

## I

Two men sat facing each other beneath a felt tent that rippled and moaned in the wind. One was short but strong, with a black mustache and central-Asian features. He wore shaggy furs over a tunic that was woven stiff with beads. He faced a white man who was dressed in a wool overcoat and floppy hat. On the ground between them, the twin reels of a large tape recorder turned slowly.

The white man pointed at his arm. The chief said, "Yalla."

The white man touched his nose. The chief said, "Baw-da."

The white man stopped to think. He looked around at an impassive circle of men, each of whom held a long spear or a thick, curved sword. He pointed at one of them.

The chief laughed and said, "Raw Shi." The circle of men laughed too -- all except the one who had been singled out, a skinny youth who blushed and stared at the floor.

It was always difficult to get the word for "person." But the white man was particularly interested in a different word. He put his hand to his chest and made it pulse as if it were a beating heart. The chief nodded and said: "Law wan." This didn't sound right to the visitor, so he tried another approach. He removed a corncob pipe from his mouth, exhaled, and pointed to his steamy breath.

The chief's face froze in anger. The circle of men clenched their weapons and moved closer. The chief shouted a long stream of instructions, and the white man was seized from behind. Three tribesmen dragged him outside onto the stark plateau, where black-maned ponies looked up from their grazing. They held his arms behind him and propelled him uphill. He looked back and saw that a fourth man was carrying a thick, pointed pole, about eight feet long. The sight of this made his insides lurch, and he stumbled. In the local language, he cried the only relevant words he knew -- "Please!" and "Peace!" -- but no one seemed to hear him.

It was near dusk and overcast; the sky was practically colorless. The nomads and their captive reached the top of a knoll, overlooking the vast steppe. One of the tribesmen began to dig through a very fine layer of short grass into the sand below. The other two bound their prisoner tightly in strips of rawhide; they tied his hands behind him and then wound the strips five times

around his chest and legs. By the time they had finished their work, the hole was dug. The fourth nomad inserted the pointed tip of the pole into the earth and rammed it down; then he stomped sand and sod around it. The white man was intensely relieved to see that he was not going to be impaled. He released a breath that he had held since his first sight of the stake.

Near the horizon, lightning flashed. Here at 8,000 feet, the storm was almost perpetual. A man standing on the steppe would be the highest thing for miles, which was why the nomads always pitched their camps in barely discernible depressions.

The prisoner realized that the pole was sheathed in pounded iron. The tribesmen bound him to it and hurried away, looking warily at the charged and rumbling sky close above. Just as the last traces of sunlight vanished to the west, the whole tribe struck their tents and moved toward lower altitudes, perhaps toward the fabled source of the Yellow River, which no white man had ever seen.

It didn't look as if this one would see it either. The lightning flashes had merged into a constant flickering as low rumbles grew louder and the very earth trembled. A trunk of light formed high in the sky and spread its delicate branches downward to touch the flat ground in a dozen places. The man's hands were completely numb -- he pulled and writhed desperately but hardly moved. Freezing rain stung his face.

Watching the horizon, he noticed one point of light that seemed particularly intense and motionless. It didn't flicker, but only seemed to swell gradually. Could it be a star? Impossible: the sky was obscured by heavy clouds. For a moment, he felt detached from his situation -- emotionally numb -- and he began to analyze the object that would soon electrocute him. The atmosphere was so charged, he thought, that some air might have turned temporarily into plasma. The light became a long wedge, the front of which bobbed rhythmically. Then it split into two parallel bars that swung gracefully in an arc toward him, cut through the rain, and caught his eyes.

He was blinded for a moment, and then the lights weakened dramatically. Just as he reopened his eyes, he heard an unmistakable sound: a door opening. He realized that he stood in the headlights of an armored car. Someone jumped down from the running board and walked quickly toward him. He made out a

short figure, a tan uniform, and a shock of unruly black hair. As this person approached, he saw that it was a woman, dressed in black boots, pleated military trousers, and a jacket with a red star on each epaulet. She was small and pale, and just one of her features overwhelmed the rest: her sparkling black eyes. She grinned and said, "Dr. Brown, I presume."

