

September 14, 2017

“I Can See Russia”

SPHEX

I want to share a political espionage story I read in 2016 prior to the election of President Trump. The story is in the novel titled “Pushing Brilliance” written by Tim Tigner. My daughter Teresa gave it to me to help me pass the time in Bethesda while the good folk at NIH took great care of me. I think the fictitious imagination of the author may be instructive in our current political environment.

In the novel, Vladimir Korovin is President of Russia. The President of the United States is President Silver, no first name ever. The Russian President is a former KGB lieutenant. A Russian oligarch, Grigori Barsukov is also a former KGB lieutenant, they last saw each other 30 years ago when they’d worked together.

Thirty 30 years ago the now president of Russia broke the nose of the now oligarch. In 1986 when they were fresh KGB grads, number one and two in their class they had the coveted post of human intelligence gathering in Brussels. They had befriended the young and rebellious teenage daughter of the personal secretary of the NATO division commander. While Alice and Vald were making out Greg who had been playing with Alice’s Nintendo put it on automatic and would search and photograph the handwritten notes on agenda drafts of the director’s biweekly meeting. He also bugged the pushbutton telephone on Alice’s mother’s night stand. Alice caught Greg red-handed as he was switching out the tapes from the bugged phone. Grigori picked up a paperweight and hit Alice in the temple with such force that she died. When Vladimir heard the double thunk of Alice and the paperweight, he lashed out at Grigori with a fist to his nose which broke his nose and left Grigori with a permanent scar.

Imagine this meeting, 30 years later, the oligarch comes to see the President of Russia at the Kremlin. The Russian President asks his old KGB “friend” if he had ever seen a crocodile catch a rabbit?

Korovin had recently returned from Venezuela where he had been crocodile hunting.

“Guides dropped rabbits from the hill country on the riverbank on the wide strip of dried mud between the water and tall grass and given their own pile of alfalfa.” The rabbits were spaced out so they could not see each other. In the hill country, they had survived a thousand generations amidst foxes and coyotes. On the riverbank the rabbits were clueless. “It’s not their turf, so they stay where they’re dropped, noses quivering, ears scanning, eating alfalfa and watching the wall of vegetation

in front of them while the crocodiles swim up silently from behind.”

“The crocodiles were being fooled like the rabbits, of course. Eyes front, focused on the food. Oblivious.” Korovin and others watched in silence from an electric boat.

“Thing about a crocodile is, it’s a log one moment and a set of snapping jaws the next, with nothing but a furious blur in between. One second the rabbit is chewing alfalfa, the next second the rabbit is alfalfa. Not because it’s too slow or too stupid . . . but because it is out of its element.”

“When it comes to eating, crocs are like storybook monsters. They swallow their food whole. They want it dead first. So once they’ve trapped dinner in their maw, they drag it underwater to drown it. This means the rabbit is usually alive and uninjured in the croc’s mouth for a while-unsure what the hell just happened, but pretty damn certain it’s not good.”

“That’s when Nicolas had us shoot the crocs. After they clamped down around the rabbits, but before they dragged ‘em under. That became the goal to get the rabbit back alive.”

“The trick was putting a bullet directly into the croc’s tiny brain . . . right there where the spine meets the skull.”

“It was a good sport, and an experience worth replicating.”

“Grigori asked, What happened to the rabbits?”

“Good question. I was curious to see that myself. I put my first survivor back on the riverbank beside a fresh pile of alfalfa. It ran for the tall grass as if I’d lit its tail of fire. That rabbit had learned life’s most important lesson.”

“Doesn’t matter where you are. Doesn’t matter if you’re a crocodile or a rabbit. You best look around, because you’re never safe.”

“Now what have you brought me, Grigori?” “I brought you a plan, Mister President.”

