

Viva Laughter!

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outskirtspress
DENVER, COLORADO

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Outskirts Press, Inc.
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4787-1102-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013903982

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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A TISSUE OF LIES



A Tissue of Lies

Headquarters – Central Intelligence and Anti-Terrorist Offices (CIAO)

Date: January 20, 2012

Time: Noonish Zulu

Davood Talasazan’s attention is riveted to the newspaper’s Puzzle Page – the Crypto Quote to be exact. He is that close to finally solving one and, were that to happen, finally gaining a modicum of respect as a member of the crack Code Decipherment Unit within CIAO. The telephone’s buzz shatters the silence of the otherwise empty office area, but Davood does not hear it. He must deduce which letter of the alphabet Q stands for. It is by far the most frequently used letter in the quote, therefore he suspects it must be rather important.

A few seconds of dead silence ensue.

The telephone sounds again, with a curiously angry tone. Without lifting his eyes from the puzzle, Davood slowly gropes about for his phone and lifts it to his ear.

“Talasazan here.”

“*You! Into my office! Now!*”

He leaps to his feet as if his swivel chair has suddenly become electrified. “Yes! Yes, sir! I have left before I am even speaking to you!”

As he starts to lay the phone back into its cradle, he can hear the Director of Operations shout, “Idiot!”

A full ten minutes later, Davood meekly enters the grandiose office of the D.O., who is on the verge of going ballistic. “Where in the hell have you been? Ten minutes ago you said you had already left.”

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“A thousand pardons, sir. I pray for your forgiveness. I got lost.”

“Lost?! You work in this building, for Christ’s sake.”

“Yes sir, but since I have never been here to your exalted office, I had to look up your whereabouts in my Rolodex.”

“And?”

“And, sir, I ended up on the twelfth floor.”

“Even though my office is on the twenty-first.”

Davood begins fumbling nervously with the cut-glass golf trophy at the front edge of the desk. “Yes, well you see, sir, I am just the tiniest bit dyslexic.”

The Director snatches the trophy from Davood and clutches it protectively against his chest. “Dyslexic? And you’re in the goddam Code *Decipherment* Unit?”

“Oh not to worry sir. I have never deciphered a single thing so far, so no harm done.”

The trophy drops to the desktop and smashes into a hundred glittering shards. “Oh . . . my . . . *God!*”

“Do I detect a hint of disapproval, sir?”

“Dis . . . ! Oh no, Talasazan. It’s far, far worse than that. *Far* worse. You see, I have to send you out on a *field* assignment. You’re absolutely the only one left here right now.”

“Field assignment? You . . . you mean as in . . . *spy* stuff?”

“No, Talasazan. Not as in *spy* stuff. As in *assassination* stuff.”

Davood’s bulging eyes and gaping mouth are fair indicators of his profound state of shock. His bladder is about to remove all doubt.

“Oh sir, I suddenly remembered a prior engagement that just popped up. I urgently need a pee. May I be excused?”

“No! Get hold of yourself, man. Sit down and cross your legs. It’ll pass. This happened with every one of your colleagues in Code, and they got through it.”

“All my colleagues? You mean that is why they are missing?”

“Yeah, where’d you think they were?”

“Oh, just avoiding me as usual. They don’t seem to see the whimsy in my slight touch of dyslexia.”

The Director sighs. “Well, that isn’t the reason this time. After I assigned the last of my operatives to covert missions, I had no choice but to use you Code nerds. And just when I thought everything was under control, this red hot project came down. Frankly, when I realized you were the only one left, I seriously considered sending my secretary instead. But she’s Civil Service, and you know how that works.”

Davood collapses into one of the chairs in front of the D.O.’s expansive desk. “But . . . but, sir. I’m not trained for field work. And *assassination*? You actually think I could kill anyone?”

The D.O. silently curses himself for letting that term slip. “Oh Davood, my boy, I misspoke. Should never have used that term, because that isn’t what this mission is about.”

“It is not? But you used the word assassination. I clearly heard you say that. It is, in fact, what brought on my near-pee event.”

