

~~the~~

"The-less"

Now, she didn't want *any* of this. All that Queen&Country service was putting a tax on her. No, she wasn't exactly unhappy with it, as her salary was surprisingly high for a governmental worker, but she had a family and spending upwards of ten hours at her office wasn't exactly something her wife and proverbial kids appreciated. Not that she had much choice, anyway. There were certain forces at play that would notify much more certain authorities of some high-treason-sentence-worthy activity from her past should she leave or do anything untoward with regards to her work.

Capitalist ventures like that of Mrs. Burnham are commonplace around Britain. What is much less common is for them to be undiscovered foreign government spy outposts, still quite like that of Mrs. Burnham. Having a close relative (like, for example, a spouse) in a governmental position doesn't help keeping up a front like that (regular background checks), but having an easy, regular access to said government's secrets greatly outweighs ever increasing risk of discovery.

— You?! But... Why? – Sarah broke down

— Oh, you didn't catch on? You were even more stupid than I thought. – Fenella shrugged, now affixing a silencer to a run-down pistol with numbers sanded off.

— So that's all I was to you? A tool?, a means to an end? – She regained her composure.

— Mostly, yes. I mean, your coital expertise is extraordinary, too, but it was just a bonus, really.

— So, before you kill me, just one more thing, luv. My so-called last words, if you will?

— Sure, I guess it *is* your privilege as an executee.

— "Painted Black"

Snipers fire.

"Here lies Fenella Burnham, 1983-2016. Beloved wife and dedicated merchant."

Much lower, where you normally wouldn't look, a Maltese flag is engraved.

"Here lies Sarah Burnham, 1984-2057. Beloved wife and selfless defender of

Queen And Country."

```
assert_eq!(  
    sentences[0],  
    sentences[sentences.len() - 1]  
);
```

"End = Start"

Not ever would she expect this.
She was supposed to be dead weeks ago,
A dead woman walking.
Not the whole of her was dead, though.
She was carrying life.
Her last words: "run, while you still can".
And there she stood, reborn; and hungry for blood.
The procedure worked.
Not ever would she expect this.



"No gifts this year"

"*Fuck*, this one was supposed to be Othala, not Jera!"
"Well, it's too late now... Run for your goddamn lives!"
"What about the old man? Won't he get mad?"
"Whatever he'll do to us is better than what this one's gonna do if we don't run now. Now get a move on, you two!"

"Where are the cherubs? Haven't heard them in a while."
"Oh, they're out summoning Stan; that's what they told *me*, anyway. They get so lonely in the season, wouldn't you say? Hard for them to get a friend anywhere close to *here*, eh?" **Sigh.**
"Well, as long as they're having fun..."

"Check who lives there, I remember his neighbourhood being pretty terrible."
"You're right. More than you'd ever want to."
Encouraging silence.
"We got..." **Deep breath.** "Satan."
"What the fuck should we do *now*? Tell the old man? He'll kill us."
"Well, so will goddamn *Satan* if we don't get away from here *now*."
"Alright, let's go. South."
"Too late... That's him."
"HIDE, THEN, YOU RETARDS!"

"What is it, luv? Anything bothe..."
"*Hush!* What's that?"
"Can't hear anything..."
"By the nine... Stay here. Better yet, hide somewhere smell-proof!"

"So, we meet again, old 'friend'."
"*You were hiding right. Not anymore. Your death is imminent.*"
"Would it surprise you to hear that I learned a couple of tricks, too?"

"Old man's tricks didn't do him much good, did they?"
"Not much you can do when your opponent moves faster than you can perceive it and interrupts the old-as-world cliché of pre-decisive-battle hero-villain conversation, is there?"
"At least he killed the thing..."
"...but it mutilated him first. Let's get out of here. Shit makes me queasy."



