

The Paranoia Experiment

by James Joist

I know this is going to sound crazy, possibly because it is crazy, but still, please hear me out. I'm a relatively sane person. Sane as any of you, or I was. Just, what I'm saying is that anything that happened to me could happen to you, and you might do the same things I did.

I worked for a CIA contractor. Worked there for about 5 years. Not the line of work I was aiming for. I wanted to go into linguistics, but when things got tight, and I saw the CIA was hiring, I jumped at the chance. It's not exactly the CIA, they farm out their work to us, but it's pretty much the same thing.

So everyday, I'm going through these translations of conversations, just double-checking the translator's work. Making sure the translation made sense. Lots of times it's just general conversational stuff. People arranging where to meet, asking how they've been, how's their family, how the weather is. Oh god the weather conversations. I always thought that was a failure of American conversations, oh boy, it's international.

But in general, it's casual. Maybe they're arranging to exchange nuclear weapons or metric tons of cocaine, I can't really tell. I leave that for the guys in Analysis. If they found something interesting they might tell me. Sometimes we catch some guy's conversation of a guy ordering a prostitute or talking sexy to his girlfriend or whatever. Usually the first round translators catch it, and we huddle around the media room with a beer and have a chuckle. It helps break up the day. Man, I wouldn't want to have that happen to me. Doesn't really matter, seeing as I'd probably never find out if it did. Or so I thought. You listen to all of these people's lives and you definitely think about if you were in that same place and people were listening in to your most awkward moments and what they might think. I feel like, some of the other guys, they really put down

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these guys they're listening to. Stuff like "stupid fuckin' Chechnyan retard. maybe you should take care of your family before you go crying to a prostitute on the phone". It comes off like a defense mechanism so they don't actually have to get involved in this guy's life. Now that I think about it, I can understand why more. Hearing so many people's stories, it starts to wear on you.

Well, that's my job in a nutshell. Nothing so crazy. But here's where things change. One day I get this translation, and it's all kinds of incoherent. Lots of cursing in Russian and then what sounds like somebody praying for their life. It doesn't make sense though. Something bad happened, which is fine, but I can't make out full sentences. I take it back to the first translator to see why it's all garbled. Sometimes you get really terrible recordings and nobody can make out what language they're speaking, to say the least, whether they're using the past imperfect or not. Shit, one time we accidentally translated a Turkish episode of Magnum PI in the background of a phone call. Man, we really thought we found something that day. I remember translating something like "sportscar chase shootout" and almost pissed myself. Then we hear something about "mai-tais back at the compound" and it gave the whole thing away. Especially since there's no word in Turkish for "Mai-tai".

Okay, so I take this translation to the original translator, Jacob, and he says that that's all he could get to. Long distance microphone with lots of crosstalk. We listen to it again, and it really does sound like something bad went down. Somebody probably died there. The part at the end where this Russian guy is praying for his life is really creepy. Scares me down to my boots. I tell Jacob to make me a copy on CD and I can maybe give it a listen on my drive home to see if I can make out some of the actual sentences outside of the interjections. He makes me a copy and I give it a listen in the Range Rover on the way home. I'm not sure what I was thinking. Not only is it impossible to decipher while driving, but screaming Russian

obscenities do not make for good radio drive-time listening. I flip on classic rock to try and wash out the sounds of the screaming.

The next day we come in to the office I find my paper copy of the translation missing. A couple papers are moved. Somebody grabbed it. I ask Jacob, and he says somebody took the original recordings and everything else he had on it. We both go to the head of our department, Francis Tinsey. Francis is usually an alright guy. Not friendly so much, but he runs the office well, and he has the sort of personality that it takes to want to do his job. Before we say anything he says, "Don't worry about translating that last Chechnyan gunfight recording. We have it taken care of. Passing it up to CIA. They just need to have all of the copies they can."

Something is definitely up here. I can't put my finger on it, but the excuse doesn't make sense.

"Do you guys have any other copies?"

"I...", I stop myself short. "do...not." Now I'm curious about what could be on that tape. I'm fine with them taking everything away, but I just need to find out what's there, just out of curiosity.

Francis looks at me oddly. "You sure?"

"Yep, no copies"

"Jacob, what about you?"

"Nope"

"Okay, if you remember otherwise, please let me know"

So we turn around and leave, and Jacob leans in to me and says, "Be careful".

I'm not sure what I'm doing, but I'm definitely scared. Hope I'm not getting myself in hot water over some recording of a guy three worlds away who's long dead, probably has no family, but the curiosity just has me fixed. I mean, we've probably heard hundreds of conversations and situations of really bad things happening. Maybe CIA assassinations, maybe assassinations of CIA members. You can never tell, and you have to distance yourself from all of them. There's no way you'll ever really know what it was, and if you tried investigating, they'd have no trouble stopping you dead in your tracks before you typed their name into Google.

