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Night Heron

Written by Adam Brookes

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N I G H T
H E R O N

Adam Brookes

sphere

SPHERE

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For my parents,
Jill and Michael Brookes

It may be that, like the military-industrial complex, the existence of the espionage-industrial complex has become a foregone conclusion, so deeply entrenched, and so vital, for all its shortcomings, to the nation's security, that it can never be undone.

'Privatized Spying: the Emerging Intelligence Industry' by Patrick R. Keefe
in *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, p. 307.

PART ONE

The Contact.

1

Qinghai Province, western China
The recent past

1.37 a.m.

Prisoner 5995 was where he should not be, and fear was congealing in his mouth.

Any second now.

The thought flickered across his mind, sent adrenalin thrumming through his gut.

He stood in darkness. Beyond the barrack block an arc light saturated the prison camp with silvery light, turned the razor wire to coils of iridescence against the night sky.

Any second now. Any bitching second.

He flattened his bulk against the wall, the brick cool against his hands. He willed himself into shadow, willed himself to stillness. His breathing came fast. In his nostrils, the cool desert air, flecked with kerosene and dust. In his mouth, fear, a rancid, viscous paste.

Any second now.

And there the man was, lumbering along the dusty path

between the barracks, his grey uniform shapeless, his brown leather belt sagging with the weight of the dangling baton, peaked cap high on the back of the head, eyes down, a walkie-talkie in one hand, a cigarette in the other. The 1.30 patrol.

From the shadows, Prisoner 5995 watched the man shamble down the path. The inmates called them *leizi*, the slow-witted, venal imbeciles who constituted the prison guard. *Leizi*. Thunders. For their rumbling and coughing and incessant shouting. 5995 pulled back deeper into darkness. He caught a whiff of cigarette smoke and felt the craving like a kick to the throat.

The thunder had almost reached the block behind which Prisoner 5995 was concealed. 5995 could hear the thunder's boots scuffing the gravelly dust. The thunder should now, by all that was right and holy, walk past the block and turn to the right, his shadow shrinking beneath the fierce scrutiny of the arc light, the crunch of his footsteps receding. The thunder should disappear into the blank night, allowing the prisoner to continue unseen on his precarious way – to what? To freedom? To a firing squad? Or to lethal injection, sodium thiopental bubbling in the vein, in keeping with the times?

5995 waited for the footfalls to pass.

But, silence. The thunder had halted.

A crackle from the walkie-talkie and an electronic *pip* sound.

5995 sought to compress his sizeable girth, his thick thighs and neck, his bristled head and muscular hands, into invisibility, into stillness. A slow crunch of gravel, as if the thunder were turning or shifting his weight. Then a murmur, another crackle. *Pip*.

Silence.

5995 exhaled an iota, took a tiny breath. Still. Still. Stay still.

Then, slowly, the gravelly footsteps resumed. 5995 closed his eyes, felt a prickling of sweat on his scalp. The footsteps were getting closer.

The thunder was not turning away from 5995, as predicted by

months of routine and all the intelligence a practised operative like 5995 could gather. The thunder was confounding reason and walking directly towards 5995 and his grossly inadequate cover. Screw his mother. Had 5995, in his reconnoitring, missed a security camera? Or had the treacherous, conniving bitches with whom he had shared two decades of life in this labour reform facility turned him in already?

The footsteps came closer, boot on concrete, grit, particulate.

Fear stopped his breath, shredded his thoughts. He forced himself against the wall, crushed an overwhelming desire to bolt, to run, to *move*.

The thunder stepped off the path, out of the light, his back to 5995. From where he stood, an arc of scarlet light, then a scatter of sparks.

His cigarette.

The thunder seemed to be reaching for something in his clothing. Silence, then a liquid hiss and spatter, a whiff of ammonia and alcohol.

The man is pissing, thought 5995. He is pissing against the wall.

The spatter turned sporadic, and stopped. The thunder arranged himself and coughed, a shocking bark in the darkness. 5995 imagined himself encased in clay, eternally silent and still like some tomb warrior, buried, invisible since the days of Qin.

The thunder was yawning, feeling in his pocket. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes. 5995 heard its cellophane rustle. The thunder shook the packet, held it up to the arc light, made a pincer with his forefinger and thumb and drew from it a bent cigarette. He placed the cigarette between his lips. Now the lighter, its raspy *snick*. 5995 blinked at the flame and saw the thunder tilt his head back, inhale noisily. The thunder crumpled the empty packet in his hand, turned, raised his arm and hurled it into the shadows. It hit 5995 on the chin, causing him to jerk reflexively,

as if he had been struck. The packet fell to the ground, and the thunder turned quickly and peered into the darkness. He cannot see me, thought 5995. He has no night vision. The thunder tilted his head, looked again. Very, very still now.