"I've never been so glad to hear my name. Would you cut me loose?"

"I suppose," she said, smiling again. Around her slim waist she wore a leather belt, from which hung a revolver and a sheathed knife. She drew the knife, walked behind him, held him firmly by one shoulder, and slit the rawhide straps in one quick movement. He stumbled free and stepped away from the iron pole, then extended his hand. "Madison Brown," he said, shaking off a shudder.

"Marta Khatchaturian."

"A great pleasure." He looked at her red stars: "Russian?"

"Armenian. But you knew that from my name. What you mean is: am I a Soviet officer? Answer: yes -- Captain, NKVD." She saluted smartly. "You got in a jam and the bloody Reds rescued you, can you believe it?"

"I may have to change my attitude about the whole Bolshevik Revolution. All power to the Soviets!"

"That's the spirit. You'll be able to make a more objective evaluation in a few days."

"Why is that?"

"You're going to Moscow. Hop in, please."

They drove across short grass toward lower ground as the storm picked up tempo and volume. Madison, in the passenger seat, shouted, "Did I cross the Russian -- sorry, Soviet -- border by mistake? I didn't mean to."

Marta snorted, "What border? One thousand miles north, you're in Siberia. Five hundred miles south, it's the Autonomous Region of Mongolia; and somewhere to the east, the Japanese are fighting Chiang Kai-Shek for Manchuria. Here, who knows? It's a blank on the map. No fixed points: everybody's a nomad." Her accent was foreign, presumably Armenian, but Madison guessed that she had learned her English in Britain.

"So you're not hauling me in for illegal entry?" he said.

"Not at all." She looked mainly at Madison while she drove at high speed across bumpy terrain. "You're not in trouble with us."

"But I have to go to Moscow?"

"I saved your life, didn't I? Now you will refuse to do me a little favor in return?"

"Madame Captain, in this part of the world, when you save a man's life, you're responsible for his happiness forever after."

"Comrade doctor, I happen to know that visiting Moscow will make you very happy. It is a beautiful city. Have you seen the skaters in Gorki Park?"

"You can give them my regards. I need to finish my field work and get back to Berkeley as soon as possible."

Rain lashed the canvas roof. The armored car moved in roughly one direction, but by skidding and sliding wildly across the wet steppe. Apparently unfazed, Marta held the wheel with one hand and said, "We'll discuss your plans at the appropriate time. In any case, I know perfectly well that you have a year's sabbatical ahead of you. You have no intention of returning to California until September of thirty-eight. No one will miss you at the university. Now, please tell me what you were doing tied to that stake."

"You know, the same thing happened to me once before. I was in Brazil, collecting the usual linguistic data. I asked an Indian to tell me the local word for 'soul.' He shot me with a quinine dart and left me for dead. If I hadn't known that xuha root is an antidote, I'd have been python food."

"Why was he so angry?"

"If you know the name of something, you can control it, assuming your magic's any good. These natives are always trying to figure out what I want from them. When I ask them how to say 'soul,' they finally think they understand."

"They believe you want to control their spirits?"

"That's right."

"Do you?"

He decided to let that question pass. Marta examined a compass on her dashboard and adjusted her course slightly to the left: due north. Outside the car, Madison could see nothing but ferocious rain; when lightning struck, it just revealed broader expanses of lunar darkness. They drove for hours, and Madison

grew drowsy. He tipped his head back, pulled his hat over his eyes, and dozed off. He awoke briefly when the car stopped, but they seemed to be nowhere, and Marta gestured for him to go back to sleep.

The next time he awoke, it was still dark and the rain continued to pound the roof. He looked next to him and saw an empty seat. For a moment, he thought he'd been abandoned, but then he glanced into the back of the car. Marta lay in the fetal position, her head on a knapsack, her cocked revolver cradled like a baby next to her chest. Madison thought about Moscow, Stalin, Lubyanka Prison, the NKVD. He thought about trying to grab the gun. He also recalled those big black eyes and teasing grin and the hips and dimpled elbows that he saw before him now, and he decided that he didn't want to part company with his new comrade quite yet.

