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Three Stations

Written by Martin Cruz Smith

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MARTIN CRUZ SMITH

THREE STATIONS

AN ARKADY RENKO NOVEL

PAN BOOKS



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For Em
More than ever

1

The summer night swam by. Villages, ripening fields, derelict churches flowed and mixed with Maya's dreams.

She tried to stay awake but sometimes her eyelids had their way. Sometimes the girl dreamt of the train's first-class passengers tucked away asleep in their compartments.

Hard class had no compartments. "Hard class" was a dormitory coach where a few lamps were still lit and snoring, muffled sex, body odor and domestic quarrels were shared by all. Some passengers had been on the train for days and the fatigue of close quarters had set in. A round-the-clock card game among oil riggers soured and turned to resentment and accusations. A Gypsy went from berth to berth hawking the same shawls in a whisper. University students traveling on the cheap were deep in the realm of their headphones. A priest brushed cake crumbs from his beard. Most of the passengers were as nondescript as boiled cabbage. An inebriated soldier wandered up and down the corridor.

Still Maya preferred the rough sociability of hard class to traveling first class. Here she fit in. She was fifteen years old, a stick figure in torn jeans and a bomber jacket the

texture of cardboard, her hair dyed a fiery red. One canvas bag held her earthly possessions, the other hid her baby girl of three weeks, tightly swaddled and lulled by the rocking of the train. The last thing Maya needed was to be trapped in a compartment under the scrutiny of snobs. Not that she could have afforded first class anyway.

After all, a train was just a communal apartment on rails, Maya decided. She was used to that. Most of the men stripped to warm-up pants, undershirts and slippers for the duration; she watched for any who had not because a shirt with long sleeves might conceal the tattoos of someone sent to bring her back. Playing it safe, she had chosen an otherwise empty berth. She talked to none of the other passengers and none noticed that the baby was on board.

Maya enjoyed creating stories about new people, but now her imagination was caught up with the baby, who was both a stranger and part of herself. The baby was, in fact, the most mysterious person she had ever met. All she knew was that her baby was perfect, translucent, unflawed.

The baby stirred and Maya went to the vestibule at the end of the car. There, half open to the wind and clatter of the train, she nursed the baby and indulged in a cigarette. Maya had been drug-free for seven months.

A full moon kept pace. From the tracks spread a sea of wheat, water tanks, a silhouette of a shipwrecked harvester. Six more hours to Moscow. The baby's eyes regarded her solemnly. Returning the gaze, Maya was so hypnotized that she did not hear the soldier join her in the vestibule until the sliding door closed behind him and he said smoking

was bad for the baby. His voice was a jolt, a connection with reality.

He removed the cigarette from her mouth and snapped it out the vestibule window.

Maya took the baby from her breast and covered herself.

The soldier asked if the baby was in the way. He thought it was. So he told Maya to put the baby down. She held on, although he slid his hand inside her jacket and squeezed her breast hard enough to draw milk. His voice cracked when he told her what else he wanted her to do. But first she had to put the baby down. If she didn't, he would throw the baby off the train.

It took a second for Maya to process his words. If she screamed, could anyone hear her? If she fought, would he toss the baby like an unwanted package? She saw it covered with leaves, never to be found. All she knew was that it was her fault. Who was she to have such a beautiful baby?

Before she could put the baby down, the vestibule door opened. A large figure in gray stepped out, gathered the soldier's hair with the grip of a butcher and laid a knife across his neck. It was the babushka who had been suffering the crumbs of the priest. The old woman told the soldier she would geld him next time they met and gave him a vigorous kick as a demonstration of sincerity. He could not get to the next car fast enough.

When Maya and the baby returned to their berth, the babushka brought tea from the samovar and watched over them. Her name was Helena Ivanova but she said that everyone up and down the line called her Auntie Lena.

Worn-out, Maya finally allowed herself to plunge into true sleep, down a dark slope that promised oblivion.

When Maya next opened her eyes sunlight flooded the coach. The train was at a platform and the dominant sound was flies circling in the warm air. The fullness in her breasts was urgent. Her wristwatch said 7:05. The train was expected to arrive at six-thirty. There was no sign of Auntie Lena. Both baskets were gone.