So really, me holding on to this recording is purely for my own curiosity. What was this guy's life like? Thrilling international spy? Or tortured freedom fighter living in burnt out war zones? Really, all I could do was sit and wonder. So that night as I'm driving home, I push the CD back in the player and give the audio another listen. Still as horrifying as it was before. At this one part, where all of the screaming and the shooting all happen at once, it's this condensed wall of sounds. So many things happening at once that it's hard to make out. It's really fascinating, to hear this new sound. Something you would never hear anywhere else.

I get home and I bring the CD in with me, maybe listen to it with the headphones on. Still amazed by that one section. I pick up the phone to give Charles a call, see if maybe he wants to come over and check it out. [mimes calling] Right while I finish dialing his number I stop dead in my tracks. They're probably listening to me. What do I mean "probably" listening, they definitely are. I heard how serious Francis was about handing the copies over. They've probably tapped the phone. Supposedly they do it on a regular basis these days as part of your yearly performance review. Don't ask me how they get away with it. God, I wish I had kept that giant stack of paperwork that I signed when I started the job. Who knows what I agreed to in there.

Charlie suddenly answers, "Hello? Hello? Pete, is that you?"

"Oh, Charles, hey, sorry about that. Completely got lost thinking about something right as I called you. Um, yeah, you should come on over and...um.."

"Come over and what?"

"And...hear this new album I bought"

"Album?"

"Yeah, it's an album of songs that I bought."

"What? What's going on over there?"

"Nothing, just music. Just come on over. "

"Just music?"

"It's an incredible record, you really have to hear it. It's got, like, textures and polyrhythms. Just get over here."

"Okay"

Could that have been any more obvious? There goes my career as international spy. Anyhow, Charlie stops by, and I give him the rundown about the tape, play a small portion of it for him and give him the spiel about how I'm probably being followed. You know what his reaction is? "Eh". Plus something about how everybody's kind of watched these days, that I should just get used to it, and some story about getting a ticket for speeding through a light he was nowhere near last week. Thanks for the consolation there brother. I guess if I go crazy I'll have some company at the mental institution. Somehow I think my situation might be a little different from being seen on a

security camera. Once you start thinking you're being followed all the time, it really starts to get to you. And not in the way you think. I tried watching terrible reruns of Benny Hill they were showing on cable that night, hoping to distract myself. Couldn't do it. Just couldn't relax. It really is like somebody watching over your shoulder. I really didn't have much to be worried about, but just an eternal distraction of somebody else being in the room who doesn't talk back.

I got no sleep that night. Just lots of pacing. I wake up early the next morning, half asleep, feeling terrible, to call in sick to work. I have plenty of days owed to me, and I am feeling ill, so i figure why not. I call Trish, our secretary, hoping to avoid Francis, but for some reason Francis picks up. Fuck.

"Hello, Infomatics"

"Uh...Trish?"

"Oh hey Robert, what seems to be the problem?"

"Not feeling well, just telling Trish I won't be in today"

"Oh. I will. What is it you are sick with?"

This guy is such a robot. I guess that's how you make it up the ranks, but man, his life must be unbearable.

"I don't know, just something, maybe just stressed out. Could use a day off of the grind if that's alright"

"Of course, of course. Hope you're feeling better by tomorrow. And don't think of doing anything crazy"

"Come again? What did you just say?"

"Don't do anything crazy while you're sick"

"Oh"

Fuck, I was about to go off on the guy for threatening me. Good thing I stopped short. Or was he taunting me? Agh, this isn't going well so far. I should just get rid of the copy and not be burdened with going crazy like this. I thought I should call Gloria and see what she thinks about it. I pick up the phone and call her.

"Gloria, how are you doing?"

"Great Robert, how are you? What's the reason for a call out of the blue like this?"

"Well this is going to sound a little crazy, but.."

And then all of a sudden this crackling sound comes over the phone.

"What the hell was that?"

"What's that, I didn't hear anything"

"I certainly did. Is somebody listening in on this?"

"No, it's just me in the house"

"No not you, somebody else"

"I...don't know"

"Gloria, let me call you back"

Was that them listening in on me? But I already knew they were listening in on me, why am I suddenly scared if they are or not. If anything, that sound was something wrong with the phone line, and they were listening in on me anyhow. Still it's driving me crazy.

