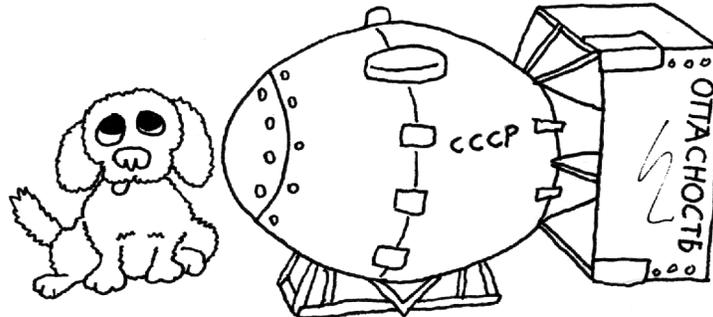


Of Bombs and Puppies



I looked around the empty hallway. I looked at my watch. I tried the locked door again. It was still locked. I dug the jury-duty notice out of my pocket and looked it over carefully. Monday morning, County Courthouse, blah, blah. Room 4, blah, blah. 8:00 AM sharp "or else", blah, blah. Bring your own water.

It was 8:00 AM on Monday morning, and I was at the County Courthouse, standing in front of a door that was clearly labeled "ROOM 4". I had forgotten to bring water, but that shouldn't have made a difference.

I waited a few minutes. Nothing. I decided to try another door. Maybe I would be able to find someone who could help me. I walked down the hall to the next door. It was also labeled "ROOM 4", and it was also locked. The next three locked doors claimed to be ROOM 4 as well. I walked the halls of the courthouse trying ROOM 4's until I found one that swung open.

Room 4 was long and narrow, had only one entrance, and smelled funny. It was lined with metal folding chairs, most of which were occupied by the sort of people you wouldn't want to sit next to on a bus. I found an empty chair and sat down.

The giant woman with the NRA tattoo who was sitting on my left turned her head and looked me over. "New guy, eh?" she grunted.

"Um... yeah." I replied, trying not to stare at the tattoo. It was on her forehead.

"You dinint bring no water." She said, and turned her attention away from me.

The little man on my right tapped my shoulder. I turned to look at him. he was dressed entirely in black, and was wearing plastic vampire fangs.

"I always bring extra." he said, offering me a half-liter bottle of what I prayed was gator-aid. "You are going to need it this afternoon. There isn't any air-conditioning in here."

I smiled politely, accepted the bottle, and held it in awkward silence for several minutes. Vampire-boy tapped me on the shoulder again.

"The secret," he whispered, "is to act crazy."

"The secret to what?" I asked, not certain I wanted to know.

"It is the secret to staying here forever. If they never put you on a jury, you never have to go home."

I tried not to make eye contact, and asked "Why on earth would you want to stay here forever?"

He sprang out of his chair, and hopped up and down in front of me. "Five dollars a day! Five dollars a day! Do you have any concept of how many cigarettes that can buy?"

"Eight packs a month" growled the woman with the tattoo.

"Nine, if you buy the cheap ones." said Vampire-boy.

"Do you mean to tell me," I asked, "that you want to stay on jury-duty forever... because of *the money*?"

Vampire-boy nodded vigorously, but then looked confused.

"That's chump-change," I continued, "Illegal sweatshop workers earn more than that!"

"Only in industrialized nations." he countered in a hurt tone.

"Get a job!" I shouted.

At that moment, the room suddenly became hushed. All conversation stopped dead, Vampire-boy slunk back into his seat, and the vigorous fistfight that had been going on in the back of the room broke up.

I glanced around, expecting to see all eyes fastened on me, but instead, they were all looking at the uniformed man framed in the doorway.

"It's Showtime, you miscreants!" he said, hefting a giant clipboard. "Benson, Fisher, Gernandt," he read. "Gordon, Hendry, Heydecke, Jones, Mori, Munson, Riney, Sy, Wynn. You all are coming with me."

The named people stood up, and started to file out the door. Someone in the back of the room called out, "Gordon's dead." Another voice added, "It was an accident!"

"All right then," groaned the man with the clipboard. "I need somebody else."

"Yo." I said, standing up.

"Okay, you'll do, Mr..." he consulted his clipboard. "...New Guy. Follow me."

As I walked out the door, Vampire-boy hissed after me "Don't forget to act crazy!"

We all sat quietly in the jury box as the prosecutor looked us over. After a long pause, he proclaimed, "Every defendant is entitled to a jury of his peers... If these are the defendant's peers, there is no way he could possibly be innocent. This jury is acceptable to me."

