

GORBY & I

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mountains on the other side. We droned above Ilwaco, Washington, and turned south over Cape Disappointment. We crossed the Columbia River bar, north to south over the river's mouth, buffeted by a headwind. Below us miniature ships and boats entered or left the river. I nudged Gorbachev and pointed down to the whitecapped bar where an albacore fish boat I was aboard had sunk twenty years ago in the summer of 1972. Robert Gray the American merchant captain from Boston crossed the bar 200 years ago and claimed discovery of the river, I said loudly into Gorbachev's ear. Russia also wanted this land, he said, and over the airplane noise and the whipping wind he mentioned Vitus Bering, Baranov, and the dream of Russian America which was sold out when the always money hungry czars brokered Alaska to the United States.

"We've always been opposites," I said. "We went west. You went east."

We continued south into the wind, following a coastal strip between mountains and ocean. The surf on the beaches resembled lace ruffles on a prom dress. We circled like a lazy hawk above Cannon Beach. The streets filled with tourists seemed to me streams of blood moving through veins and arteries. Haystack Rock was no larger than a sewing thimble.

Gorbachev made an not altogether original observation as he peered intently down at the human flow of recreation shoppers. "From up here the proletariat masses look more like locusts," he said. "They are," my friend the pilot replied. "Overpopulated humanity acts like a locust swarm." He pointed to large bare patches of clearcut forests in the mountains below us. I looked down at the people entering and exiting buildings, imagining them consuming everything inside; soon enough they will consume everything outside, I thought.

We flew low around the heavy bulk of Tillamook Head. Around a last ridge the city of Seaside came into sight. We flew back to Astoria over the Clatsop Plains. We entered the river at its mouth and crossed the bar several hundred feet above a ship rocking through heavy swells. For a finale my friend dropped our altitude to almost fish level and dipped under the arched green steel girders of the Astoria Bridge. Then we leaped into the air like a delicious butterfly and made a wide sweep in to land.

Later, still flushed and excited from the flight, Gorbachev sat with me at a window seat of the Pacific Rim Cafe. We drank chianti and ate Sicilian pizza (oysters with black olives and mushrooms). A huge steel shank of the bridge towered above us. The masts of ships occasionally moved above a row of deteriorating cannery buildings on the waterfront across Marine Drive. Patrons appeared to not recognize him. As a matter of fact we were not approached the entire day he spent on the Oregon coast, unlike his first visit two years ago (which was recounted in the June 1990 Times Eagle). People were not ostentatious, nor did they chant "Gorby, Gorby" as so often happened back then, but he was at least recognized with cordial warmth. Now, the reception was far less than cool, it was nonexistent, which made me wonder how low he had slid in the polls. He didn't mind. "I enjoyed very much the generous welcome I received at Fulton," he said. "I have been in illustrious company since my visit began, and now I appreciate quietly and anonymously mingling with the local folk."

