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Alfred

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Alfred

Joe Zaub

Jon nodded his head, flashed a smile at me, and continued to hold a burning cigarette next to his chin. His eyes were squinting at me through the thick lenses of his wire-framed glasses. They seemed preoccupied with studying my facial responses.

"That's really weird," I said. I was indeed interested in the story that he was telling. Possible conspiracy theories had always captivated me. Could we be possibly dealing with a terrorist? A foreign spy? Jon had quite the conspiracy brewing. I looked down at the cracked pavement and kicked a tiny rock towards the storm drain.

"This guy's at Perkins every night?" I asked.

"Always after ten." Jon took a drag from his cigarette then turned his head from me to blow out the smoke. He kept his eyes focused on me the entire time. The grin on his face was widening as it had been after every inquiry I'd make.

"And you've talked to the police about this?" I asked.

Jon nodded.

"I'd like to meet him," I said. *Was it possible that I could be part of the most important conspiracy crack in U.S. history?*

Jon nodded once again. He took a final drag from his cigarette then bent over and rubbed it out on the pavement. He walked over to the storm drain and flicked the butt into it. Dusk was steadily approaching. A purple and orange mixture stretched across the sky above the trailer. It was early September and the leaves were still clinging to the tree branches that hung over the patio. The leaves rustled against one another when a sudden burst of wind blew from the east. I knew it was only a matter of time before they'd be strewn across the patio.

Jon returned to standing a few feet in front of me. He put both of his hands into his jeans pockets and let his eyes wander aimlessly. I could smell the pungent stench of cigarette smoke clinging to his shirt. I tried to discreetly take a step back from him so the smell was out of range.

"What time do you got?" I asked.

Jon pulled up his left sleeve. "8:30," he answered.

I told him I was ready to go back inside. We had at least 90 minutes to kill before heading over to Perkins. I bounced up the patio steps and was the first to step inside the trailer. My room-

mate was at the kitchen table eating a bean burrito he had just zapped in the microwave. He greeted both of us, then proceeded into a long-winded monologue about what he had read in *Sports Illustrated* earlier that day. He was directing his recapitulations at me.

"That's great," I answered.

"Dude, not only that," my roommate continued, "but he was batting .375 in August. That's amazing. He could easily..."

"Erik," I interrupted, "I don't have time for this now."

Erik lowered his eyebrows at me then went back to eating. Jon and I plopped on opposite ends of the sofa. I continued to ask Jon questions about this strange man he had met at Perkins. Sometimes I'd ask the same question more than once just to make sure the answer was still the same.

This is what I had learned so far. The guy he met was German. Jon said he overheard him talking to one of the waitresses about girls carrying around chessboards in Germany. At that point Jon said he leaned over the backboard of his booth and said something to him in German. The two of them then proceeded to have a conversation that lasted for five hours. Part of it in German, part of it in English.

"He couldn't believe how well I spoke German and had initially thought I was German," Jon said. "He told me I wasn't a typical American."

The intriguing part was not how long the two of them had talked or how impressed this German guy was with Jon's ability to speak German, it was what they actually talked about. More appropriately, what Jon had listened to this guy talk about. Jon said he went on monologues (longer than what I was accustomed to with Erik) about world history, current politics, and conspiracy theories that ranged from Osama bin Laden not being involved with 9/11 to George W. Bush ordering it. This German guy also showed Jon pictures from inside North Korea that Jon claimed were impossible for an average citizen to obtain. What seemed to bother Jon the most was the guy had offered to buy him a plane ticket to Germany the first night they met. He claimed he had connections at the Embassy and could arrange it right away. This struck Jon as curious and kept him coming back to Perkins to talk with him.

"Why did he offer to buy you a plane ticket to Germany?" I asked.

Jon shrugged his shoulders. "That's what I'd like to know. The only thing I can think of is he's convinced there is going to be a major attack on the U.S. I know the first night I was there I heard him talking to a guy about moving to Sweden."

"This is all too weird. Something doesn't add up," I responded. *Did this guy believe there was going to be an attack on the U.S. because he was helping to plan it?*

"What's worse," Jon began, "is he claims to be a professor at Iowa State. He told me he has an office in Gilman Hall. I went to Gilman and nobody has heard of him. Worse, they said Iowa State did not hire any new professors this year."

Erik's ears had been perked up the entire time we were having this discussion. "Do you think this guy's a terrorist?" he asked.

"I don't know," Jon answered.

"He sounds like he's just crazy," Erik said.

Jon smiled but did not respond to him verbally. Erik's reality check statement only served the purpose of deflating our escalating hopes for a valid conspiracy theory. I, for one, was leaning towards a conspiracy perhaps for no better reason than the sheer boredom I felt with life at that time.