The defense attorney rolled his bloodshot eyes and groaned. He put his briefcase on the table in front of him, opened it, inserted his head, and tried to close it again. The papers muffled his voice as he spoke. "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. They are all fine. I don't care. I'm going to lose anyway, what difference does it make? I always lose. Lets get it over with."

I have had days like that too. I made a mental note to buy myself a briefcase.

"Okay, we are ready." said the prosecutor.

"Ready!" shouted the bailiff

After a moment the judge entered the room. She practically ran to the bench and sat down.

"All rise for the honorable—" the bailiff started.

"Quiet, you!" shouted the judge, brandishing her gavel in a threatening manner. "Bring in the defendant!" she demanded.

An officer escorted in a slack-shouldered man with dark stringy hair and a truly frightening mustache. He was unceremoniously seated next to his attorney, who still had his head in the briefcase.

"Defense, you may present your opening argument." said the judge.

The prosecutor cleared his throat and raised a finger. "Excuse me, I believe I go first."

The judge glared at him.

"Um... objection withdrawn..." he mumbled.

"Defense. Opening argument." she asserted.

The defense attorney shuffled the papers around with his face. "I wanted to be a veterinarian. Why did I give up my dream?" There was a long pause. "I don't want to live anymore." he moaned. Another long pause. "No further questions."

"Prosecution. Go." said the judge.

The prosecutor stood, straightened his lapels, and paced back and forth in front of the bench. "I intend, over the course of the following days and weeks, to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the defendant, Mr. Yubi, is not only the principle mastermind of an international caviar smuggling ring, but in fact he is the channel through which *all* illegally imported fish by-products enter our country."

Mr. Yubi shifted his eyes rapidly over the jury, and twitched his mustache in a way that made me want to go home and shave.

The prosecutor continued. "The state has evidence that the defendant has trafficked more than three thousand metric tons of fish eggs over the past ten years, and that he has orchestrated the deaths of at least eighteen people to maintain the secrecy of his operation."

Mr. Yubi exploded out of his chair, ripped an Uzi out of the folds of his orange prison jumpsuit, and fired wildly into the air. Chips of plaster hailed down

on the courtroom, and everyone dove for cover except those who were too shocked to move or too stupid to move. I wasn't shocked, but to my dismay, I found that I was still sitting up. Mr. Yubi jumped forward, pressed the Uzi against my forehead, and dragged me out of the jury box by my neck.

"Nobody move or I am keel him!" shouted Mr. Yubi. "The people vant caviar! I am bring them caviar! I am not criminal, I am hero!" He pulled the gun away from my head just long enough to randomly spray a few more bullets around, and then dragged me out of the courtroom.

We were in the parking lot. Sirens were audible from several directions, and a police helicopter was already circling the in the sky.

"Which ees your car?" Yubi demanded.

"Grrmpk! This one— erk, right here." I choked. He still had me in a head lock.

Yubi looked at my car with open disdain. "You have no hubcaps or viperblades. We cannot use."

"How about— gaaa— that one?" I said, gesturing to a sportscar so sleek and new that it was difficult to look at without imagining a supermodel draped across the hood.

"Good." he said, and kicked in the passenger side window. The sportscar's alarm blared, but the sound was lost in the approaching sirens. "Get in!" he ordered, releasing me from the headlock, but keeping the gun trained on me.

I reached inside the window and fumbled for the door lock. Yubi ran around to the other side of the car, and kicked in the drivers side window too. He unlocked the door, climbed in, and immediately climbed out again.

"We cannot use thees!" Yubi exclaimed. "There ees glass all over the seats!" He ran back around to the passenger side, pulled me out of the sportscar, and pushed me ahead of him to the next car. It was a beat-up pickup truck with its windows rolled down.

Within seconds, we were inside the truck, and Yubi was starting it with the keys he had found in the ignition. He popped it into reverse, and roared out of the parking lot, hopping a curb and taking out a hedge to avoid the oncoming police cars. After a quick one-point turn, we were moving forward again, with; by my count, twenty black and whites behind us.

Yubi seemed to be having difficulty steering, shifting gears and keeping the Uzi aimed at my head all at the same time.

"Lemme hold that. You worry about steering."

Yubi handed me the gun, and put both hands on the wheel.

"You know that you can't possibly get away, right?" I asked. "These chases always end up the same way."

Yubi laughed. "Yes, eef I do not keel us both with crash, we run out of gas and they have us for sure theen." He swerved up a freeway onramp.

"Us?"

"You are the one who has the gun," he said, "they cuff you first."