“Oh my boy, I am so sorry for that unfortunate choice of words. I . . . I just couldn’t think of an appropriate term on the spot like that. This mission . . . well, it’s difficult to describe what it’s about in one word.”

“Well, perhaps you will use a few more words and help me to understand what is like assassination but isn’t. And please, do not hurry on my behalf. Take all the time you need.”

The D.O. inhales deeply and lets the breath slowly escape in an audible stream. “All right, I will lay the details out for you *if* you accept this mission. But before we get to that, I want to ask you something. When we got you out of Iran and granted you political asylum – after the Ayatollah took over – you were grateful, weren’t you?”

“Oh, yes indeed. As a follower of Bahai, my days were numbered.”

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“And do you feel you owe this country something for saving your keister like that?”

“Oh, indeed I do. That is precisely why I joined CIAO and diligently attempt to solve the Crypto Quotes in the good old Yankee Doodle newspapers.”

“Ahem! Yeah, well enough of that. Now, let me put one last question to you. Knowing how unscrupulous this organization is, and how we leverage the Patriot Act so as to completely avoid any Constitutional restraints, is it just a teeny weeny bit conceivable that we could find, oh I don’t know, maybe a gazillion reasons for deporting you back to the land of your birth?”

Davood leaps to his feet and barks, “*Sir!* I accept the mission, *sir!*”

The D.O. leans back in his thronelike leather chair and casts a fraudulent smile upon his prey. “Excellent Talasazan! Excellent! Oh, I can’t tell you how deeply moved I am by your patriotism.”

“Uh, sir. Just for my enlightenment, you understand. Does this mean I will be patriotically assassinating someone?”

“Oh!” The D.O. throws his head back and chortles. “No, Talasazan, no. What we want you to do is sneak back into Iran to inflict . . . to inflict . . . *extreme discomfort* on a very high official.”

“Extreme . . .”

“Discomfort, yes.”

“And which high official will I be discomforting?”

“The Grand Ayatollah.”

After a long, agonizing silence: “Sir?”

“Yes, Talasazan?”

“I am sorry to report that that pee event has just occurred.”

“Oh, forget that. You’re not the first guy that’s happened to. That’s why those chairs are covered in vinyl. Now, here’s what’s going to happen. You will be inserted back into Iran where you will make your way to Tehran and get yourself hired as the Grand Ayatollah’s valet, or

whatever they call it over there. Once you are in his employ, you will plant a device – which you will smuggle in – and that device will give him the ‘extreme discomfort’ we’re talking about.”

“Just like that? I just go to the Ayatollah and get hired?!”

“Easy, easy. Settle down. We’ve already got a man inside his household, and he will see that you get the position.”

Davood is clearly on the edge of a panic attack, his wild eyes and hyperventilation a hint of that condition, and so the D.O. tries to reassure him. “Get hold of yourself, man. We’ve worked out every step of your mission. We have people in place, and they will do their part in getting you in safely. All you have to do is follow the directions I give you to the letter. Good Lord, we’ve been doing this kind of thing since before you were born.”

Davood decides it is not politic to reveal that he is, at that very moment, regretting that he had ever been born. But there is one trivial detail he feels compelled to raise. “Okay, okay, you get me in. I plant the device. How the *hell* do I get *out*?”

“Not to worry. Not to worry for one second. That, too, is all worked out. Listen, let’s start at the beginning, and I’ll give you your instructions for every step of the way. Okay?”

“Okay.” Davood pulls out a writing pad and a pencil.

“*No!* No, no, *no!* Put those away. Listen up, agent, and listen good. None of what I’m going to tell you is to be written down, *at any time*. This is one of the most sensitive operations this agency has ever undertaken. So put that stuff away and memorize every detail of what I’m going to tell you. You screw up on so much as a single word and you’ll be dog meat. Got that?”

Unable to speak, Davood nods weakly.

“How is your memory, by the way?”

“It will be adequate, inch’ Allah.”

