



SANITY

OLIVER DEAN

“What is the cost of lies? It’s not that we’ll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognise the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth and content ourselves instead with stories? In these stories, it doesn’t matter who the heroes are. All we want to know is: ‘Who is to blame?’”

— Valery Legasov

THE AIR WAS THICK

Many people use the expression to describe a feeling of unease, discomfort, tension. Feeling. Emotion.

∅Definitions∅

Emotion:

a strong feeling deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationships with others.

Thick:

in or with deep, dense, or heavy mass.

To Andriy Kovalenko, anything and everything could be described as thick. Objects and emotions alike.

The air was thick as Andriy stepped out of the Russian Army UAZ-469 Jeep. The fresh mud affixing itself to his finely polished shoes was thick also. The calloused skin on the Colonel's fingers was thick.

Chernobyl Nuclear Power plant was thick.

Andriy silently shook the Colonel's rough hand. He liked it when people didn't talk. It prevented wasting valuable time. It made his work efficient.

He let go.

Something that he didn't do very often.

Andriy's job now was to make everything that seemed thick, elaborate and deep; thin.

More on this later.

RELATIONSHIP

Just weeks ago, Andriy was at home in Kiev. Alina's hand was in his. They were strolling in the park past midnight.

The air was thick. Thick with love. Thick with elation. Thick with a happiness, a willingness to be alive. He reached into his pocket, a soft, silk box met his hand and he fell, clumsily to his knee. Alina gasped, her curly brown hair dancing in the breeze.

“Alina, will you make me the happiest man in the world?”

Alina didn't have time to answer.

She fell.

Her blood was thick.

Andriy screamed, cowering over Alina, helpless. He squeezed her hand. He buried his face into the thick road of gravel, not ever wanting to get up. Not to leave the love of his life.

A man appeared. A thick beard attached to his face. A thick suppresser attached to his gun.

Borja spoke thick, lingering words. “I'm sorry.”

MOOD

Over time, Andriy developed an intolerance to listening. Listening to others. Sometimes he could not stand even the thought that there were words coming out of people's mouths. Any one of the words could be a lie. The Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosi were good at lying.

So was Andriy.

The next weeks were thick. Thick with hatred, thick with anger, thick with a constant dread that everyone he knew, even his closest friends, were against him.

He had been briefed on the reasoning for Alina's assassination.

He didn't mind that she was a double agent. All he knew was that without her, his life meant nothing. In a way, his life was thin without her.

Borja had been Andriy's friend. He knew that Borja had been given orders. In the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, you obey orders. He knew that friends didn't kill their friends' fiancé.

His mood was melancholic. Angry. Empty.

CIRCUMSTANCE

Andriy was on a Mil Mi-6 helicopter. The cabin was thick. Thick with dread. Thick with pointlessness. Thick with uncertainty.

His circumstance was sudden. He was flying towards Pripyat, Ukraine. He was under informed. He was tired. He was crawling with unease.

Chernobyl Nuclear Powerplant came into view. A castle, piercing the thick forest.

How was he going to keep something that big under the world's radar? How was he going to hide that from the world's prying eyes?

The Soviet Union was crumbling.

All it needed was the lightest push to fall apart.

It was Andriy's job to stop that from happening.



Andriy stepped further along the muddy road. The Colonel followed.

THE COLONEL

He wore a khaki jacket, adorned with vibrantly strung medal ribbons. Pants, striped with red.

The colour of the motherland.

A wide cap sat proudly atop his head; a gold pennant pinned to a crimson puggaree.

Brilliant brown boots had taken a beating from not quite so brilliant brown mud.

His face bore the brunt of a score of service. It was fatigued, wrinkled and scrunched beyond his years.

He was tall, stocky, an outright brick of a man.

He was thick.

Andriy was led to a large, grey-brown tent, dimly, eerily lit by a white light bulb. Comrade Bryukhanov sat smoking, slumped over a table next to his counterpart, Comrade Fomin.

“Comrade Kovalenko,” Bryukhanov began, extinguishing his cigarette on the table. He forced the weary statement out from his husky voice. “I’m sure you know by now that my power plant is burning away as we speak. I’m sure you know that my country is not happy.”

Andriy stood silent. He was bored by the useless information, ignoring it he instead surveyed the two pathetic men.

COMRADES BRYUKHANOV AND FOMIN

Managing Directors of Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant

Both short, around 5 ½ ft.

Bryukhanov had knotted, dark grey hair, a grey face. Fomin had brown back and sides and a bald top accompanied by thick lensed glasses.

Both avid smokers.

“I cannot do this much longer. It has been 12 hours. I have cut the phone lines. I have cut all communication to Pripyat and Chernobyl. I need you to take over from me, you are to stop the flow of misinformation. Do not let the world know about the failure.”

Andriy nodded, coldly.

“We are going to inspect the damage later today and then you will take over while we meet with the President.”

Comrade Bryukhanov stood up with an enduring sigh. Comrade Fomin followed as Bryukhanov strode out of the tent, his eyes fixed on Andriy.