In the morning, she used a siphon to refill the gas tank from a steel barrel. They ate salt crackers and cheese for breakfast and then drove through heavy mist, always north. The car was like a submarine, cruising through still waters. After thirty minutes, nothing -- not a tree or hill or animal -- had broken the monotony. In the mirror, Madison saw that brown stubble had grown over his squarish face; and his eyelids, normally drooping, were puffy.

He wanted to know what information this Russian woman had about his work. And he wanted to connect with her, to get her on his side. Since breakfast, he had been mentally rehearsing a story that could initiate a useful conversation. He began abruptly, "I was in Java once, deep in the interior where it takes days to cut through a half-mile of jungle. I'd been meeting lots of tribes, and each was harder to communicate with than the last, because they shared hardly any vocabulary with known peoples. I was trudging along with my Himotomati guides when we were ambushed by a band of men who had only rocks for weapons. They marched us into the cave warren that served as their village, and made us stand there while they talked.

"The head woman and I had a strange discussion; neither of us said anything that made any sense to the other. I pointed at various objects -- a tree, the sun -- but she just stared at my hand, not where I pointed. When one of the Himotomati laughed, she seemed startled, as if the very sound was strange. I was getting a

bit nervous: this was cannibal country, and I thought I might look tasty. On the other hand, I was fascinated, because I'd finally found what every linguist dreams about: a people who shared no signs with us. If I found ways to communicate with these people, then I could witness the origin of a *new* language -- something that no scientist had ever seen before.

"I blurted out, 'So this is it, then.'

"Well, there was a lot of commotion, a lot of gesticulating and waving of rocks, and finally an ancient crone emerged from the cave, borne on a kind of litter. The Javans flattened their palms on their foreheads, which I interpreted as a gesture of respect. And then everyone cried out, 'So-this-is-it-then!' 'So-this-is-it-then!'"

"That was her name?" Marta asked.

"I guess so. Or maybe her title. I never found out for sure."

"And she was the elder?"

"That's right, the head muckety-muck. It was a matriarchy, you see, and she was the big cheese. Even better, she'd been to Port Moresby in the 'eighties and remembered a little pidgin English."

"Why are you telling me this story?"

"To prove that there's no one you can't talk to. Deep down, we're all one big family."

Marta snorted and stared ahead, but Madison saw a faint smile on her lips. She can't decide whether that was a joke, he thought.

"When I was a little girl," she said, "I used to imagine what it must have been like when the first language began. Inventors of words would climb on soap boxes, I thought, and announce to crowds of people what each new word meant. They were men with long grey beards."

"How could they explain their inventions, if there wasn't any language yet?"

"I was seven," she said. "That problem didn't occur to me."

She returned to silent thought. After a while, Madison asked, "Where exactly are we going? I assume we won't drive all the way to Red Square."

"The first day at training school, they tell you: never reveal any more information than you have to. You'll see."

Madison considered the idea of Marta in NKVD training school. He asked: "How did a nice girl like you end up in Stalin's

secret police?"

She grinned. "Maybe I'm not so nice."

"Oh yeah? Did you major in torture? Ace the execution class? I suppose you received high honors in concentration-camp management."

Now she looked annoyed. "I don't want to have a political argument with you, you imperialist parasite. Armenians know what it's like to suffer under an evil secret police: the Czar's men murdered my mother and father. That happened about when you entered first grade at Choate. In Spain, I saw fascists shoot children in the back of the neck for having Republican uncles. I serve the international working class, defending our revolution against bourgeois reactionaries like you. It's a humble calling, but it's enough to make an Armenian peasant girl rather proud."

"Sorry, comrade Captain."

"Apology accepted, comrade doctor, but may I advise you to watch your language when you meet my colleagues."

The thin grass gave way to bare sand as the altitude dropped. There was no visible sun, but Madison was able to catch a faint solar reflection on his watch band. He pointed left. "The sun's over there. That means we're driving south."

"I know where we're going."

"Your compass says north."

"Lesson two: believe nothing you see or hear. You're learning."

"I'm not sure I want to enroll in your school."

"Attendance is mandatory."

