

Lost in Translation

No one knew where Svetlana was. Oliver asked Eduardo, the project manager, who only shook his head and pointed to the clutter of paper on his desk, as if that explained the absence of the office translator, the woman they'd hired from the Kazakhstan government employment agency. He asked Andy, Eduardo's assistant, a kid who looked more like he belonged on a skateboard in a New York City park than helping to run a multi-million dollar US AID project in Almaty. Andy offered the answer that had become his trademark: "NFC," which apparently in Andy's text-speak stood for "No Fucking Clue." Finally, Oliver asked Stefan, the securities expert from the New York Stock Exchange, the chief of party who was nominally in charge of the multivalent consulting assignment. Stefan had his phone to his ear and only shrugged.

Fine, Oliver thought. I'll grab my driver and I'll go to the meeting without her.

He'd been summoned by Professor Nurbayev, the head of the Kazakh legislative reform commission, to discuss changes to the company law that Oliver's group had been advocating, with zero progress, for months. The West insisted on these changes in order to bring post-Soviet Kazakhstan up to a regulatory level that would appease, if not quite satisfy, foreign investors. That Nurbayev was now at least willing to meet was, he hoped, the breakthrough Oliver had been waiting for. The two had, in fact, met briefly once before, at a reception given by the US Ambassador. Oliver remembered the old man as being cordial, disheveled, and shallow, a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other, his eye on the golden-haired Svetlana. Still, everyone agreed that he was the key player on the legislative side, and if Oliver's attempts to reform corporate governance in this country were ever going to get off the ground, Nurbayev's support was crucial. So this meeting was more than just promising. It was vital to the success of his project.

He grabbed his briefcase and headed to the stairs of their Soviet-era office block, not far from the capitol. Where the hell was Svetlana, and how was he going to pull this off without her? Nurbayev spoke some English, having spent a year on a Fulbright at Harvard, but Oliver recalled that it was minimal-to-nonexistent. He had even struggled with the social niceties, the hellos and the how are yous, and Oliver wondered how he had accomplished anything during his time in Cambridge. Of course study was hardly the point back then. His grant would have been about fostering better relations between the superpowers, not actual scholarship. But if Nurbayev really did want to move forward with this reform, this would be only the first of a long series of meetings. Svetlana would be needed to interpret when they started the real work of drafting and negotiating. For now, he hoped, Oliver's elementary Russian and Nurbayev's half-forgotten English would be enough.

He exited the building, looking for his driver, Alexander, whom everyone called Sascha. The project employed two drivers, both free-lancers with fancy German cars that Oliver assumed had been stolen in the West and driven to Central Asia like most of the foreign cars in the city. These were details Eduardo didn't want to know and certainly didn't want to have to report to Washington. He shook his head and held a finger to his lips whenever anyone asked about the origins of these cars or some of the office equipment that had mysteriously appeared without

being authorized. The project didn't buy the cars, they belonged to the drivers, so their provenance didn't matter. For Eduardo, that was the end of the story.

Sascha and his pale-blue Mercedes were nowhere to be seen. He was supposed to be waiting out front at all times. He drove Oliver to meetings, drove him to lunch and sometimes dinner, drove him to and from the office from his apartment near the embassy, and that was it. Easiest job in the world, for which he was well paid, and all he had to do was wait. But he hadn't waited, and it wasn't the first time.

The other driver, Dimitri, was right where he was supposed to be, however, hovering over his black BMW, wiping away the dust that accumulated in seconds on the dry Almaty streets. Dimitri was Stefan's driver, but was also used by the other project staff members when necessary. And Oliver deemed it necessary now.

"Where's Sascha?" Oliver asked Dimitri. Both Sascha and Dimitri understood a little English, although conversations with the two men were always a struggle. Dimitri shrugged and continued dusting his car.

"Off with Svetlana again, is he?" This had happened before and wasn't really Sascha's fault. It was Svetlana who had no doubt commanded the driver to take her wherever it was she thought she needed to go. Sascha was a good man. Svetlana, however, whose loyalties he had suspected from the beginning, was becoming a problem.