“All right, well get it into gear and remember everything I’m about to tell you. The instructions aren’t all that complicated.”

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Another feeble nod of the head.

“You will fly from here to Cairo on KLM and check into the Cairo Hilton. You will be carrying fake papers, of course. The next day, at precisely 10:27 AM, you will proceed to the Cairo Museum. Be sure to avoid Tahrir Square as best you can. The place is crawling with Egyptian military. You with me so far?”

For some reason, all Davood can remember is his cat’s name. “Yes, sir. Yes. I am memorizing like crazy here.”

“Good. Now, when you get into the museum go and view the King Tut exhibits. One of the museum’s guards will come up to you and say, ‘Do you want to see Rameses?’ You will respond by saying, ‘My mummy done Ptolemy.’”

“What?!”

“Don’t interrupt. Just remember, the wording must be exact. Now, if all this goes right, the guard will take you far back into a part of the museum that is not open to the public and he will give you the device.”

“Please sir, forgive the interruption, but I must insist on knowing what the device is. If it is to inflict extreme discomfort on the Ayatollah, surely I must know how to trigger the thing.”

“Oh, you don’t have to trigger it. After you become the Ayatollah’s valet, just put it into its proper place in his bathroom.”

“His bathroom? What in the world is it?”

“Toilet paper.”

“Toil . . . That is what will discomfort him extremely? His toilet paper? How is that to happen?”

“Itching powder.”

“Wha . . . ? You are sending me on a dangerous . . . ? You ask me to risk my life to smuggle *itching powder* into the Ayatollah’s bathroom?”

“You don’t get it, do you boy. This is an operation we call Desanctification. You’ve seen how he sits up on that platform and

gazes down at his followers. Those nuts think he's some kind of saint. Well, he isn't gonna look very holy sitting up there scratching his ass. Now, is he?"

"You have done this before? This is a for real?"

"Yes, yes. Now shut up about the TP. You've got a lot more instructions to memorize. Remember, your life depends on getting every detail right."

"Yes, sir."

The D.O. draws in a deep, calming breath before continuing. "Once you have the device . . . Oh, by the way, the roll of toilet paper will be concealed in a lead cylinder. Don't open it until you're ready to place it."

"Lead? Why?"

"That's your cover. If anyone asks, tell them it's your brother's ashes. You've retrieved them from the land of the infidels, and you're going to bury them in the holy city of Qom as soon as you're able to get there."

"Oh, sir, that is just brilliant."

"Starting to realize that we know what we're doing, eh?"

"Oh, yes sir. That is devilishly clever."

"Okay. Now, once you have the device, catch an Egypt Air flight into Tehran and go straight to the Zurkhaneh – the one dedicated to Ali. Know it?"

"Yes, I have been there. The House of Strength."

"Okay, there you will be contacted by Fredoun Fassa. He's our man inside the residence. He will make himself known to you by saying, 'How much wood could a woodchuck chuck?' You will answer, 'I take it you refer to the marmota monax.' You with me?"

Davood suddenly remembers that he hasn't fed his cat. "Uh huh."

"Fredoun will then take you in hand and get you hired as the old man's valet."

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“Okey dokey.”

“All right, listen up. Plant the toilet paper as soon as you can, and the next day say you are going to Qom to bury your brother’s ashes. Then get the hell out of there and work your way, by back alleys, to the Avenue of the Prophet. Now, listen to this very carefully. This is your extraction procedure. On the Avenue of the Prophet, go to number 21. Knock on the door with three short raps, three long raps and then three short raps.”

“SOS?”

“Yeah, kind of appropriate, huh? Now, to the person who opens the door say, ‘I’m Troubadour. I need extraction.’ From that moment on, you will be on your way back to us.”

Davood’s brain is reeling from all the instructions which he must memorize, all in the proper sequence. It is well and good to be discussing extraction, but he is in serious doubt about even getting there in one piece. The D.O.’s voice halts his ruminations.

