

## THE RED AGENDA

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Files kept going missing. Except that Willie suspected (in his cardigan he suspected much) it was not that they were going missing as such, but that they were being hidden. Most thefts were trivial, such as the little red box of his secretary's wedding invitations, the shopping list he had written up yesterday when his daughter had called for a favor, or a gigantic tableau of the best politicians in history, as drafted by himself. He'd just had that last one printed up again and tagged surreptitiously by the Department of Security and Espionage, even though the thief was never so uncreative as to strike twice at the same object. Then again, he or she had never picked so inconvenient a document to hide as this week's Agenda.

The cabinet meeting was only in a few hours and if he could help it he would have liked not to improvise what could very well be the most important briefing of the year. What with all the security threats these days it was fairly rare to even get them all into the same room together, and now!—now it would be impossible ever again if he could not find that paper, a single sheet: eight and a half by eleven, one inch margins, the gambit, with the exact combination of letters that at this moment he needed. He contemplated the training of monkeys.

His thought, mindless screeching animals typing at machines they could never understand, merged effortlessly with the image of his daughter's boyfriend Rob when he entered the office on some unimportant errand.

"I've got to keep you busy," he said, except not out loud. "Run down and get me some of those demographics from Printing that everyone's been talking about, I need good news." And he was off, the leech.

But where was it? Ah! Here—no that was last month's. It was color-coded, see. Where was the red one? It was even colored to signify its importance. No other agenda in the history

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of Logistics had ever been colored red, it was that important. What would Diplomacy think? Even worse, what would Reg Doley think about it, just back from angling on the Jesuit river, when all he had to say for his Red Agenda was that the terror level was up twenty percent (he remembered that much) and that he thought they'd better deploy to Suriname (except he made that part up). He didn't think the President would pick up, but Reg? Reg wouldn't even take bribes.

He considered for a moment the fact that he was livid about the situation, and in this moment of contemplation took under advisement suicide, homicide, and genocide, but each of them only as euphemisms so hopelessly diluted that they all seemed part and parcel for the sort of work he did here anyway. Eager to break the silence, he turned out his third filing cabinet and spilled its contents out over the scratchy gray carpet and swam in them, his little arms gripping at once a memo on troublesome journalists and a coupon for best bowling in the capital, reports on rising crime rates, classified interview transcripts with foreign ambassadors, and over by the contemporary trash bucket/paper shredder a blogger's detailed defense of privatizing the church labeled with a post-it, "get yourself some coffee and a sit down Willie—need a translation for the next legislative meeting."

No, it just wasn't here. All he kept were important archives.

He took a break outside with Krissy, who everyone thought was his secretary, but his secretary was a work-at-home single-but-engaged middle-aged mother who he'd promised could earn \$2000 a week on the internet. So far he had kept his promise and she got paid (it was charity—even on his tax returns) and he avoided any nasty legal trouble. He'd promised Krissy \$2000 a week also, but for entirely different reasons.

"You seen a red slip of paper lying around here somewhere?"

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"No 'haven't."

"Okay, well, keep your eyes open."

"Willie, don't you know I never sleep on the job?"

They had a good laugh about that, and Willie retired to the bathroom to calm down. And that's where the ransom letter was, bold as can be, stuck with a little shred of scotch tape to the long mirror and written in a long but blocky hand.

Oh, God, what would Security and Espionage say?

Willie was pissed when he came out of the bathroom; so pissed that he flipped out at Rob, who was waiting in the lobby opposite Krissy for his return.

"I said demographics, not **demo graphics**," and trashed the whole set of company logos in the contemporary trash bucket/paper shredder by Krissy's desk so that he might hurt his hands getting them out, and slammed his door.

"Guess he's pretty pissed," was all Rob could say (really, it was a good try, thought Krissy).

"Speaking of which," she said, "whatcha doing when you get off tomorrow?" and popped a bubble.

Willie tapped his watch in the park. He did it nervously and was only aware after doing it for twenty minutes at least that he was tapping to the rhythm of a marching band he had sponsored and heard at a convention for lobbyists last week. Healthy people jogged past, trailing things like dogs and children at paces so unbelievably protracted that Willie thought they were trying to be boring. Willie was into action, fast paced cinema, that sort of thing. Sitting here in the park wasn't at all how he expected this business deal to play out. In **Crossed my Heart** last week, the aging wrestler played by Sean Connery had figured out that

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the Rebecca Lowe character had a hidden agenda by tricking her into thinking he had defected to the Iraqis by blowing up a public park (the thing was that it had nobody in it—he had convinced people to clear it for a spy movie shoot, very clever). He shifted uncomfortably on the bench, and started whistling.

