

Stetslovich's Conjecture

Piotr smells coffee in pre-dawn darkness, when the world should be silent, but isn't. He has always prided himself on being first to rouse, but before he even wakes, in the center of the canvas peaks rising from the dusty ground, someone prepares a communal vat of coffee in a stockpot hanging over an open fire. It beckons, an incentive to join the day.

As Piotr rubs his eyes, he discovers his Walkman has been running all night long. The plastic is so hot that it smells of ozone. The cassette, Chopin's preludes and etudes, has played an endless loop, and now it's been stretched so thin that the sound emerges tinny, as if he's listening through a long, hollow tube. He pops the earpieces out and peels the Walkman off his chest. It leaves a bed of sweat, and the inside of his ear canal feels soaked, as if he'd been underwater. He rolls his head in a circle, the bones popping back into place. Lorraine's empty cot looks remarkably neat; Ted snores lightly. But they are lucky even to have cots: two tents down, Monika from the UNDP simply lays across six plastic bins pushed end-to-end.

No one sleeps soundly. It's impossible. Ignoring matters of comfort—rough canvas cots, drafts creeping beneath the edges of the tents, thin grey blankets that feel like fiberglass—almost everyone feels pressing anxiety: had they done enough the previous day? How many people had they already failed, and how many would they fail today?

Such things don't bother Piotr, however, because his task is to know things, and he can either give an answer or he can't. It's like being a pianist: one either plays the notes on the page, or one doesn't.

But first: coffee.

The pot appears next to a hand-lettered sign in English, warning not to scoop the grounds at the bottom. Since the first evening, others have appended their translations: French, Italian, Swedish, German. As additional aid workers arrive, new translations appear, and the sign looks as though it's grown a beard. People scoop out a cupful of the black liquid and sit on their haunches, sipping. It's a ritual, watching the fire flicker, stoking it, thinking about what lays outside of camp. As the pot empties, someone adds more water, emptying bottle after bottle until the liquid browns again, and people resume drinking. By afternoon, someone sets the pot and its holder aside, and, in the middle of the night, the process starts anew. Piotr does not know who the mysterious brewer is. Not yet, at least.

He hits the stop button on his Walkman, and the day begins.

The Walkman was a gift from his former boss, Connor Gibbard, head of his own DART team. This was the infamous Connor Gibbard, who, for a Christmas party in his Georgetown home, greeted his guests wearing his lucky flak jacket. He bragged that he had had it tailor-made. He festooned it with ornamental bows, the red and green representing, he said, blood and gangrene. His good luck charms. In the foyer of his house, he had hung a gas mask stuffed with mistletoe. Piotr gave Connor's wife, Beth, a quick peck on the cheek, eyeing the mask above his head. Beth said, "That Connor, he has quite the morbid sense of humor. Merry Christmas." She suddenly looked

concerned. “Oh, dear. You’re not Jewish, are you?” Piotr shook his head. Technically, he was, but not practicing. “Well, if you are, I hope I didn’t offend you. If you’d like a beer, they’re in the bag.” She pointed to the body bag laid across the plastic-covered kitchen table, bottles poking out of the zippered gash, the sleek, black nylon oozing condensation.

Connor was known in USAID circles as the iconoclast, the “aid bully.” He resisted the image of the aid worker as a silent figure. No, Connor argued, the aid community should have a prominent role in shaping international policy. Aid workers were not merely deliverymen, he said; they were public advocates for the dispossessed. Connor insisted on placements in conflict areas, and in the ten years Piotr worked with Connor, they were dispatched to Somalia, Rwanda, Colombia, Haiti, Chechnya, Tajikistan, and Bosnia. And after Bosnia, Piotr left Connor’s team.

But when Piotr was first hired, Connor told him that everyone in the field needed a distraction. Knitting, books, whatever. Something to shut out the shells whistling overhead, the gloom encroaching from all sides, or, worst of all, screams—if only for five minutes. Piotr told Connor that if he concentrated on his work, he could quell the voices around him.

“You’re wrong,” Connor said. “They only get louder.”

They ate lunch at Eastern Market, in the southeastern quadrant of D.C., among the booths that sold African masks and sticks of incense bundled in Mason jars. Sweet smokes filled the air. The vendors shouted and beckoned, each outdoing the other.

“Sometimes,” Connor said, “you can’t simply give things away. Governments have to be coaxed—or coerced—into taking aid. Imagine that! They see aid, especially from us, as an intrusion, a new form of colonialism. First come the aid workers, then the governmental advisors, then the military.” Connor was in his fifties, handsome and so energetic that he seemed to vibrate. He animated the tables around them, all the conversations rising in volume. “So we need to change the system into which we deliver our help. Otherwise, it’s a black hole. A waste of money. We need to be part of the negotiations.”

