

The Rendition Competition

I hadn't heard from my friend Fred for a long time. Ever since he joined the Department of Homeland Security, he seemed to be impossible to contact. The last time I saw him he was explaining the new multiple tiered color coding system they invented for various terrorist alerts...puce, ochre, baby doll pink...and so on. I had tried to contact him now and again, but his phone always had some strange message on it, like "Ralph is vacationing in the People's Republic of Cambridge" or "Ralph is finally philandering in Philadelphia." His messages were always in the third person and used big words, probably an inside code or something. Ever since Ashcroft left and Chertoff took over, the Department seemed to get weirder and weirder.

Anyway, I was deeply asleep one early morning around 3 AM when the phone rang. I heard a low voice the other end. It said, "Psst." I'm not kidding. It was like in a comic strip. The voice said, "Pssst," again. Of course I knew immediately it was Fred. Only an undercover agent would say something as obvious as that.

"Fred!!!" I yelled to the phone. "I haven't heard from you in ages."

"Keep the voice down," the voice said so softly I could hardly hear him. "You can never tell when somebody is listening."

"Pleeeease!" I groaned. "Nobody cares what I say. What's up?"

"Are you alone?" he whispered. "Can I come over? I've got some great news."

"Sure...nobody here but my cats and they can keep a secret," I said.

Ten minutes later he was knocking on my back door, something like in the dumb song "Hernando's Hideaway." Bum, bum-bum, bum-bum-bum-bum. Like that.

He had his coat pulled over his head like in the old spy movies. "Come on in, Fred," I hissed secretly. "Nobody's here." He went to all the windows and pulled down the shades and drew drapes. Finally he sat down and sighed. "You can't be too careful in this business," he whispered.

“Come on, Fred,” I said. “what’s the big deal?”

“The next Olympics,” he said. “We’re proposing a new sport.”

“Who’s proposing a new sport?” I asked. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Cheney and Chertoff are meeting with the American Olympic committee as we speak,” he said. “Promise you won’t say anything to anyone. I would be in big trouble if the information leaked out.”

“Not to worry about me,” I said. “But we better let my cats out. You never know.”

I thought he’d laugh at that, but he didn’t. He jerked his head over towards the back door. “Ok...better not let them hear this.”

I couldn’t believe it, but I did as he said. After Gromit and Golom were safely out in the back patio, I got us a couple of beers and sat down again. I was finding this unusual even for Fred.

“So what’s the big deal?” I asked.

“They’re proposing a new Olympic sports category. They’re calling it ‘The Rendition Competition’. Waterboarding is the featured event.”

I burst out laughing. “Get outta here,” I nearly choked on my beer. “You mean they’ve put together a competition based on torture? How does it work? Last scream wins?”

“Don’t call it that,” he said unsmilingly. “We would never use ‘torture’. We help people tell the truth, a Christian virtue. And besides, Waterboarding is just physical conditioning. The one who can stay underwater the longest without telling the truth wins. Simple.”

“I don’t know,” I said skeptically. “There are plenty of countries that are really good waterboarders. How would you like to get stomped for a gold medal by Zimbabwe? You would never live down the humiliation.”

“As a matter of fact,” Fred said, cupping his mouth so that the cats wouldn’t hear if they had their ears plastered on the patio door, “we have hired a former

KGB Waterboarding expert as our coach. Fyodor is a direct descendent of Dostoyevsky....he has his great grandfather's notes on renditioning from "The Brothers Karamazov". We can't lose."

"This is ridiculous," I said, exasperatedly. "Even if you are successful in getting torture an Olympic event, how would you ever recruit any victims?"

"Please," he said," a hurt expression on his face. "You've never met him. Chertoff is really a nice guy under his bald, vampire-looking head." Fred was starting to get really huffy and red in the face. "It is NOT torture. We know all about torture, I assure you. One of our secret agents managed to get a copy of the Vatican notes on the Inquisition. Torture is weird racks and wheels and thumb screws, not Waterboarding."

I must confess I was impressed. Getting Vatican notes on anything is a pretty daunting challenge.

"And we have already managed to get a ringer...a guy that can't lose in the Waterboard event. His name is Bob Hughes."

"I've never heard of him," I said. "I would think you would recruit Michael Phelps or somebody like that. He can stay underwater a long time."

"We tried to get Phelps," he said with a smug little smile. "But he was busy. Hughes is the owner of the oldest record in Olympic history."

"Why haven't I heard of him, then?" I asked, perplexed again.

"In the 1956 Olympics, he was the first American to compete in two separate water sports since Johnnie Weissmuller. He held the world record in the 100 meter breast stroke."

"And....?" I said, really at sea now. "Even so, he would be in his seventies now."

"Hughes got his record by swimming an entire length of the pool, 50 meters, underwater without taking a breath....check it out. There was no rule about breathing then. Other swimmers tried to imitate him, but they didn't have the lung capacity of this guy, so a lot of swimmers passed out underwater and damn near drowned. The Olympics Committee changed the rules the next year. Hughes might be old, but he can still hold his breath underwater for over

five minutes. We would kill Russia, China and Zimbabwe.” Fred looked at me, arms folded, a self-righteous look of superiority on his face.

“Wow,” I said, completely blown away. “And the Olympic Committee will go along with this new venue?” I asked. “The Olympics are supposed to be about peace and camaraderie, stuff like that, not who is the best torturer.”

“Rendition,” he corrected me. “Don’t forget ‘competition’. No matter what they say, the Russians still want to beat the Americans at everything. They will be putting a huge wrestler or somebody up against poor ol’ Bob. China is a great competitor, but they have little skinny guys. We will kick ass, I assure you!”

“Are there any other events?” I asked, no longer skeptical. As always, Fred spoke with governmental authority.

“Several. For example there is the sleep deprivation marathon. To even qualify you have to prove you haven’t even taken a nap for three months. Then there’s the Rendition Condition venue, our premier event: the one who can watch Rush Limbaugh the longest. We have a guy who is so far right politically he reads the private diaries of Caligula for entertainment. He had Limbaugh on for three weeks, 24/7 and then switched to Hennety for another week. He’s a Rendition stud.”

“My God,” I cried. “Death would be a welcome relief for most people!”

“See?” he said. “How can we lose? Chertoff is a genius!”

After Fred slunk out with his coat over his head again, climbed silently over the back wall into the alley, I thought this whole idea over. Talk about American ingenuity. We can market anything! A Gold Medal sweep in the international Rendition Olympic competition four years from now!

What a country!