He had a point. If anybody was going to get me out of this mess, it would have to be me. I looked back at the pursuing police cars, hoping to think of a way to escape them. A police helicopter followed close above us, and several news helicopters watched from higher elevations.

An idea hit me. I opened the glove compartment, and started digging through it frantically.

"Vhat are you doing? Vhat are you doing!" demanded Yubi.

I ignored him. I found what I was looking for. A scrap of paper, probably a receipt. I dropped the gun on the seat, and leaned out the window, holding up the scrap of paper with both hands.

"Vhat ees that? Vhat are you doing?" Yubi repeated.

"Just keep driving. I'm saving our necks!"

The news helicopters flew in closer in an attempt to get a shot of whatever I was holding, crashed into each other, and plummeted to the ground, taking the police helicopter down in their wake. All three helicopters crashed down in a heap on the freeway directly behind us, blocking off the police.

We sped away, home free.

The beat up pickup truck was parked in the driveway of Mr. Yubi's upscale house. Yubi and I sat on the tailgate eating fast food.

"You are best hostage I have ever taken." said Yubi. "You are like brother to me!" He punched my shoulder in a brotherly way.

"Thanks, man." I said, taking a bite of my cheeseburger, and continuing with my mouth full. "I was expecting a boring day today, but this has turned out to be a lot of fun."

Yubi nodded. He took a long slurp of his shake, and then said, "The police vill be back, so I must leave country now. Before I go, I give you present for helping me escape police." He hopped off the tailgate, ran up the driveway, and disappeared behind the house. After a few minutes he reappeared dragging a fifteen foot long missile behind him. It said CCCP in large red letters down its side.

"Nuclear warhead." said Yubi. "I won in poker game back home. Now ees all yours."

"Wow," I said, "does it really work?"

Yubi shrugged. "Never tried it."

I walked around the warhead, viewing it from every angle. It was covered with rust spots, radiation stickers, and warnings printed in Russian. "How am I going to be able to get this home?" I asked.

Yubi pointed to the base of the warhead. "Trailer hitch. I had same problem bringing it here." He pulled a keyring out of his pocket, and removed two identical keys. "For launch." he said, handing them to me.

"Where do I put them?" I asked, looking for keyholes on the warhead.

Yubi shook his head. "Nowhere. Just keep for show. Launcher is still in Smolensk I think."

We closed the tailgate, and attached the warhead to the truck's trailer hitch. I shook hands with Yubi, and got into the driver's seat.

"It was nice meeting you, Yubi!" I called out as I pulled the truck out of the driveway.

"Perhaps we meet again sometime." he called back with a wave. "And be careful with bomb!"

I made a hard left through a yellow light. The warhead I was dragging along behind me slid sideways into a fire hydrant, bouncing off with a resounding metallic noise. It fishtailed back and forth several times, trailing a shower of sparks behind it as it scraped across the pavement.

I barely braked as I made a hard right at the next light. I knew it was dangerous to drive like this with a nuclear weapon hitched to my bumper, but I was worried about something else. A black sedan with no license plates had been following me for several miles, matching my every turn and lane change. I could still see them in my rear view mirror. It looked like I would never be able to lose them. I scanned the darkening sky for helicopters, but none were around. I suppose it was silly to think I could ever pull off a trick like that twice in the same day.

Out of options, I pulled over to the curb, turned off the engine, and waited. The sedan slowed, drove past, and parked in front of me. All four doors opened, and four men in dark suits got out.

"Do you know why we have stopped you, sir?" asked one of the men as they surrounded me.

"No clue. Who are you?"

The man flashed a wallet that contained no badge or credentials of any kind. "State Department. We noticed your thermonuclear device."

"Oh, that!" I said.

"We would like to 'purchase' it from you."

"Sorry, it's not for sale... Besides, what would the State Department need

with a rusty old bomb like that? Don't you have thousands of bombs already?"

The man cleared his throat and adjusted his collar in a slightly embarrassed manner. "You don't follow the news very closely, do you?"

I shook my head no.

"The United States recently used up all of its nuclear weapons blowing France* off the map."

"What!" I exclaimed, "I'm sure I would have heard about something like that!"

"It happened rather quickly. The point is, we used all of our thermonuclear weapons, and we need more."

"So you want to buy mine?"

"We are prepared to offer you ten million dollars."

"Forget it," I said, "It's mine, and I'm not selling."

"Twenty Million?"

"It was a gift. I couldn't."

The man chewed his thumb for a moment. He looked at one of the other men from the sedan. The other man nodded.

