

THE CARGO

Ted Polet

(EXTRACT)

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He was a slightly built young man of about 20 or 25 years old, with a head wound although the blood appeared to have been washed off by the sea. He was stone cold and didn't breathe, his face discoloured blue-white and not a trace of a pulse to be felt. We wrestled with the wet lifejacket, got his anorak and sweater off him and listened for a heartbeat, but once again there was nothing at all.

We glanced at one another. 'This doesn't look good,' Thijs said, looking a bit pale, never having seen a drowned person before.

I remembered the seaman off my ship who years ago had fallen into the harbour in Baltimore after a night ashore. He had looked the same as this young man. I was confused – should I try to resuscitate him? You never knew how long he had been like this.

'Call the Brandaris traffic centre on VHF channel 2,' I told Thijs. 'We're in the Inschot channel bound for Kornwerderzand. Tell them we have picked up someone from the water and we're trying to revive him – ask for immediate assistance.'

I turned the boy round and lifted him with my hands under his stomach to see if there was any water in his lungs. Nothing came out – after all he had floated on his lifejacket, so I turned him back and started the CPR procedure. No result at all, and within five minutes I was sweating, as you will when properly performing CPR.

Thijs stood next to me and said the lifeboat was on its way from Harlingen, estimated time of arrival in half an hour, and they were sending a helicopter from Leeuwarden airfield. 'Shall I take over?' Thijs knew how to give CPR.

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After a few minutes, a slight middle-aged man in civilian clothes approached her from a side door. 'Gospozya? Please excuse me for letting you wait. My name is Vadim Alekseyev. Will you follow me to my office?' He was unusually polite for a Russian official, led the way, held the door open for her and installed her in the chair opposite his desk. 'What can I do for you?'

'My name is Yekaterina Nikolayevna Semyonova. I raised my grandnephew and grandniece after my niece Olga and her husband Pavel were killed in a road

accident. But now they have been gone for weeks and I haven't heard of them since. I am afraid something is wrong. They never go away this long without calling me.'

'Mm. Can you tell me their names?'

'Yuri Pavlovich Makarov and Irina Pavlovna Makarova. Yuri was in the Navy, but he had served his term and came home last winter. He was a corporal-gunner on the *Sovremenniy* and wanted to find a job at sea, in cargo ships. Irina studied in Leningrad, excuse me, St Petersburg, until my shares in Yukos Oil became worthless and the money ran out, so she had to come back here. Four weeks ago she read an advert about work in the West and left me. I never heard of her since. Yuri rang me a fortnight ago saying he had to go away for a while, and I didn't hear from him either. I am very worried about them.'

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The boat was thrown aside violently, the dishes flying off the galley worktop and landing noisily on the cabin floor. From outside came a sound of powerful engines quickly fading into the distance. I was wide awake, and cursing fluently and colourfully I put my head out of the hatch. The noise came from astern – whoever it was had come past at a great speed, running with the tide and almost colliding with me as I lay at anchor in the fog. The tide ran west, so he'd be heading towards the anchored trawler, if it was still there. The sound died away, and all that was left was the remains of the wild wash that had almost thrown me out of my bunk. It was two in the morning, foggy and pitch dark, the anchor light shining dimly into the damp night air and on the sea around me. A fast boat on its way to the trawler? Certainly not to go fishing in the middle of the night.

I could have sworn to hearing women's voices a few moments later, screaming and protesting. But fog does strange things to sound – probably it was just birds calling in the night. So I forgot about it and returned to my bunk, hoping that the idiot wouldn't run into me as he'd return in the darkness.

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Half hidden under the bridge carrying the Van Woustraat over the canal, something was hanging from the bridge piling which at first sight looked like a grey refuse bag. The skipper swerved past it, but as the boat went by one of the passengers began calling out to make himself heard above the whine of the

outboard engine, gesturing at the object in the water. The skipper slowed down and looked astern.

The ‘object’ was a dead woman in a grey raincoat. She had nearly slipped underwater, but the coat had caught on one of the mooring pins on the piling. The skipper steered for the inclined basalt-lined bank of the canal, under the overhanging trees, and killed the engine. They regarded each other hollow-eyed. ‘Better call the police,’ one said.

The patrol car arrived, siren blaring and blue lights flashing. Two PCs hurried to the motorboat. ‘Did you report a body in the water?’

The boys pointed under the bridge.

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Thijs whipped round and yelled: ‘Run, Irina,’ giving her a push towards the shore. She called something that sounded like ‘*Nyet*,’ and fearfully ‘Thijs,’ but even so she jumped ashore. The first attacker came into the cockpit, but he tripped over the genoa sheet and Thijs gave him a shove causing him to drop over the side. The man caught his feet behind the wire of the rail and was overboard in a second. He hit his head against something solid and disappeared underwater. The second man tried to get ashore and go after Irina, but Thijs grabbed the first object at hand – the heavy motor drive of the autopilot, a steel tube with an electric motor inside. He wildly lashed out at the man and managed to hit him over the head with it, dropping him like a brick. Later he didn’t remember how he had done it, but the man lay in the gangway, moving weakly. ‘Run and get help,’ he yelled again at Irina. She ran into the field towards the road.

