

**Author's Note:** *Written for QuoteME: Challenge 3 on Section VII.*



Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing.

*William James*

## **MIND DANCING**

BY [LAH](#)

**Winter 1969**

***U.S. region around Lake Erie***

Illya Kuryakin sneezed once.

“Bless you,” his partner quickly conferred the usual sentiment.

“You may be CEA of U.N.C.L.E. North America, Napoleon,” the blond man noted glumly, “but you certainly don’t have it within your power to bless me.”

“Smart-ass Russian,” countered Napoleon Solo with a smirk.

“This Russian’s ass is freezing, along with the rest of his anatomy.” The heater in the rental car wasn’t working and neither he nor Napoleon wore an overcoat, a definite disadvantage in the frosty Great Lakes winter weather. “Whatever are we doing here?” Illya subsequently (and somewhat peevishly) demanded to be told.

“Seeking what Ralph Colnik wanted us to find,” replied the American.

“Might I remind you that we never got the chance to exchange word one with our south-fleeing, supposedly ready-to-squawk Thrush bird before he vanished from all line of sight?”

“We might not have gotten to speak to Colnik directly, but he provided us with lots of words, Illya.”

“The stale jokes of a standup comedy routine he performed in some sleazy nightclub hardly qualify as vital information, my friend.”

“Don’t they?” challenged the other man playfully.

Illya internally counted to ten to keep his temper in check. Sometimes Napoleon could be absolutely infuriating. It had been Solo’s decision to – instead of trying to further locate Colnik after he disappeared at the conclusion of his Miami nightclub gig – take a flight to Toledo. He hadn’t explained the why of that to his partner, just asked at their hotel for some maps of the Great Lakes region, peered at an atlas the concierge had found for him, and then announced they were off to Ohio. Once the plane landed, he hustled Illya to the rental car desk, and – very unlike Napoleon – accepted the only vehicle they had available at that time: a sad old Plymouth Belvedere with scratched sky-blue paint and the rather vital lack – considering the frigid temperatures – of a working heater.

*“We generally don’t rent it out,” the girl at the counter had admitted, “but if you really need a car that desperately, I can let you have it for half the usual fee.”*

*“We’ll take it,” Napoleon had stated without hesitation, much to Illya’s complete astonishment.*

As Kuryakin wiped the breath fog from the window on his side of the vehicle, a sign appeared out of the darkness on the road before them. NOW ENTERING LUNA PIER, MICHIGAN, it read.

“I am just going to ask nicely one more time,” Illya warned in a voice surprisingly close to a growl as he huddled his body tighter in an attempt to keep to himself whatever warmth he could muster. “Why are we here?”

Now that there was no possibility of their conversation being overheard by any Thrush flies on the wall... or the plane... Napoleon knew it was time to let his partner in on the gambit.

“Where do monsters like to swim?” Solo quoted one of the jokes from Colnik’s standup routine.

Illya sighed before answering, “In Lake Erie.” Then he furthered, “And I do realize this town is on Lake Erie, Napoleon, and that Thrush can be classified as monsters, but there are hundreds of towns on this lake.”

“And why was the moon not hungry?” prompted Napoleon.

“Because it was full,” Illya responded. “Okay I get the ‘moon’ equals ‘luna’ reference, but where does the pier come in?”

Napoleon shrugged. “It doesn’t maybe. But then again we are **fishing** for whatever Thrush plot is running deep in these waters.”

Kuryakin rolled his eyes. “Napoleon, it is you who are fishing... for clues where there are none.”

Solo shrugged once more. “We have nothing better to go on, Illya. My hunches about the particular point of those jokes he told are worth a shot surely.”

“I know he did pick you out of the crowd,” granted Illya. “I know he nodded to you when he did. But I still think he was just trying to let us know he might be ready to talk when his stint at the microphone was done.”

“Maybe,” granted Napoleon in turn. “But those jokes were really pretty pointed, it seemed to me.”

“They just seemed pretty bad to me.”

Napoleon laughed lightly in agreement. “That too.”