The first man leaned in close and whispered, "If you give us the weapon, we can see to it that you are the next president of the United States."

"You can do that?" I asked?

He nodded solemnly.

I didn't say anything.

After a moment he sighed. "Two terms." he offered.

"Sold!" I said, shaking his hand.

The other three men went behind the truck to unhitch the bomb. I handed over the launch keys to the first man.

"This is a great day for America," he said. "We are once again a nuclear power!"

My inauguration day was a little weird. The former president refused to attend, because he was a still miffed about having his term cut short by early elections. The man from the State Department had been true to his word. I was standing behind a podium in front of the Washington monument, taking the oath of office. When I was finished, I preemptively took the oath of office for the next term, saving everybody the trouble of having another election in four years. After the fiasco of my election, nobody was really excited about having another one anytime soon. I had won by a massive landslide, on a third-party ticket. Not many people voted for me, but all of their dead relatives did— and I'm not talking about voter fraud. It was sort of a voodoo thing.

* The author of this story does not hate France. France is nice.

I had a very special speech prepared. I pulled out a small adorable puppy I had concealed in my coat, and placed it on top of the podium. I waited for the crowd to stop saying "Awwwww!"

"To me, the presidency is more than just being a celebrity and meeting women." I said, pacing back and forth.

The audience laughed, and the government-type people behind me made nervous noises.

"To me, the presidency is about bigger things... Like world peace."

The audience laughed again.

"No, I'm quite serious."

The nervous noises behind me intensified. The government-type people were worried I was about to say something stupid. They had no idea.

In all the thousands of years that we have had civilization on this planet, we have had war, and fighting, and hatred. It is all going to end today. If the world does not declare peace within the next thirty seconds..."

The audience stared at me in bug-eyed silence, waiting for my ultimatum. The television cameras zoomed in on me. The government-types behind me bit their nails.

"...I will slap this defenseless puppy."

The audience gasped. The government types let out a collective sigh of relief.

"27...26...25...24" I said, looking at my watch. "I'm serious," I said. "World peace or the puppy gets it!"

There was dead silence.

"three... two... one... Time's up!"

I backhanded the puppy.* It yelped pitifully. The audience roared in anger. Some people tried to climb onto the stage to stop me, but the secret service restrained them.

"I will continue to slap this puppy, at thirty second intervals, until my demands are met." I said. "World peace."

Thirty seconds of tense silence followed, and I hit the puppy again. Boos from the crowd.

An aide of some sort rushed up to me, and handed me a telephone. I spoke into it for a moment away from the microphone.

"That was the President of Russia." I said to the audience and the cameras. "He promises total military disarmament if I stop hurting the puppy."

A few people clapped uncertainly.

"As soon as I get similar offers from every other country on earth, I will stop." I checked my watch, and slapped the puppy again.

Things started to move fast. Calls flooded in. China, Pakistan, Israel, Iraq,

* The author of this story does not hate puppies... no, that is a lie. Stinking puppies!

Nairobi, Burma. Nobody could stand to see that poor little whimpering puppy get hit again. I had them set up a giant teleconferencing screen so everybody could watch live as the president of the European Union announced that they were no longer going to hold a grudge about the Gulf-of-France incident. The director of the CIA called and apologized for everything.

"What are you apologizing for?" I asked him. "Can you be more specific?"

"No." he said.

The Mafia disbanded, Elvis came out of hiding, and bloodsucking aliens called from orbit, and told me that they had called off the plan to infiltrate us and harvest our brains.

The crowd's boos turned to cheers with each passing call, and by late afternoon, everyone was accounted for. I stopped slapping the puppy. Representatives from the SPCA and the American Red-Cross rushed forward to check on its health. The crowd cheered as they announced that he would be okay. I promised to never harm another animal again as long as mankind was at peace. Fireworks went off all over the sky, and every city on earth celebrated. The reporters took a picture of me cuddling the puppy in my arms as it licked my face. The headlines would read; "President Achieves World Peace! Puppy Forgives All!"

World Peace lasted almost six months. When war broke out, I tried the same stunt again, but by then the puppy was all grown up, and I got bitten rather badly. I was thrown out of office. I tried to stage a coup, but it failed miserably. Finally, I found myself sitting in a gutter, forcing rats to sign peace treaties with each other. That's when I realized I had a problem. That's when I came here, to Megalomaniacs Anonymous. Thank you for listening to my story. You have all been very supportive. Thank you.

The contents of this story are words, and as such, they are to be read, and remembered, and above all, shared. These words belong to you who read them, but these words also belong to he who wrote them. Please respect his ownership of them.

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