"I need to go to a meeting," Oliver said. He was never sure how much Dimitri understood and so he was careful to speak slowly and distinctly. Still, he got only a blank stare from Dimitri. "We go," Oliver tried.

Dimitri shook his head. "Mister Stefan," Dimitri said.

"No, it's okay," Oliver said. "Stefan's in the office. He's not going anywhere. I need you to take me to Professor Nurbayev's dacha outside the city."

Dimitri looked up at the office building, as if asking Stefan for permission.

"Look, I know you're supposed to wait for Stefan, but it won't be a problem. I'll tell him it was all my doing. I have an emergency. We need to go now."

Dimitri shook his head again. Oliver moved closer to him. He had no intention of getting physical with the guy, a much bigger man who had served in the Soviet Army and could no doubt level Oliver with one blow. He only wanted to make the point that he was the boss here, and Dimitri needed to do what he was told. But when he was standing next to the man, looking up into his bloodshot eyes, he understood the real problem. His breath smelled of the cheap Kazakh liquor the men drank. Dimitri wasn't waiting for Stefan after all. He was simply in no shape to get behind the wheel.

Oliver had no desire to drive on Kazakhstan's crazy roads with their crazy—and often inebriated—drivers, but what choice did he have?

“Give me the keys,” he said. Dimitri complied. “Now get in.”

Oliver had the address for Nurbayev's dacha, although addresses were almost meaningless in Almaty. He knew the general vicinity—a settlement just off the main highway to the west—and finding it would require Dimitri to ask the locals for a precise location. An important government official, Nurbayev's house would be known.

They sped through downtown. Traffic was light at this hour because private commercial activity, at least commercial activity of the legitimate kind, was still virtually nonexistent. Even so, pedestrians took their lives in their own hands when crossing the streets because a truck, or a bus, or an unmarked sedan belonging to the secret police, ignoring traffic signs and lights and speed limits, might appear at any moment.

Embassies and government buildings rushed by, then the one high-rise hotel and the one nightclub Oliver had visited. Before long the taller buildings diminished and the streets were lined with one-story structures, many of them empty, some hosting squatters, maybe farmers selling their meager production of cabbages and potatoes and cucumbers out of a concrete shell. Soon they were in the bucolic western district, where private estates—once the exclusive privilege of party officials but now available to any gangster who could accumulate sufficient capital—lurked unseen behind high hedges. To the north, vast wheat fields rolled toward the steppes. To the south lay the snowcapped Altai Mountains.

Finally they came to the turnoff Oliver was looking for, an unmarked road that meandered south toward the mountains. A few miles on this road and then it would be up to Dimitri, if he was able, to navigate the rest of the way. They passed a school that looked closed, an empty playground, a gray concrete building with a barbed wire fence that Oliver suspected was a prison, and a few modest homes. Oliver glanced at his watch and pressed on the accelerator as the road rose into the foothills. So much time had been wasted looking for Svetlana and Sascha, and so much was at stake.

He rounded a bend in the road knowing that soon they would need to stop to ask directions, when something leaped in front of the car. He slammed on the brakes and the tires screeched on the rough pavement, but the collision, unavoidable, was like hitting a wall. Dimitri flew forward, his head banging the windshield, before falling back and crumpling in his seat. Oliver waited for the car's rocking to stop, but didn't move. He took deep breaths, taking stock, assessing the damage. He'd been seat-belted in, and had hit nothing inside the car. He'd twisted his neck attempting avoid whatever it was they'd hit, but otherwise he thought he was okay. He moved his fingers first, then his hands and arms. He lifted both feet. He looked over at Dimitri who appeared to be unconscious. Only then did Oliver open the car door and climb out.

Lying before the Mercedes, the smashed front end of which hissed and steamed, was an enormous goat, its neck contorted, blood trickling from its nostrils and ears. It was obviously dead and so, perhaps, was Dimitri. The meeting was lost, but now that was the least of Oliver's

worries.