Illya then chose the least resistant path of quiet as Napoleon continued to drive through the maze of dark streets in the small Michigan town of Luna Pier. A fairly heavy snow was falling, making the visibility less than ideal.

“Check the map, Illya,” Napoleon required after about a dozen minutes or so had passed.

“For what in particular?” the blond wanted to know.

“The city library.”

“Oh come on, Napoleon!” Illya balked. “You can’t really think—”

“What’s the tallest building in the city?” interrupted Napoleon doggedly.

“A library because it has the most stories,” countered Illya with definite ill-humor. “If the clues were this easy to follow, Thrush would have recognized them as well.”

“They likely did. I never intimated Colnik was any kind of great mind.”

“A fit match for his truly mediocre wit then.”

“Just find the library on the map,” insisted the CEA.

The subordinate agent did, albeit reluctantly. “It’s on Oak Street. 4349 Oak Street, to be exact.”

“Seven after one,” Solo muttered more to himself than Illya.

“What time is it when seven hungry buzzards are chasing you,” Illya provided the initial question to the joke Napoleon had just answered. “I will grant you four plus three equals seven, but where does the final four and nine come into the equation, oh great guru of jest interpretation?”

Napoleon chewed his lower lip for a few moments. Then he asked, “What is seven plus one, Illya?”

“Eight. I’m sure even you learned that in school.”

Napoleon ignored the jibe as he further queried, “And eight is **before** what number?”

Illya blinked. Maybe this whole wild-goose chase wasn’t so crazy after all. “Nine,” he conceded. “Turn left here,” he then advised his partner after consulting the map. “That’s the quickest way to Oak Street.”

They pulled up in front of the Luna Pier Public Library and hurriedly exited from the car. The building was shut up tight for the night, but Illya easily managed to pick the lock. Once within though, they were a bit stymied as to what to do next. Neither man knew exactly what they were looking for, and that was definitely a major problem.

Just before them stood the children’s section of the library. They walked into the room cautiously. Nothing special was readily there to be seen, but they searched anyhow, getting frustrated when nothing out of the ordinary turned up. One wall of the children’s section was devoted to tales of the sea: fishing, boating, diving, myths regarding Bessie, the sea serpent of Lake Erie... Twenty-four shelves of sea stories, at least according to the numbers from 1 to 24 clearly painted in black on the lip of each shelf.

On a table before that specific wall lay a folded yellow card. Illya picked it up, opened and casually perused it. It was a child’s report card and this child was no more a great mind than Ralph Colnik. Every subject showed a failing grade.

Illya was about to drop the card back down on the table when he happened to glance back at the wall of shelving again. His mouth dropped open instead.

“Uh, Illya, your mouth is gaping as wide as that of the fish mounted on the wall there.”

“Napoleon, what does twenty-four feet of water and a bad report card have in common?” he demanded of his partner.

Napoleon’s hazel eyes glinted knowingly. “They’re both under C level. So it’s to the basement that we go, tovarisch.”

In the basement they found what they presumed to be the hidey-hole of the night watchman, though the man was nowhere to be found. On a bench in one corner of the small room rested his lunchbox.

Illya glanced askance at the metal container. “Don’t you think that design kind of odd for a grown man to choose for his lunch pail?”

Napoleon’s gaze darted to the item in question. “A flock of little birds. What is it that the leader of the gaggle has hold of in its beak?” he queried as he moved closer to the lunchbox.

Illya moved closer as well. “A sickle it would seem.”

“Meaning death perhaps?”

Illya shrugged. “Or perhaps no more than that the owner is Soviet of heritage.”

“I think the more ominous interpretation rather more likely.”

“As do I,” admitted the other man.

“Well, here goes nothing.” Napoleon took a deep breath and leaned down to unlatch the lunchbox.

“That might not be wise,” Illya more than suggested as he placed a staying hand on his friend’s forearm.

“Likely not,” agreed Napoleon, “but we have to find out what’s in there. Mr. Waverly won’t be pleased if we turn up with no more than some guy’s bologna sandwich.”