He watched her as she drove. She had made herself comfortable by reclining slightly in the driver's seat; one arm reached straight out to hold the wheel. It was a slender arm, but strong. The other hand rested reflexively on the handle of her revolver. She had wide palms and short, narrow, ringless fingers. Her neck was long and covered with wisps of hair that merged into the shock of thick black curls on her head. Her eyes were huge and the irises were completely black. Her mouth sometimes suggested a smirk.

"We should see a caravanserai soon," she said, breaking the silence after hours of bumpy, noisy driving. Sure enough, some low domes and a minaret came into view over rolling sandy hills. They

had reached a dusty little town made of a material that reminded Madison of adobe: squat houses scattered near a single road. There was also a mosque and one large, low building built around a courtyard. Camels and ponies were tethered to wooden rails near a muddy little pond. They parked in front of a building at the edge of town -- a windowless block with a cloth curtain for a door. Above the entrance was a red hammer-and-sickle flag.

A tall blond man emerged. He wore a khaki uniform like Marta's and tall boots. She jumped out of the car and returned his salute Russian-style, her fingers lined flat against her forehead. Madison stepped unsteadily onto the sandy ground and reached out a hand: "Madison Brown," he said.

The blond man nodded curtly. Marta said: "This is Comrade Lieutenant Alexei Stafonovich Starobin." He had a crew cut, high cheek bones, and very pale eyes.

"A pleasure," said Madison.

"We'll speak Russian," Marta said, "so the Comrade Lieutenant can understand."

"I don't know much," said Madison.

"Stop lying," said Marta, in Russian. "We have a file drawer full of data on you. You have been a prodigious language-learner since you were six. After you'd had a French nanny for a week, you could chatter in *patois* like a Parisian. As an adult, you've claimed fluency in twenty-eight languages -- and we know that one of them is Russian, because we've intercepted your letters to the Czarist linguistics professor, Nikolai Sergeyevich Trubetskoy. Your colleagues claim that you're too modest: you can actually make yourself understood in fifty languages. It's an unusual gift, but hardly unique. There are Communist linguistics professors in Moscow who know twice as much."

They walked inside. As Madison's eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw a rough table and chairs, three cots, several file cabinets, and a rifle rack. "Is this Town Hall?" he asked, also in Russian.

"Just a consulate. We're in Mongolia, not the U.S.S.R." Marta pointed to a chair and Madison sat down. The Soviets faced him across the table. "Vodka?" Marta offered.

Madison shook his head. Starobin took a Soviet passport out of his pocket and handed it across the table. Madison opened it and saw his own face inside; the name, in cyrillic letters, was also his.



Marta said, "Alexei Stafonovich would like to trade. It's just temporary, while you're in our care. Your U.S. passport, please, for this Soviet one."

"All my papers vanished with those nomads," said Madison, reverting to English.

"Nonsense," said Marta, in Russian. "Don't force us to search you."

Madison opened his coat and found an inside pocket. He undid the false bottom and retrieved his passport. In the process, his fingers touched some dollar bills and a souvenir from Brazil: a blowgun with six darts. The hidden pocket also contained a suicide capsule which, at the earliest opportunity, he'd load into his false molar so that he could release it with one very hard bite. Madison had heard rumors about NKVD interrogation methods. He handed his passport to the Soviet Lieutenant, who didn't move a single facial muscle as he grasped it. In fact, his face remained motionless for the next five minutes.

"So," Marta said, still speaking Russian, "please tell us about your work here in Central Asia."

Madison, aware that an inquisition was beginning, paused and answered cautiously: "I'm sure it's fully described in your files."

"We'd like to hear about it from you."

"Fine. What I do certainly won't interest Moscow. I'm just a self-indulgent bourgeois intellectual, fiddling while Rome burns. As you know, I'm a palaeolinguist: I reconstruct dead languages."

"How can one do that?"

"By finding similarities in living ones. The French say *père*; the Italians and Spanish, *padre*. Why? Because their ancestors all used to speak Latin, and the Romans called their daddies *pater*. If we had no written evidence of Latin, we could reconstruct it by working back from modern languages, as long as we understood the laws of linguistic evolution."

"Why are you interested in nomads from Mongolia?"

"Actually, I'm interested in a lot of languages. I get around. I did my graduate fieldwork in British East Africa."