"Six Minutes"

"Ello, luv! What can do for ya'?"
Pfft. "Drop the damn pretense. Glad you're here. Pass me that pouch, would ya'?"
"Heavy stuff; what's in there? 'Новинки'?"
"Heh, look at this one, for example." **Metal-metal clang.* * *Click.* * *Metal-metal clang.* * "Ready? Observe!" **Explosion.* *
"What happened to that guy's *face*?"
"Oh, y'know. It just kind of... ceased to exist."
"What's *in* these rounds?"
"Oh, various things. Observe!" **Metal-metal clang.* * *Click.* * *Metal-metal clang.* * *Explosion.* *
"That tank... just..."
"Exploded, yes."
"But you're not supposed to be able to do that with a *bullet*."
"Those are not ordinary rounds. They're manufactured by our capitalist 'friends' over in America. That's what they call an 'ayy-pee-aii', I think that stands for Armour-Piercing-Incendiary?"
"It pierces even tank-grade armour?"
"Clearly, yes. But you came here to discuss...?"
"You. Me. Us."
"Oh?" **Explosion.* *
"You can stop accenting everything you say by shooting your rifle, y'know?"
"Fine." **Explosion.* * *Giggle.* "A'ight, I'll stop. You were saying..."
"Yes, us."
**Encouraging silence.* * **Explosion.* *
"We can't stay here. Not for much longer, anyway. You *know* what they do to the likes of us, and they're growing suspicious already."
"You can rule me out of the equa-" **Explosion.* * "-tion."
"Why? What's happened, luv? I thought you joined the army, and I followed, to finance our escape to your, as you called them, capitalist 'friends' over in the Americas."
"Well, yes. That *was* the plan at the time. And still *is* for you. As for me..."
**Explosion.* * "Good shit. ...as for me, I can't do that."
"Why, love? What happened? Can I help?"
"Guessing that's one way to break the news to you. I'm dying. I'm practically dead as is. Cancer, terminal. The doctor gave me a month or two. Increasing calcification, first of..." **Explosion.* * "Meh. ...first of the skeleton, originating in my right shoulder, then spreading all the way to my brain**", and that's probably

what's gonna kill me."

Sobbing. "No way to save you?"

"Nah, I enlisted with the army because if I die here it'll be probably less painful than what'd occur 'naturally'." **Explosion.**

Deepened sobbing.

"Oh come on, not even a faint smile for that?" *Sigh.* "I have a plan for you. After I die and your deployment ends you take my money, you have the account details, right?"

Nod.

"You take my money, you should have enough, fly to America and find yourself a nice lass, alright?"

"Y- yes."

Growl. "Goddammit, soldier! How are you to respond to a higher-ranked officer!" **Explosion.**

Faint smile. "**Yes, sir!**"

"I knew I could get something out of you t'day. Gimme a hug and run. Save yourself. They've broken through our defences. Tell the others that I say that we won't hold up much longer."

Hugging. "I love you."

"I know. Now **GO!** See you in hell!"

Reassured. Determined. "Make Satan sorry he's met you!" **Distant sound of footsteps.**

Brass clatters in a leather pouch.

**Новинка_(rus) – novelty/gimmick.*

***Cancer in the form of full brain calcification – I'm not a doctor but I think I heard that's possible?*

I took the liberty of considering nonverbal parts of a conversation "dialogue", too.



"Cucumber Dog"

Jakub was returning from the pub when he stumbled upon a stray. Normally he'd just kick it and stumble forward but this thing had a toxic-green knapsack and was somehow resilient to his multiple kicks.

"Kurde, what was I drinking?", he muttered to himself, "I'm supposed to be seeing white mice and/or elephants, not poodles with backpacks."

"I am on a journey looking for Ass, Potatoes, & Cucumbers. Can you assist me?", responded the dog.