No one was around when he got back to the office. It made no sense to him for a moment, since he was still counting the seconds on his watch one tap at a time and it wasn't closing time yet. He swung open the door to his office and jumped back when he saw the spread-eagled mess of files all over the floor; briefly he thought the place had been ransacked, infiltrated by spies, perhaps by the thief himself, and his hands were on the phone by the time he remembered—the lackey on the other end of the line asked who he was speaking to and if they could help him. Willie was silent for a moment while all this worked out in his brain, and when the knot had been eased and speech came to him again the lackey had hung up.

Willie casually canceled Krissy's paycheck and got himself a beer with the rest of the afternoon, and spent the night preparing an ersatz agenda for the meeting the next morning. His wife came in at one point with a mug of coffee that she delivered unapologetically to him, and he felt sorry for himself sipping it. The next day, he would make an effort.

"As you all know, biological weapons—" Willie was getting himself some coffee, "coffee anyone?" They all shook their heads in unison like the tops of cotton in a breeze. "Er—fatal chemical capabilities have proliferated in foreign countries with a specific anti-American agenda. Look at Suriname." And they did, with brighter eyes now, at the enormous yellow shape that Willie had stuck up on the projector. It looked like the profile of a hairy man in a

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fez, a nice trick, thought Willie.

"I've made the most of these findings from the Pentagon, most of them regarding export and import patterns for the whole of Latin America. As you can see," here he was pointing at a figure excerpted from the manilla documents laid carefully in front of each of them (and, Willie hoped, without any trace of the photocopy smell that was so obvious to him). "As you can see," again, at some green figures that resembled pills. "It is really unquestionable that there is some internal activity related to these figures that Suriname has publicly deferred to its recent estrangement from the Netherlands and its renouncement of the Economic Divide. They are speaking a language of confusion, and I don't just mean Dutch." The fat man with the slightly straighter tie laughed at that. He slapped his thigh and spent the rest of the meeting nodding in a daze at every word.

"Me and Jack Preverra, from Security and Espionage, we have been in touch with experts at MIT that are more than confident that the phenomenon is yet another mismanaged attempt at oppressive social governance, and that the regime—mostly brainwashed Creole rebels—you know Jack don't you Miles? No? He's been around for a couple weeks now but, oh, you've been on vacation; how's it down there in Georgia this time of year? Bit wet I heard—the regime is making the same political mistakes as Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and the Soviet Republic before it, and by that I mean "ing with the United States of America." He made the double quotes with his fingers.

A thin little man apart from the rest ventured some questions about actual data; it was a fairly usual query so he put up some stats he'd employed from the Internet. 'I'm Feeling Lucky,' he thought, and wiped his hands on his cardigan as the board members pretended to study the data. Best of all, they all seemed more or less uncomfortable about talking about

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"Logistics' most important agenda of the year" anyway. "It's important running a country," one intimated when the discussion had degenerated enough, making an excuse about Willie being a little flustered, "but part of what makes us American is our fraternity."

"And freedom," reminded another.

"And freedom."

Near the end, Willie assembled the last illusion of office by asking if anyone had anything to say about his proposal, and if they thought the President might share his concerns. They were all silent for a moment and Reg Doley raised his hand to suggest that he might be more prudent about naming his Red Agenda something more, you know, appropriate for an American audience, just a suggestion, and that they might consider giving it a new title before they submit to the White House.

Willie strolled the winding path between his garage and his house, a villa in the suburbs sinking gratefully into manufactured white pebbles that made the air hot and reflected the sun. He kicked at the flowers that were coming up through their cracks, crushing stalks, petals, executives, politicians, whatever. He would play billiards tonight with the boys and win. He would be nicer to his wife, make an effort with his daughter.

As he topped the delicately arranged bend to one of the entrances to his home, he took hold of the doorbell on a long, flamboyantly fabric pull. He heard it echo through the spaces inside, receding within its enormity like the growl of a cave bear—though in fact the noise was a conceited little ringtone modeled after a game show jingle. It had all been too easy: the meeting, the thief. They were the most petty of problems, the most petty of—His wife opened the door without a glance and turned back to the kitchen, not that it had been locked anyway.