But Piotr had no aptitude for negotiating. As a child, he watched his mother haggle with department store saleswomen, holding up a pair of trousers and pointing out every uneven stitch, each crooked button. The saleswomen contorted their mouths and offered ten, fifteen percent off, and his mother withheld her grinning until the item was rung up, final proof of victory. Piotr, on the other hand, simply accepted fixed prices and non-negotiable stickers. They simply *were*—part of the fabric, part of the threads.

“If you can get some sort of tangible concession,” Connor said, “then all your efforts are worth it. Nothing comes for free.”

They wandered the interior of Eastern Market. This was a whole new world: T-shirts with unfamiliar slang. Stained-glass suncatchers and wind chimes. Carved-wood elephants. He needed none of it, of course: in his one-bedroom apartment, he had all that was necessary. Still—he tapped a hanging wind spinner, a series of reticulated glass bars glued into a spiral. The edges undulated, a golden ocean wave, and Piotr could have stared, mesmerized, for hours. If only all beautiful things could be so simple.

Connor walked to a salesman who had spread Walkmans of dubious origin on a blanket laid across the floor. One was the size of a deck of cards, thin and silvery as a fish. “You need a proper distraction,” Connor said. “Do you like music?” They paused,

and other shoppers brushed by. The hem of Piotr's jacket fluttered. The salesman flashed a crooked smile.

"You like?" asked the salesman. Connor picked a Walkman off the ground, a box with dials and buttons protruding every which way. "Beauty, huh?" Connor shook his head and stepped backwards, as if to rejoin the stream of humanity, but stepped forwards again. He pointed to the thin one.

"How much?" Connor asked.

"For you, my man, ten bucks."

"Ten! Maybe if it were new. But look here—" Connor pointed at a scratch in the silver paint, revealing bland plastic beneath. "It's damaged. How do I even know if it still works?"

From his pants pocket, the salesman produced two AA batteries. He patted his torso until he found a cassette squirreled inside his jacket. He detached the headphones around his neck and plugged them in. Connor and Piotr pressed their heads together. The music that issued forth wasn't to Piotr's taste, but it sounded free of distortion, of slowing.

"Headphones ain't included," the man said.

"Not included? I'll give you a dollar if you're not including the headphones."

"No way," he said.

"These things are antiques. How many have you sold in the last week? The last month?"

"I'll give it to you for five."

"Do they even still make cassettes? I should just buy a CD player." Connor started to move away, but slowly, very slowly. "Let's go, Piotr," he said.

"Hold up hold up *hold up*. You're killing me, man. OK. One buck."

Connor had been palming a dollar since the encounter began, the paper soft from overuse. "Take it easy," the man said, and Connor nodded. On the Orange Line back to Federal Triangle, Connor pressed the Walkman into Piotr's hands. Connor smiled as if to say: *See how easy it is? You could be me in no time.*

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The tiny military airport in Bhuj has been overwhelmed by the number of incoming flights. Planes idle on the tarmac nose-to-tail. The previous day, USAID had sent a C-5 Galaxy's worth of goods, and the air traffic controllers feared that the plane would not be able to land, that the runway would crumble beneath its massive weight. What the earthquake had not destroyed, the Americans would. Typical.

But the pilot had found a way, and as the wheels touched down, they left a river of melted rubber. The plane seemed as big as the base itself, a self-contained world. Its belly opened to a city of boxes draped beneath tarpaulins secured to the floor with rope the size of fists. Piotr held his breath a moment, a long, glorious moment—and then he and the others climbed aboard and began the long process of unloading.

Since then, the military has reserved Bhuj for food aid, rescue equipment, and medical personnel. Today, housing materials—canvas tents, plastic sheeting roofs, galvanized metal walls—are to arrive at the Gandhidham Military Base, and Lorraine assigns Piotr to distribute them.

“This might be an all-day affair,” she says. “The roads are still a mess, so I don’t know how long it’ll take you to get there and get back.” She touches his shoulder. “Be careful.” He nods, and she keeps her hand there. Her hair has expanded like a sponge in water, her head a fibrous mass of dark-brown curls. She carries weight beneath her eyes in dark pits. He assures her that he’ll be fine, she says, “I know, but I still want you to be careful.”

She hands him a dossier: maps and charts and graphs. The major arcana of his work: seismic activity, population density, estimated damage, loss of life. The sheets curl around his arms, a ceaseless rustle of paper, and he clamps them in his armpit to keep them stationary. His skin smells of a fax machine’s insides.

“Have you been getting any rest at all?” she asks, and he shrugs. He suspects that Lorraine harbors some sort of romantic feeling towards him and that she keeps this feeling deep inside, a golden stone within her heart. “It’s going to take us a few more minutes to finalize transport,” she says.

