



Blue Swan

by Chris Mathison

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Okay, Version 1 is shipping and early sales are good.

Right now, I'm lunching solo underneath Tokyo Station as trains rumble overhead. I'm slurping noodles and thinking to myself, Looks terrific, but our little ZA>COM is still a startup on a shoestring. How can we grow this company?"

Boom! I get a brainstorm. Since we've mapped in both Japanese alphabets and got kanji conversion knocked, how hard would it be to yank one alphabet and shove in another—like Korean, Greek or—Whoa, Nellie—Cyrillic! I mean, it's all ASCII, right? Should be a walk in the park! Jeez, our itsy-bitsy outfit has already developed the means for a full-fledged Russian word processor—we just hadn't realized it! I slap my forehead—Wow! The USSR's a big spread. Maybe we can move in. Yahoo!

I slurp more noodles, look up and there's this guy. Guy says—heavy Russian accent—"Mind if I join you?"

Don't know why he wants to join me, but I don't mind. I don't own the table. "No problem," I tell him.

He sits down, introduces himself, hands me his name card. (Something tells me not to offer mine just yet.) He says he's Alexandre Something-Impossible-to- Pronounce, the marketing manager for Aeroflot Airlines, which has an office down the street.

I know it, so I nod. "Yeah. That's the place the rightwing Japanese sound trucks keep blasting all day long. How do you guys ever get any work done? "

He laughs; says I sound American and wants to know what's up with me in Tokyo.

I give him the 90-second capsule sans technology. Tell him I'm a writer, an "at large" kinda guy. Then he mentions that Aeroflot has this in-flight magazine called *Blue Swan*. Always looking for contributors. Would I be interested?

"Absolutely, " I immediately shoot back.

Alex is tall, handsome, well-spoken and tailored. He picks up both lunch tabs. Nice. Asks me if I'll go back to his office, talk things over, meet his sales-marketing crew.

"Sure. Why not?" I'm excited.

So now I'm inside. Meet a bunch of Russians. They're all real friendly. I'm real friendly. It's real casual. Everybody's getting along swell. Feels right, so I bust a move:

"Dudes ... are you, like, you know, *communists*?"

They laugh heartily, saying you gotta be to get posted overseas. Moreover, says Alex, they're all true believers, card-carrying and proud of it—just love Mother Russia. ... So how about me? Like, how am I arranged philosophically? they ask with circumspection.

"Me?" I tick off capitalist to the core, entrepreneurial to the extreme, free trader to the max, free as a bird. "All I want from life," I exude, "is more money, preferably other peoples. Some of yours if you got any." I give 'em all a wink and toothy grin to top off my line. They crack up.

Then I tell them, truthfully, that I'm half-Russian on my father's side. Never been to the USSR, but hey, I'm a "roots" kinda guy. I really want to go! Want to catch the Moscow Circus, the Bolshoi, the Hermitage; tromp the Silk Road, swim in the Black Sea, climb the Caucasuses, ride the subways, especially those with the rocket escalators in the Moscow

stations I've heard so much about. Heck, maybe I'd find some old relatives while I'm there.

"Closest I ever got to Russia, " I tell them, "Was at an outdoor chess tournament with life-sized pieces aboard one of your cruise ships out of Vladivostok that I hopped aboard in Yokohama. " I pause dramatically, lower my voice. "Had your guy a rook down. Then his skinny black bishop sneaks up out of nowhere, snuggles up to a scrawny little pawn and checkmates me! Never saw it coming—Jeez, how did I miss it so badly? "

They love my rap. Offer me the magazine gig. I say sure—how about I do a sweet piece on Japanese arranged marriage, then follow it up next issue with something hard and informative on artificial intelligence?

Terrific, they say. There's a hint that after an issue or two, they'll send me to Moscow to figure out some Russo-Japanese angle for future stories.

Cool.

They offer top yen, about three times what I'd usually get for a magazine feature.

Way cool.