“I’m so sorry this has to fall on a total idiot like you, Talasazan, but the fate of the entire Free World is in your hands, and I know you will do what you have to do.”

“Okey dokey.”

“Stiff upper lip!”

“Yeah!”

“Semper Fi!”

“Yeah!”

“Pair of serious cojones, eh?”

“Yeah!”

“Only one life to give for your adopted country!”

“Oh my God!”

Davood Talasazan steps out into the cold.



Memo to Director of Operations, CIAO

From: Agent Two-By-Four

Date: January 26, 2012

Time: 0900 Zulu

Dear Director:

It is I, Talasazan, and I appear to be decidedly in captivity here in Tehran. I told my captors how anxious you would be for a full report on my mission, but that I could not rely on them to refrain from peeking at its contents. I wish to assure you that that risk has been circumnavigated. Let me explain.

At first, these fellows were exceedingly rough with me, doing indescribable things to my person. But as they came to know and understand me, a remarkable transformation took place. A new interrogator was assigned, and to my great relief he turned out to be most friendly and sympathetic to my predicament. When I explained that my strong sense of duty compelled me to send you a full report, but that such a report must remain confidential, he was most forthcoming with a solution. He suggested that instead of sending it as an official document, I should send it as a personal letter. My interrogator – Faz Ali is his name – explained that he had every right to read an *official* report by an enemy agent. But – and I blush to admit I did not know this – the Koran forbids every good Moslem from reading anyone’s *personal* mail. Isn’t that wonderful? I must say I am in awe to think that the Prophet could have foreseen even the Postal System. So anyway, you need have no fears about my revealing the information which follows. I have clearly printed the word, “Personal” under the agency’s address.

There was an incident on my KLM flight to Cairo which gave me several moments of panic, I can tell you. Even though it turned

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out to be just an innocent mistake, I feel obliged to include it in this report.

We were well out over the Atlantic and, with a couple of cocktails under my belt, I was actually beginning to enjoy myself. The fellow next to me finally folded up his newspaper, pushed his seat back a little and began conversing with me. He was most amiable, and our dialogue was cordial and relaxed. At one point he asked how long I was going to be in Cairo (since I had told him that was where I was going.) I said, "Oh, just one day. I am going to visit the Cairo museum."

"Ah yes, well you'll want to see Rameses."

Well sir, I cannot begin to describe how I felt, hearing the password given at that time and place. I almost swooned. And I am afraid my response was a bit amplified. "What?! . . . My Ptolemy done . . . What did you just say?"

He wore a very quizzical look as he replied. "I just said that you will want to see the Rameses mummy while you're at the museum. It's very popular with the tourists."

My eyes bored into his as I wondered what to do next.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"What?"

"The toilet paper, man. Where is it?"

The fellow seemed genuinely perplexed. "There in one of the restrooms. Where else would it be?"

"Good God! You left it in . . . ? But any one of these passengers may have already used some of it!"

"I think that's a pretty safe assumption."

"The agency will hear of your behavior!"

I squeezed past him out of my seat, rather rudely I am sorry to say, and I proceeded up and down the aisle to see if I could spot anyone excessively scratching his or her posterior. It was a great relief when I ascertained no one behaving in such a manner, and so I returned to my seat.

VIVA LAUGHTER!

I was in a quandary. Was he my contact, or wasn't he? He hadn't given the password exactly as you gave it to me, sir, but it was so close. And it certainly was not to be given on the airplane. I had to know.

"Tell me, do you work as a guard in the Cairo museum?"

"No, I run a gear manufacturing plant in Sandusky, Ohio."

He fished his business card out of his briefcase, and I crumpled with embarrassment. "I am so sorry," I said, barely above a whisper.

The awkwardness of remaining in his company all the way to Cairo was resolved to our mutual relief when he arranged with the flight attendant to change his seating.

Everything went perfectly in Cairo, probably because of the rehearsal on the plane. I saw Rameses and got the device. At Tehran, the Customs official questioned me about the lead container, but the story about my brother's ashes worked like a charm. He dropped it like a hot potato when he learned what it contained.

