

Shooting Russians

The deal to shoot the Russian was struck in the dingy back bar of Filthy McNasty's pub in Pentonville. The shooter, who was not an Irishman but was treated by everyone as if he was, drank lager. The buyer, a tall suited Englishman with broad shoulders and big hands, was on Guinness. Grey February daylight filtered through the nicotine-stained windows.

"So let me get this straight", said the Irishman, in quiet measured tones. "You don't know what this feller Vassily Blokhin looks like, you say he lives in London but you don't know where, but you know he's going to be in Egypt next week?"

"That's about the size of it", replied the Englishman. The Irishman thought that he sounded East End, but well educated.

"Doesn't he pay tax?"

"Not under his own name, no."

"What's he into?"

The Englishman lit a cigarette. "Sex trafficking and prostitution, mainly. Kiddie porn as a sideline. Nasty piece of work. His gang run girls from Russia, Estonia, Siberia, dirt-poor places like that. Routes them to London via Prague. These girls from coal-mining towns think they're coming to the West to be barmaids, dancers, au pairs, make their fortune. They end up in brothels here, no money, no passport, no language, too scared of his goons to go to the cops. Slavery, really."

"Nice. And the kiddie porn?"

"A sideline. Internet stuff. I know he can get you a fourteen year-old for three grand."

"Was she worth it?" The ghost of a smile played on the Irishman's face.

The Englishman stared impassively. "Funny."

"No offence. What about Egypt? How do you know he'll be there?"

"Our man Blokhin is persona-non in Moscow at the moment, some local spat. He's got a business partner, name of Leved or Lebed, handles things from the Russian end. We've had a tip that Blokhin and Lebed will be meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh next week."

"Why there?"

He stubbed out his cigarette with a massive paw. "Would you believe that, after London, his biggest market is Israel? Seems that they use tarts more than we do and have a big thing for Baltic blondes. Sadly for your average Jerusalem punter, Israeli immigration has been cracking down. So they've taken to flying the girls into Egypt on tour groups and then smuggling them across the border. The Bedouin do it – nice little sideline to the camel rides, I suppose. Lots of Russians visit Sharm, you know."

"OK. So how do I find this mystery man? What can you give me?"

"One thing we do know, Blokhin has a scar on his throat, courtesy of that Moscow unpleasantness." The Englishman passed over a manila envelope. "These here are some of his KA's. Main one is his bodyguard, a bruiser called Yukov, here." He slid out one photograph. "He should be easy enough to spot."

The Irishman studied the photograph: heavily muscled, narrow blue eyes, big chin and sneering mouth. He looked up at the Englishman, dark eyes glittering beneath heavy brows. "KA's? Speak like that and anyone would think you were police..."

The Englishman shifted "Not me. Why did you leave Belfast, anyway?"

"Ah, peace broke out. No further use for someone with my particular talents. Decided to offer my service in a few of the world's other trouble spots. Here, my shout."

They agreed the money over another pint. During the next day, the Irishman spent some of the Englishman's advance. Two days later he was crammed in to an aisle seat on a packed charter flight from Gatwick. The in-flight movie starred Owen Wilson: he studied the set of photographs and descriptions for most of its duration and read the small print in the back of his passport for the rest.

Sharm airport is a grey concrete strip and set of low concrete and glass buildings in a drab brown desert landscape. As he walked off the plane into a wall of dry heat, tainted with jet fuel, the Irishman noted the armed policemen that slouched in the available shade around the apron. Inside the terminal building he handed over money for an entry visa and waited patiently amongst the pale sun-seekers and tanned divers to be shepherded through the chaotic immigration process. A flight from Moscow had recently arrived: he studied faces unobtrusively and unproductively.

At the baggage reclaim he spent some time filling in forms to reclaim the steel case that carried his equipment. He'd had a lengthier job in London getting it onto the flight in the first place, but as it wasn't cabin baggage he had succeeded in the end.

The official looked at him suspiciously. "Where do you think you will use this, sir?"

"Up in the mountains. I've come to shoot the wild goats."

The baggage conveyor belts were stopped. A pack of scurrying, moustachioed Egyptian porters dragged random suitcases out to bewildered tourists until they hit on the correct one, then demanded a tip. The Irishman got his clothes holdall after five misses. He tipped twenty pence.