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A little stack of mail for the Logistics director had been left on his study desk apart from a much smaller pile for Willy Gimmer. Pulling a misshapen little cigar from a box at the table's end, he ignored the stack and eyed the pile for Twenty Gilbert Pines road or for Deborah Gimmer. He sighed a little cloud and shifted to sit up on the edge of his desk and peer over his desk at the sunset on the cityscape outside, miles of fog felt hillside turned into bronze tire spikes warning, **wrong way**; seven million dollars for that view. He looked down at the mail again, little hillsides, jagged; his daughter sometimes mailed for money.

He took a poorly folded mass-mail envelope that looked familiar for some reason and sat in the hardest chair in the room, a rocker of his grandmother's. The light from the tucked-in bulbs in the ceiling obscured the first line, "To the Director of the Department of Logistics," and then swooped up as Willie rocked forward, and dipped again, and settled as he clamped his feet on the floor to steady himself.

"To the Director of the Department of Logistics,

With Joy in Their Hearts, Mr. and Mrs. Myers request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their child Janice Kelly to Joseph Miles Johnson at the Spritely Pavilion Fishing Club Saturday, the Eleventh of August Seven o'clock in the evening.

The agenda for the evening will include . . ."

The invitation went on. Sandwiched between the bisected card was a scrap of paper that had been torn out of the side of a spiral notebook. On it had been written in red marker, **we all have a hidden agenda**, in a blocky hand.

The wedding was a very white wedding. There were no black people there, only men with facial hair like threadbare carpet in stark white tuxedos, in stark white skin. The whole

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thing was stark and spiritual, and the dome of the club in which the wedding took place, an enormous stadium-like structure with fake grass, was mounted with fluorescent lights that gave everything a hard edge, sharpened the lapels and whitened everything but the air like a special toothpaste.

In one of the long carelessly arranged rows of fold-out chairs that made-do for pews, Willie tapped his watch to the marching band sidling down the aisle, occasionally having to reciprocate conversation with the most pathetic and discouraging gestures he could think of with the other guests, and stopping only once on his way out to congratulate his secretary the bride. No one had approached him and threatened his life; a bearded cossack with a red marker engineered to shoot acid, a sniper cleverly arranged to take advantage of his trap, a flailing fundamentalist on jihad with TNT strapped ridiculously to his chest, no one materialized to reveal the evil plot, no glorious movie mastermind. Willie needed to know what had happened to that agenda, it hidden away from him by any one, every one of these passersby—children with balloons, a homeless wretch navigating the parking lot with his shopping cart full of reeking bottles and cracker boxes, a yuppie pretending to listen to his iPod. He thought for a while that someone was following him home when he merged in off the highway, the same yellow car he'd passed on the way to the wedding, hadn't it been? Where was the gratuitous explosion? He felt around on his hands and knees for the car bomb. He expected it around every corner—scorpions in his collar.

His wife said, "doesn't make any difference to me," and closed the door to their room. Willie suspected (in his slippers he suspected much) that this villain was too sophisticated and masterful for petty violence, and that the terrorist, for terror was what he felt, was waging an

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invisible war. Even still Willie turned the heavy bolt in the glass front door, and with blurry eyes adjusted the settings of the burglar alarm. Then he retired to the lounge where he lifted the empty hunting rifle from the mantelpiece and, sitting, stiffly clattered into the old rocking chair like a piece of pasta. Staring out from bushy eyebrows that glowed a silver stronger than they were (under the overhead lights), he rocked vaguely, and then firmly when some disquiet thought rose and broke the surface of his sudden sleep and twitched the skin hanging limp from his skull. He woke suddenly, too, to sunrise baking all the little wood things that decorated the lounge into static shapes. He was sore along his back where the wooden chair had made deep grooves, and as he stretched these out with the kinks of oversaturated sleep he was unconsciously drawn out of the rocking chair to the window across the room where the seven million dollar view lurched onto his face, white and starchy. The cold glass that sucked his fingers to it was like a thin shield of ice on top of a pond, and the oxygen only beyond. There was a moment where he did not, or could not breathe, and then some automated mechanism made him splutter, and spit little drops, and gasping, he lurched into the kitchen and made himself an orange juice.

By the time he stepped out of the elevator into his empty reception room he felt refreshed. The blue light from the windows made the manilla folders on the floor appear as frost on a rock, and disdaining to slip he sent for Rob, who appeared red-faced and hung-over to put them away. The day passed without event, and finding boring more boring than usual, took the day off early.

He had promised earlier that he would make an effort, and in high spirits he decided it would start now. He walked down the street past a little cluster of newsstands with headlines

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like Slapped by the Latin Glove (again!), through a park, and took a taxi the rest of the way to church.

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