The walkie-talkie crackled.

The thunder looked down, pressed the talk key, and in a desultory movement brought the walkie-talkie to his mouth, mumbled, and let it fall. He sighed and turned away. His footsteps receded into the night.

1.42 a.m. Eighteen minutes until the next patrol.

Move.

Delicately, and with a degree of light-footedness and quiet surprising in such a big man, Prisoner 5995 ran through the savage arc light, across the path, to the windowless two-storey boiler house opposite. A grey door, which, thought 5995 as he ran, must be unlocked if I am to live. He slowed, reached for the handle.

The door gave. His momentum carried him through, and he was inside. A dim, cool interior, damp concrete under his feet, a sulphurous smell. He closed the door behind him gently, breathing heavily, allowed his eyes to readjust.

Before him he made out a pile of coal. Beyond it a doorway, through which came the hissing and ticking of the boiler. The boiler room was festooned with pipework, lit by a single bulb, water pooling on the floor. He stopped in the doorway, listened. Nothing. He passed the boiler soundlessly and pushed to one side a dense plastic curtain. A dingy corridor, in darkness. At its end double doors.

Move.

He inched the doors open, peered into a shadowy office space of six or seven desks, dull filing cabinets, a smell of old cardboard, cigarettes. He stood, collecting himself. He thought, Dear God, this might work. This might . . .

A hand on his shoulder.

Adrenalin like lightning in his muscles, anger and shock flickering in the brain, 5995 turned fast, reaching for anything, cloth, flesh, hair. He forced his weight forward, a shout strangled in his throat. The body before him gave, unresisting. 5995 slammed it into the wall. The body grunted with the impact, and then spoke, a quavering whisper.

‘Bit less noise, if I were you.’

With one hand to its neck, the other raised to strike, 5995 regarded this creature, its flickering eyes.

‘What, what in God’s name are you doing here?’ he whispered.

‘I did everything you said.’

‘I nearly killed you.’

‘The locks, everything. And all the stuff is over there on the floor.’

‘God in heaven.’ 5995 let it go, this trembling scrap of humanity, in its labour reform grey, its cotton shoes. He rolled his head back, caught his breath.

‘It’s all there, you can check it,’ said the man.

‘Oh, I will.’

5995 turned. Between the desks lay a miserable pile of objects. He kneeled and rummaged through them, checking off each one. Two large plastic containers, of the sort that might have held cooking oil, with screw tops, filled with water and linked together by a length of green nylon cord. A carrier bag, containing a paper bag half-filled with corn bread and cooked greens, the grease rendering the paper bag translucent. Two bars of the atrocious chocolate they sold at the commissary. Nine packs of cigarettes. A lighter. A few yuan notes, barely enough to buy a bowl of noodles in the real world. A small clear polythene bag, cinched at the top with an elastic band, and what appeared to be a yellowed newspaper clipping inside. And a brick. That was it. His escape equipment. His plan.

'It's all there, isn't it?'

5995 looked at him hard.

'Yes, it's all there,' he said.

'Yes.'

'And why are you here?' said 5995.

'We have a deal, don't we? Peanut?'

That was what they called him. Peanut.

'Yes, we have a deal,' he said.

'You will stick to it, yes?' said the man.

'For God's sake, yes.' It was, in truth, less of a deal, and more, well, blackmail, Peanut reflected briefly. He had found this creature, a trusty with a job in the prison administration, behind the kitchen storage bins, eyes wide with panic, pants round ankles and manhood pointing to the stars, while the cookhouse thunder kneeled and gaped. Peanut had offered a careful bargain: his silence in exchange for access to the offices and the loading dock.

'You won't say anything, Peanut? About me, my mistakes. When you're . . . out.'

5995 rolled his eyes.

'I will not tell anyone that you sold sexual favours in a labour reform facility.'

'That's a harsh way of putting it, Peanut. Unkind.'

'Screw unkind. Now lock the doors behind you and keep your mouth shut.'

The man sighed.

5995 shook his head, shoved the supplies in his pockets, draped the water bottles over his shoulder, picked up the brick. The man's eyes held his for a second, a half-smile.

'Good luck, Peanut.'

'Screw luck.'

And Prisoner 5995, alias Peanut, was gone.

*

The loading dock was flanked by seven-foot walls. Beyond the dock, a series of three locked gates and the road to the main prison complex, forty miles away.