Maya rose and walked unsteadily down the corridor. All the other passengers—the boisterous oil riggers, the university boys, the Gypsy and the priest—were gone. Auntie Lena was gone. Maya was the only person on the train.

Maya stepped onto the platform and fought her way through early-morning passengers boarding a train on the opposite side. People stared. A porter let his baggage cart coast into her shin. The ticket takers at the gate didn't remember anyone resembling Auntie Lena and the baby. It was a preposterous question from a ridiculous-looking girl.

People in the platform area were making good-byes and hundreds circulated around kiosks and shops selling cigarettes, CDs and slices of pizza. A thousand more sat in the haze of a waiting room. Some were going to the wilds of Siberia, some all the way to the Pacific and some were just waiting.

But the baby was gone.

2

Victor Orlov stood in a shower stall, his head bowed and his eyes shut while an orderly clad in a surgical mask, goggles, rubber apron and rubber gauntlets poured disinfectant on Victor's head until it dripped from his nose and four-day stubble, ran down his sunken stomach and naked ass and pooled between his feet. He looked like a wet, shivering ape with patches of body hair, black bruises and toenails thick as horn.

The station medic had been called "Swan" for a long time for his long neck. Having been a pickpocket and snitch, he was proud that he had worked his way to a position of responsibility and opportunity.

"I called as soon as Sergeant Orlov came in. I said to myself, call Senior Investigator Renko. He'd want to know."

"You did the right thing," Arkady said.

As the candle burned it released a florid, slightly rotten odor.

"We do what we can. So, is our old friend Victor using anything new, anything besides alcohol? Heroin, methadone, antifreeze?"

"Alcohol. He's from the old school."

"Well, the disinfectant will kill body lice, bacteria, microbes, fungi and spores. That's a bonus. Your friend's insides I can't do anything about. His blood pressure is low, but that's to be expected. His eyes are dilated, but there are no signs of head trauma. He's just detoxing. I gave him Valium and an injection of B_1 to calm him down. We should keep him here for observation."

"In a drunk tank?"

"We prefer 'sobriety station.'"

"Not if he can walk." Arkady held up a plastic bag with a change of clothes.

The orderly in the shower stall unreeled a hose and opened it full force. Victor took a step back as water drummed on his chest. The orderly circled him, hosing Victor from every angle.

It was not easy to be arrested for drunkenness. It was difficult to distinguish drunkenness from, say, sharing a bottle with friends, jolly times, sad times, saint's day, women's day, the urge to nap, the need to hold up a wall, the need to piss on the wall. It was hard to stand out as legitimately drunk when the bar was set so high. The consequences, however, could be dire. The fine was insignificant but family and colleagues would be informed—in Victor's case that would be his commander, who had already threatened to drop him a grade. Worse, multiple offenders had to spend two weeks in jail. Policemen did not thrive in jail.

A digital clock on the wall flipped to 2400.

Midnight. Victor was four hours late for his shift.

Arkady gathered his clothes from a dimly lit recovery

area, moving among the beds of sedated men and urine-soaked sheets. The legs of the beds were sawed off to allow for falls. All the figures were still except for one who twisted against restraining belts and urgently whispered to Arkady, "I am God, God is shit, I am shit, God is shit, God is dog, I am God," over and over.

"You see, we get all types," Swan said. He had Victor's ID, keys, cell phone and handgun waiting when Arkady returned to the desk.

They dried and dressed Victor, trying to keep him from unraveling.

"He's not registered, right?" Arkady just wanted to check.

"He was never here."

Arkady laid fifty dollars on the desk and maneuvered Victor toward the door.

"I am God!" said the voice from the bed.

God is drunk, Arkady thought.

Arkady drove Victor's Lada because his own Zhiguli was in the shop awaiting a new gearbox and Victor had lost his license for drunk driving. It didn't matter that Victor had been washed and wore a change of clothes, the smell of vodka came off him like heat from a stove and Arkady cranked a window open for fresh air. The short nights of summer had begun, nothing like the white nights of St. Petersburg but enough to make sleep difficult and aggravate relationships. The police radio maintained a constant squawk.

Arkady handed Victor the walkie-talkie. "Call in. Let

Petrovka know that you're on duty." Petrovka was shorthand for militia headquarters on Petrovka Street.

"Who cares? I'm fucked."