I went straight from the airport to the Zurkhaneh in the city and settled down to watch those powerful fellows do their ritualized exercises. I enjoyed the drummer immensely. He was a cool cat and really boogied.

Presently, a young man sat down beside me and gave the recognition challenge: "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck?" I immediately responded with the correct countersign: "I take it you refer to the manic marmot."

He then said, "You're that idiot from CIAO, right?"

I said, "Right."

He said, "Close enough. Come on." And off we went to the Ayatollah's residence.

I underwent two days of intense scrutiny, but thanks to the false employment history you provided, I got the job.

I was understandably anxious to plant the device as soon as possible and get out of there, and so on my first afternoon in service I was delighted to find that his toilet paper roll had gotten pretty low. I decided to replace

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it with ours that very night. When the time came, I left all the lights off, tiptoed into the bathroom and installed our device. I must admit that I was startled to see it glowing in the dark, but then I realized you would need to use an especially strong itching powder for such a critical mission.

The next day, I asked permission to take my brother's ashes to Qom. I explained that I wanted to get that obligation out of the way so I could give the Ayatollah my undivided attention. They bought the story, and I left to go to the safe house on the Avenue of the Prophet. But that is when things became a bit unraveled, resulting in my present incarceration.

I had no trouble reaching the avenue without being followed, and I readily found number 21. Since that is where things began to fall apart, I really must try to acquaint you with all the factors that contributed to the unfortunate outcome.

By the time I came to be standing in front of that door, and after enduring all the stress of carrying out this mission, my mind had become razor sharp. I had developed all the instincts and mental acuity of a real operative. So, as I gazed at the numerals of the address, I suddenly remembered how my dyslexia had caused me to go to the 12th floor, when your office is on the 21st. Oh, yes! It was crystal clear now, and thank God I caught it in time. This was *not* the safe house. Fact: I am dyslexic. Fact: I had a dyslexic event only a few days before. Fact: That event involved my transposing the numbers 21 and 12. Fact: My dyslexia must be especially sensitive to that combination of numbers. Fact: The real safe house will appear, *to me*, to have the address of number 12. QED.

So I walked down the block and did the SOS rapping on the door of number 12, knowing for certain that it was actually 21. A man in a white coat answered my knock and invited me in. I gave the correct password, "I am Two-By-Four, and I need extraction." To my immense relief he smiled warmly and said, "Of course. Just relax. You're in good hands now. Come with me."

Safe at last!

He led me to the back, and I was surprised to find myself in a dentist's surgery. My handler told me to climb into the dental chair and get comfortable, which sounded pretty good to me by that time. But I was no sooner in the chair when he clamped a mask over my nose and mouth, and the gas knocked me out in no time. Perhaps dyslexics are unusually sensitive to the effects of nitrous oxide. I don't know.

I learned later on from my captors that the man is really a dentist, and his offices are at number 12 Avenue of the Prophet. They verified this for me by showing me where the scoundrel had actually extracted one of my perfectly sound molars. *Oh, where is the justice?* They also said that the Laughing Gas had acted like a truth drug on me and, according to them, I blabbed every detail of my mission. The terrified dentist, hearing me spell out a dastardly plot to inflict extreme discomfort on the Ayatollah, immediately summoned the Secret Police, and here I am.

Now, sir, at this point I must risk incurring your anger by raising a rather ticklish subject. Back when you were briefing me for this mission, did you perhaps forget to tell me something? Something of a *nuclear* nature, maybe? I only ask because my interrogator, Faz Ali, swears on the Koran that our toilet paper was radioactive. He further swears that the Grand Ayatollah is presently driving the Geiger counters crazy, so you see my concern. I have insisted, all along, that this was just an irresponsible American prank involving itching powder. Utterly tasteless, but a prank nevertheless. If you can confirm this by return mail I will be ever so happy. If you cannot – for the obvious reason – then I have one last request:

Please tell my fellow operatives that I was a real dandy Yankee Doodle.

Talasazan