Just before I leave, Alex casually asks if I often travel. "Comrade Dude, travel is what I Do." I grin. In that case, he goes on, the next time I'm at Narita airport, could I pick up some little pamphlet for him? An interior guide they give away to anyone. Nothing improper, of course. Aeroflot, he explains, is forced to fly in and out of Niigata, so he never has

a chance to get out to Tokyo's main airport. Save him a trip.

How about it?

Alarm bells go off so I tell him I'll think about it. Alex drops the subject. I split, promising to be in touch.

Now I'm back on the sidewalk, back on the ankle express. I want this gig, really want to go to Russia on the house, but I'm no dummy. Could this be the first step in being recruited by the KGB? And maybe the magazine deal is only a carrot? Rats!

Real suspicious now, I zoom over to the U.S. embassy for some free advice. Soon as I show all the Aeroflot name cards to the information officer, bang! —I'm in a room with five or six intelligence types. ... But hey, they're real friendly. I'm real friendly. They know my byline from the baseball

features I write for *The Japan Times*. Right off the bat, they want to talk spring training.

“How ‘bout them Giants—think they’ll repeat?” one of them asks.

“No way, “I tell them. “Yomiuri’s all washed up. ... Giants leave their starters in too long—their arms are DOA in August. Their relievers get no work. Then suddenly it’s September, and they got N-O-T-H-I-N-G.”

“Say, I got a kick out of that interview you did with the Japanese baseball commissioner,” another one says. “How’d you get Shimada-san to spew so openly?”

I spill the inside scoop on how the commissioner was plotting to rid Japanese baseball of all foreign players within five years, and how my exclusive caused a media

frenzy and eventually forced the old goat to recant.

Next, me and the guys swap info on our favorite Tokyo night spots.

It is not a heavy scene. So, I blurt:

“Dudes ... are you, like, um, *secret agents*?”

They roll their eyes. Somebody says, “C’mon Chris, this is serious. ... Tell us what happened over there.”

I spill, quickly offering to walk away from this "dirty, filthy, rotten, stinking, no good, vey bad commie mag gig. "

They hoot but cry that’s the last thing they want me to do.

The agent who took off with the Russians’ business cards returns. He says, “OK, here’s the deal. Your friend

Alexandre is really (so-and-so unpronounceable) and a colonel in the GRU."

"What's GRU?" I ask.

"It's their army intelligence, even nastier than the KGB. All these guys belong to it, " he says, handing me back the cards.

They tell me, as a loyal American, I should go along with the magazine offer and, of course, periodically report back to them. They'll "make it worth my while." What the "Ruskies" are surely recruiting me for, they explain, is technology espionage. This leads one of them to observe: "Your main deal is computer software, right? " Then he pulls out *my* ZA>COM business card! One I guess they had all

along, and continues, "Your pal Alex didn't meet you by accident."

He goes on to explain that they've never been able to get into Aeroflot's office, and they're positively jubilant that I did. And then made a beeline straight to them. ... So, won't I please help? Pretty please? These are my fellow Americans; these are real nice guys—but it's clear I have no choice. But it's fine and dandy with me, though.

It's been only a short time since lunch—and like, wow—now I'm a spy! Maybe even a double agent. I wonder, aside from all the extra moolah and new pals it looks like I'm gonna make, how I can work this to my long-term advantage? Namely our Russian word processor. I start scheming.

* * *

Over the next several months I churn out stories for *Blue Swan*. Aeroflot likes them, even translates several for the domestic edition. From time to time, my CIA contact calls me to set up a meeting.

Sometimes he says: "Hi, it's 'Steve.' Free Wednesday? ... Can we meet at the American Club for tennis? " ... That means we're going to have lunch this coming Thursday at the Grand Palace Hotel.

Or maybe: "Hey it's 'Bob' How about next Tuesday for golf? " ... That means we're going to meet for dinner Monday at the New Otani.