There were, however, two problems. First, the dog's voice was rather high-pitched and quiet. That was quickly fixed by Jakub stumbling and falling upon a bump in the road and the dog utilising that opportunity to repeat its line. The second, however, was much greater – Jakub understood not a *word* of English. He recognised that the dog spoke the language, though, as that sounded rather similarly to what his grandson tried to teach him over the summer holidays. He struggled for a Very Long While as he searched for a single word of English his grandson managed to teach him. It was proving elusive, until...

"Okej", that was the only word he could remeber in this state.

"Magnificent. I'll just follow you, then", the dog responded, not that Jakub understood. Or, for that matter, listened at all.

"Okej", Jakub confirmed again.

The dog was still babbling but Jakub cut it out and forced himself to attempt to walk in a roughly straight line. The dog, thankfully, followed.

By the time he arrived at his house Jakub was sober enough to regain the nimbleness of his fingers. He pulled out his trusty brake cord with a loop on the end, and, like many before, made short work of the dog.

Assessing his haul, he nodded affirmatively: a couple days' worth of fresh meat and an unused toxic-green knapsack, a perfect gift for his grandson when he comes over for holidays.

This is based upon [Andrzej Pilipiuk](#)'s book series about [Jakub Wędrowycz](#).

```
loop {  
    assert!(soldiers  
        .iter()  
        .filter(|s| s.age == Age::Old)  
        .all(Soldier::alive));  
}
```

"Get upsoldier"

Pain, left shoulder. Reoccurring every three seconds. Inhalation. Sharp pain in back of right lung and dull, dry pain in throat. Facial muscles, all roughed up, but functional. Left thigh. "Aaaagh!" Shot, definitely shot.

"Oh, you're awake. Magnificent." One more kick to the left shoulder. "Get up, soldier. There's work for you to do." Raspy voice. His CO? Close. His CO's superior, more like it.

"Aaaaai got shot." *Wheezing*. "And died."

"Old. Soldiers. NEVER! DIE!" Each word was accented with another kick.

"Now. **GET UP!**"

Memories came flooding. The CO's brain splattering upon his uniform. Ripping off his mags, rifle and sidearm. Bob stepping on a landmine. Scavenging his corpse for spare rounds. Getting surrounded by seven al-Quaeda riflemen. They were low on ammo, too. Managing to shoot four of them dead before catching a bullet in his left thigh, then finishing the rest. Bleeding out on his face in the middle of some Yemenian desert. Being left to die.

But two details didn't quite match up. One, how the *fuck* was he alive? He definitely remembered bleeding out through two bullet holes in his left thigh and being able to do naught about it, not to omit the excruciating pain caused by his shattered left femur.

Now, his thigh was still hurting, but not as excruciatingly as back then, and he was able to put his full body weight on it, which would be rather tricky if his bones were shattered. And it seemed to be getting better by the hour.

"So, what's all this about? Me being back from the dead and all? And before you say something, I *remember* bleeding out in the middle of a desert after getting shot."

"You see, mate, you never really died. I mean, you did *die*, just... Y'know you never committed to being dead, and you've been in the force for numerous years. Can I also assume you didn't *want* to die? That you wanted to give those motherfuckers what they deserve and finish your mission despite 'bleeding out in the middle of a desert'?"

"Yes, and... Yes. But what does that..."

"You seriously don't get it?" His CO's superior interrupted him. "Your family is soldiers all the way down to six generations back. You've never been told stories

of this as a child?"

"Evidently not, so cut to the chase, would ya'? You said there's some work for me."

"'Attaboy! So, as you can see, you're back and kickin'. How's yer leg?"

"Suspiciously not shattered, I can tell you that."

"So that, too, checks out. Neat. It's the first time I've attended the process in person." An unreadable nod and grin. "You're probably asking yourself how this came to transpire. Well, it all began around the thirteenth century before current era when king Menelaus of Sparta prayed to the gods to ask them how he could prevent his best warriors from dying on the battlefield. Since his best men were also the oldest, he phrased it like so. After many a day of negotiations he struck a deal, so old soldiers, when gravely injured on the field of battle, could be brought back to active duty, so long, of course, as you're able to piece the solid pieces back together."