On the other side of the seven-foot wall, nothing. No fences, no perimeter, no wire. Just two hundred miles of rocky desert plain. Not so hard to escape labour reform, but the desert? No one escaped the desert. No one tried.

The loading dock was in darkness. Peanut listened to the night. Nothing.

Three blue plastic crates of the sort that might have held beer bottles were in their prearranged position. Peanut set them one atop the other, quietly, next to the wall. Standing on the crates, he rested his elbows on the wall, into which some thoughtful comrade had cemented jagged chunks of broken glass. Peanut took off the stained blue tracksuit top that he wore. He laid it on the wall to cover a swathe of glass perhaps eighteen inches wide. He took the brick, felt its heft, and very gently, the tracksuit muffling the noise, chipped at the glass. Within minutes he had created a narrow, navigable pathway across the top of the wall.

He hauled himself up, kneeled on the wall, swaying for a moment, clutching the water bottles and the carrier bag. Then he jumped.

Stillness, he knew, was enemy to him.

So he ran.

He ran for hours in the night. The desert plain was strewn with sharp shale. It rattled and clinked beneath each footfall, and his cotton shoes were too thin, and the shale jutted and forced his ankles to odd angles and his feet were an agony. The two plastic water bottles grew heavier and swung and slapped against him, queering his movement, and the nylon cord that held them cut a welt in his shoulder. He longed to leave the water and go on unencumbered. But without it he'd die. Quickly. The air was cold in his throat and his breath came in gasps.

Ahead, low hills against the night sky.

He stopped in the dark, squatted, tried to calm his breathing and hold his balance. Faint starlight, the wind sharp. Could he risk a cigarette? He cupped his hands around the flare of the lighter. The tobacco stank in the clear air. They would smell it a mile away.

Screw them.

A deep, cold billow of fear.

You're exhausted, he thought. Fear is born of loneliness and exhaustion. Where had he read that?

Stillness is the enemy.

Move.

Up and running, stumbling over the jagged ground, the water bottles flailing, towards the dark hills. As he ran, a beautiful, stupid song from childhood shimmered in his head.

Er yue li lai ya! Hao chun guan! February's coming! A fine spring beckons! The families are at work in the fields! We hand grain to the troops!

How he loved that idiotic song. He'd sung it the day he got his red scarf, scrubbed raw and on parade outside the neighbourhood committee offices. Afterwards Father, walking stiffly by then, subdued, had taken him and his sister, Mei, to the park. It was 1969. They'd sat on a stone bench under a luminous willow, ice cream dripping from the stick, cicadas whirring in the still, thundery air.

He had about two hours until dawn, and the sirens and the dogs.

His absence had already been noted. Back in the barracks, Prisoner 7775, fraudster, rapist and light sleeper, was awake and contemplating the empty bunk above him. Peanut often got up in the night to piss. They'd fought about it for years. But this time Peanut had not reappeared. It had been a good hour and a

half, and if the thunders came in at dawn and found Peanut gone, Prisoner 7775 was going to be asked about it, as was everyone else in Production Squad 20. Asked forcefully.

Prisoner 7775 turned the problem over in his mind. He liked his absent neighbour, which was rare, because in general 7775 didn't hold with the intellectuals and the politicals. He didn't trust them, all their bold words evaporating into the labour reform cringe at the first sign of trouble.

But Peanut was different. He was *resourceful*. While most of Production Squad 20 were skin and bone, laced with taut, wiry muscle, Peanut remained fleshy. While 7775 struggled to accumulate items of value in the prison economy – cigarettes, letter paper, antibiotics – Peanut seemed always to have a supply. Which he would share, sometimes.

Prisoner 7775 reflected on his acquaintance with his calculating companion. Their years together in labour reform were indistinguishable one from another, punctuated only by occasional, strange, memorable episodes. 7775 spooled them through his mind.

Once, years before, a weedy little political had arrived in the camp, trembling and weepy, eyes sunken. He was a lawyer of some sort, who'd tried too hard. On a work party up in the hills, he got knocked about because he was useless with a shovel, and because he had straggly hairs on his upper lip, and because it was raining. Nothing serious, but a couple of thunders joined in with their batons and his nose went and the blood was running down his chin, gobbets in it, and he was all weepy again. Peanut watched it unfold, and when it was over, stood the little political on his feet, helped him back to the barracks and cleaned him up.