Swear I'm not making this up. The code was that simple. But all I can report to them are what brands of fax machines and dedicated Japanese word processors Aeroflot has, and how many secretaries work in the office, and

whether they're cute. ... My CIA guy always wants to know all about that last tidbit.

But, boy oh boy, do I ever get wined and dined, paid and repaid throughout!

Anyhow, this goes on and on, and I realize something unexpected is happening—I'm becoming good buds with these GRU/KGB guys. Especially Alexandre. Sure, in the beginning he makes a few more lame attempts to recruit me, but I always demur, finally telling him to save his breath:

"Comrade, pal, dude, what are you trying to do—get me in trouble with my government? What happens if I get arrested or deported or excommunicated, or whatever they do to bad citizens? ... I'd be a man without a country. Russia's the last place I'd ever live. You don't even have baseball."

Alex guffaws. Doesn't appear to be a problem for him that I won't snatch secrets or any stuff. Instead, he increases my assignments and raises my rate.

We start meeting two or three times a week for breakfast or mid-morning coffee. Our ritual is always the same. Alex reads me anti-USA diatribes from *Pravda*. I tell him it's the biggest crock I've ever heard—what drugs are those editors on, anyway? I read him items from the *New York Times*, which he “disproves” by applying Marxist theory. So, no matter what wowie-zowie thing America claims it did today, according to Alex, it never happened, it couldn't have—everybody except the rich is starving to death in America—don't I realize this?

We get nowhere ideologically but enjoy the sessions immensely. You know those Russians—they thrive on

intellectual sparring. Lenin and Trotsky planned their whole revolution in coffee shops. That's what they do.

Alex wants to know why the Japanese love the Americans, but hate the Russians so much. So, I explain:

"See Alex at the close of WW II, we grabbed Okinawa and some chump-change atolls while you annexed Japan's four northern islands. Things settle down, we give the Js back their southies, but you guys never do—so how would you feel?"

Alex is silent, his eyes downcast.

I remind him that, in war, we Americans are great victors but sore losers—look at Vietnam, Cambodia. His country's the opposite: good losers but sorry winners—look at Japan, Eastern Europe.

He shrugs.

Time goes on and eventually, the CIA hears the GRU's has stopped trying to recruit me. At first, they're bummed, because they'd been working on some disinformation campaign they'd planned to have me feed Aeroflot. They moan that I should have checked with them before flaunting my patriotism so emphatically to all of them. Chastened, I say:

"Sorry, fellas, I'm new at the spy game. But stick with me—I'm a fast learner."

And, as my CIA guys see story after story of mine appearing in *Blue Swan*, as they hear through their own bugs how often I meet with the other side, as I show them the family photos that Alex from Moscow and Viktor from Kiev

and Ivan from Leningrad had presented to me, they put together a new scenario. And become happy campers again.

"Chris, " one finally says, "all this can only mean one thing: Those Russians are planning to *defect*."

Awesome.

* * *

So now I'm ordered to take Alexandre and company to the next level—you know, socialize at night, get the wives together, get them all drinking and yakking, see what they say. Here's the money to do it with. Go get 'em, tiger.

Problem is, partying is evidently against Russian rules. Alex says he and the guys aren't allowed out after dark unsupervised. They can't even go to Roppongi and party on weekends. The only place they're permitted to entertain

guests is inside the Soviet embassy. We try that a few times, but it's tough to relax and unwind in a place where you're constantly under surveillance, where everybody's wired. Mine is always so damned itchy!

The only good thing about it is that their embassy is next door to the American Club, where I sometimes meet my CIA guys. Some nights I hit both places—out one door and in the other. A little risky, but it does save me cab fare.

Finally, I tell Alex: "Dude, no offense, but your embassy gives me the creeps. It's the ultimate popsicle stand."

So, we go back to our routine of meeting for breakfast or shooting the breeze in his office. I try to drop all the hints my handler taught me—but don't get any bites from any of them. Not even a nibble.

Then tax time rolls around, and suddenly I've got a new problem—how am I going to report all this extra income on my Japanese and U.S. returns? Revenues from spying and counter-spying are far exceeding my normal income from previous years.