But Victor pulled himself together to call the dispatcher. Miraculously no one in his district had been murdered, raped or assaulted all evening.

"Bunch of fairies. Do I have my gun?"

"Yes. We'd hate to see that fall into the wrong hands."

Arkady thought Victor was nodding off but the detective muttered, "Life would be wonderful without vodka, but since the world is not wonderful, people need vodka. Vodka is in our DNA. That's a fact. The thing is, Russians are perfectionists. That's our curse. It makes for great chess players and ballerinas and turns the rest of us into jealous inebriates. The question is not why don't I drink less, it's why don't you drink more?"

"You're welcome."

"That's what I meant. Thank you."

Other cars, beefed-up foreign monsters, roared up behind them but didn't tailgate for long. The Lada's exhaust pipe and muffler hung low and occasionally dragged a rooster tail of sparks, fair warning to keep a safe distance.

If the Lada was a wreck, so were the men in it, Arkady thought. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror. Who was this graying stranger who rose from his bed, usurped his clothes and occupied his chair at the prosecutor's office?

Victor said, "I read in the paper about two dolphins trying to drown a man in Greece or someplace. You always hear

about noble dolphins saving someone from drowning. Not this time; they were pushing him out to sea. I asked myself what was different about this poor bastard. It turned out he was Russian, naturally, and maybe a little drunk. Why does the reverse of the normal always happen to us? Maybe the dolphins had rescued him a dozen times before. Enough was enough. What do you think?"

"Maybe we should make it official," Arkady said.

"Make what official?"

"Russia is upside down."

Arkady was neither up nor down. He was an investigator who investigated nothing. The prosecutor made sure Arkady followed orders by giving him none to defy. No investigations meant no runaway investigations. Arkady was ignored, welcome to spend his time reading novels or arranging flowers.

Although he had time he hadn't spent it with Zhenya. At fifteen the boy was at the peak of sullen adolescence. Was Zhenya absent from school? Arkady had no say. His status with the boy was not official. All he could offer Zhenya was a clean place to spend the night. Arkady might not see him for a week and then by chance spot Zhenya in his other, secretive life trudging along in a hooded sweatshirt with a street gang. If Arkady approached, Zhenya froze him with a look.

The director of the children's shelter that Zhenya originally came from claimed that the boy and Arkady had a special relationship. Zhenya's father had shot Arkady. If that wasn't special, what was?

The day before, friends brought champagne and cake to celebrate Arkady's birthday, and then gave such rueful, eloquent speeches about the cost of integrity that the women cried. Some of the drunker men too, and Arkady had to go from person to person and reassure them that he was not dead.

He had written a letter of resignation.

> As of noon today I resign my position in the Prosecution Service of the Russian Republic. Arkady Kyrilovich Renko, Senior Investigator of Important Cases.

But to afford Zurin so much satisfaction was unbearable. Arkady had burned the letter in an ashtray.

And the days marched on.

Arkady had a new neighbor across the hall, a young woman who was out all hours and sometimes needed help finding her latchkey in her voluminous bag. A journalist young enough to burn the candle at both ends. One night she showed up at his door with a black eye and a boyfriend in hot pursuit. The light on the landing was out, as usual, and Arkady did not get a good look at his face. However, the man could see Arkady in the open doorway, gun in hand, and vanished down the stairs in bounds.

"I'm fine. It was nothing," Anya said. "Really, thank you so much, you're the hero of the hour. I must look a mess."

"Who was it?"

"A friend."

"That was a friend?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to report this to the militia?"

"The militia? You must be kidding. Oh, you must be the investigator in the building. I heard about you," she said. "I take back any insinuation about the honesty and integrity of our brave men in their battle against the criminal element in our society."

He heard her whooping and laughing as soon as she was in her apartment.

The following night she knocked on Arkady's door and saw the bottles and plates of his birthday celebration scattered around the living room.

"A party?"

"It wasn't the Sack of Rome, just a few friends."

"Next time let me know." From her bag she gave him two tins of Osetra caviar, 125 grams each, together worth almost a thousand dollars.

"I can't."

"We're even. I get these all the time and I hate caviar. Where's the woman who lived here?"

"She left."

"Are you sure you didn't chop her into small pieces and mail her around the country? Just joking. You scared the shit out of my friend. Served him right."

