

### **Something to Say**

It had been a long hot day in the office, and a tedious one. The burdens of public responsibility are great and onerous, and seldom carry with them the rewards of excitement and variety. This was most certainly the view of Deputy Commissioner Gryshenko and so, whenever possible he would make sure to fill up his day by making appointments at different sites around the sector which fell within his control. Then he would happily spend large proportions of his time driving from one place to the next, in the adequate if less than luxurious car which his position afforded him. He enjoyed the relative variety which that kind of day provided, and indeed he enjoyed the travelling itself. He would spend periods sitting in his car, listening to the radio, between meetings with the different local supervisors, and it brightened his otherwise mundane existence.

In the evening he would never speak to his wife about his work - at least, not about the nature of the work itself. Instead he would arrive home and say to her,

'I drove past the old hospital today, over in the Eastern sector. The new wing is almost complete. It will prove a fitting monument to our endeavours, a fine testimony to our careful, and caring administration.'

Or he might say,

'I heard a good programme on the radio at lunch time, as I was driving from the Northern Sector into the old town. It was an

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interesting and most complimentary exposition of our agricultural policies.'

In fact, he would say absolutely anything - just as long as he and his wife had something to talk about. The thought of a long hard evening of silence was unbearable to him. He must have something to say.

However, on this particular day he had been forced, either by a trick of fate or a lack of foresight on his part, to remain at his desk, in his office all day long, where he had been obliged to interview a seemingly endless succession of callers. One after the other they had trundled in, cap in hand - literally in one or two cases - and now, as the day approached its end, there was very little in his memory to distinguish one caller from another. They had all looked vaguely similar - grey, uninteresting, and uninspired to Gryshenko's mind - and they all wanted the same thing. They wanted money. They wanted Gryshenko to give them some money from the government purse. They wanted him to delve into the public pot of gold over which he had jurisdiction, and pull out some nuggets for them and their project.

They may well have couched their requests in more acceptable language - 'it would be good to have your support, Deputy Commissioner Gryshenko - perhaps you could look favourably on our work' - but in the final analysis they all wanted

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money. 'Fund us. Sustain us. Keep us in employment. Give us some cash.'

Deputy Commissioner Gryshenko did not have a large budget to dispense, but he knew only too well that it was sufficient to command for him a certain level of respect, a degree of deference and the promise of gratitude. He had become accustomed to the obsequious behaviour it could elicit from supplicants, and more than that, he had come to expect it, and to enjoy it. That expectation, and the occasional opportunity for driving around the sectors, constituted his only vestige of job satisfaction. But now, on this hot dusty evening, he wanted to be home. It was four thirty and he wanted to stand up, to stretch his legs, to arch his back, to push his arms towards the sky, to lift his jacket from the back of his adequate if less than luxurious chair and to walk out to his car. He brightened as he thought ahead to the journey home, and the chance to listen to the car radio. Then his initial optimism faded as he pictured his wife greeting him in the hall way and how it would be difficult, arriving at the house after such a grey and ordinary day with nothing to tell her. Nothing of interest observed. No story to relate. She would expect to hear something, and it would be very hard for him. It was not a promising scenario, but he was tired, and he wanted to go home.

And this last appointment was late. Indeed if the final petitioner did not appear within a couple of minutes Gryshenko

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would be perfectly within his rights to leave; to refuse the opportunity for a further interview; to deny his request there and then. What else could these people expect from such a busy man, such an important man, such a servant of the people for so many years? And what sort of people were they whom he served with such dedication? They were offered the chance to come to him, to put their case, to receive the benefits of his generosity, and they did not even have the decency to turn up. Perhaps he should tell his wife that. Perhaps that was worthy of forming the main topic of their conversation this evening. He ran through a possible conversation in his mind, but no - it would simply be construed as the complaint of a tired old man, hardly sufficient for his wife's requirements. He stood, sighed, and began to take his jacket from the back of the chair, but turned as the door opened and a man of perhaps twenty five, unshaven, unkempt, and shabbily dressed in grey denim, was ushered in.

He came in looking apprehensive, which although understandable did not immediately gain either sympathy or pardon from Gryshenko, who replaced the jacket on the back of the chair and sat down, beckoning the caller to sit also.

'Deputy Commissioner Gryshenko? I'm sorry I'm late. It is dreadful, I know.'

'Dreadful.'

Gryshenko repeated it silently to himself. The word was unexpected and did not seem to him to be entirely appropriate. Arriving late was rude, possibly even unforgivable, but surely not 'dreadful', and furthermore the use of the word implied a certain sophistication which did not sit comfortably with the caller's untidy appearance. He now pulled an equally untidy sheaf of papers from his inside pocket and made as though to pass them across the desk. Gryshenko prevented the action by an outstretched arm and a shake of the head.

'No. I am familiar with your proposal. I have already seen the papers.'

By the merest downward movement of his head he indicated his own set of papers, by contrast in pristine condition, obviously unread, on the desk in front of him. He began to leaf through them.

'I will just refresh my memory regarding the details of your petition. Unless you have anything more to add as I am looking through them?'

The man, now seated, appeared uneasy and flustered.