Grigori expounded that while his business was gas and oil, his hobby was investing in start-ups. He had a drug compound he opined had strategic potential. He had met a couple of brilliant biomedical researchers out of Kazan State Medical University, they had developed a compound which would increase a person’s IQ by 20 points and on the high end makes a person not just the smartest in the room, but the smartest in their discipline. Korovin was not interested in a plan to give Russians an intelligence edge over foreign competition. Grigori said that’s not my plan. His plan required some significant time for him to set up his scheme. He met with the Russian President three other times over a 30-month period before he delivered the “rabbit.”

As Grigori implements his plan, he recruits Vaughn Vondreesen, a venture capitalist in California. Vondreesen establishes Vitalis Pharmaceuticals and recruits Dr. John Achilles and his son, Dr. Colin Achilles to take on the medical potential for the mind clarity drug compound. The senior Achilles was responsible for patents, and the day to day operations of the company. The younger Achilles was responsible for evaluating the clinical trial results and the compound's formula. The clinical trial was being run in Russia by Dr. Tarasova. The compound's formula was supposed to be synthetic without significant side effects.

Two years later when Vitalis folds and goes bankrupt Dr. John Achilles retires. He had been a Physician in the Air Force who had spent the last 15 years in biotech, 10 with a company that was acquired for half a billion and his part of the sale as Chief medical Director in stock options was 10 million. He considered retiring then when recruited for Vitalis, two years ago. His family had planned a 60-year birthday party which also became a retirement party.

Kyle Achilles is Dr. John Achilles' younger son and Colin's brother. Kyle is a former CIA Special Operations Agent Specialist and rock climber. Kyle, a University of Colorado star skier, and excellent marksman, made the Olympic biathlon team (the composite athletic contest of cross-country skiing and target shooting with a rifle), won the Olympic bronze in Vancouver. After a lower back injury he started rock climbing, tackling cliffs like they were battlefields. He won some time meets and when they were reported in a Colorado Newspaper caught the eye of "Granger" who was visiting the Air Force Academy. Granger recruited Kyle for the CIA training program. He trained under Master Sargent Dix at Fort Bragg and worked five yrs with the CIA Special Operations Group. Kyle resigned suddenly a year ago and started traveling around Europe competing in rock climbing competitions free-soloing and recently set speed records in Greece. At the time of his father's party he was a free spirit.

Making the novel "Pushing Brilliance" a real thriller, Kyle's family is murdered on his father's yacht, the Emerging Sea, following the party while Kyle is laid up with Sophie, a UCSB graduate student and waitress from the party.

Kyle is accused of killing his family. His fingerprints are all over the packing tape, empty super glue, PVC pipe with collars at each end, all recovered from the crime scene. Kyle first saw these items on his bed in his room on the yacht which he removed and put in a dresser drawer. The killers had deliberately set him up, and the death of his family was not accidental carbon monoxide poisoning.

While being questioned, the venture capitalist, Vaughn Vondreesen, and Vondreesen's lawyer, Casey McCallum, show up at the Santa Barbara Police Department. Casey tells them he is Kyle's lawyer, and gets Kyle's version of the events including that Kyle helped his father move the 10 million overseas two years ago.

With no bail Kyle remains locked up for nearly six months when Casey comes to visit with news that his investigators have not found the real killers and no other evidence but that he has a plea deal for involuntary, two years for each death for a total of six. Kyle turns it down. There's about three

weeks till his trial. The only visitor he's had other than his lawyer was Dix, the Master Sargent who was his trainer for the CIA.

The following Saturday morning when he went for a shower, he was met by three inmates. He injured all of them and after he washed himself off he rounded the shower wall to find Officer Grissel. Kyle says, "There are two ways to deal with this. Either both of us were here, or neither of us were here." Kyle heard Grissel decision, as Grissel walked away.

The same day, Kyle has another visitor, Katya Kozara, his brother Colin's fiancée. She had not been killed with the rest of the family because she spent that murderous night on the yacht in Kyle's room while he was off with Sophie. Kyle's room was the only bedroom on the yacht where the carbon monoxide poisoning was not emitted. Katya had gone back to Russia and finished her Doctoral dissertation in mathematics at Moscow State University. She had come back to California to work in a post doctoral program at Stanford University. She had written Kyle during his incarceration and came to see him that Saturday because she wanted to tell him that in the week she's been back in California she thought someone was trying to kill her.