"All right, but why Mongolia now? It's not exactly convenient to Berkeley."

"I enjoy travel. Become a linguist, see the world." Seeing a

dark look cross Starobin's face, Madison added, "This is a fascinating region for palaeolinguists. Many Eurasian peoples started here, then swept outward to settle the continent. If there were a common root to Chinese and English, for example, you might find it here."

"Can you imagine why Nazi scientists might be interested in this place?"

The question surprised Madison, so he took a moment to answer: "Germans are very good at palaeolinguistics. Leibniz more or less founded the field in the eighteenth century."

"I don't just mean Germans," Marta said; "I mean Nazi scientists employed directly, secretly, and at high cost by the German government."

Again, Madison paused to consider the question. "I can only guess. My guess is that they want to learn Aryan."

"Aryan? You mean some primitive ancestor of German?"

"Something like that. It's a lot of mumbo-jumbo."

"There are excellent scientists involved."

"Good scholars will do any kind of work for the right money, especially if the alternative is a concentration camp. You Communists know that. Besides, a fair number of skillful German linguists are racist ideologues."

"But knowing Aryan wouldn't do the Germans any good, would it? I mean, militarily."

"Of course not."

"Then your explanation makes no sense."

Madison shrugged. "Who's involved in this Nazi project?" he asked. "Do you know?"

For the first time, Starobin moved: he rose silently and walked to the file cabinet. Just then, Madison noticed a startled look on Marta's face; he turned around in time to see a stick of dynamite fly past the curtain and into the hut. It fell near the door, its short fuse burning brilliantly in the dim light. Madison leapt toward it, grabbed it, and thrust it outside. He heard a series of sharp explosions, probably rifle shots, and the curtain near him began to rip into pieces. He rolled away from the door as the two Soviet officers returned fire from behind the upended table. He crawled toward the rifle rack as the noise outside grew sporadic. Then there was one very loud explosion and a section of the front wall

collapsed into dust. Madison covered his head to protect himself from the roof, but it held. When he looked up, three men were galloping away on horseback and the two Soviets were shooting futilely in their direction.

A fourth man lay not too far from the hut, a crimson patch staining his ankle-length cloak. Marta approached him, keeping her pistol trained on his chest. When she was still three feet away, his hand suddenly emerged from his cloak, holding a revolver. He fired once, missing Marta as she dropped to the ground. He rose to a sitting position and lowered his revolver, but by then Marta was at his throat. Her body blocked Madison's view for several seconds. When she stood up, she held a bloody knife in her hand, and the cloaked man lay still. She turned and shouted, "This guy doesn't look Mongol. He's blond."

Madison was glad that she hadn't been shot, but startled by her evident satisfaction. While he still panted and his heart still raced, she brushed her clothes off like a carpenter pleased with her handiwork. He stared at her, trying to sort out his fleeting emotions.

The dead man had worn Western khakis beneath his Mongol robes. Marta found a British Imperial passport in his vest pocket, issued to Horace J. Smith. She scratched the passport photo, sniffed the leather of the cover, and announced: "Fake. Professional work, though."

Starobin and Madison now stood nearby. The two Soviets rolled the dead man over onto his stomach and Starobin found a label on his collar. Marta read it aloud: "J. Brimmer, Hamburg." She added: "A dead Kraut, apparently." She and Starobin consulted in low tones, their backs to Madison. Wishing that he had a pipe to settle his nerves, he wandered toward the hut and examined the hole that the dynamite had blown. A hundred yards away, a group of children had gathered to watch, all the adults in town having vanished. Madison turned to face the NKVD officers when he heard their boots on the sand.

"We'll go immediately to Uqbar," said Marta.

"Fine." Madison made toward the armored car.

"That's too dangerous," Marta told him. "You can spot it for miles away, and the Nazis have horses. They'll be desperate to find us before we reach the Trans-Siberian Railway. This is their last

chance to nab you.”

“So it’s me they’re after?” said Madison, but no one answered. They walked back to the ruined hut, and Starobin started emptying files into a canvas sack. Marta opened a heavy traveling trunk and pulled out some black clothing. She tossed Madison a wide turban with a conical center, like those that Pashtan herders wear. When he’d put it on his head, she threw him a long black robe and a cashmere scarf to wrap around his face and neck.