The Colonel entered soon after the men left. His towering, burly figure dwarfing them. “Comrade Kovalenko.” The Colonel spoke his first words to Andriy. “Follow me.”

Andriy was led out of the tent and he soon found himself in the back of the same UAZ-469.

“We are going to the hospital first, there are many injured there.” The Colonel declared, handing Andriy a faded white piece of paper.

THE PAPER

A brief list of assignments.

Hospital: Comrade Kovalenko to control crowds at Pripyat Hospital. No one is to enter apart from the wounded.

Chernobyl Archives: Comrade Kovalenko will censor reports from the disaster. No civilians are to enter the building.

Pripyat General Hospital was crowded, overwhelmed with patients of all ages. The room was thick.

Andriy fought his way through the bustling crowd. Deafening whines and cries of pain reverberated off the walls.

Through all this Andriy stood coldly, bluntly at his post, guarding the entry to the emergency hall. Children, young children, red all over, rushed in on stretches and even mattresses. Howling parents, holding on to their children until the last moment until Andriy intervened with the numb order, “Injured Only.”

The faces.

The cries.

Andriy barely had time to remember his intolerance to listening while he battled the unforgiving crowd.

A young police officer attempting to control the crowd snapped, turning his head and walking right out.

Andriy stood cold, all through the day, and into the night.

After midnight.

The waiting room had thinned, spotted only now with sleeping patients.

Soft footsteps came from behind him. A woman.

THE WOMAN

She wore a black skirt, brown cardigan.

Curly brown hair.

Hazel eyes.

Bright red lipstick.

Andriy was taken aback. A woman had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, from behind the guarded door. She was not a nurse, not injured, and fit none of the criteria to enter.

“What are you doing?” Andriy began.

“Leaving.”

How did you get past the door?”

“Easy. You didn’t guard it very well. Slipped right through under a trolley.”

Andriy paused. He was slightly impressed. He admired her attitude.

“Why?” Andriy resumed, asking in the bluntest way possible.

“Oh, to see my husband.”

“You can’t do that ma’am.”

“I know.”

She disappeared.

Andriy stood numb at the door, staring at the ground where she had been standing. For the first time in his life, he was bewildered. Unable to move, his face turned to an uncontrolled smile.

He smiled for the first time in as long as he could remember. He smiled for the first time since he was with Alina.

Busses flooded the streets. Loudspeakers blared the evacuation order through the city.

Molasses sprayers littered the empty streets as people fled Pripyat.

By noon the city was deserted.

The air was thick.

Thick with emptiness.

Emptiness is not often described by the word.

The word thick tends to represent an abundance of something.

Maybe the way to describe the thickness of the city was that there was an abundance of emptiness.

Chernobyl Archives was a large room within the Pripyat town hall, crammed with towers of filing cabinets that reached the high roof. Inside the building, Andriy filed reports made on the meltdown, censoring anything exposing the disaster and mailing glorified reports on the heroic efforts by liquidators to Kiev. Andriy sorted everything from blueprints of the reactor to western propaganda calling for the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev.

SOME NOTABLE REPORTS

A text by a Nuclear Physicist named Valery Legasov detailing the events that led to the meltdown. Disposed of.

A list of all the dead (so far). Censored.

A statistics report on a German robot named 'Joker'. Classified and sent to KGB headquarters in Moscow.

The sound of a cabinet being opened screeched through the silent room.

Andriy leapt up to inspect and found none other than the hazel eyed woman from the hospital.

“What on earth are you doing here? The city has been evacuated!”

The woman turned to face Andriy.

“I want to find my husband’s file. You pigs won’t let me see him, go to his funeral, or even find out how he died. All you tell us is lies. I was told that I would see my husband and now I must secretly enter the city to even find where he got buried?”

“We are not pigs; we are trying to protect you.”

“Of course, everyone is saying that. That lying cow Gorbachev saying, ‘the Soviet people have shown the utmost honesty and bravery’, no they haven’t.”

“How dare you call our leader a lying cow? I will have you shot!”

“Good! Maybe that way I finally see my husband!”

“Comrade.”

“Yes?” Andriy darted to face the Colonel.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Her.” Andriy muttered uneasily, pointing down the empty aisle.

“Who? There is no one here Comrade.”

“The woman from the hospital, she was just here.”

“Go back to your seat Comrade.”

“But you need to find her, she escaped!”

“Go back to your seat Comrade!”

Andriy was hyperventilating, sure that the woman really was there.

The Colonel exited the room indignantly.

Andriy struggled to his seat, dizzy and disoriented. Had he just hallucinated? What was wrong with him? Was he going mad?

Andriy read through a document. A handwritten letter to Mikhail Gorbachev.

DEAR COMRADE GORBACHEV

I know you are covering up the disaster at Chernobyl. You are a lying cow and deserve to die of Radiation sickness like the rest of us.

Love, Alina.

Andriy blinked and the paper turned into a report on RBMK Class Reactors.

The Colonel re-entered.

“Hello Colonel, you are back quickly.”

“You are no longer of any use, thank you for your service Comrade.”