"So I'm guessing that's why both my CO and Bob aren't here?"

"Well, it's hard to put someone back together after they stepped on a landmine, yeah. As for your CO, he was a Russian spy so we wouldn't even try to."

Sigh. "Right. But since that was a deal that that Greek guy struck, what's the catch?"

"You can and will die irreversibly of old age and/or when you get out of active service, whichever comes first." Glance at watch. "Your thigh should be fully recovered by now. Come on kick me with your left leg. Give me your best shit." Stumble backwards. "Not bad. How's the output?"

"*Within norm, sir.*" A metallic female voice responded.

"Magnificent. Cheers, Athena. So, if you don't have any questions let's get right to the briefing, shall we?"

"Lead the way."

After the briefing and out on the field once again, he realised what the second detail was. He should have felt joy when he was told he'd return to active duty and sorrow after Bob and (less so, but still) his CO. It was too late before he realised that he was turning into an equivalent of a remorseless and feelings-lacking CIA zombie-merc like on the news, just for the U.S. Military; and that he was surprisingly okay with that.

He smiled and muttered to himself. "Old soldiers never die." That was his last conscious thought.



"Utopian Assassin"

Life's easy. For ordinary people. You do something good, you get money in up to 7 days processing time plus postal service delays. You make someone happy, you get money in up to 7 days processing time plus postal service delays. You get the idea. Here's another simple-to-get idea: the better the thing you do, or the happier you make someone the more money you get (in up to 7 days processing time plus postal service delays). I met one of the guys that make the formulas for payout calculations, they're *crazy*, lemme tell ya. The whole money-for-good-stuff business reflected positively on human happiness and economical growth in the last couple of years, all more the reason to rejoice, right?

Locally, yes. Globally, not quite. You see, the whole utopian government business works on a medium scale, but doesn't quite scale up to the level of the whole continent. Also, the system doesn't actually *punish* bad behaviour, so, naturally, people have taken to exploiting it. How to exploit the system? Keep slaves and sometimes don't beat them! Magnificent. Fucking. Job. Extraordinary, utopian government.

That's where I come in. I'm an official governmental assassin. That means that not only do I get to murder people and get paid for it, which is pretty sick, but I also work for the government so I need not worry about the bodies. The guy that was keeping slaves? Fucking slaughtered, thanks to our utopian government law enforcement's demographics department. Maybe you're not as bad, utopian government. The downside is I legally can't claim happiness money for killing people that were causing dishappiness, much like a detective can't claim money for bringing a sought fugitive to justice.

So, one day I'm woken up by a courier ringing at my door. "Comiiiiiiiiiiiiing!" I yelled to get him off the damned bell. "Sir, there's a delivery for you. You need to sign *here* and *here*." He gestured at dotted areas as I started to read the delivery bill. "This can't be right..." I muttered to myself. "A'ight, thanks, mate. Dump it there." I gestured over in the general direction of the old German bunker I had cleaned up in my back yard.

Yawning and examining the delivery bill closer, I stumbled back in. Three hundred thousand dollars. In fifty-cent coins. From the government. Labeled "happiness money". Couldn't be right. I failed to recall any recent non-

government-contracted murders of this magnitude, so I called my handler (of course I have a handler).

"Yo, I just got a delivery of three hundred thousand dollars in halves." I started, still perplexed.

"So what's the problem?"

"It's labeled 'happiness money' and I haven't done any off-the-books contracts recently."

"You know well and good that we have no knowledge as to the cause. And I checked that transfer personally, it's correct."

"Righty ho'..." I tried to end the conversation, but I got interrupted.

"You should turn on the news."

And so I did. *"Recent reports suggest that the leader of the communist Cuba was assassinated yesterday and the people have started a coup."*

"I guess they'll be able to overthrow the government, but how does that factor into..."