On the first day he hired a bike and started cycling. Sharm is three resorts spread out along fifteen kilometres of coastal highway between the desert and the Gulf of Aqaba. There are around one hundred hotels. His was modern and featureless, just like the rest, as he soon discovered. His routine at each was the same: an armed guard showed him through the hotel's metal detectors; the sweat from his cycling would chill on his skin in the air conditioning; the desk clerk would be obsequious.

"Excuse me can you help, I am looking for this man, Genardy Yukov, he completed his PADI certification yesterday with us at Clam Divers but didn't pick up his certificate or log book, he seems to have changed hotels, is he now staying here by any chance?"

He'd had a passport-style photo of Yukov pasted into the PADI documentation, which was as authentic as bribery could get you in London. After three days he'd covered all the hotels and only had sore calf muscles to show for it.

The Irishman spent an afternoon on the coarse white-sand beach, resting and reflecting. Gazing out over Na'ama Bay, he eventually realised that he'd overlooked one possibility: a number of large cabin cruisers, the ocean-going type, bobbed in the gentle swell, moored to buoys. The nearest was about 200 metres away, just beyond the coral reefs that had brought the first tourists here, but still within the lee of the bay.

"Where better if you wanted a little privacy? And what the feck do I do about it?"

Late that night, he had his piece of good fortune. As he strolled along the restaurant-lined promenade that ran between the beach and the hotels, he spotted Yukov sitting at a Bedouin-style cafe, Arab carpets strewn everywhere. Yukov was sitting upright on a bolster, dressed in a tight white t-shirt that accentuated his gym-built muscles. A pretty but bored-looking girl was sitting on each of his bulky thighs. Neither was older than eighteen. The Irishman strolled into the café and ordered a mint tea, the trio noting him disinterestedly. The waiter, a tall thin man in a white kaftan with a prominent nose, came up to them and chatted in broken Russian. After a

few minutes he went away and changed the music, something poppy and Russian. The smaller of the two girls, a tanned feline blonde with a bored, sulky expression, got up and started to dance, her shoulders and hips as sinuous as smoke in a breeze. The tall waiter joined her with a hopping little jig, clapping. The Irishman watched her arse gyrate, clad in skin tight white pedal pushers, until he realised that Yukov was staring at him, a smile on his face.

"You selfish prick. You're not jealous about me leeching at your girl, you just want me to know that you're shagging them both."

After the Russians paid up and left, the Irishman followed them to a jetty that the glass-botomed boats picked up the tourists from. They climbed into a moored black Zodiac dinghy, guarded by another heavy-set Slav. It purred slowly into the ocean darkness beyond the beachfront lights.

"Gotcha", he murmured, watching the running lights disappear.

The next morning, the Irishman transferred the contents of his steel case into a holdall. From the beach, he scanned the bay with binoculars until he spotted the Zodiac, tethered at a floating platform at the stern of a large motor yacht called "Shalimar", about half a kilometre offshore. He considered using a boat to get closer but discounted it when he saw the heavy-set Slav come to the stern of the cruiser and sweep the sea with binoculars. If he was spotted he would stand out like the Pope at an Orange Lodge meeting, with probably the same life expectancy.

He spent some time walking the promenade and studying beachfront buildings before turning into the grounds of the Hilton Fayrouz hotel complex. The buildings were uniformly low-rise, the tops just high enough to clear the date palms that fringed the beach, like all of the other hotel complexes along this stretch of coast. What he had spotted at the Hilton was that its promenade café had a large water tank and a maze of pipe work on the roof. Good visibility and good cover, he judged. He sat at an outdoor table, bought coffee and croissants and spent some time studying the area, the staff's lines of sight, the comings and goings on the hotel's footpaths. He planned his strategy.

"Well, here we go, laddo."

He paid-up and walked slowly toward the main part of the hotel, as if he were a returning guest. Apparently dropping his hotel key, he was able to quickly check around him as he picked it up. No one seemed to be looking. He scurried in a crouch toward the side of the café building, behind a large dumpster, where a set of iron rungs was embedded in the whitewashed wall. He slung his holdall over his shoulder and started to climb. As he neared the top, he glanced down. An orange-skinned forty-something female tourist was walking toward the hotel from the beach, staring up at him. He winked at her conspiratorially. She grinned back and walked on.

"Still got that boyish charm," he thought. "Device defused."