'No, I - of course I realise you are very busy - it's good that you have taken the time to read the papers - I'm sure I do not need to - it is a very worthwhile project - with your support - in the Eastern sector - but of course you already know that - environmentally it is very sound, and fulfils the administration's aims - I'm sorry - I hardly need to tell you.'

While casually, half heartedly flicking over the pages Gryshenko studied the caller, as he fidgeted, sighed, rubbed his eyes and looked nervously around the room. He noticed particularly how his eyes were red and heavy. At one stage the caller even yawned, hardly managing to stifle the sound with his hand.

If I know already, if he hardly needs to tell me, thought Gryshenko, then why is he here at all? Doesn't he want this funding? Look at him staring around the room. Am I keeping him from something more important? Did he not prepare himself for this meeting? Does he think I have nothing better to do? Can't he at least show some interest, make the effort to persuade me? Doesn't he have something to say? Gryshenko was becoming annoyed. He looked at his watch. He could be on his way home now, indeed he should be, and this man was sitting, slouching in the chair even, and yawning.

Gryshenko pushed the papers away from him, hoping to signify irritation, and also that he had made a decision. Before he could speak, the man straightened and said,

'I'm sorry. I'm very tired, I'm not really myself today.'

Gryshenko gave a derisory nod, implying acknowledgement but not sympathy, and certainly not inviting further explanation. Nevertheless the young man continued.

**'The man who lives in the apartment next to mine was murdered last night.'**

**Gryshenko stiffened and focused his attention. He straightened his sitting position and leaned forward. Was he hearing correctly, or had the young man used another inappropriate word?**

**'I beg your pardon? Did you say 'murdered'?''**

**'Yes. That's right.'**

**The young man swallowed and continued to speak quietly.**

**'In the middle of the night. I heard a noise - a scuffle perhaps - it woke me up, you see. It was the sort of thing you dismiss at the time and yet, thinking back, perhaps I should... '**

**He stopped, looking past Gryshenko into space, then continued, 'and then later the police arrived.'**

**The young man's elbow was on the desk, his hand supporting his head. He was talking to Gryshenko but the Deputy Commissioner's presence was largely irrelevant. As Gryshenko could see, in truth the young man simply needed to talk.**

**'They broke down the door to his apartment - the police I mean - and then they called on me.'**

**Now he lifted his head and looked at Gryshenko.**

**'They kept me up all night, asking questions, wanting to know if I had noticed anything. I didn't get back to sleep at all -**

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that's why I'm so tired now. You must forgive me. It really is quite dreadful.'

'Dreadful'. That word again. And now it did seem appropriate. Gryshenko leaned forward, his chin now resting on his hands.

'Who was the man - the man who lived next door? How did he die? And this noise that you heard - what do you think it was? Do the police know who did it?'

'I know very little of him. There are rumours of course - the black market, gangs, drugs - .'

He stopped and looked at Gryshenko, almost as if he was concerned for him, as if he might have offended his sensibility.

'But I must apologise. I am sure the Deputy Commissioner does not wish to hear of such things.'

Gryshenko waved his hand.

'No. Go on. Of course you must speak. It has clearly upset you. Go on. They mentioned gangs, you say, and the black market?'

For a further twenty five minutes Gryshenko interrogated his caller with the expertise which he had built up during his career. The caller himself seemed only too pleased to answer the many questions, to speculate, to share his horror with the Deputy Commissioner. By the end of their conversation Gryshenko had gleaned as much from the young man as any of the policemen who

had kept him up all through the previous night. Indeed he had gleaned as much as there was to know. Then, looking at his watch he suddenly remembered that just half an hour earlier he had been ready to leave for home.

'I'm sorry - I have to leave. My wife will be expecting me.'

He arose and ushered the man to the door. The man complied meekly as Gryshenko shepherded him out, but glanced back at the desk and the forgotten papers.

'Oh yes, of course, your request for funding. Please do not worry on that count. I am sure we will be able to help. Of course, you understand I must give it some more consideration. Be assured I will be in touch.'

Five minutes later Gryshenko breathed in the fresh air and felt revived as he walked to his car with a new spring in his step. The evening was still bright yet seemed somehow less dusty. He drove home full of anticipation. The traffic was heavy but he smiled to himself and, tapping his hands on the steering wheel, he started to sing along with a tune on the car radio. A weight had lifted from his mind. Tonight he could walk into his house and greet his wife without the fear of a silent evening. A man had been murdered last night. It was the gangs, or possibly something to do with the black market. There was some mention of drugs. The day had been saved. He had something to say. How should he introduce the matter? He thought back to the young man sitting uneasily at his

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desk, his eyes red and his voice uncertain. How to begin? Yes, suddenly he knew. That was the way. That was it.

The Deputy Commissioner nodded to himself as he remembered the man's words, and he silently rehearsed his speech to his wife. He smiled to himself again.

'Good evening my dear' he would say, as he entered his house, 'What a day I have had.'

He would pause at this point for effect. He would sigh, and closing the door slowly behind him, perhaps he would shake his head slowly. Then he would continue,

'I heard of something today. Something quite - dreadful.'