"Think! Who killed the guy?"

"I did, and you know that. But I can't receive happiness money for that because you, as in the government, contracted it."

Slapping sound. "Oh god, I just remembered."

"Did you just facepalm *in real life*?"

"Yes. But I remembered why you got that money."

"And?"

"The legislation says you can't collect happiness money resulting from your governmental contracts *in the country*."

"Well, that's an oversight, right?"

"Yep, I'll take it up with the higher-ups. But for now, enjoy your new-found wealth."

"A'ight, see ya, mate."

Life's easy. Now for Cubans and me, too.



"Degenerate Watch"

Degenerate call 2016, the biggest annual source of income for many governmental workers, including me. Hell, it's not even that the job's hard or requires special training, which it doesn't, it's just that there's a tremendous amount of degenerates to be handled in a three-day period. Thankfully enough, my departament handles the stage 2 of degenerate handling process, so we already get them presorted as the music-listening kind.

The process is really not that bad, for the most of them. Just the usual questions about sexual activity, influence of certain artists over the individual degenerate's life, et cetera; routine stuff, really. Then come the head-splintering verification tests. That sounds scary but it's basically a polygraph that lets us gleam a little bit more information. If you answered truthfully you'll have no problems and we ask you to come again next year.

If, however, you lied or you otherwise confessed to being heavily influenced by **REDACTED**, not that there's anything inherently wrong with that (some would even call you an innocent victim), there's a good chance your family will not ever see you again.
...And recognise you.

Our national theatre hosts an annual life-sized puppet show. The strings that hold up the puppets are made of shoelaces, and there's probably some historical reason for that, not that I'd care. Regardless of how obvious that makes the puppetry, it's highly praised for "incredible life-likeness" and "movement fluent as if the puppets had a life of their own", but I already said too much... **Vocal scratch.**

*There's no time for that, it matters naught, now the only relief is in dance.
Dance and fly, high as a kite. The highest praise – the sighs of amazement from the crowd.*



"Ghostly Lasers"

"Speak to me, father", I called loudly, "for I am in need of advice."

*"Oh what is it with this bloody cat, it's getting louder by the day!" *Sigh.**

"Might as well try calm it down with this, eh?"

My calls were answered: "Right, let's get over this quick, I don't've much time for this advice shit." Must've caught him mid-something, a pity. I liked to chat with him when he had time.

"Shouldn't he be chasing the laser instead of meowing at it?"

"No idea. Do continue meowing, though, seems to calm him down faster."

"Father, I turn to you for advice once again, for I am facing a conundrum of the century"

**Sigh.* "And that'd be?"*

"I was wondering, whether, should I find myself in a situation..." My father's image flickered. "Are you listening?"

"Don't unclick the pointer! Is your hand shaking?"

"I just get excited by science in any and all forms, and you've got a notepad, so we're no longer just fucking around with our cat."

"I am listening."

"Should I find myself in a situation that presents itself as providing me two food sources, one of which is not meant for me, is it acceptable to consume food from both sources?"

My father's image seems to have steadied slightly as his voice was no longer bored. "Indeed, that is the question for a lifetime. I shall discuss it with the elders. I will get back to you tomorrow."

"My hand's shaking too much, take the pointer and I'll meow and take notes instead."

"Farewell, father." I bid and backed out of the room.

"So that's just it, eh? It just meows for the last time and leaves?"

"As is clearly evident. So what should we do with the notes?"

"No earthly idea, let's stash them somewhere and append to them next time."

```
assert!(eyes
    .pop()
    .is_some());
assert!(eyes
    .pop()
    .is_none());
```


"The Last Eye"

"This is it, then, ay?" A rhetorical question to a person long gone lingers in the air.

Sigh. "The big day..." Muttering to myself was quite a weakness of mine. So was not checking my surroundings before rolling about in bed.

