

Tashkent Horizons

Vinay Gupta, May 20, 2010

In the long run it was much easier to destroy than create. That's what got us. The increased complexity, the increased power of the Great Optimism slowly collapsed back into this - the much scorned high-tech anarchism of the New Renaissance.

It's an ironic term for a world in which I read my news as a laser scans over a century-old metal wall, painting letters in ephemeral light. Nothing I need to know about has happened, so I slip the computer into its case and shoulder the pack that's about to save my life.

I'm about to go outside, do a little survey.

Everybody thinks the Renaissance was golden age, a beautiful time to be alive.

It's not. I'm fifteen seconds away from nasty, brutish and short.

I've hauled this pack of tricks 400km in the last two months seeking some answers to a pollution riddle. Somebody is using one of the "forbidden solvents" - ecotoxics on the scheduled list of the guerilla EPA that I work for. It's two, three dozen hops down a supply chain to find the user, and then probably another five or six to get to the guys with the warehouse or mine or old dumpsite that they're refining this filth out of. All the evidence we really had was new gold with the traces of

having been pulled out of ancient technical waste - a few stray atoms of lead and a bit of tungsten. But it's a messy, noisy operation that can't be easily hidden so the circuit analysts put it on their watch lists and gradually the data accumulates enough to put an agent on.

This is how I find myself bleeding heavily. The crossbow bolt has passed through the back of the pack, through a strap, and into me. Right above my shoulder blade, pretty much. On all fours below the windows I plot odds and disassociate, mind telling itself it's clear as the wet patch spreads across my shirt. If there are enough of them to come inside and find me, or the arrow was poisoned, I'm a dead man. If not... how bad can it be?

I cut the strap on that side and roll the bag off, then jam a chair under the door handle for the five seconds of prolonged panic it could buy me. No footsteps on the stairs. Breathing heavily, panicked, sweaty, cold. Lean heavily on the chest of drawers, wait, bleed, wait. No-one comes, no firebomb follows the arrow, no searing or sleepiness of poison, no fire in the veins. I've lived another night.

The bag has bandages, wound ointments both natural and technical in small sachets. It's less than two inches deep, much less bad than I'd feared, a metal buckle sheared by the bladed head. I lie and wait for morning, without risking sleep. I wonder how it was when my father had this job.

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They'll tell you it could all have been avoided, the old guys. Thirty or forty years of "I told you so" means most people don't ask, but these guys lived at a time when we had more than a handful of MRI machines per continent, when death by violence was a remarkable way to die - when knives and guns weren't streetware. My father was an EPA guy, a scientist. Lab animal, mostly, white coat and soil samples in my mind although I expect he wore a polo shirt in real life. As things came apart the family wound up in the midwest on grandpa's land, waiting for the recovery that never came.

I grew up a fighter, scrapping with local toughs, strapping young militia man, but I got an education from my father's friends, and wound up a field guy then an agent. The Federal networks never quite died, a mix of loyalty and ties to the military kept us going and as the Renaissance settled in, we got back to work.

Time mentioned me once, in a piece on the Freelance Government. They didn't quite understand the job, why the people out there need me to do this.

Right now I don't understand it either.

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I slept. Wound's crusty but not infected to the point where anything is crawling along my veins. I come downstairs dragging the bag, pay for breakfast and eat as much of the bacon and eggs as I can face. My father would have drunk

coffee. I smoke a cigarette. I'm not going to make the 15 or 20km to the next survey point, and I'm not going to risk another round with that guy. It's time to go home, file a report, and hope somebody with more luck can find an entry point on this case. I'm not too old for this, I tell myself, but no point going down to a bullet next time.

The hotel used to be a warehouse. Rough shacks inside the bare frame. The office is in a square little house next door, and I check out. The owner is a squat little Minnesotan with blond hair, blue eyes, two kids and a grizzly bear of a husband. I've stayed here when I'm out this way for years, but she doesn't ask about the blood.

You can't trust anybody these days.

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I hire a cab. Pickup truck, diesel, the kitchen smell as we putter down the road to the nearest railway station. 40km, normally I'd have hitched and walked, but I can spend a few dollars today. I'm getting out.