"I just wanna know who he is," Jon finally said. "The police are starting to take more of an interest in this guy with each new thing I tell them."

Around 10:15 that night Jon and I left for Perkins. My stomach began to weaken as I pulled on to Duff Avenue. Clouds had rolled in that evening and the sky was absent of any guiding light from the moon or distant stars. My mind was in a frenzy. The original hope I was gravitating towards that this guy might be a foreign spy or terrorist was beginning to spook me out. I knew my fears were probably not warranted, but that did little to alleviate the growing anxiety I was experiencing. Jon casually instructed me not to mention to this German guy any part of our discussion earlier that evening. He said this guy would openly talk about such things, anyway. I agreed not to.

"What's this guy's name?" I asked.

"Alfred."

Jon and I entered Perkins and were greeted by a petite brunette. Jon requested a table in the smoking section and she led us to the back of the restaurant. My eyes immediately picked out Alfred from the description Jon had given me earlier that evening. Alfred was in the corner booth and greeted Jon immediately. They

spoke to each other in German as the hostess seated us at a booth adjacent to him.

The two of them talked for roughly five minutes in German. I began observing people throughout the restaurant; mostly cute college girls gathered around tables in the non-smoking section. Jon eventually invited me into the conversation and I greeted Alfred as if I had no prior knowledge of him.

"Come friends, sit," he instructed.

Jon and I went over to his table and sat across from him. A thick haze of smoke was stinging my eyes and I did my best to ignore it. There was a large scroll written in Chinese that Alfred had pushed to the side of the table. Jon informed me later that Alfred was the author of it and it was approximately eight feet long if spread out all the way. Alfred had notebooks, a briefcase, scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings, book bags, plastic bags from the campus book store filled with more books, and all sorts of writing utensils scattered on top of the table and floor around him. Most noticeable, however, was the mound of cigarette butts piling up in the ashtray that set in the middle of the table. He also had a coffee urn next to the table's edge. Alfred sipped coffee from a tiny mug in between his chain smoking. Without much ado, he jumped right into a manifesto.

"Think about this, Jon," he said, blowing cigarette smoke out of his mouth and nose as he spoke, "everybody in Germany knows exactly where Osama bin Laden is. You can come up to a young child in Germany and ask where's Osama bin Laden? They will tell you North Korea. Your president is an idiot. He doesn't care about terrorists, Osama bin Laden, or Mr. Saddam Hussein; he cares about the oil and the oil profits." He stabbed a cigarette into an ashtray and lit another one. "Look, Jon," he said, his accent overshadowed by the rapid pace of his speech, "George Herbert Walker Bush has had business deals with the Saudis for years. Think about who put Saddam in power. It was the U.S."

Alfred carried on as I turned my head to face Jon. He was smiling and looked to be absorbing everything this man was saying. I began to look around the room wondering if anyone else was paying attention to the conversation. Alfred's voice carried and the way he carelessly tossed around names such as Osama bin Laden made me nervous to be sitting with him.

A waitress came by and asked Alfred if he needed more coffee. Alfred quickly shoed her away and continued with his

monologue. He was now talking about being in Vietnam with his father, who was a volunteer doctor of some type when the American version of that war was going on. He talked about how Republican politicians had been trying to paint John Kerry as a liar and unpatriotic for speaking out against atrocities committed during the Vietnam War. He said he personally witnessed Americans flying overhead and dropping North Vietnamese soldiers out of planes.

"Do you think John Kerry would make a good president?" I asked.

Alfred looked down at the table and began shaking his head. "No, I don't. The man is just the same as all of them."

I was about to prod him for more information but he started on another monologue about infamous events during the 1980's that I had no clue about. As he spoke, I couldn't help but stare at the wound in the side of his neck. It looked like a black hole inside a ring of scar tissue. Jon had told me earlier that evening that it was a bullet wound. Supposedly, Alfred had been in a hospital in Lebanon in 1982 when American soldiers ambushed it. That's where Alfred claimed to have gotten the wound. He was an East German soldier of some prominence and if his story had any validity, the incident he described would probably be one of those covert operations that the United States government kept top secret.

The bullet wound in his neck was just one of many physical features that made Alfred look eerie. He wore a black leather jacket with tiny pins of the German and Vietnamese flag attached to the left pocket. The tee shirt underneath his leather jacket was black as well, along with his pants. Alfred's eyes were dark and his nose was extremely round at the tip. When he smiled, there was a noticeable loss of teeth. When he wasn't smiling or rambling on, his head was facing down and his right hand was combing through his silver streaked hair that flopped loosely on his neck. Those times, however, were rare. The majority of the time he was speaking.