Smashing upon the floor wasn't the most pleasant thing, less so physically (it is but a 'bout a foot, after all).

"*Don't keep rollin'...*" My banterous murmur and temporary grin trailed off into the void that filled my heart.

More so mentally, as that reminded me of my wife's recent passing, as normally she was the one who slept at this side of the bed. So no, the mutter was not to myself, it was to my late wife. She's still here, y'know, talking to her doesn't make me *crazy*. Well okay, maybe a little; or, given other more-less related effects, quite a lot.

Grasping at semi-literal straws (seeing as my mattress substitute was a lot lower-tech than a modern-day mattress), some degree of verticalism was achieved without much more damage to my bottom. Then came the time for acquisition of carbon-based polymers, which today would be [cereal](#). Or, rather, would *have been* cereal, had it not been for the fact that the milk, which is essential for assembly of my dish of choice for the morning, had "gone bad", as the youngsters call it, and was now emitting a stench so horrid the only place it deserved to visit was the facilities, wherein it was promptly baptised in roughly 1.32 gallons of water along with what was left of the contents of my stomach and intestines. Upon returning to the kitchen, feeling surprisingly tranquil after being purged of all that was impure, my breakfast was now cancelled. That decision wasn't uninfluenced by the hallucination of my wife remarking "You always did say you think better on an empty stomach."

"S'pose yer righ'" My response was mangled by a yawn, which caused my imminent fall backwards to be noticed much too late.

The parquet never did hit my back, as the world around me vanished when my fall still had around 20° to go. Okay, maybe "vanished" wasn't quite the right word for it, a better phrase would be "replaced by various images of nation-affecting catastrophes": the 9/11 attack, Чернобыль, Black Death, Canterbury TV, et caetera. Soon enough, patterns started to appear, seemingly out of nowhere (probably another hallucination, oh well), connecting the seemingly unrelated and subtracting the images themselves, until... The image was deeply

unsettling, as if something that existed in more than the cosy three dimensions was sliding through the perception, but the conclusion could only be one: there was not a strand of hope, and boy would it be painful. Seeing the choice between a death slow and painful and death swift and borderline painless, there really was no contest. One last text, to a contact named "Denise ": "Love you.", and another one: "Evacuate.". Then, it was a simple matter of puncturing the veins around my wrists. The world faded away in darkness.

"What happened to my wife?" Denise Abernathy yelled into the phone in panic. "Just received a text from her phone!"

"But madam, you know as well as we do that is impossible. Your wife's phone hasn't been touched in three months and, lemme check, yep, it's still here. The battery is dead, there is no way it's been used." A very agitated hospital man puffed back into his phone.

"Going there to investigate myself." Denise snarled back.

"As is within your rights, you can visit your coma-affected relatives at any time."

"As shall be done." Denise put away her phone and rushed past hospital man to the room her wife has been occupying for the past three months.

She was stopped at the door by doctor man that was assigned to the case.

"How'd you know to get here?" He asked, pretty startled. "Was just going to the nearest phone to notify you..."

"Got these." Denise stuck her phone with opened text view into doctor man's hand and squeezed past him in the tight doorframe. "But she's..."

"Yes, dead. We assessed her as such barely twenty minutes ago." He looked at Denise's phone. "Which coincides with the time of..." **Gasp.** "Mrs. Abernathy, you don't think..."

"You know what she was, what she was capable of." She snapped. "But if this is right, boy are we in trouble."

"Like this?" Doctor man pointed at the window with a sad grin, where the sky was being covered with hunks of steel. "Ten more minutes, give-take?"

Denise collapsed at the side of her wife's bed, grasping her hand and brought it to her face, tears wetting their pale skin. She cried and whispered more to herself than her late wife's body. "Why, Ciri? it wasn't supposed to go like this... The old blood, the sight... They were supposed to save us... Save you!"

She felt a rush of blood through her temples. Ten seconds before doctor man and hospital man would, she vanished.