I get up and start pacing the room for a good hour or so. Not sure what to do, but it's this unsettling nausea that's slowly consuming me. Not sure what to do. I pick up the phone, thinking maybe I could call the police, or a newspaper. Maybe give them a hint as to what's going on before I go completely schizo and blow my brains out. Tell them something useful while I'm still lucid. Then what's the point really? Does anybody even care about this? I just feel trapped, sitting there, dangling the phone receiver on my ear, listening to the dial tone. I decided I could call my voicemail and leave a note for myself. It was a safe decision. This way I don't alarm anybody or even just have somebody like Charles tell me how I'm worrying over nothing again.

"My name is Robert, of sound body and mind. ugh, it's like I'm giving a living will. Let me start over. I, Robert, am here to tell you that I know that they are following me because of the recording, and that I will probably give it back very shortly. I am not trying to do anything with it. I'm not selling it to the Russians or taking it to the media. I just thought it was a curiosity. Trust me, I'll give it back soon. I know you guys are listening to me right this very minute, so please hear me out. You're probably all sitting there bored out of your minds having to listen to all of my crazy hysterics, just because you have to. In a way it's kind of sweet justice. You're making me go crazy with paranoia, but then you have to hear me whine and complain in return. I guess nobody comes out clean in this do they? So yep, keep listening from your cramped little van parked down the street. Probably smells like day old sausage breakfast burritos and Cheetos in there. Yep. Listen away. You have to hear me and everything I say. No matter how mundane or annoying. Do you want to hear my views on international economic currency regulation? Oh, you do? Well,

great, let me just tell you. I think they should make a one world currency. It's crazy I know, by why the fuck not? I think it would stabilize the markets rather than having all these fluctuating currencies constantly skyrocketing up and down. Someday that idea may save the world. What do you think? Huh. You don't say. Really? Very interesting. You know what I say to that? Blurp. Yeah you heard me. Blurp. And you know what else? Blurp blap bleep bloop blip blah blee bloo. Skee doop skabadeebedoopeedadadaladadatadeedoodeedaatrallalaalaaalalaaaaa, oh when he hits you, with those sharp claws. and he bites you, with those fangs, they call him, mack the knife. Oh, he shoots you, and he kills you, in such a swinging way, that everybody loves him, that's why they calllllll hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiim. mack the kniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiife. you can stab me any time old macky. Whoo!"

And I hang up the phone. I went a bit crazy, but it felt...good. Really good. Partially taunting them, partially entertaining them. I was making a difference in the lives of these spooks on surveillance. I could be a positive force for them. I think to myself, I'm going to do this again.

So I pick up this old Casio keyboard from a thrift store in Beltsville. Some pots and pans from the kitchen. Charles lets me borrow his acoustic guitar, and he gives me this furrowed brow as I'm leaving and a quick "you'kay?", and I throw him back a quick "never been better". I get it all back to my house and set up this one man band around the telephone. Spoons and pans are laid out on the Ikea table like a marimba. I hit the salsa beat button on the keyboard and pick up the phone to call my voicemail. I look at the setup for a moment and realize how much it resembles either a crazy homeless guy or a gong show contestant without the gold lame shirt. Holding the receiver upside down like a microphone I start in, "Welcome back ladies and gentlemen, you are now about ready for the all star surveillance revue. I hope everybody's having a good time tonight.

So put the emergency brake on the Astrovan, kick back the captains chair, set the headphones on right, refill the coffee mugs, and for you boys in post, if you could adjust the treble on my voice, that would be great. Here goes." I then start beating on the pans like I'm Tito Puente for a good 45 minutes. Yoooahh-hiyaah! This is full on mental insanity, but I'm loving every minute if it.

So the next day, I walk in to work and Francis approaches me again. At this point, I'd already forgotten about the recording. I'm not even sure where I left it. Probably in the glove compartment somewhere. Well, he's all kinds of cautious around me. "Is everything okay?" "Of course, why do you ask?" "Oh no reason. But I do need to talk to you, can you meet with me later today?" Uh oh, this is it. I'm not sure how I'll delay the inevitable. Either they confront me about everything, or they fire me, or both. Or they start ransacking my house. Or all three. The fun is over. My rampage of entertainment is done, and now I'm going to pay the piper. I figure, why not one last song. Those guys in the surveillance truck, they need one more tune to send them on their way. Something that bids them all a good night.

So I rush out to the car, and I fumble around for that CD. This might get a little conceptual here for a second. Maybe even a little political, but don't worry, it will all be in good taste. I take CD into the transcription studio we have, and output it to the room speakers. I pick up the office phone there, put it on speaker, and call my cellphone. For a second it picks up a screech of feedback. Hope that woke them up.

"Gents, you there?"

I wait a second and there's a small click. Maybe that was another glitch on the line, but I think it was their way of signaling back, saying, "ready when you are". I play the CD in it's entirety. From the strange static beginning to the blood curdling screams and the

desperate pleading in Russian at the end. After a minute of silence, I chime in with a ballad from the top of my head.

