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The Awful Truth
by Jeff Hecht
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Mainstream

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"Perestroika, glasnost, humbug!" muttered the old man as he sipped lukewarm coffee from a chipped cup. "It is treason to the glorious revolution."

"Indeed it is, comrade," agreed the Party Secretary, his shaky hand tapping the end of a cigarette on his battered desk. "The Party is coming to a sad end. Who would have thought..."

Both stopped when they heard a knock at the door. When they were young, they would have held their breath in fear of the FBI, but now they worried more about the landlord. The rent on their third-floor office was six months overdue. The few remaining members had nothing to spare from their Social Security checks, and the Party was waiting grimly for the eviction notice. They saw a man's shadow through the dirty glass window, and ignored him.

The man outside knocked again, then turned the knob of the unlocked door. "Comrades, I have glorious news," announced the stranger. He was small, pale, and slightly built, but his clothes were finely tailored and his shoes perfectly shined.

"Who are you?" asked the Party Secretary, always wary of well-dressed strangers claiming to bear good news.

"I am Comrade Ralph, and I've been under cover for 50 years. I return to report successful completion of my mission!"

The Party Secretary squinted over his glasses. "I thought the FBI had stopped paying for memberships."

The newcomer was shocked. "FBI?? I evaded them for half a century. They never suspected me."

"What have you done?" asked the other old man, who dimly recalled when Party members had talked of spying.

"I have been undermining the capitalist swine of America. And I have succeeded beyond my wildest dreams! The industrial imperialist empire is tottering, and ready to fall with the slightest push from the glorious working class."

"It's about time," the Party Secretary began, then paused to hold back a cough. "We keep hearing that the imperialist empire is rotten. But we never heard anything about you."

"I was under deep cover. Very deep cover," mumbled the newcomer. "The Secretary ... the man who was Secretary before you ... said I should not return until my work was done."

"The Party does not believe in the violent overthrow of the United States government," the Party Secretary recited the legal exorcism recommended

in front of suspected police informants. "We merely wish to exercise the right to peaceful dissent."

"I didn't do anything violent. I don't know how to make bombs..."

"So..."

The little man looked straight at the Party Secretary, trying to appear soldierly. "I was assigned to destroy the will of the American public. Psychologists had just discovered the power of subliminal messages. The capitalists used them to deceive the working class, to lure them into fighting imperialist wars and to make them think they benefitted from capitalist exploitation."

"They made my daughter a class enemy. A Yuppie lawyer!" spat the Party Secretary as he put the cigarette in his mouth and began searching his pocket for matches.

"I was the one who saw the power of television, back at the start of the War. I saw that it could reach every home in the country. And I knew that the capitalists would try to control it, like everything else. They wanted to make it a new opiate for the masses, to replace the old religions, but I knew it could rouse the anger of the working class."

"The working class in this country haven't gotten off their collective fat duffs in the past forty years," spat the Party Secretary. He lit his cigarette, inhaled, and coughed.

"Well, yes, but that was ... well, that became ... part of my plan. I had to hide, you see, or they would catch me before I could subvert their evil designs. It was hard. At first I tried deep subliminal messages, hidden even from the advertisers, but they didn't work. Instead of loving Comrade Stalin, they all feared him..." The two old Party workers looked away as he shook his head.

"But I would not admit defeat. If I could not build up, I would tear down. I started with the programs, convincing the networks to make them a little dumber each year. Then I began working on the signals themselves. I found resonances with the electric fields in the human brain. The people talking about the hazards of electromagnetic fields have missed the real danger. The 60 cycles of electric current is just a little too high. When I helped set the standard for color television, I make sure it shows 59.94 fields per second. That puts the subtle flicker of the screen in perfect resonance with the biochemical cycle of neural tissue. An hour of watching each day conditions neurons to misfire. Gradually, it destroys reasoning. Children can't focus their eyes on a page to read. Adults can't reason or think through the consequences of their actions. It destroys patience and the will to work hard."

He paused, having run out of breath before exhausting his supply of words. "I couldn't convince the Europeans to adopt the standard, but I succeeded in America, and it has destroyed the heart of the imperialistic war machine."

The Party Secretary turned to his companion, whose face had paled, and muttered, "He's insane!"

"No, Comrade! It worked. Look around you. I have destroyed the will power of the American public. Call Moscow! It is time for the Red Army to bring the glory of the Socialist Revolution to America."

The Party Secretary coughed so hard that he dropped his cigarette. His shoe ground it into the pile of other ashes on the floor. "Have you seen the news lately, Comrade?" he asked icily.

"I know better than to watch television," announced the little man. "I know what it does to people."

"Or read the papers?"

"I never trusted the imperialist press," replied the newcomer.

"What about the Daily Worker?"

"I couldn't be seen with that. The people I worked for might have suspected the awful truth."

"That's too bad," wheezed the Party Secretary. "The awful truth is that

we already lost."

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