Her name was Anya Rudikova. Oddly enough, he saw her a week later on television, black eye and all, discussing violence in film with the objectivity of a sociologist.

The radio dispatcher called and Arkady picked up on Victor's behalf.

"Orlov."

The dispatcher was cautious. She demanded to know whether he was fit for duty.

"Yes," Arkady said.

"Because when you called earlier you didn't sound so good. People are talking about you."

"Fuck them."

"Well, you do sound better. Can you handle an overdose? The ambulances are running late."

"Where?"

While Arkady listened he executed a satisfying U-turn in the face of oncoming traffic.

What tourist maps called Komsomol Square, the people of Moscow called Three Stations for the railway terminals gathered there. Plus the converging forces of two Metro lines and ten lanes of traffic. Passengers pushed their way like badly organized armies through street vendors selling flowers, embroidered shirts, shirts with Putin, shirts with Che, CDs, DVDs, fur hats, posters, nesting dolls, war medals and Soviet kitsch.

During the day Three Stations was in constant motion, a Circus Maximus with cars. At night, however, when the crowds were gone and the square was floodlit and gauzy with insects, Arkady felt that the stations were as exotic as opera sets. Leningrad Station was a Venetian palace, Kazansky Station was an Oriental mosque and Yaroslavl

Station wore a clown's face and cap. The night revealed a population that the daytime bustle had obscured: pickpockets, flyboys handing out directions to strip clubs and slot arcades, gangs of street kids looking for the wounded, the slow, the easy mark. Men with vague intentions idled in small groups, beers in hand, watching prostitutes grind by. The women walked with a predatory eye and looked as likely to eat their clients as have sex with them.

Drunks were everywhere, but hard to see because they were as gray as the pavement they sprawled on. They were bandaged or bloody or on crutches like casualties of war. Every doorway had a resident or two; they might be homeless but Three Stations was their roost. A beggar with broad shoulders and withered legs propelled his cart past a Gypsy who absentmindedly pulled out her baby and her breast. At Three Stations the crippled, outcast and usually hidden members of society gathered like the Court of Miracles only without the miracles.

Arkady jumped the curb at Yaroslavl Station and rolled across a small plaza to a workers' trailer that had stood in place so long its tires had deflated.

He asked Victor, "Do you want to stay in the car? I can cover for you."

"Duty calls. Someone may be pissing on my crime scene. Piss on a man's crime scene and you piss on the man himself."

Workers' trailers provided basic on-site accommodations: four bunk beds and a stove, but no toilet, shower or a/c. They baked in the summer and froze in the winter and

from the outside the only concessions to human habitation was a sliding window and a door. After all, the workers were generally migrant labor from Central Asia. Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kirks, Kazakhs, although Russians tended to call them all Tajiks.

Russians were the actors, Tajiks the necessary but unseen stagehands who did the work too miserable or too dangerous for any local boy to consider.

Victor and Arkady were admitted by a railway police captain named Kol. The captain was cutting a raw onion and eating the slices against a summer cold. He wiped away tears.

"A lot of fuss for a dead whore."

The trailer's wiring had been ripped out but an extension cord entered through a window and ran to the ceiling hook, where a bare lightbulb cast a watery glow. The back of the trailer resembled the bottom of a trash barrel: hamburger wrappers, empty soda cans, broken glass and, on a lower bunk, a woman faceup and eyes open on a dirty mattress. Arkady guessed that she was eighteen or nineteen years old, fair-skinned. Soft brown hair and light blue eyes. She wore a cheap quilted jacket trimmed in synthetic "fur." One arm was raised as if making a toast. The other was tucked into her waist.

From the waist down, she was nude, legs crossed, and on the inside of her left hip the tattoo of a butterfly, a favorite motif among prostitutes. A half-empty liter of vodka stood on the floor next to a denim skirt, underpants and shiny high-heeled boots. Arkady would have covered her

but the rule was no touching until the forensic technicians had finished.

Scattered on the mattress were a black patent-leather handbag, lipstick, rouge, hairbrush, douche, toothpaste and toothbrush, tissue, pepper spray and an open bottle of aspirin. Yellow powder spilled from the bottle. What Arkady did not find was an ID.