Racing down the hill to the right came a red-faced Kazakh, the goatherd, Oliver surmised, screaming and waving his hands, more goats following, bleating and nervous. But what could be done? It was an accident, and it wasn't his fault. The goat had jumped in front of the car and couldn't be avoided. But how was Oliver going to make this bumpkin understand? If Svetlana hadn't run off, if Sascha had waited for him, if Dimitri hadn't been drinking, if the goatherd had kept control of his goddamned goat, none of this would have happened.

The goatherd rushed at Oliver, brandishing his staff. He took a swing, but Oliver ducked.

"Hey, wait a minute," Oliver said.

The goatherd swung again. Oliver ducked again.

"Look, I'm sorry, I'll pay for the goat, okay?" Oliver took out his wallet and waved a twenty dollar bill at the man. The goatherd swung again and Oliver jumped away. "Forty, then?" He pulled out another bill.

The goatherd stopped. He wasn't looking at Oliver, though, and Oliver turned to see that Dimitri had emerged from the car. Blood covered his face and one arm dangled loosely at his side as he limped forward.

Dimitri shouted something in Russian at the goatherd. The goatherd shouted something in reply. Dimitri advanced, shouting. The goatherd, shouting, raised his staff, prepared to swing. Dimitri raised his good hand and shot the goatherd in the head.

The shot rang in Oliver's ears. He raised his hands to his head as he backed farther away. The two twenties fluttered to the ground. What had Dimitri just done? He'd killed the man over the stupid goat? How was that possible? Oliver was willing to pay, it didn't matter, oh, God, what had they done?

Dimitri retrieved the money that had fallen from Oliver's hand and stuffed it into his pocket. He climbed into the driver's side of the Mercedes, wincing as he maneuvered his injured shoulder, and started the engine. It whined and groaned, but it worked. Dimitri grunted something that Oliver didn't understand. Dimitri repeated himself, louder, insistent, and Oliver moved to the passenger side of the car, sliding into the blood-soaked seat.

Using just one arm, Dimitri reversed and drove back the way they'd come. But instead of turning east, toward the city, he went west, the engine complaining loudly, smoke rising from the tented hood. When they entered a village, nothing more than a few houses and a shop alongside the road, he pulled off, behind the shop, out of sight of any traffic that might pass. Dimitri went inside. Oliver followed him, anxious to escape the car, and listened to Dimitri on the telephone. When he hung up he barked something at the shopkeeper who produced a bottle of vodka and two glasses. Dimitri splashed vodka into both glasses and handed one to Oliver. Dimitri drank his in one go, then poured another. Oliver did the same.

In an hour or so, Sascha arrived in his BMW. He barely looked at Oliver but retrieved a towel from the trunk and laid it on the back seat, waited for Oliver to sit, and then put another one on the front seat for Dimitri. Dimitri gave Oliver's cash to the pacing shopkeeper, and then they drove off.

"We have to tell someone," Oliver said.

"No," Dimitri said. "We tell nobody."

"But they'll find out. The shopkeeper will say something."

"No," Dimitri said again.

Oliver imagined the dead farmer and his goat in the middle of the road. Someone would find them. It was a lawless country, but surely there would be an inquiry when a man was found with a bullet in his head. Questions would be asked. The Mercedes would be found then and traced. The police would come to the office and Oliver would have to explain what had happened. Oliver hadn't pulled the trigger, but it was all his fault. He'd been in such a hurry. The repercussions would be endless.

Or maybe not. The car? Stolen in Germany or France. Untraceable. The farmer, a casualty of the country's growing pains, maybe killed by a rival, another goatherd, for all anyone knew, a jealous lover, an angry boss, anyone. As for his own guilt, Oliver might have hit the goatherd with the car instead of the goat. An accident, unavoidable, completely forgivable. And maybe the goatherd won't even be missed? Perhaps there will be no inquiry after all?

"You paid the shopkeeper?" Oliver asked Dimitri.

"I paid."

"And he won't say anything?"

"No."

When they get back to the office, Oliver thought, he'd have Svetlana call Nurbayev. She'd tell him Oliver had gotten lost on the way to the dacha, had gone east instead of west.

"Talk to Eduardo about getting another car," Oliver said.

"Yes," Dimitri said.

A new meeting would be arranged. Excuses would be made. Svetlana would translate. The project would go on.