That night Master Sargent Dix and a fellow CIA operative Ortega came in FBI windbreakers with a court order signed by a federal judge for Kyle's release to their custody. All fake but not to be known by the DA and Kyle's attorney until Monday. In the meantime Kyle hooks up with Katya and disposes of the goons in Black suits who in fact had been trying to kill her. They flew to Moscow to begin Kyle's investigation of his family's murder which he thinks is related to the compound they were working on at Vitalis that had its origins in Russia and where the clinical trial his brother had evaluated was run in Russia by Dr. Taravoso.

Achilles, made phone calls to the DA, asking for bail, after several days, calls, and negotiations, bail was set at ten million, the father's money, the "inheritance," the who benefits money.

At their initial Moscow hotel stop, two goons in Black suits similar in size and appearance to the ones disposed of at Katya's apartment complex in California, accosted them and ended up dead on the interior hotel steps. A search of their bodies yielded a key to a Mercedes Gas/Ex van and a folded piece of paper of pictures of Kyle and Katya.

Kyle used his CIA skills and passwords to pierce the dark web finding Tatiana Tarasova, MD, residing at, married to . . . graduated from, home phone, work phone, cell phone. Found the number Dr. Tarasova used to call Colin, got a potential list of people in the clinical trial from calls made from Dr. Tarasova's cell number and Katya recognized a name, Saba Mamaladze, a former classmate at Moscow State University.

All of this led to Dr. Tarasova's death posed as a suicide at the hands of another set of goons in Black suits driving a Gas/Ex Van which Kyle and Katya had a Lada cab driver follow. They made the "mistake" of having the cabbie go to the gate when they were scanned by a facial recognition program as they were told shareholders could only enter during the annual meeting.

After learning that Achilles had showed up at his headquarters, Grigori acknowledged there must be a trail. He, however, proceeded with his plan and called Dr. Galkin who reported two vectors have proven viable.

Rather than going through the rest in detail I'll try a summary so we'll have some time for our current view of the "relationship" of Russia and the United States.

Kyle's continued investigation of his family's murder revealed the code name of the compound as "Brillyance," spelled with y-a-n-c to be cute or something, the clinical trial was on the very well educated in Russia, it was pushed in the United States to high achievers and politicians sworn to secrecy and it's delivery system was a parental delivered once every three months during a six-hour infusion. Tarasova's husband was hung by the goons in Black suits in his bathroom shower, Saba's roommate Max had also been in the clinical trial run by Dr. Tarasova. Saba's head was blown off, his friend Max survived. Max is a biochemist doctoral candidate. Kyle gave Max the vials of "Brillyance" he found in Dr. Tarasova's refrigerator for analysis.

After getting himself disguised and at a party in California where users were scheduled to get their infusions, Kyle found himself with two more goons in Black suits, the venture capitalist, Vaughn Vondreesen, his lawyer, Casey McCallum, nine members of Congress including California's Senior Senator, Colleen Collins, who chairs the Senate Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Technologies with regular contact with the National Security Committee, and Congressman Dr. Neblett, a Neurologist.

Kyle gets to tell this group about the side effects of "Brillyance." Kyle has the Neurologist, Dr. Nesbitt dial up Max on speaker phone to hear the devastating news, Brillyance exposes the brain to extreme levels of oxidative stress, a cause of dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and other serious neurological disorders. Congressman Dr. Neblett confirms oxidative stress could be a side effect.

This leads to the disclosure that Vice President Daniels is using Brilliance and has been for two years, even before he became Vice president, when he was the junior Senator from California. The Vice President has two constitutional roles, tiebreaker vote in the Senate and takes over if the President dies. The president is our government's executive; Achilles reasons, Grigori intends to assassinate President Silver.