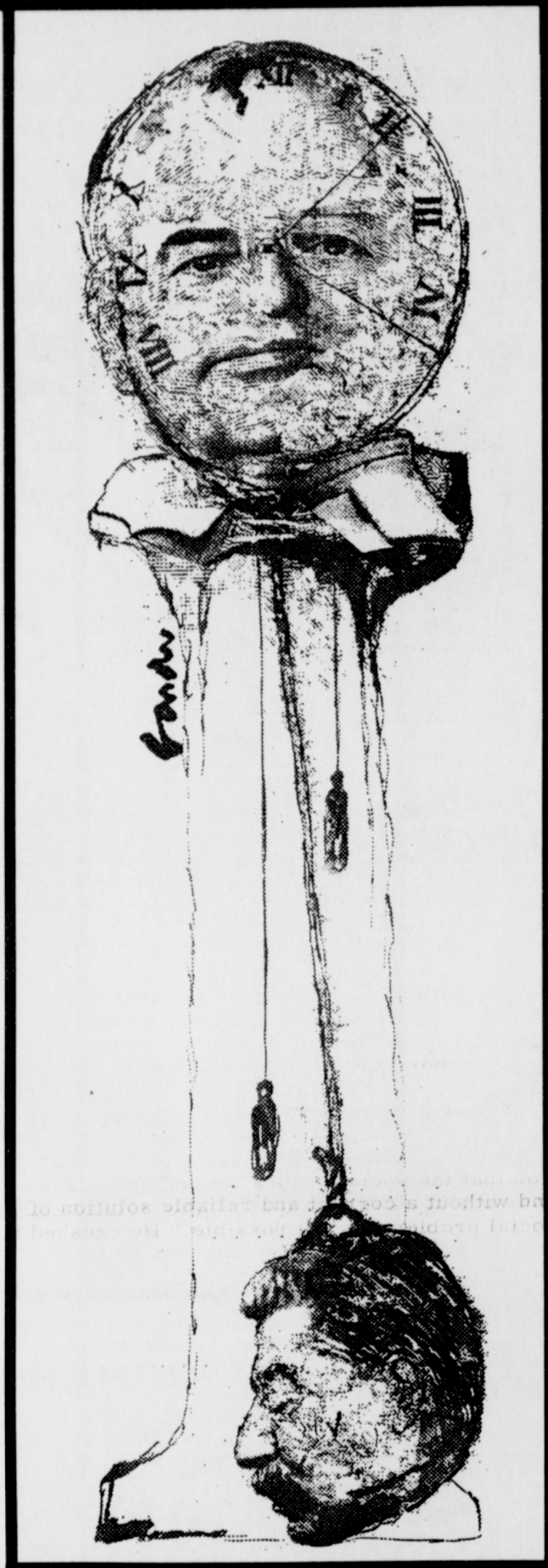
His own folk had disappeared from Astoria. Marine Drive outside the cafe windows was crowded with traffic and pedestrians, but unlike his previous visit there were no Russians walking around. Russian fishing trawlers and process boats were common on the riverfront then, and Russian seamen and women were all over the city. Gorbachev commented on the scarcity of his countrypeople as the unfortunate result of "voodoo economics" and "deplorable environmental practices by both of our countries. We were mutually engaged in a splendidly dismal example of vulture capitalism," he said.

But you never experienced the real perestroika we felt, I thought. Astoria was a pioneer post for reconciling ideological differences through the mutual profit of self-interest.

I told him that the August coup occurred on my birthday. "While you were under house arrest in your Crimean dacha and thousands defied the last gasp of Stalinist Bolshevism with barricades around Yeltsin's White House in Moscow, I dined with my parents, sister and aunt in Astoria restaurants and drank several glasses of wine in toast to a rapidly depleting personal history."

"The conspirators wanted me to resign, which would have given legitimacy to the coup," Gorbachev said. "I refused and the plot collapsed."

"I thought Yeltsin and a few thousand citizens of Moscow had something to do with its failure," I said.



HORATIO FIDEL CARDO

"Of course Yeltsin inspired the resistance," he said, "but the real reason the coup failed was that the army refused to turn against the legitimate government."

I remembered asking him two years ago if soldiers and police in the Soviet Union would ever again open fire into crowds as was done at Tiananmen Square in China the previous June. No, he said.

Gorbachev insisted that the unsuccessful coup attempt was a predictable reaction to the process of democratization and that it failed because the Russian people had come too far in changing and liberalizing Soviet society to turn back. The irony, he said, was that the putsch was the final factor that disintegrated the Communist Party and the central government. An equal irony was that Gorbachev had ignored warnings of the coup, which was fostered by ministers he had appointed to appease Party conservatives. Thereafter he had no position to resign, only an empty title. He used his remain-

ing prestige to accommodate the breakaway republics, actually strongarming opponents to support the independence of fifteen republics that were at any rate separating from the catatonic Soviet mesolith.

