

College for Spies

Copyright 2007 by Zac Horowitz

Chapter 17

Wood did not go home immediately after leaving the College, but parked his car, still loaded with boxes, outside Buffy's. He could have eaten at the Faculty Club on campus which also served scotch and for much less than Buffy's charged, but he preferred to get away from the College, get away as far as he could on the short leash he'd been given.

Wood was not and never had been a solitary drinker. Fortunately, at Buffy's he was able to find good company, other remittance men like himself--how else could they be there drinking in the middle of the day? Outside, both the sky and the sea were a clear bright blue, and the surf, he learned, was excellent. But on the coast, as on the campus, were faces he did not yet want to confront, not until he was adjusted to his reduced status.

About four, some of the men began talking about going to Oceanside to a bar that featured topless waitresses. Wood was for going to the Bar-B dance hall instead--he felt drunk and mean by this time, and would not be dissuaded from this idea, although the men kept telling him the Bar-B would not open until much later in the evening.

Eventually, Wood settled in the parking lot outside the Country Store, sucking on a six pack and watched as the workers, finishing their day, picked up a half-gallon of milk or a loaf of bread before going home.

He'd gone to the Bar-B first but, as predicted, its door was closed and locked. He'd pounded on the door anyway, off and on for ten minutes, a foretaste of what he was to become later that evening.

The six-pack failed to help his driving. His vision kept blurring and he would take his hands off the steering wheel to wipe his eyes, letting his car

weave back and forth on the road. Despite this loss of control, he headed out on the ocean road toward SeaCliffs.

He'd barely arrived at the restaurant's parking lot when he realized, fortunately for the SeaCliffs' patrons within, that this restaurant was not and had never been for him. Snobs, he snarled, crying and not crying, wiping the back of his leaking nostrils with his hand.

An hour later, despite several near misses on the road, he was at the Bar-B when it opened, and almost ran toward the bar, where he nursed a boilermaker until it was time for the dance lesson. He was not a success as a dancer, weaving unsteadily and hiccupping, his breath ghastly and unpleasant, and had to be escorted from the floor. The bouncers had walked him halfway to the exit before he persuaded them he could be left to sit quietly at the bar.

There, he smiled amiably at anyone and everyone who came within range. He left after a drink or two, but it could have been hours or minutes later.

He drove slowly through the town, far too slowly, the way a drunk will drive sometimes, slowly and carefully, until he reached the north road. Then he gunned the accelerator, going around and around the curves at increasingly higher speed until he crashed into a canyon wall.

The previous evening, it had seemed so easy for Goreff to break into the campus. Although a light was on still at the central guard gate, indicating the guard or guards were still at their post, he knew now it was only necessary to park near the boundary to the campus and then approach from the rear over the desert.

This proved not to be as simple as Goreff had at first supposed. Parking was prohibited on the road to the gate and if he did so illegally, pulling off on the narrow shoulder, his rented automobile would be sure to be discovered by the first cruising patrolman.

He elected instead to follow the outer boundary of the campus, to the north not far from his motel. This led him to a series of dead ends and, once, into a housing tract with its many cul-de-sacs, each with two or three houses that backed up against canyon walls.

He was at a point to the northeast which he guessed to be almost 180 degrees further around the curve on which he'd first approached the campus, when he found himself halted by a weed-filled dump filled with old paint cans, lumps of plaster, and even a mattress.

Outside his car, looking around him in the darkness, he could hear the chirp of crickets and the small not-quite-definable noises of other, presumably less-friendly creatures that lurked in the dark.

The walls surrounding the dump were steep and he had climbed no more than half the way up, when the gravel gave way sending him sliding painfully downward. His pant leg was covered with gray streaks. The sole on one boot had ripped loose and he'd bent his thumb.

A handful of fresh snow might have kept the thumb from swelling, but there was no snow to be had here on the desert just a few miles inland from the ocean where, even at two in the morning, it was still warm, though much less so than it had been during the day.

Goreff returned to his car and drove slowly along the shoulder, using only his parking lights. Eventually, after much backtracking, he came across a narrow curving two-lane road with fields on one side and a line of trees on the other. He could have been heading toward the mountains or he might have crossed to the other side of the campus and been curving back to town. He didn't know; he had lost all sense of direction.

Tired, defeated, he was prepared to abandon the search. It was then he saw first one automobile and then another parked beneath a line of trees.

He waited until he'd rounded a second curve which put him out of sight of the cars and then he braked, putting out first his engine and then his lights as he cruised slowly to a stop.

He walked back into the woods, climbing down a slight incline as he did so. Presumably, the dry stream bed at the bottom of the hill filled with water at some time in the year; this would explain the trees that grew along both sides of it. He forded the stream and then the ground began to rise rapidly, so that he was out of breath when he stood at the top of the rise, near a worn path and a torn line of fencing.

He could see a line of hills behind him and to the left of where he'd just ascended. The campus must be a few hundred yards in front of him, then.

Not very far ahead through the trees, he saw the reddish glow of a cigarette. It winked for an instant in the darkness and then vanished. Not a very good idea to smoke here, he thought, critically, in the manner of a well-trained Soviet citizen; so dry, the vegetation crackling underfoot, the entire area could burst into flames in minutes.

Ahead of him where he'd seen the glow, he heard the murmur of voices but could not distinguish individual words. Two people, three at most. Suddenly, one of the voices (a woman's?) became angry, there were the sounds of a struggle, he heard someone, (a man?) holler, "you bitch," and, then, there was a gun shot.

Goreff remained still, very, very still. He slid his own gun out from its hiding place beneath his windbreaker at the small of his back. He waited, for hours it seemed. It was very quiet and only when he heard the crickets did he realize he was alone again in the woods.

Morning on the desert is very beautiful, so close to the sea. There is always dew on the ground and, for a few hours, there may even be desert flowers blooming just long enough to attract a few scattered insects which buzz briefly and then disappear with the rising sun.

The colors are borrowed from the ocean's bottom; the oranges and reds of the ocean's pebbles may be found reflected in the desert's flowers. The air is always fresh and cool. And though Goreff had slept in fits and starts, half crouching on the rocky surface of the desert, he felt awake and

alert. Taking his bearings from the rising sun, perceived more as a glow than as a distinct object in the sky, he picked up his boots and began to walk toward what he judged must be the campus.

Birds, they say, are born with a complete instinctive knowledge so the instant they emerge from the egg, they know which berries to eat, which to avoid, and how to recognize the shadow of a predator in the sky. Each human child, clumsy primate, is forced to recapture its race's knowledge all over again, watching, imitating, learning to behave as other humans do. But there are exceptions, certain ratiocinative concepts, primeval impulses, sounds, smells buried within man's primitive hind brain. When the ground begins to shake and tremble beneath your feet, you will know it is an earthquake, you will not need to be told, and you will find you have moved instinctively to safety. When you step, as Goreff did, on a coiled-up rattlesnake, the hindbrain willed to you by your caveman ancestor will recognize and interpret that distinctive rattling sound.

One instant Goreff was on the ground, the next he had leaped into the air and, like some cartoon character, was attempting to run while still several inches above the earth.

"Ebetsa [fucker]," Goreff said in Russian when he had settled upon the ground several feet away from the now-madly-hissing snake. My God, where were his boots--had he eased them off before he slept? where were they now that he needed them?

"Shto staboi," came Wood's voice in Russian from just over the rise.