“Turn around, please.”

He faced the door.

“You can look.”

She had completely vanished inside a black, square-topped dress with a veil. Her eyes peered through a narrow slit; the dress trailed behind her on the ground. Starobin, meanwhile, had put on clothes like Madison’s. They left the hut looking like three devout Afghans and marched across the dusty plain toward the caravanserai, Marta following modestly behind. Several tiny children scampered away, presumably to tell their elders about the strange transformation of the Russian soldiers.

The caravanserai was a large gated courtyard surrounded by low buildings and watering troughs. A few men squatted beneath a portico at the end. Starobin approached one of them and waved some bills in their direction. There followed a long period of silent negotiation, during which he and the locals pointed in various directions, scratched characters in the sand, gesticulated angrily, handed money back and forth, and threatened repeatedly to walk away without an agreement. Finally, Starobin returned and nodded to Marta. They waited in the shade near what appeared to be a dormitory while Madison tried to classify the architecture of the caravanserai’s main gate: was it Mongol? Turkic? Chinese? A melange, certainly. As he studied it, two young men appeared, leading twin-humped Bactrian camels.

Madison examined his animal, which stared disdainfully back and worked its lips as if preparing to spit. He mounted it gingerly, put his feet in the stirrups, and rode through the gate with the Soviets beside him on their camels and the youths trotting in front. Outside, they found two more camels -- these bearing huge packs -- and a small herd of long-haired cashmere goats. The whole

convoy wound out of town, the young men herding the goats at the rear.

And so they went across dunes and rocky flats, the road marked sporadically by ancient stone pillars, while a huge red sun sank bloated behind the earth. It was twilight before they saw the lights of a car ahead of them. It approached quickly, and Madison could see that it was a lightly armed military vehicle. They moved aside to let it pass, but it came to a stop nearby. It carried a Chinese driver and two Westerners in the back seat; the latter wore tan camouflage uniforms and tall boots. Madison heard Marta and Starobin cock their revolvers under their robes as the passengers climbed out, submachine guns in their arms.

Madison said loudly in Uygur, "Allah be with you. Peace."

One of the men answered in thickly-accented English: "Good evening. We are looking for some friends. Russians. You have seen them, perhaps?" Madison decided, unsurprised, that the man's accent was German. He had a round face, thick lips, and a scar under his left eye.

His voice trembling a little, Madison addressed the driver in Mandarin: "We are herders, bound for Uqbar." He heard his words translated into German. The man with the scar said, also in German: "Tell them they must show their faces." As the driver relayed this to Madison, the Germans trained their weapons on him and his companions.

Marta started to babble and weep, speaking no language known to Madison, although it sounded like a parody of Turkish. She climbed off her camel, still wailing, and Madison began to stammer in Mandarin, "It is impossible that my wife should show her face to infidel strangers on a public --"

His sentence was interrupted by two quick blasts from somewhere below. The panicked camels began to canter and snort. Madison's animal turned in a tight, disoriented circle. As a result, Madison lost his bearings and could see only stars beyond the front hump. He clutched the tuft of hair that crowned it, saving himself from being tossed off. When he had turned half a circle, the armored car came into sight. Madison ducked instinctively and was about to leap to the ground, but then he noticed the Germans. They were sprawled in their seats and shiny dark patches spread across their chests. He looked the other way and saw Marta calmly

replacing her revolver in a holster strapped to her bare leg. She let her dress fall back into place, caught her camel's rein, and remounted. Madison exhaled slowly, shaking his head. Once again, Marta had both shocked and impressed him.

They left the Germans for dead and rode all night. Madison had seen the desert sky in Mongolia before, but it still stunned him, the stars so numerous and fiery that they merged into fields of shimmering light. When they had ridden for hours, Marta started to sing in what Madison assumed was Armenian: low, rhythmic, peasant songs of sorrow. She had bared her face and head and rode in front, but once she turned and gave Madison a startling look. In that instant, her face conveyed pride and grief; it issued an obscure challenge that he would not decline.