Illya nodded and removed his hand from Napoleon’s arm, though less than happily.

Holding his breath, Napoleon carefully eased up the latches of the lid. Nothing happened. So then he just as carefully fully raised that lid.

Inside there were just two things: a package of band-aids and a roll of hard fruit-flavored candies.

“Why do you need to pack band-aids in your lunchbox?” Napoleon asked in honest befuddlement.

“For the cold cuts,” deadpanned Illya.

Napoleon glanced at him, about to make a sharp retort... until it dawned on him such was another joke from Colnik’s routine. “Oh yeah,” he stated with a nod. “And the cold cuts: Col – Nik. So this is something he left for us, undoubtedly, but—”

“What is it... exactly?” interjected Kuryakin.

Both men ruminated for a minute or two, each fully cognizant that Thrush might even now be on the same trail they were. Time was something they didn’t have to spare. So maybe they should just take the whole kit-and-caboodle to headquarters and—

“Close that box, Napoleon! Now!”

Napoleon did that even as he inquired, “What—”

“What’s one candy that a ghost will never eat?” quoted Illya.

“Life Savers,” responded Napoleon. “And no one can say no to Live Savers<sup>1</sup>. I’ll call it in, Illya,” he spoke on even as he was pulling out his communicator. “They’ll need to quarantine this place.”

“We still don’t know exactly—”

“Did you hear the story about the germ?” interjected Napoleon.

Illya’s face paled as he finished the ‘joke’. “Never mind, I don’t want it to spread.”

---

***Three days later***  
***U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters in New York City***

“You men were extremely lucky,” Waverly chastised his two top agents bluntly. “The virus was only intended to become airborne once the roll of candy was opened. Otherwise, you would both be dead men.”

“Yes sir,” conceded Napoleon dutifully. “But after all, sir, Ralph Colnik turned to U.N.C.L.E. as an informer regarding Thrush’s machinations. So realistically one wouldn’t expect that the clues he gave us to unravel would put us or anyone else in any immediate peril.”

“Which they didn’t,” seconded Illya. “And we did get Thrush’s prototype for that virus.”

“Allowing our medical people to find a means to render it inert. Yes, Mr. Kuryakin, I am aware of that. Nonetheless more circumspection might have served.”

“Sir, we were working only on what tipoffs our common sense suggested,” further protested Napoleon. “None of it was foolproof—”

“Indeed it was not, Mr. Solo. That is something we all can agree on,” stated Waverly unequivocally. “Still,” he softened his stance the slightest hair, “we don’t train you men to routinely skirt personal jeopardy. U.N.C.L.E. does expect you all to, as it were, grab danger as a partner and dance to whatever tune is being played. So my determination in this matter is that each of you will have one week’s desk duty to ponder the possible consequences of your actions before returning full-time to the field. That is all, gentlemen.”

The two chastened agents meekly left the private domain of their superior and walked the gunmetal hall toward their own offices.

“He’s right, you know. It could have been a disaster,” Illya noted after a few minutes of silence had passed between them.

“Illya, if we didn’t take the risk, we never would have found that virus at all. We had to go with the flow.”

“With Ralph Colnik’s potentially deadly scavenger hunt you mean.”

“Ralph Colnik’s tango-like way of surrendering that virus was less than honestly amusing, that’s for sure,” Solo acknowledged.

---

<sup>1</sup> Old 1960’s slogan for Life Savers: “Ever heard anyone say ‘no’ to a Life Saver?”

“Much like his standup routine,” interposed Illya.

“From his viewpoint though, he got the virus to us without actually having to personally hand it off. And it could be said that, if we failed to follow his clues, he would have been free-and-clear of any possible association with U.N.C.L.E.”

“A smarter man than his comedy would suggest.”

“More practical than smart, I’d say. You have to remember,” Napoleon ventured on, “humor – even when it’s biting – is still only common sense dancing.”

Illya silently nodded his agreement with that inversely rational outlook.

**—THE END—**