I tell the CIA that the Aeroflot's playing it straight up, deducting Japanese federal withholding for my stories. "So how about the CIA? ... Do you guys, um, give W2s for this?"

My handler just scratches his beard, says this doesn't come up that often; meanwhile, better not mention this to the IRS. All his pals agree.

"Gee, thanks, fellas, " I mutter. "I feel so reassured."

The CIA cannot figure this out. The GRU way overpays but no longer tries to recruit me. Nor do any of my Aeroflot pals seem to want to defect. Now that we've come to know

each other so well, the CIA admits—"sorry about that, pal, we have to, it's our job"—that they watch *me* like a hawk. They've been tapping my phones, intercepting my faxes, reading my overseas mail, following me around—to make sure I'm not up to any monkey business.

And to them, the most baffling thing of all is this: neither the KGB nor the GRU—"not your Aeroflot pals, their bosses, the fake attachés watching your pals"—is spying on me, either.

"Not that we've ever been able to tell," says Agent "Ken". They're letting you live your life in Tokyo, free as a bird. "

He clears his throat to introduce another point:

"Not that we think it's your fault, Chris, old buddy, but here's the deal: we've been at this for almost a year now,

and, frankly speaking, we've never received a single bit of useful intelligence from you. ... Nor, I suspect, have they."

"Well, " I protest jokingly, "I've always told you how cute their secretaries are."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah—but we can't go on like this. Both sides pay you; neither gets anything. Don't know about them but it's sure not how we like to do things."

"Fellas, can't we give this one last shot? I've got an idea," I'm pleading now. "OK, spill," Agent "Ken" concedes.

I pitch:

"I go to Alex, admit I've been reporting to you guys all along, but tell him you're all real nice. Then I say I've told you the GRU guys are nice too. So, since we're all a bunch of nice

guys here, why don't we all take a day off from espionage and just do lunch?"

Eyeballs roll. But there's no stopping me now.

"We'll sweep the room beforehand," I enthuse. "Then eat and drink. Smoke and joke, see what shakes."

Dead silence. Finally, a sigh. "Yeah, sure. ... What are we gonna talk about at your luncheon—world peace?" somebody in back asks wearily.

"Of course not," I answer, urging them to try my idea on for size: "Last year my company took its Japanese word processor and turned it into a Cyrillic one—you know, the Russian alphabet. In version 1.5, we hid the Greek and Russian alphabet s as Easter eggs."

"What's an Easter egg? " The CIA guys know most stuff, but hadn't heard that one.

I explain:

"They're undocumented features. Kind of a bonus, a surprise in the program, something only found by pressing exotic key combinations—a reward, something totally unexpected, out of the blue. It's what we programmers like to do late at night just for grins."

Agent "Ken" says, "So let me see if I've got this. You've got an English-Japanese word processing program that your ZA>COM outfit is selling under famous brands, NEC and Fujitsu. But inside the program you've secretly hidden Greek and Russian word processors."

"You got it." I clap mt hands loudly.

"So," he says, trying to picture it. "Say a secretary is typing away in Japanese. ... She accidentally hits the wrong keys. ... Are you telling me she's now looking at a screen full of Greek or Russian?"

"Surprise! Happy Easter! "

This cracks everyone up.

So, I rev it way up: "Fellas, how about this:

First, we release a quick upgrade and stick access to Russian on the main menu. Then We print up fake ZA>COM name cards with fancy titles for all you all who are going to lunch. Next, we rendezvous with Alex and his merry men at a quiet spot that we pick and have wired to the max beforehand. Then, ss ersatz ZA>COMers, you hand-wave and rah-rah about how you want to bring to the Soviet Union its first native-language word processor, plus a premiere

keyboard training program, the Cyrillic alphanumeric works!