I asked why he had so vigorously presided over his own disempowerment.

He shrugged and drank a long draught of wine. I refilled his glass from a liter bottle. "There was nothing else I could do," he said. "Events rushed beyond me. People were impatient. I wanted to reform and liberalize the socialist state but they wanted to liquidate it altogether." He chewed thoughtfully on a slice of pizza. "It is ironic that I inspired a movement toward freedom that I could not comprehend or keep up with. I remember that I said in the early days of glasnost that one day life itself would force radical changes in our country. I did not foresee that the forces I set in motion would doom the Party and the Soviet system itself."

"We will reconsolidate," Gorbachev said as we stood together on the outside observation deck of a gazebo built on pilings at the Sixth Street Pier and watched the sun set over Cape Disappointment. He continued as though he was speaking to himself, his round face ruddy in the dying light. "Let the republics choose independence for now," he said. "We Russians are used to making strategic sacrifices. We know how to retreat, regroup and recover. Kutuzov temporarily gave up Moscow to Napoleon. The Red Army blackened the land in front of the advancing Nazis. Even though there might be civil wars and wars among the republics, I believe that eventually their leaders will see the wisdom of a commonwealth for our mutual benefit and survival."

"What if it works out the other way?" I asked.

He put his hands in his coat pockets and shivered in the sudden coolness following the sun's departure. "I don't think it will," he said. "We are all Russians." Then he smiled ruefully. "But even the dreams of Bolivar the Liberator for one great Colombia were dashed. Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia established separate nations, much to their continuing disadvantage," he said.

We sat at a table in the Workers Tavern. We were the only patrons without pitchers of beer. We drank wine, a white something this time. We were silent for awhile, watching a pool game and listening to the loud talk and laughter.

Gorbachev held up his glass for a toast. I clinked my glass against his and sipped a large swallow. "The ideology of communism has collapsed," he said, "and into its vacuum have crawled virulent forms of nationalism." He drank. "Though the cold war is over there is a greater possibility of conflict that might become world threatening as a result of the release of pressure the superpower rivalry leveraged on every nation and most groups within them," he said.

But, I disagreed, "Every bit of trouble anywhere in the world during the cold war threatened nuclear holocaust."

He smiled. "The threat of nuclear exchange between our two countries contained every outbreak that might have otherwise enlarged like wildfire," he explained patiently.

"I am a confirmed supporter of the idea of socialism," Gorbachev said later as we stood at the bar of the Labor Temple, known locally as the "Temple of Doom." Barry the bartender served us glasses of burgundy. "I am convinced that the discrediting of socialism in the eyes of the masses is only a passing phase," Gorbachev said. "Socialism is rejected because of its association with Stalin."

"Discrediting socialism as an ideology might be the heart of the matter," I said.

He shook his head vigorously. "We always imagine a golden age," he said, looking at the ruby glow of his wine. "Usually it is in the past but sometimes it is a vision of the future. Socialism offers a vision for that future, a vision of equality and social justice and of property held in common instead of privately, a practice by early Christians, I might add."

A boistrous game of eightball was played behind us. The barstools were crowded with noisy patrons who seemed to be waiting for their chances at poker machines. A local rock band ripped through a loud repertoire of raw rhythms. Gorbachev was almost forced to shout into my ear, and I leaned toward his voice. He said that when Marx became a communist the communists were simply regarded as the more radically democratic wing of socialism. Marx belatedly agreed with his nemesis Hegel that the proletariat is the ultimate negation of the bourgeoisie, just as the bourgeoisie was the negation of feudal society. "Marx thought a dictatorship was necessary until the last remnants of private property are eliminated," Gorbachev said. "Only then, when the proletariat masses are properly prepared to live in the final communist society, will the state disappear and free association — true communism — take its place."

For a few minutes he was silent.

"Utopian!" he said. "Marx called the other