Hauling himself over the roof edge, he saw that his instincts had been right. He was able to secrete himself in the shade under the water tank and had a good view to the ocean. He started to assemble his kit, but not hurriedly - he knew that he could be there for hours. He placed a small beanbag on the edge of the roof and rested the end of his longest barrel on it - at this range he would need the support. He lay down on the hot concrete roof and lined up on the Shalimar, the view superb, if only stern-on. Not for the first time he gave silent thanks for the output from the Zeiss optics factory.

The boat had a two-deck superstructure, the rear seating area being mainly in shadow from the upper deck's canopy. Inside the main cabin, the Irishman could discern heads moving in the darkness, but could make out no features. There was plenty of activity outside of the cabin as well: three guards on surveillance duty, with occasional visits from Yukov, who seemed to be part of the cabin meeting.

After an hour or so, the two girls from the previous night came into view, diving off of the front of the boat where they had evidently been sunbathing, out of sight. They splashed for a while

then swam around to the mooring platform on the stern where they clambered back on board, clad in thong bikinis that left little to the imagination. They towelled off and applied more lotion, an event that drew the attention of all of the deck guards, before heading forwards again.

The day wore on and the Irishman's eyrie became more uncomfortable. The thirty-degree heat reflected off of all the white surfaces and metal around him, steadily baking him. His sweat ran into his eyes, eyes that were suffering anyway from the glare off of the ocean. Worst of all was the constant aroma of coffee and baking bread from the café beneath him. Still his target did not appear. He drained a bottle of water and tried to ignore the growing pressure on his bladder. After four hours he started arranging himself to make use of the empty water bottle, still trying not to look away from the boat for any length of time. Just as he was about to relieve the pressure, things changed on the Shalimar.

Through the sight, he saw Yukov emerge and issue orders to one of the guards, who scampered down into the Zodiac. The two blondes tottered back from the foredeck, discarding the sarongs, hats and sunglasses that they had evidently been wearing. Two men he had not seen before emerged from the main cabin, smoking cigars, laughing, their faces frustratingly still in shade. The larger of the two gestured to the two blondes, standing quietly to one side.

"Go on matey-boy, try a free sample," muttered the Irishman. "That means you're probably Leved or Lebed, but I won't know until I see that scar."

Leved hesitated, made gestures. The Irishman resumed his commentary. "Oh no Monsieur Ambassadors, with this Ferrero Rocher you are really spoiling us."

Leved stepped down onto the mooring platform, a thin balding man, no scars visible. "Thank you Comrade, but they give me wind." The guard fired up the Zodiac's outboard, Leved stepped in and waved up at Blokhin, still in the shadows of the deck. "Come out, come out..."

He could see that Blokhin was now taking his clothes off, assisted by the smaller girl who neatly folded them. The Zodiac cast off and headed toward shore. The taller blonde climbed onto the side of the yacht and dived into the sea. Now clad in his swimming costume, Blokhin and the girl stepped into the sunshine onto the mooring deck, he stooping to speak to her. The Irishman tensed. He couldn't see the man's throat clearly. Was this definitely Blokhin? The man took the girl into his arms and kissed her, ran one hand through her blonde curls, the other, still holding his cigar, down her bare back. Evidently finishing the cigar was the priority, for as the girl started to kiss her way down his pale chest and stomach, he leaned back against the stern of the boat, slipped it into his mouth, closed his eyes and offered his grinning face up to the sun. The Irishman saw the ugly white scar across his windpipe: he had his man. He held his breath, moved the target down to the back of the kneeling girl's head, paused for a moment, reconsidered, then swung back up again to the smiling, wiry Russian's face. He started to shoot. He was not caught.

The Englishman published the Irishman's photographs in his newspaper, along with the rest of his expose on the sex slave racket. The article was syndicated globally, the photographs of a gang boss being obviously but not graphically felled by a teenager selling particularly well in more sensationalist publications. Blokhin was arrested and eventually deported back to Moscow, where he subsequently dropped out of sight. His departure resulted in a brief flurry of violence that culminated in the deaths of four Albanians and two Russians. With the proceeds of his work, the Irishman was able to move out of his Kilburn flat and into a larger place in Hackney. The new tenant in Kilburn, an Irish accountant, unfortunately died in a mysterious fire not long after moving in.