Behind him something moved. He had forgotten the third man. Thijs felt a blow against his left side, followed by a searing pain inside his chest. Suddenly he was out of breath and his legs felt funnily weak. He had to sit down and something warm dripped down his side. There was a lot of noise on deck – someone seemed to be dragging at the man he had knocked out.

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After everyone had come aboard, the skipper started the engine. The four-stroke outboard made little noise, and quietly the boat slid over the surface of the lagoon, without navigation lights in order not to be seen. There was no moon

that night and it was cloudy, which meant the boat was almost invisible at a distance. On the other side was the narrow, uninhabited wooded spit of land which separates the lagoon from the sea.

The skipper beached the inflatable on the shingle, in a place littered with rusty cans and empty vodka bottles, between the scattered remains of fishermen's campfires. The passengers waded ashore and assembled at the edge of the trees. A bird was startled by the group and flew away into the distance with a clatter of wings and an eerie cry. In this area, the spit was only a few hundred yards wide, and there was a rough path to the coast. Again, they were told to keep quiet, because further to the north-east towards Baltiysk there is a military airfield. One never knew if the Army had an exercise that night. It would not do to run into a *Spetsnaz* platoon.

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Soon the door opened and a tall blond man with a prominent nose came in, clad in a grey suit, followed by a dark-haired young woman in a sweater and jeans. The man introduced himself to Irina in English: 'Good afternoon. My name is Rob Tholen, of the police in Amsterdam. This is Aisha Markouch who is on my team. And your name is?'

Irina replied weakly: 'Irina Pavlovna Makarova.'

'Miss Makarova, do you speak and understand English well enough or will you need an interpreter to translate between Dutch and Russian?'

'No, I speak English well enough.'

'All right then, we will not need an interpreter for the moment.' And to Baukje: 'So you are her attorney? My idea is to get at the truth, without any tricks up my sleeve. Aisha will note down what is said, and if you need to interrupt, please do. I'm not prepared to play games with an attorney, no one will be any wiser if I do.'

'Very well,' said Baukje. 'But I will be listening carefully. And before we start: what is Irina being suspected of? Her custody has been extended, so I wonder at the need for that.'

'She is suspected of being involved in the death of Yelena Litvinenkova in Amsterdam.'

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Volkert woke to the sound of car tyres on the gravel outside the shed. He got out of the deck chair and went to the door. To his surprise, Boris came in. He could just manage to ask ‘What are you doing here?’ before Boris pulled out a gun with a silencer and shot him in the head. Volkert dropped like a stone.

Jelle jumped out of the boat and ran to the end of the shed. He saw Boris come for him and squealed like a pig. Boris shot him twice before he fell. He tried to crawl away, crying and pleading, but to no avail. A third shot at close range ended it. Boris calmly walked out and got into the Seat, which quietly drove off without lights. In the farmhouse across the road, a light was switched on. The farmer came out the door, but didn’t see anything untoward. Except for his cattle curiously standing at the fence near the road in the moonlight, a dark mass softly breathing clouds of vapour in the damp night air.

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Thijs Brouwer sat on the edge of his bed, white as a sheet and dizzy, drain and drip feed still attached. They had come just in time – obviously he had been the gunman’s target. The nurse meanwhile had checked the unconscious policeman. ‘I think he will come round soon, with a headache,’ she said to his mates. Meanwhile, two other nurses ran in. ‘What happened here?’ they asked of their colleague.

‘A shooting. Will you check the wounded men? I think they need to go into A&E. I have to see my own patients first. She went to Thijs. ‘Come, Mr Brouwer, it’s over now. Please lie down. You shouldn’t sit up, your blood values are still way too low, you will fall over if you don’t. Come on...’ She helped Thijs lie down and tucked him in. ‘Don’t worry, boy,’ she whispered. ‘The danger has passed. That man won’t harm you anymore.’

Meanwhile, the bald gunman was handcuffed and searched before he was checked over by another nurse. He bled profusely from the torn ear and a gaping head wound, and gazed around groggily. ‘He is one Boris with an unpronounceable surname,’ the tall officer said to his mate. ‘You can inform headquarters that we have cargo for them. I’m going to have a chat with that formidable lady over there.’ He nodded at the nurse, who was busy with her patients.

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Heldring put on all the lights on deck and called over the intercom to launch the attack boat. A big floodlight was aimed at the trawler and a bullhorn roared over the water: ‘Stop your engines!’