This sends Kyle back to Russia. He uses his rock climbing skills to climb the Gas/Ex Moscow headquarters building which looks much like the Washington Monument but made of blue glass with auxiliary towers running up its four towers giving it an X-shaped footprint like the entrance to the Louvre.

Before Silver was elected President, his DNA had been collected. Grigori hired Dr. Mikhail Galkin to develop a bio-weapon.

Grigori has his helicopter pilot, Erik, flies him to the Kremlin where he meets President Vladimir

Korovin. Grigori put the finger-sized vials upright on the chess desk in the King and Queen squares. When Korovin saw them, he said, "Something for the hunter watching the crocodile watching the rabbit. Kind of completes the circle." Grigori said "the King is a flea, the Queen a tick." Harmless except to the hunter. Grigori explained the technology used to develop them is the same use to develop customized cancer therapies, in this case they would attack the retinal cells, causing the hunter whose DNA was used to begin to have vision problems in a month and within three months would be blind. Predisposition weakness, not a cancer or heart attack, not an assassination. Natural, untraceable and inconspicuous, if a hypothesis, no evidence.

Kyle Achilles climbs the blue glass building and chips his way in and overpowers Grigori and two more Black suit goons who responded to the roof alarm. Achilles uses extreme measures to get Grigori to talk; try hanging somebody over a Viking gas stove and turning on the burners.

His answer, "bugs, they are using bugs they're going to kill Silver using a custom bio-weapon delivered by fleas; they figured out how to transfer the pathogen through flea bites, one would do."

"Who's making the delivery? Korovin."

Achilles turned off the burner and asks when they got Silver's DNA, and authenticates who created the weapon. With Grigori's tablet he looks up Dr. Mikhail Galkin at Kazan State Medical University.

"When?" "On hunting trip, Sunrise this morning. It's going to make him blind, he's genetically susceptible. It won't appear suspicious."

Achilles gets Grigori to call Erik the helicopter pilot. Achilles calls Katya and Max tells them to go to the US Embassy and tell them Kyle Achilles sent them and is en route by helicopter with information regarding National Security. Achilles proceeds to clean himself up, puts on one of the dead goon's suit jacket and black shirt, washes his face in the kitchen sink, hears the helicopter rotors, turns on all six gas stove eyes, Grigori is moaning. As he leaves, Achilles shoots Grigori in the head, piercing his broken nose. Achilles gets in copilots' seat with a Glock pointed at the pilot, told to fly to the US Embassy, protected air space says he's expected, lands on Embassy's pad surrounded by Marines. Achilles gets out, identifies himself, is searched and all is taken, Glock, knife, Grigori's tablet etc.

Michael McArthur greets Achilles by name, they had trained together in the CIA's six-man cohort advanced field-operative course and McArthur now worked at the USA Embassy in Moscow for Ambassador Jamison. In the special Embassy room Achilles tells McArthur the intelligence he has is for the Ambassador.

Achilles and Ambassador Jamison work on how to handle the delicate situation, maximizing President Silver survival, protecting the President's life and minimizing the odds of instigating a war. With a police escort the Ambassador's limo races across the Russian countryside to President

Korovin's hunting dacha. The Ambassador greets the presidents and said Mr. Achilles requires a word in private with President Silver where Achilles administers two vials of insect repellent.

"Doesn't matter where you are. Doesn't matter if you're a crocodile or a rabbit. You best look around because you're never safe."

Question: Who can See Russia?

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Some background on the author of "Pushing Brilliance," Tim Tigner from the Goodreads website

He was in Soviet Counterintelligence with the US Army Special Forces. He learned Russian with Reconnaissance Marines and Navy Seals. After the fall of the Berlin wall he worked in Russia where he lead prominent multinational medical companies, worked with cosmonauts, chaired the Association of International Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and helped write Russia's first law on healthcare. He moved to Brussels during the formation of the EU and ran Europe, Middle East and Africa for a Johnson & Johnson company. He has also lived in Silicon Valley where he launched a new medical technologies startup. All of this reported background is relevant to the credibility of his imagination in the political espionage of his novel, "Pushing Brilliance."