And then Peanut told the little political to write a letter, to address it to 'foreign journalists'. In Beijing. There were lots of them, he said, and they lived in a big compound near Altar of the Sun Park. So the two prisoners composed a letter, and the little

political, in spidery characters blotched with tears, told of the terror and degradation that was labour reform, spiced up a bit, and Peanut got it smuggled out in the laundry run and sent to Beijing. And some foreign newspaper printed it! Big exposé! *Horrors of China's Gulag!* And, soon after, inspection teams showed up, and the thunders' faces were a treat.

Now, as Peanut pointed out, the higher-ups did not care one whit about conditions in labour reform, or beatings, or whether the little political lived or died. But they cared that they had been humiliated by foreigners. And they were going to make everyone else in the Labour Reform Bureau care too. The little political was given a cushy job in the kitchen, and no one said a word, and Peanut just looked at the thunders with a knowing expression, an I-can-fuck-you-up-if-I-try expression.

How the hell did Peanut know about foreign journalists, anyway?

7775 lay in the fetid air of the barracks, the night pressing in on him, listening to the whispered breathing of the other prisoners. He clutched at his blanket and thought of a home he'd once had and a little girl in pigtails cracking sunflower seeds with her teeth. Her face was almost gone now. He pawed away the desperation.

7775 wouldn't turn Peanut in.

Not yet, anyway. Wait another hour.

He was on the slope now, heading into the hills, the ground less stony, a little easier. The darkness was holding, and it was colder, traces of snow on the ground. Exhaustion took his mind in discursive, pointless directions. He wondered idly if he was leaving scent, if they even had dogs. He'd never seen a dog in the camp. Any dog to come within range of Production Squad 20 would have been beaten to death and grilled with the cumin that 1414's mother sent. 1414 – *yao si yao si*. It wasn't his number; it just

rhymed with *want to die, want to die*, which was what he shouted at night, and it stuck. Early on 1414 had been in the shackles, hands chained to the waist, and a wooden bar two feet long affixed each end to an ankle, so that when he walked each foot described a half-circle. A couple of the Christians had fed him and wiped his arse.

Peanut stopped, breathing heavily, and looked behind him. He was gaining height. He saw the lights of the prison camp across the plain, faint now, silver in the night. No sound, no activity, yet. No trucks. Of course no one escaped. Where the hell would anyone go? He looked up again, breathing hard. The slope would steepen, he knew, and then he'd almost be there. Move.

7775 pondered again the empty bunk above him, then sat up. Time now, Peanut. Sorry, but needs must. In the darkness he felt for the grey jacket hanging from the peg above him, the white stripes across the shoulders. He padded down the centre of the barracks, the concrete cold against his bare feet, biding his time. The next few hours would be tricky.

He leaned over the familiar sleeping form. 'Section Chief, wake up! Prisoner Number 7775 wishes to report.'

From the section chief, nothing, just the hiss of sleep. 7775 bit his lip, then shook a shoulder. 'Prisoner Number 7775 wishes to report.'

One baleful eye opened, grasping for meaning at this dead hour.

'Section Chief!' 7775 stood upright now. Better make it official, he thought. 'Prisoner Number 7775 wishes to report that Prisoner Number 5995 is absent.'

'What time is it?'

'Five, Section Chief.'

A yawn, a thick smell rising from the bedroll. 'What do you mean he's absent?'

‘He’s not there, Section Chief.’

‘Well, where’s he gone? Isn’t it Peanut?’

‘Prisoner Number 7775 does not know where Prisoner Number 5995 has gone, Section Chief.’

‘Why are you talking like that? Have you been to look for him?’

‘No, Section Chief.’

Over the section chief’s sleep-sodden face, a shadow of realisation spread slowly. He blinked and struggled out of his bedroll. Their balding, affable section chief, himself a prisoner – saboteur apparently, though no one knew of what – was oppressor and friend both. Now he was pulling on a vest and standing pot-bellied in the dark, rubbing his hand across his chin.

‘So where’s he gone?’

‘I don’t know where he’s gone, Section Chief,’ which got a direct look.

The section chief turned and looked out of the window at the dust and the glow from the arc lights, breath steaming the glass, fingers splayed against the pane, hopeful.

‘What do we do?’

7775 opened his mouth, then shut it again.

‘Yes? What?’

‘7775 would suggest reporting to the duty guard officer, Section Chief.’

The section chief stared at him. ‘But he must be somewhere.’

‘It’s been . . . a while.’

Panic flaring now.

‘A while?’

The section chief was out of the barracks at a splay-footed run, heading towards the guard house, where the thunders were dozing in front of a Hong Kong movie in which brave monks chopped down the enemies of China.

*