Kol took a position inside the trailer door. Hash and heroin flowed through Three Stations and relations between the militia and railway police was a truce between thieves.

Victor asked, "Who found the body?"

The captain said, "I don't know. We got a call from someone passing through."

"How many is that?"

"People passing through Three Stations on an average day? About a million. I don't remember every face."

"Do you remember her?"

"No, that tattoo I'd remember." Kol couldn't take his eyes off it.

Arkady asked, "Who put the trailer here?"

"How should I know?"

"Nice knife."

"It's sharp enough."

Apart from the fact that the woman was dead, she seemed in good health. Arkady saw no obvious cuts or bruises. From her temperature, muscle tone and the absence of lividity—the purple stripes of pooled blood—he guessed that she was dead no more than two hours. He

played the beam of a penlight on blue irises gone slack. There was no bleeding in the corneas or any other indication of head trauma. No roseate nose, raw cheeks or needle tracks. Her forearms and hands presented no defensive wounds or scraped knuckles and there was grime but no scratched tissue under her fingernails. It was as if she had slept through her death.

Victor came to life; murder always did that for him. The forensics van would generate photographs he could circulate among streetwalkers, kiosk clerks and other nighttime regulars. Arkady took a short stroll around the trailer looking for items of clothing that might have been dropped, but the streetlamps in back of the square were so few and so dim it was like wading through water. The apartment building opposite Yaroslavl Station could have been a distant planet. Even prostitutes hesitated to enter some corners.

Of course, there were prostitutes and prostitutes. Exotic beauties at expensive clubs like Night Flight or the Nijinsky demanded $1,000 a night. At the bar of the Savoy Hotel, $750. Room service at the National Hotel, $300. An all-night Thai masseuse, $150. Oral sex in Lubyanka Square, $10. Three Stations, $5. It was a wonder the captain hadn't scraped her up with a shovel.

Victor took a call on the car phone, saying only, "Yes . . . yes . . . yes" until he clicked off.

"Petrovka demands to know what I've got. Homicide, suicide, accident, overdose or natural causes? If I don't have evidence of deliberate foul play, they want me to move on.

The ambulance will come when it comes. Some oligarch lost his little dog in a garage. Petrovka wants me to go there, get on my hands and knees and help find the little puppy. If I find it first I will twist its furry head off."

"You'd leave before the technicians get here?"

"If she's an accident or natural causes, there won't be any forensic technicians or autopsy. They'll collect her, and if she goes unclaimed for a week, she'll go to the medical school or up in smoke." Victor squinted to get a thought in focus. "All I know is that she was dealing with a perverse individual. Nobody leaves half a liter of good vodka with the cap off."

"Your point being . . . ?"

"He could afford another bottle. He had money."

"And this wealthy individual chose to have sex on a dirty mattress in a trailer?"

"It wasn't in the street. And then there's the butterfly tattoo. That's an identification plus."

Captain Kol was slicing the onion with his eyes fixed on the girl when he exploded with "Fuck!" He had cut himself and blood ran from his onion to his elbow. "Shit!"

"No bleeding, pissing or picking your nose around my crime scene." Victor launched the captain out of the trailer. "Cretin!"

She didn't look like a homicide, suicide or OD to Arkady. No sedatives, no needle tracks or peg teeth of a methadone user.

"What's that?" Victor noticed the open aspirin bottle and yellow powder.

"We'll have to wait for the lab to tell us."

Victor licked a gloved fingertip, dipped it in the bottle and came up with a dab of powder that he smelled, tasted and spat out like a wine expert dismissing an inferior Bordeaux.

"Clonidine. Blood pressure pills. Want a taste?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"A cocktail of clonidine and vodka would drop Rambo in his tracks." Victor warmed to the thought. "Rambo would wake up with no money, no clothes, no bow and arrow, and now we have a case. Madame Butterfly here had the criminal intention and the means of rendering some innocent man unconscious and robbing him."

Arkady shook his head. "'Madame Butterfly'?"

"Well, we have to call her something. I'm not going to spend the night saying 'the deceased.'"

"Anything but Butterfly."

"Okay. There are so many Russian prostitutes in Italy that the new word for whore there is 'Natasha.'"

Arkady said, "That would presume she was a prostitute. It would affect our attitude."