Behind the stern, suddenly the FRISC shot on to the water, wildly bucking in the waves and heading for the trawler, turning with it as it approached from astern.

From the trawler someone was firing with a light weapon. ‘Searchlight on the bridge,’ Heldring ordered, and a blinding light illuminated the *Daugava’s* wheelhouse. The FRISC fired a few rounds in return, causing someone to run out of the wheelhouse with his hands in the air. From the main deck however, someone else fired back with an automatic weapon.

Now the crew on the FRISC returned fire with its heavy machine gun. On deck the impact sparks of the big bullets could be seen. The trawler gradually lost speed and finally lay still in the water. The boarding party hooked on and rushed on board. Meanwhile, the helicopter appeared over the ship and dropped a support platoon on deck, before turning away and hanging in the air at a distance.

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The farmer’s wife was a kind-hearted soul and beckoned the girl inside. She looked haggard and unwell. What was the matter with her? She sat her down at the kitchen table and put on the kettle. Even though she couldn’t understand her, they were at the table having tea when the police arrived.

‘You have called us about this young woman?’ A stout WPC in her fifties, hailing from Surinam, looked searchingly at the mysterious visitor. ‘I don’t think you’re from these parts, are you, love?’ the police officer said kindly. She knew a thing or two from her beat in the old town centre. The girl shook her head indicating she didn’t understand, and said something that might have been Polish or Russian – the policewoman couldn’t make out which.

‘Polski?’ the policewoman asked.

‘Russki,’ the girl replied.

The WPC called the station saying they had found a Russian young woman who they couldn’t understand.

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Vitaliy had arrived at Schiphol Airport from Moscow that morning, and came into the country on a fake Slovak passport, which didn't require visa, one of many identities which he kept in a safe in his flat in Kaliningrad. The 3D printed parts of his all-plastic gun weren't recognised on the luggage scanner, so he came through security and immigration without a hitch. At the car lease company's desk he picked up an inconspicuous mid-size vehicle. Leonid had given him the address of Grigor's holiday bungalow at Emmeloord. Grigor's having shared that knowledge with Leonid, long ago, was going to be fatal.

Vitaliy found a hotel in Almere, where he ate a light lunch and then coolly stretched out on the double bed. At nine he went out the door, got into the car and drove off. He had an appointment at an address in Amsterdam West where he could obtain .22 ammunition, the only thing he couldn't carry on a plane. At eleven he loaded the gun and disappeared into the darkness.

The car and Vitaliy were never seen again, but Grigor was...

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In his office, he shredded a pile of incriminating material an inch thick, turned off the light and told his secretary he was going home early. At home he packed a bag of personal belongings and a change of clothing. He left the dirty dishes in the sink and fed his fish, hoping they'd survive till his housekeeper called in after the weekend, then locked up the house and drove to the marina.

He had bought the motor yacht two years previously with part of the bribes he had received from Leonid Nevski. It was a Grand Banks cruiser, a seaworthy twin engine American motorboat that proved to be excellent value for coastal cruising in the Baltic. He often used it to go fishing with friends, and occasionally he took a woman on board for a cosy weekend at anchor in the lagoon. This time things were different: the boat was his lifeline to the west and freedom.

He stepped on board, checked water tanks, provisions and fuel, and started the twin diesel engines. The familiar sound of the diesels calmed his nervous mood at the hazardous trip awaiting him. He cast off and steered through the narrow harbour channel to the lagoon. Once outside, he headed south-west at slow speed, turned the point at Svetliy and continued westward to Baltiysk. He dodged a few sailboats and at Baltiysk he calmly passed between the old forts guarding the harbour entrance, heading to open water. Once at sea he turned

north-northeast and pushed up the throttles. The diesels under the floor growled throatily and he opened a beer. If he was lucky, he'd make Memel at dusk.

A few miles behind him, a Coast Guard cutter emerged from the piers. It also turned north-northeast and started overtaking Andropov's boat at a fair rate.

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It was an old, but well rehearsed game played both by the opposition and the governing Coalition, almost a ritual dance. As expected, Parliament threw the motion out with a small majority and the Undersecretary looked away disinterestedly, but the next day Samira had appointments with a few left-wing newspapers. She dropped the name of the Chief Prosecutor in Leeuwarden during an interview. Neither the Prosecutor's Office, nor the Undersecretary were available for comment that evening.

The next morning they paid the price. Two newspapers brought main editorial articles giving good measure about blundering officialdom, ignoring leads and evidence, police brutality during arrests, illegitimate interrogation, and finally the haphazard way the Human Trafficking Directive was executed. The Prosecutor's Office in Leeuwarden was named as an example, and the Undersecretary, the President of the Order of Prosecutors, the Chief Prosecutor in Leeuwarden and the Chief Constable of the National Police were beleaguered by the press. The Chief Prosecutor was furious as the Order had asked him to explain why his name had been mentioned.

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