

AGENT Vx



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Introductory Note

This story is a work of fiction, inspired by a series of events which really happened to me.

I amused myself by inventing possible consequences of each of these events and by embroidering them with fictional characters.

Apart from these events, everything else is pure fiction. All the characters involved are products of my imagination, and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental. The isolated Lac perdu in Quebec, its islands, rivers and main characteristics, exist as described.

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Chapter 1

I dropped my laptop and folders onto the aisle seat and swung my suitcase up into the baggage compartment. Easing myself across to the window, I glanced down at the wing. The evening flight from Detroit would get me into Montreal at about ten-thirty.

I had flown in from Knoxville, Tennessee, an hour earlier, where I had attended an international scientific conference.

I was feeling pleased with myself because the presentation of my research work had been well received. Being a consultant, each well-received publication boosts visibility and frequently leads to lucrative contracts.

Admittedly, one distinguished professor had been critical and clearly felt it his duty to point out a shortcoming in my experimental setup. However, I had anticipated this and had a strong defence ready. The man was eventually forced to accept defeat, which he did with a scowl.

I was naturally in an excellent mood and looking forward to a restful Sunday wandering around the city.

As I opened my computer, a couple of young American women stopped beside me in the aisle.

'Excuse me, sir.' The first and prettiest leaned forward and looked me straight in the eyes. 'I think you're sitting in our places.'

The girl had lovely blue eyes, and I dragged out my ticket, nodded my mistake and slid back out of the seat.

'Sorry.'

'That's fine.'

'Well!' I joked. 'You've got the best seats.'

'Really?' She cocked her head on one side.

'Yes. You'll be able to see the wing coming off.'

The blue eyes blinked at me, and she shook her head, 'Wiseguy,' she said, slipping herself into place.

This had not been a good opening move. Assuming that people I like the look of have the same sense of humour as myself has frequently led to a certain coolness in burgeoning relations. However, I never seem to learn.

There was a sudden noise, and the plane jolted. The captain's suave voice came smoothly over the intercom and announced that a pallet transporter had rammed the fuselage. He was waiting for the damage to be inspected.

'See!' I said, leaning forward and speaking between the seats.

'Wiseguy.' came the reply from the other girl, who didn't have blue eyes, 'Hear that Sandra?' The two exchanged looks and raised their eyebrows.

Leaning back, I winced and glanced across the aisle at an impeccably dressed American businessman. The man looked back at me, shaking his head sadly and with a pitiful expression. I shrugged, and he pulled a face again from behind his dark glasses.

We had met earlier in the first-class waiting room and had discovered a shared enthusiasm for cross-country running. The man was halfway through growing a beard and perpetually scratching it. Laughing, he explained that he had always had one but had recently shaved it off to please his wife.

'She had never seen me without my beard,' He smiled. 'But once it was gone, she decided I looked much better with it than without it,' he sighed.

We talked about many things, and I told him I lived and worked near Grenoble in France. The man had always wanted to visit Paris but had never found the time. Consequently, I did my best to promote the place where I have spent many happy holidays.

Later, over a glass of cold beer, we discussed a good run for my Sunday morning. He insisted on drawing me a detailed map, showing the critical turns not to miss.

We then discovered a shared enthusiasm for botanical gardens. I was further surprised to learn that the man was an administrator of Montreal's famous botanical gardens. I now had a complimentary VIP ticket in my jacket pocket.

Sitting back in my seat, I gazed out over the wing but suddenly realised I had left my folder on the floor beside the seat in front. I leant forward once more.

'Excuse me.'

I heard a sigh, 'Now what?' came the exasperated answer.

'I left my folder on the floor. Sorry. Could you pass it back, please?'

The blond leaned forward and retrieved it. On the front of the green folder, I had marked with a black felt tip, "Toxic Gases / Nerve Gases". The girl read this and showed it to her friend. 'Nice thing to be reading, mister.'

'That's my job. Well, part of it.'

'One hell of a nice job! You English?'

"Ah-ha," I thought, 'this looks like a good opening.'

'Yes.'

'On your way home?'

'Yes.' She handed the folder back between the chairs.

'Good.' She said. And that was that.

Nevertheless, snubbed as I was, I was still full of enthusiasm. So, I decided to write up my report to leave my Sunday entirely free.

While at Knoxville, I visited the world-renowned "Oak Ridge" research facility. The place is famous for its decisive role in building the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima. I didn't know what went on there today, and I still don't, but I did know that some of the world's best specialists on toxic gasses worked there.

I'll correct that statement slightly because most of what we call "nerve gases" are not gases at all. They are liquids. Mind you that would make little difference to you if you were on the wrong end of an attack using the stuff.

However, my presence had nothing to do with military conflicts and was entirely above suspicion. At least, that's what I thought at the time.

An international organisation had commissioned me to write the technical annexes of a new document. The objective was to clarify safety concerns linked to the use of a specific synthetic gas. I was employed as a consultant by a Danish Magnesium foundry that used this gas. As we have all learnt at school, magnesium is extraordinarily flammable and reacts violently with the atmosphere's oxygen. Consequently, molten magnesium is processed under a protecting blanket of inert and dense gas. The best gas for this purpose is sulphur hexafluoride, or SF₆ for short. However, trouble started when someone discovered that at high temperatures, SF₆ decomposes and creates highly toxic by-products. These by-products are ten times more toxic than most military nerve gases.

In everyday situations, the danger is minimal. Still, when the press and trade unions got hold of the subject, all hell was let loose.

In such situations, the only practical procedure is to publish the truth.

First, however, one must get at the truth, and it was for this reason, I had been asked to visit the "Oak Ridge" national laboratory.

While there, I was privileged to see samples of several of the deadliest nerve agents known to man. Sarin, Phosgene and Agent-Vx were prime examples.

I was reassured to discover that the security precautions surrounding these products' safeguarding, storage and handling were truly impressive. Such precautions are not out of place, though, when one realises that a single bottle-full would be enough to kill a small town's population.

Having gleaned some helpful information, I was now travelling to Montreal to meet a group of engineers and scientists. In this laboratory, the scientists studied the use of SF₆ gas in the electrical engineering industry. Their

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research targeted the protection of maintenance staff, which was thus much closer to my brief.

The evening before leaving Knoxville, it was raining, and I walked around the dreary town centre before dinner.

I did not do this because there was something of interest to see but because I was bored stiff. On the way back, I bumped into one of the other conference participants. He was doing the same thing and for the same reason.

We did not particularly appreciate each other, but boredom is a hell of a handicap when far from home on a Friday night. So, for once, we did not ignore each other. We even agreed to eat together, which shows how bored we were.

Now, my dinner companion was a well-known American scientist but had several shortcomings in my eyes. Firstly, he had an overly professional approach to everything and took almost every comment I made in its literal sense. Secondly, he did not seem to have any sense of humour at all and finally. He was not very pleasant to look at.

The evening was inevitably long and tedious. Worse still, I somehow managed to leave the man with the conviction that I questioned the religious rules which formed the foundations of his way of life. He misinterpreted my smiles as sneers and my gestures as signs of hostility against his origins and beliefs.

I don't know why, but I often get into trouble this way.

However, compared with the staggering episodes I was about to live through, this incident would soon seem unimportant.