Surprisingly, they're waiting for me at the station. Sleepless and hurt I don't really notice two or three big guys waiting, until one of them stands in front of me and tells me to get up. I'm afraid. They take me outside of the station building and into a van, and I'm sitting on empty burlap sacks with the two gorillas. They're militiamen too, they have the tattoos, so at least they're polite.

“Surveyman, eh?” asks #1 thug.

“EPA, yes” I say, looking for some sign in his face to tell me if they’re taking me out to a shallow grave or just a beating

“Samples?” he asks in a fairly relaxed, almost professional way

“Yes, a few, and a basic test kit. But I hadn’t found anything.”

There’s no more conversation until we arrive. Old industrial park, half abandoned, half residential from what I can see out of the back windows of the truck. It’s mid-morning, cold and clear, and they unload me in the loading dock.

They check me out. Once it’s settled, they’re EPA too it turns out. They go over the samples, checking the gridpoints against their own data, asking for clarification. They say they’ll send me a case file with some additional facts. I relax.

They even offer to take me to a doc to get the puncture wound looked at, but there’s not really enough time before my train home. I’ll get it seen when I’m back.

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It’s six months since I was hurt. Work stopped for the harvest, and now we’re into the freeze. My wife was worried after I took the dart, but it was six years since the last violence I saw on the job before that, which is hardly highly dangerous work. Still it’s made me a lot more cautious, and I take one of the younger guys with me on this trip, armed. Izzy Young’s about 5’11”, shaved head and a bobble hat, nostalgic for an old sports team.

He plays ice hockey on the lake. I went to school with his brother. His father knows mine. He’s got some chemistry and biology, but he’s going to wind up as a farmer. He’s just doing this to make a bit of money on the side, to buy a motorcycle.

By this time we’ve narrowed it down quite a bit. Four or five states have been seeing the new gold, and it’s not being smuggled far. Local artisans and a little industry. Eventually we get it down to Akron, which is basically a farm town with a lot of rusty old factories, and somebody’s repurposed one. Containers of electronic waste get intercepted on a traffic stop and we have a story but no names. Fifty year old consumer junk and barrels of poison somebody found in an old lockup, off the books industrial materials storage in New York. It’s a wonder these guys don’t all have cancer already.

So it’s us, the guys from Illinois, and Ohio Local. Law enforcement don’t care - nobody’s being killed, and this stuff hasn’t caused serious public health problems in the midwest in twenty or thirty years, since some of the old industrial stuff got restarted in Chicago. People just look at it all with distaste. Passe crimes of a bygone age.

The final raid is anti-climatic. It’s five Chinese immigrants who learned the trade back home. Small time mafia. Of course we can’t hand them over to law enforcement, who have local jurisdiction only - a crime that isn’t killing anybody, isn’t robbing anyone isn’t a crime. Sure they were dumping the solvents into the watershed when they were too clogged to produce more gold, but it’s only a few barrels.

So we execute them.

It's quick, clean and legitimate. My father's generation, the real Freelance Feds, were real holy terrors. Firebombings, arson and assassination. They clamped down a lid on the tail end of the economic collapse, stopped industry rebuilding in the dirtier forms - it doesn't take more than a few snipers to close a coal mine, and there were no effective Federal troops. Warming had gotten bad enough that they didn't get much resistance from the general population - a tacit acceptance that this was necessary - not nice, not polite, not clean, but necessary.

The biolabs went the same way - headquarters of the gene companies laid waste, smoldering wreckage. That wasn't the EPA, though. Medical research ground to a halt for a while as people got clear in their minds what kind of work was clear and what would get you a warning letter, then a knife in the ribs.

As the governments fell, we took back control of the law. Natural law. We never tried for government, we just killed what looked bad, or drained its resources. Pretty much what the pre-Crash EPA did, but without the division between the scientists, the lawyers, the judges and the police. We didn't fine you, we just shut you down.

There wasn't much left after the collapse anyway, in terms of the big, nasty old industries in America. We grow a lot of food, and do alright.