"Never mind the trailer, the sex, the drugs. Do you prefer Princess Anastasia? Olga? There's a name you trust."

"What does she look like?"

Victor brushed a fly from her ear. "To me she looks like—apart from the makeup and skimpy clothing—a nice country girl."

"I agree. Olga."

"Good. I'm worn-out and we've hardly started."

"The problem is that Olga screwed up with the knockout drops. Or this guy saw what she was up to and switched glasses when her back was turned. Maybe he spiked her glass even more. She passed out. He robbed her and took off."

"Another problem," Arkady said. "There are no glasses—"

"We can always get new glasses and rub a little sleep dust on her lips. Otherwise, they'll bag our Olga and dump her and no one will notice or care. She'll sink without a fucking ripple. I'm not saying we should come to any conclusions, just keep an open mind."

There was an almost gawky quality to the girl, as if she had not yet grown into her long legs. Her knees were dirty but not scabbed. Arkady wondered what she would look like if her face were washed.

Victor studied the vodka bottle. Half empty or half full, the bottle had a silvery allure. Neither man had touched it for fear of smearing prints. Arkady heard the detective's dry swallow.

"You know what's tragic about all the money floating around?" Victor said.

"What's tragic?"

"A bottle of vodka used to cost ten rubles, just the right sum for three people to share. Not too much, not too little. That was how you met people and made friends. Now they have money they got selfish. Nobody shares. It's torn apart the fabric of society." Victor raised his head. "There's not a scratch on her. You fished me out of the drunk tank for nothing."

"Probably."

Victor said, "Why don't you come with me to the garage? The dog's name is Fuck Off."

"We need a witness or, at the very least, her pimp. Fortunately the pimp is near."

"Where?"

Arkady ran his finger along the extension cord from the lightbulb to the window. "At the other end of this."

While Victor went out Arkady stayed in the trailer with the dead girl and the bottle of vodka. Contract killings aside, four out of every five violent crimes involved vodka. Vodka faithfully attended every human activity: seduction, matrimony, celebration and, definitely, murder.

Sometimes a scene told a story in dramatic terms: a kitchen table with so many beer and vodka bottles there was hardly room to set a glass, knives on the floor, blood smeared the length of the hall to two bodies, one crisscrossed with stab wounds and the other peppered with bullet holes. In comparison the trailer scene was a still life, horizontal, nothing left standing but the bottle.

Arkady was aware that he was missing something profoundly obvious, some basic contradiction. Now when he needed imagination all he could summon was Victor's story about the wayward swimmer and the dolphins. Arkady felt his own invisible dolphins pushing him out to sea and away from land.

He sat on the bunk opposite the dead girl. She had an oval Slavic face that was more soulful than that of Western women and her hair was not simply brown but a dove's

mix of ash and brown. Her gaze was averted from the grossness of her pose. Pale bands on her fingers showed where rings had been removed, not forcibly; there was no bruising of the joints. He saw no sign on her of violence new or old, but given the choice between investigating the murder of a streetwalker or writing her off as a "death by natural causes," Petrovka would happily accept the proposition that a young woman in apparent good health had undressed, lain down for sex in a trailer and peacefully expired. Finis!

Arkady lifted the vodka bottle off the floor by its bottom edge and stopper. A circle of water marked the floor where the bottle had been. Then something fell from the bottom of the bottle to his feet and he picked up a silver plastic card that said in black script, *Your VIP pass to the Nijinsky Luxury Fair*. The reverse side had a bar code and *June 30–July 3, Club Nijinsky, Browsing begins at 8 p.m.*

June 30 was two hours ago. Arkady went to the window. Finding a witness among the furtive citizens of Three Stations promised to be a farce. In this particular place who would notice a prostitute practicing her trade? His eye ran to the apartment house across the plaza. Eight stories mainly of dark flats, but some with kitchen lights on or the hypnotic glow of television on the ceiling. The trailer door opened and Victor was back, saturnine and triumphant.

"You'll never guess."

"Surprise me," Arkady said.

"Okay. Our extension cord runs from here and goes directly to the railway police station. I saw our friend the

captain through a window. He's got a bandage on his hand the size of a boxing glove. But the cord doesn't end there; it's connected to another long cord that's plugged into an outlet at the back of the militia station. Got it? We're the pimps. You don't look surprised."