The Colonel pulled out a suppressed pistol.

Andriy fell.

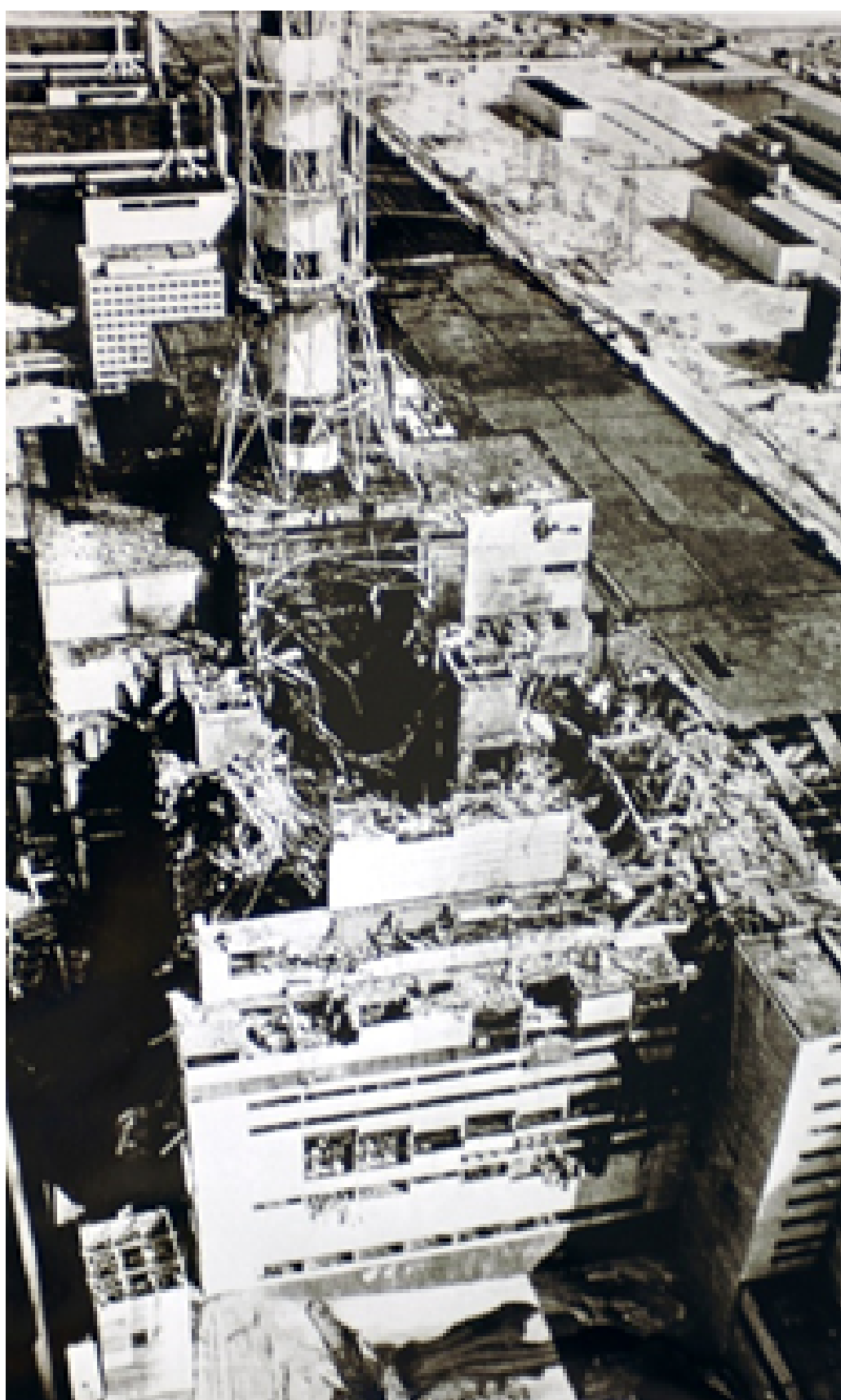
His blood was thick.

“No one knows. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that, to them, justice was done. Because, you see, to them, a just world is a sane world. There was nothing sane about Chernobyl. What happened there, what happened after, even the good we did, all of it... all of it, madness.”

— Valery Legasov



Comrades Bryukhanov and Fomin, Managing Directors of Chernobyl Nuclear Power plant on trial in 1987
Source: Radio Free Europe



Aerial View of Chernobyl Reactor 4
Source: Wikipedia

In April 1986 a meltdown occurred at Chernobyl Nuclear Power plant, sending radioactive fallout across Europe and forcing the evacuation of the citizens of nearby city Pripyat. The Soviet Union deployed KGB operatives to the disaster site tasked with the job of silencing upstanders and hiding the full extent of the disaster from the world. These men were expected to blindly carry out tasks. Censoring media publications and preventing hospital visits were common ways for KGB and police to hide the disaster from public eyes.

Agents working in the exclusion zone were exposed to large doses of radiation, which led to cancers, radiation sickness and mental illness.

In Andriy's case, Schizophrenia.