"What's going to happen, Jon, if Bush gets reelected," Alfred began, "is you will be at war with Iran a week later and every male between the ages of 18-30 will be drafted by December. Guarantee it," he said, tapping another cigarette nub into the ash-tray. "And hey, look at this." Alfred leaned over and grabbed a newspaper out of his briefcase. It was a South Korean newspaper.

"The North Koreans are already testing nuclear weapons. That was what that big explosion was yesterday." Alfred tossed the newspaper to the side of him and grabbed a piece of notebook paper. "Here, Jon, let me show you something." He scribbled on a piece of paper and started talking about a ripple effect. "You know how a ripple starts out small and gradually grows larger? Well, look at this." Jon and I leaned over as he slid the paper he had scribbled on around for us to view. "At the first ripple you have Japan with two checks by it. The first check represents the battle being on their turf. The other check represents an American victory. The next ripple is a little bit larger and has a check and a dash by Korea. The check, again, stands for the war being fought in Korea. The dash stands for it being a draw. Now the ripple gets even bigger and you have Vietnam, a check and an X. The check stands for the war being fought in Vietnam and the X stands for an American loss. Now, all three of those battles have been on Asian soil and have escalated. The biggest ripple I have a question mark by with two X's. The next battle will be fought in your country and you will lose."

I looked around the room and noticed the restaurant was starting to fill up with people, mostly college-aged students. To the left of us was a booth occupied by three scrawny teenagers. All three of them wore band tee shirts and black pants. One had a mohawk haircut and numerous piercings on his nose, lips, and ears. All three of them were burning a cigarette and laughing so loudly that the majority of the people in Perkins were distracted by them. I was grateful for this. While I was intrigued by this German guy, I was also embarrassed to be with him. The distraction the teenagers created prevented people from eavesdropping into Alfred's monologue. There was one person, however, who did take an interest in Alfred. He was an elderly gentleman sitting directly behind me. He wore a short sleeve flannel shirt and was eating key lime with who I assumed to be his wife. He stared at Alfred and wore nothing but a blank expression. I could only imagine what he, somebody who probably remembered World War II distinctly, was thinking at that time.

A waitress came by and emptied the ashtray in the middle of the table. Alfred lit another cigarette and I returned my attention to him. I wondered how many nights Alfred had been up at Perkins attracting young people to his table for the purpose of unleashing his capricious rhetoric on them. What were his

motives? Why did he talk so adamantly about things most people would perceive as slanderous against the government?

Those were the questions Jon and I delved into after we left the restaurant – at 2:00 in the morning. We ended up coming back to Perkins two other nights. Each night was the same. Alfred would be in the same corner booth in the smoking section working on his Chinese scroll or writing some other manuscript in Arabic. He was very fluent in many languages. His English vocabulary was extensive and his articulation of it was so impeccable it was hard to believe English was not his primary language, even though he carried an accent that gave it away. Each time Jon and I did go back, however, there was one noticeable difference – his rhetoric became more eccentric and more intense. He talked about the only way to change the course of events for the United States was to overthrow the government. He continued talking about George W. Bush being an evil man, but offered the alternative choice as being no better. He insisted that George W. Bush had something to do with 9/11.

“Okay, do you remember how Hitler rose to power?” he asked. “Well, it’s a lesson Germans will never forget. How did he get people against Jews? He burned down the Reichstag and blamed it on the Jews. I’m telling you, not only did George Walker Bush know about 9/11, he helped plan it. He knew the only way to justify his imperialistic intentions was to find a way to get America angry. It’s the same thing Hitler did. We Germans, we learn from our mistakes. You Americans, however, don’t. You are stubborn and arrogant. You are greedy. You don’t take care of your people. Look at this.” He pulled a laminated business sized card out of his pocket and waved it in front of us. “You see this? This card allows me access to health care anywhere in the world because I’m a German citizen. All of Europe has access to health care. If I was to have a serious medical need I could walk into any hospital in America and be treated because the German government would pay for it. But you, you Americans, the richest nation in the world, you let your people starve. You let your children die if their parents can’t afford to pay for an operation to treat it. This is a disgrace.”

The third night I sat up at Perkins to visit with him was the last night I ever went. He claimed to have a friend that had a medical emergency that required him to have a CAT scan immediately. Alfred insisted that he needed sixty dollars to help pay for

it. Jon and I both denied his request. That was the last visit we had with him. Jon had already been in continual contact with the local police weeks prior to this. At one point, Jon informed me they were planning on bringing in a federal investigator to consider the case. That never came about and the police eventually became disinterested.