So, could they please, pretty please, introduce us to their trade delegation? I'm telling you that Alex is actually a really good guy, he likes me, he'll chomp—besides, we all know that techno-shopping is what he really does over here. So, all goes well. Alex sets us up with Comrade J-Trade Guy, their new czar about to be posted here in Tokyo—I think Alex said his name is Gorba something. And now, here's the kicker: Next meeting, we're inside their embassy, WHERE YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE, and on legitimate business to boot

"

I stand up, spreading my hands.

"C'mon, fellas, how can this miss?"

"Plenty of ways, " Agent "Steve" quickly objects. "To start with, they all know us, just like we all know them."

I love objections; they make me feel closer to closing.

"Of course they do! ... But what difference does that make? "

These are sharp cookies; that's why Intelligence is their company's middle name. Agent "Dave" makes the leap.

"I think I'm getting the picture here," he muses to his colleagues. "We go in pretending we're ZA>COM. Just like they've been pretending all along to be Aeroflot. Of course, everybody knows it's just pretense. But as long as everyone remains in their roles, follows their scripts, we can all relax and unwind. ... It's like we all meet on this fantasy plane, where our front company nuances with their front company. ... Yeah, think I'm starting to like this"

But Agent " "Steve" is still not buying in. Or he's paid to be devil's advocate. Never know with these CIA guys. Alex's

GRUs are the same way. ... Oh, they're all gonna hit it off for sure, I chuckle inwardly.

Says Steve: "Your program requires a 32-bit operating system, right? But all those PCs are on Commerce's no-no list. The Russians will squawk that we're trying to sell them software that requires machines we won't let the J's export "

"Who cares? ... Listen—" I fire back.

But again "Dave" saves me the trouble.

"Chris is right. Their trade ministry will agree to purchase all of his software just to get a shot at importing hardware. If they can pull that off, his pal Alex will want to ship everything on Aeroflot. He's GRU, but still has an airline to run. If Commerce won't grant an exemption, the Russians will say that the deal's off. ... Guys, they're gonna go for at least exploring this"

Now this elderly spook—no name, an analyst I reckon.
I've seen him lots of times before, but never heard a peep.
The guy always sits in back listening.

But now he speaks up. Immediately it hits me: he's the
one calling the shots. Through granny glasses, he looks
spookily at me and says:

"Here's what I'm hearing ... Sir, you *propose* to vend
software by bundling hardware worth fifteen times your
product's value. ... You *propose* that the United States
Central Intelligence Agency act as a front for your firm. ... You
propose that our State and Commerce departments remove
export controls on our sworn enemy. ... You *propose* to sell,
to employ your term, an 'Easter egg' to the Soviet
Union. ... And, finally, you *propose* to ship your merchandise
via their Aeroflot Airlines. ... Sir, I must ask, are you
dreaming?"

The way he puts this sounds spooky, so naturally I'm spooked. I just shrug (a habit I picked up from the Russians) and wait for him to spill more.

Finally, he does:

"The man's name is Mikhail Gorbachev. And he is the *only* reason we're going to pretend to do this, up to a point. You're going to set up that luncheon because it may give us a chance to sit across from Mr. Gorbachev. ... We think he's going to be important. We want to see what he's like up close in a meeting. The ostensible reason is of little importance."

"Yes sir. Very good sir." I don't know if you're supposed to salute in the CIA, but figured it couldn't hurt. Boy, you can sure tell, after this guy speaks, THE MEETING IS OVER.

So, now I'm back on the street, hoofing and scheming madly. The CIA's gonna march in my parade all right, but only up to the point where they get to meet this Gorbachev character. Then for sure they'll bolt. Between now and then, though, maybe I can pitch the guy myself and get on his A-list. ... Sooner or later the Soviets are sure to beg, borrow, steal or design their own PC, right? Then maybe the Russians will march in my parade. ... God, I love sales!

But that night it rains on my parade—pours, nearly washing it away forever. The Soviet Union blows a Korean Airlines passenger jet out of the sky, killing everyone aboard.

The next morning, all hell breaks loose in my office when Alex, Viktor and Ivam storm in.