

TALES FROM THE ROAD

Good stories like Judd Swift's revenge make the rounds of advance teams. Some are best told without too many specifics, including names. So the following tales will use proxy names. I cannot confirm or deny that any included my participation.

The team was advancing the Moscow summit. Before departure, they had a State Department briefing where they were warned to expect listening devices in their hotel rooms. "Don't embarrass yourselves, or us, by talking about the Russians," they were cautioned. "They'll probably hear everything you say."

The team was riding back to the Moscow hotel after a fruitless day of negotiating with their Russian hosts. Every suggestion, if it came from the Americans, was treated with deep suspicion, and rejected. Even efforts to make arrangements more beneficial to their hosts were greeted with hostility. The advancement threw up their hands, *the not-invented-here syndrome*.

So the lead decided to test the listening-device theory. "Listen guys, we'll all go to my room to talk about our meeting with the Russians. But remember, they may be listening, so we'll feed them some propaganda."

They gathered in the lead's room and spent several minutes talking about their Russian hosts in glowing terms. They stifled smirks. Then they reviewed the many items they had offered to favor the Russians, expressing disbelief their counterparts couldn't seem to appreciate how it would help them. "Maybe we aren't expressing our suggestions clearly. These guys are just making it harder on themselves," the lead concluded. Then he held his finger up to his lips and bid them goodnight.

The next day, their Russian hosts were immediately friendlier. They offered coffee and small Russian pastries. They had rearranged a portion of the schedule in line with the American's proposals. "We have been talking," they said. "Perhaps we were too hasty to reject some of your ideas."

The Americans had to force themselves not to share knowing looks.

Preparations for the visit progressed more cooperatively, and after a successful day, the Russians invited the Americans to dinner. Russian dinners apparently require iced vodka bottles and multiple toasts. Vodka is poured to the brim in shot glasses, no ice, just very cold vodka. Attempting to sip one's vodka brought immediate guffaws of derision; it must be the Russian way, one glassful, bottoms-up per toast.

Which was how it happened that our team staggered back to their hotel and gathered in the lead's room, holding each other up. The lead pulled their heads close together and whispered, "Let's find the bugs." Faces immediately brightened.

Vodka-fueled laughter followed. The lead impatiently gestured with his fingers to his lips, until one by one they each followed suit, fingers on their lips and silly smiles on their faces.

They began to reel around the room, searching behind pictures, in lamps, behind the headboard. They became more hysterical as they searched, but managed to restrain most outbursts. When the lead pulled back the throw rug, he gestured excitedly. They all gathered, fingers on lips, but breathing hard.

A round metal plate about six inches in diameter was mounted in the wooden floor. Four large screws with thick slots appeared to secure it. *They had found the bug.*

Someone produced a quarter, which fit the slot perfectly. One by one they removed the screws. The last screw was harder to turn, and, as it came out, there was a loud crash in the room below.

They froze in horror. Then, as if in slow motion, they glanced up at their own ceiling, noticing the chandelier for the first time. *Oh my God.* The lead threw the rug back in place, and everyone scattered.

The next day, the Russians, not at all bleary, seemed solicitous of their new friends. "We hope you weren't disturbed last night. Apparently there was some excitement in the hotel."

"Oh?"

"A lighting fixture tore right out of the ceiling in a room near yours."

"How terrible. Was anyone hurt?"

"No. Fortunately the room was not occupied. Otherwise, we would have the trouble of looking for an explanation."

Vodka toasts, along with bug searches, were suspended.

* * *