After our last Perkins visit with Alfred I told a friend this story. He said Alfred was probably some crazy homeless guy. I struggled to accept that explanation. I found it extremely curious that a homeless guy could be so highly educated and astute. There were too many ambiguities about who he was and what he was doing. Many pressing questions still lingered, as well. If he wasn't a professor, what was he doing in Ames? Who was he? Could we ever discern his motives with absolute confidence? While those questions had merit, Jon and I gradually began to disengage ourselves from the situation. Perhaps the daunting challenge of uncovering answers to those questions when nobody else seemed to care compelled us to do so.

Weeks went by without Jon or I returning to Perkins. One day, however, Jon ran into Alfred on the fourth floor of Parks Library on the Iowa State campus. He came over to my trailer that night and told me about the incident.

"I confronted him," Jon began, "and asked him where my twenty bucks was."

"You lent him twenty bucks?" I asked.

Jon shifted on the sofa and closed his laptop. He put it to the side of him and began to devote his attention to me. It had been a while since we had had a conversation about Alfred. It struck me as curious that Alfred was actually on campus.

"Remember, I told you about that. The first day I met him he asked for twenty bucks. He told me the university was depositing two grand into his bank account on Friday. I believed him."

"So did he pay you back?" I asked.

"Nope. He said something like, 'Hey man, get off my case. I don't have it. Where's my Korean money I gave you?' He just began mumbling about the stuff he gave me when we first met."

"Really? What else did he give you?"

"Just money, basically. I know he gave me some Syrian money and I'm pretty sure some Afghan money as well," Jon answered.

"What'd you say after he told you he couldn't pay you?"

Jon lowered his eyes and said, "I told him that he was a liar and a thief and that he shouldn't even be on campus. I told him I checked with the university and found out he wasn't a professor. I told him I was going to call the police if I ever saw him again on campus."

"What'd he do?"

"Well, I began to walk towards the elevator and he got up from his desk and began chasing after me. He was like 'Hey man, you're an asshole.' He mumbled a few other things then ran away."

"What do you think about all this?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Jon replied.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well, you know. Just, ugh, what do you make of Alfred?"

"I'd like to know who he is," Jon began, "but truthfully, I don't really care anymore. He's more nuts than dangerous, in my opinion."

That was the last time either one of us saw him. A couple of months later I returned to Perkins with a date. When I went up to the register to pay for the meal I recognized the host from my visits earlier in the Fall. I handed him the bill and debated whether to ask him about Alfred. I was sure he at least knew of him.

"How was everything?" he asked while punching keys on the register.

"Good," I answered. I handed him my debit card and he immediately swiped it through the register. After the card was processed and approved he slid the bill under the register printer then smiled in response. As he handed me a receipt to sign I blurted out, "Does Alfred still come here?" I signed the receipt and handed it back to him.

The host glanced at me briefly. His eyes looked like they were floating in space. It was hard to tell what he was thinking. Perhaps he was trying to remember my connection to Alfred. Maybe something weird had happened with Alfred that he would never forget. As he slid my copy across the counter, he casually said, "I haven't seen Alfred in a long time."

I politely nodded and wished him a good evening. As my date and I walked out the first set of glass doors in the restaurant lobby, she turned to me and asked, "Who's Alfred?"

I pulled my stocking cap down tighter over my ears. I could

see tiny insignificant amounts of snow flurries blowing beneath a lamppost in the parking lot. My mind mulled over what exactly to tell her. Jon and I had been deliberating on that question for weeks. Although our fervor for investigating had gradually subsided, the mystery behind Alfred never did. It was that mystery that kept my mind lingering from one conspiracy to the next on the rare occasions I gave it thought. Would I one day see his face on the news as the man who orchestrated a raid of a biology lab in Ames where anthrax was stolen? Were the Germans plotting with North Korea and was he sent to Ames as a spy? Or did he simply have a cardboard box abode on Main Street, along with ample time to read in Parks Library? The first two thoughts were the most engaging. Because Alfred's true identity was still unknown to me I allowed myself to deem them possible. However, it was the probability of the last one that led to my declining interest in the matter. Regardless, the one constant that remained was the fact Alfred was still a mystery. It is quite likely that he will always remain that way.

After careful consideration, I finally responded to her question with probably the most truthful answer I could offer. "Oh, he was just some German guy who used to sit up here every night and drink coffee. He'd tell all kinds of stories and was pretty good entertainment."

"Cool," she said.

I nodded as we walked out of Perkins into the cold and damp November night.