this, Comrade. We, err... I... I like to listen to them. They are better than human television, radio-"

"Did you say *human*?" Interrupted Doreen.

"I- what was that, Comrade?" said the voice, growing noticeably fainter.

"Did you say *human*?" said Doreen into the receiver, speaking as loud as she dared.

"Is losing signal!" said the voice, disappearing into static by the moment. *"Remember, Comrade Door-eenski, remember secret! No kaboom! Ha-ha! No kaboom—"*

He said something after that, but it was lost to the static. Doreen spent another hour trying to reclaim the signal, her ear pressed against the speaker and her fingers twitching over the dials. But it was gone... and it *was* a school night. Eventually, she had to sneak back downstairs, put away her dishes, and climb into bed... but not before first checking on her brothers to make sure they were sleeping okay. They were, and soon enough she found herself tip-toeing back into her own tiny room, and her own tiny bed.

Doreen knew that tomorrow would be another big day. There was a math quiz for one thing, but she was fairly confident she understood it well enough. She did a few practice problems in her head as she drifted off to sleep, confident that, whoever it was she had talked to tonight... well, he seemed to know what he was doing with the bigger issues. In those hazy last moments before sleep overtook her, a fraction of the anxiety and fear returned from when Mrs. Khan had given her talk. She thought that, maybe, she might have to let Mrs. Khan know about the voice, and what it had said.

The voice had said it was a secret though, and through the years that came to mean a lot to her when she went back to her memory of the night. It was probably make-believe. She checked her brothers' heads for mind control chips anyway. She had probably just dozed off in the attic and imagined the whole thing. Still, to be safe, she never did tell Mrs. Khan.

The bombs never did fall either... so there was that to consider.