People believe that he doesn’t rest, but he does. He returns to their tent, where he removes his glasses, puts down his pencil, and rubs his temples in small circles. White hairs have established a stronghold there. He pinches the bridge of his nose. Then he puts his glasses back on and picks up the pencil. This is how he rests, with a pencil in hand, its tip just above the paper. His head tips forward, chin to chest, and even with his eyes closed, he looks plunged deep in thought. A rare moment of calm, this moment after sunrise, when the morning rays stain the sky blue; when, in a nearby field, trucks rumble with their engines on low, behemoths dreaming of a stampede.

An Indian gentleman, dressed in clean clothing, steps in. “Hello,” the man says, unaccountably cheery. He has a well-fed, flush complexion and smells of sweat and cologne. He introduces himself as the Special Government Liaison for Gujarat, and the man’s reputation precedes him. The locals refer to him as *babaji*, both an insult and an honorific. He is a “fixer” who greases the wheels of Indian bureaucracy—if one needs a building permit or a new irrigation canal, he can help.

He clasps Piotr’s right hand in a vigorous, friendly gesture. “I understand that you’ll bring back housing,” he says.

“We will be distributing materials, yes,” Piotr replies.

“Good, good,” he says, with a distracted air that suggests anything Piotr says is good. “The housing here is unsatisfactory.”

“It will take a while to rebuild infrastructure.” Piotr speaks carefully. Hopes are a double-edged sword.

“The work you do is truly commendable. Truly, truly.” Babaji rubs his hands and hunches as if to conserve warmth.

He has a simple request: if Piotr can acquire semi-permanent housing, would he be able to set one aside for him?

“If it were me alone,” Babaji says, “I would happily sleep on the ground in the open air. I am accustomed to having little. But my wife and my elderly mother—oh! You should see how they shiver at night. I must do anything I can do to ease their suffering. Are you married, sir?”

“I am.”

“Then you understand what I say. The lengths you would go to protect your family.”

“We are all in the same situation,” Piotr says.

Babaji nods vigorously. “But one day,” he says, “you will leave this place, and leave behind nothing more than canvas tents and good intentions.” Babaji bows graciously and leaves, trailing cologne into the sunshine.

Distractions, Connor had once told him, keeps one sane. So Piotr slips his earpieces back in, and Vassilov begins his repertoire once more.

The cassette of etudes and preludes was a gift from Rana. She had found it on a shopping excursion in Astoria. Where she bought it, she never said, but it featured the great Ukrainian pianist Arkady Vassilov, recorded in 1969 at the Durgatev Concert Hall in Kiev. As a child, Piotr wanted to be a concert pianist, and even though he showed no signs of being a prodigy, he practiced rigorously, religiously. When he turned thirteen, he knew that his small hands and short fingers could never achieve Vassilov’s grace. He could never play chords of more than an octave; his fingers could not race up and under each other to chase arpeggios; and so he abandoned his piano lessons. His parents were disappointed, but he knew, as much as anything else, his own limits.

Rana placed the cassette on the kitchen counter as she put away groceries. They had invited Ted and Lorraine over for dinner, and Lorraine had cancelled. Rana was skeptical about having a homosexual in her home, but Piotr reassured her that Ted would be most gracious. Piotr picked up the shrink-wrapped cassette and turned it in his hand. He had not thought of Vassilov in years and did not recall telling Rana about his childhood fantasies. But she remembered things he could not, and perhaps they had lain together in bed, and he had whispered to her, his hand encircling hers: *you know, when I was young...*

“Music,” she said. “For dinner.” She tossed a lump of ground beef from one hand to the other until it was the shape of a thick thumb. Tomato sauce bubbled on the stove, and she had left a head of cabbage for Piotr to cut for into salad.

“Very nice,” he said.

During dinner, Ted’s deferential charm won her over, and by the end of the night, she grasped Ted by his chin and reprimanded him for his rough face. “I will show you where to get proper shave,” she said. “So smooth, your face will forget what hair is like.” As she cleared the table, Ted played with their son, Mikhail.

“Like Gorbachev?” Ted asked.

No, *not* like Gorbachev. Rana laughed. Mikhail was named for Mikhail Stetslovich, the economist, he of the elegant theorems about needs and desires. If he had more time to develop his models, he would have shown communism for the sham that it was. But he was too slow, and the pogrom caught up with him. Stetslovich had formulated his own version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs, years before the publication of *A Theory of Human Motivation*.

We must chart a population’s needs and desires on separate graphs, Stetslovich wrote in his last manuscript. For although certain constants remain as points-of-reference between the two, the curve of the desires always rises faster. But Stetslovich ignored the base of Maslow’s pyramid—the physiological needs, which Stetslovich had considered overly self-evident: breath, food, water, sleep, excretion.

Also: homeostasis and sex.