

Red's Rockets Glared

A Short Story

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Red's Rockets Glared (1982)

After the president made his first speech, the one that only New York received, all the radio and TV stations must have found it difficult to just say, "And now back to our regularly scheduled program." He would later make a speech that would reach nearly the entire world, but that was a speech that would last nearly an hour, and New York didn't have that kind of time.

What the president said in the first speech, simply, was that New York, and its nearly nine million residents, had thirty minutes from the end of the president's speech to tie up its affairs neatly, and for all the people to hide in their shelters, and to pray they would be shielded.

Oh, it was a hell of a bang, and it just brought some people to think, What do you do when you've just been handed a death sentence?

Surprisingly, Nelson found that none of the long line of phones before him were occupied. It was five minutes after that speech. Nelson was standing in the lobby of a huge, and now empty, office building. All the people had rushed to the street, and Nelson found it interesting that no one, in the last minutes of life, wished to reach out and touch someone.

Nelson clearly didn't look like a Russian. He supposed that was because his years here in service for his country at the UN had softened his once hard features, and greyed his hair. He was forty-five years of age, and Nelson wouldn't leave behind any family or friends to grieve for him, but he would become something in the very last minute of his life.

He slipped the coin into the phone. It was a collect call, so after he entered the number the dime rolled back to him, and the number he reached in Connecticut paused a moment before accepting the charges. After all, Nelson would never have a chance to repay him now. But a voice, clearly more Russian sounding than Nelson's, did accept the charges after the above thought, for a moment or two.

"Nelson?" the same voice said. "Is that you?" the voice said. It was a familiar voice to Nelson but never the voice of a friend.

"Yes, comrade, it is me. Have you heard..."

"Of course, Nelson," the voice returned.

"Then what arrangements have been made for my evacuation?" Nelson asked.

And the voice returned, almost hysterical laughter at first, then he quieted himself. Nelson's comrade doing so out of respect for the dead, and the near dead. What did Nelson expect? A helicopter to swoop in from the sky just for him, and lift him up... up to life?

"What do you mean, Nelson?"

Nelson didn't know what to expect, but how could they leave him? He'd been so loyal. "What about me?! Me?!" Nelson was shouting, seeing that being here, now, made him as good as an American now.

The voice spoke, the last time. "I am sorry, comrade, there is nothing we can do for you. This came as a shock to us as well."

A dial tone soon replaced the silence from the phone in Connecticut, but Nelson would have preferred the silence. And he would have preferred being alive thirty-one minutes from now.

Nelson wandered out into the traffic, on the streets and the sidewalk, all of the people running, praying to get themselves just one inch beyond the city limits. That would make them safe, yeah, 'cause after all that bomb they're sending was just for New York, and it will never reach us.

Nelson had graduated at the top of his class at each school he attended. And that always seemed to be his destiny to him, before. And after succeeding so well they gave him an offer he could not refuse — a chance to see all that corruption he had heard about that was going on in the free world right up close. And while it was standard procedure to worry about those sent to the U.S. defecting, it was not so with Nelson. No, not loyal as a puppy dog Nelson.

He went off the sidewalk, just a step or two, and that was as far as you went in an hour on a New York City street. And then he stared into the moving cars' windows. And yelled.

"You must help me! You must! I am a Soviet citizen, and..." he said, never noticing that he was saying it with that accent that had disappeared several years ago, that funny accent that was so peculiar to him now. It seemed as if Nelson was regressing. "Oh, my, Nelson, you're going back to just plain commie in the last minutes of life, aren't you?" They all said, all his comrades, and peers and teachers, and parents from Russian, all laughing at him.

He went back to Moscow once a year, and in the past several visits he seemed so ill at ease in his country. It wasn't like it was his home anymore. And all of his friends now treated him like an American — worse than an American, a New Yorker.

"What was that, friend?" Nelson felt a hand on his shoulder, and it was a man, taller and broader than Nelson.

"Did you say you were a Soviet, friend?"

Nelson nodded. Maybe he had a way out, maybe he was the comrade they had sent to take him out of here. Yeah, 'cause on the phone they said to him, "Don't you worry, Nelson, just stay right there. We're coming for you." Right? So he nodded again, and four or five men just like this guy were on top of Nelson a second later, clawing and punching. "Commie bastard! Let me have some of that commie blood."

And Nelson saw the future of all the survivors, here and wherever that bomb went. He saw them as savages. They would kill each other for a drop of water.

They left him there a minute later. He was fading fast, but it didn't matter 'cause Nelson's place in history had been secured. He was the first one of "them" to be killed by "us." Yeah, we had drawn first blood, but pretty soon those missiles were coming down to make it U.S.: one. Russia: nine million.

They say emergencies bring out the best in everyone. Well, when you think about New York, the word emergency seems to come to mind. Like the blackout back in '77. Everyone remained calm and people were helping one another get home safely, with true New Yorker spirit.

Alex Logan was in the back seat of a checkered cab going along Fifth Avenue. From the expression he wore, he was not exactly interested in emergencies right now. But, several minutes before, it had started, what looked like some sort of disaster had erupted. People began running wildly through the streets, screaming, fighting just to get away. It had happened just when the cabbie's radio had blacked out, which started the cabbie shouting.

This cabbie was an old gruff-looking man, and it occurred to Alex that he had most likely been so all his life, as well as being a cabbie that long. He was rapping the rectangular box that was below where the radio should

be with one hand, while, with the other, steering the taxi around the bodies that were in the streets, some lying on the ground dead already, trampled by the crowds; others running, avoiding the cars.

Meanwhile, Alex was trying to figure out what it could be this time. Once, he remembered, some psycho with a gun had started shooting right on Thirty-Fourth Street. He shot his way to the middle of the street, where he stood, right on the yellow line, shooting. Of course, about three seconds later, the streets were so empty you could see clear down to Lincoln Center, and the cops had to wait until he ran out of bullets to get him.

But did Alex care? No, he wanted to look right into one of those TV cameras that were going to be coming here to report this event (whatever it was). Just smile into one, and he hoped his boss saw his smile just as he looked into his office safe and gasped. No, he didn't care, 'cause by the time his boss did see his safe, Alex, just like whatever the emergency was here, would be long gone.

The driver had quit punching at the radio, and instead was just cursing at it. "Goddamn piece of crap. Probably made by some goddamn commie Jap."

Alex was not about to respond, but thought that when they did get to the airport he would just coolly hand this guy a hundred-dollar tip. Then, Alex thought, later on, when this guy was holding up the bill, and telling his whole story to the wife and kids, they would flash his picture on the TV and tell Alex's story, but the guy would say, "That's the goddamn guy!"

Alex didn't have a wife or a lover. No, it was just Alex and one ticket to Hawaii. He knew it was ridiculous but he was smart. He had to make the money last. And besides, he would find Ms. Right, probably laying on the beach. It didn't matter, 'cause Alex was a lot more than all of these other specs on the sidewalk (who were still running, but from what?). Yeah, Alex was special, and he was in a position right now to have anything he wanted.

And if you're looking at your watch very closely, and if we're not very careful, then the bombs may soon be bursting in the air, and we may see the Red's Rockets Glaring.

The end.