

Dateline: A capital city in the “near abroad”¹, October 2010

It had been a challenging work week in central bank reform. The European financial system was in chaos, with Greece the first domino to fall, so strategic planning wasn't easy. The power and surveillance games typical of Eastern Europe institutions made it hard to progress. But by Friday night we had reached the main goals of this visit. Soon we would be back in New Zealand, where excitement about next year's Rugby World Cup there was building. Our flight out would be a leisurely affair tomorrow, so why not have a good dinner out?

A year ago, we'd lunched at a brand-new Mediterranean restaurant. The food then had been healthy and excellent, and the free orange juice squeezed on the spot was memorable. Now the restaurant was rated excellent in guidebooks. And it was just 200 m from our hotel! Elisa booked us a quiet table by the window for 7.15 p.m.

Dinner started well enough. No free orange juice this time -- instead our waiter proudly offered a wine list! Their liquor licence had finally come through, he explained, after two years. We recalled that in world rankings on “ease of doing business” this country came near the bottom. Who knows how long that licence had taken, and how many sticky hands payments and paperwork had passed through?

We ordered, and settled in for a good evening. The first course was fine, but only fine. The second course was downright dull. The wine was only adequate. Except for us, the place was empty. Had their highly-reviewed Greek chef been over-hyped? Our night out was drifting. We began to miss New Zealand's fusion cuisine....

Suddenly waiters began bustling about. They elaborately set the next table for eight, with perfectionist attention. Clearly someone important was arriving!

Someone important did arrive - a master of ceremonies (“Mr Pink Tie”), accompanied by two large goons. Mr Pink Tie inspected the table, with considerable disapproval.

Next thing we knew, that table was moved to the centre of the restaurant, disturbing us on the way. Since there were plenty of other tables, we resented that. I pointedly asked our waiter if President Obama was coming. He just looked worried.

Then the fun began. The restaurant suddenly filled not just with people, but also with goons. While a VIP party sat down at the centre table, staff began moving an even larger table next to us, this time setting up for 10. Unhappy at being disturbed again, I asked our waiter if President Obama and Mr Putin were coming. He didn't reply....

The newly adjacent table quickly became “Goon Gully”. The squad settled themselves down, as considerately as ten men each 2m high and 1.5m wide could in a smallish restaurant. Quelle beefcake!!! All were local muscle as far as we could tell. They were not quite in uniform, but their long leather jackets and well-cut suits (no easy task at their size) looked like a bulk purchase. We twitched a bit the first few times they reached for their pockets, but happily they just took out cellphones for clipped conversations in their own language.

The squad leader for the goons (a little smaller than the rest, at just 1.8 by 1.3 metres) bustled in and out of the restaurant a few times, clearly checking security

¹ Soviet Union terminology for the countries within their bloc, before that empire collapsed in the late 1980's.

outside. Looking around his table, with New Zealand still in mind, we felt awed and excited. What a pack of rugby forwards they would make, especially the front row! South Africa, you're gone! Perhaps they could emigrate in time for the World Cup?

So when the squad leader returned ready to relax, we asked him if this was the new national rugby team. He smiled synthetically and pretended not to understand English (we could tell he did). His colleagues were equally uncongenial. Sadly, we had to forget about making new friends and sharing common interests at that table...

With our goon neighbours settled down, we turned our attention to the VIP party further away. A curious assortment! The older head man appeared Greek (at least he spoke some). He also had curious dimensions. His height was ordinary, and was far exceeded by the extraordinary distance between the leading edge of his belly and the trailing edge of his bum. Special cushions and lifters had to be organised just to help "Mr Agamemnon" into his seat.

A middle-aged lady (Mrs Agamemnon?) sat next to him, but she played little further part. It was Mr Pink Tie who led the talking and toasting, which was clearly designed to flatter and persuade. He targeted the three people on the other side of the table – who were presumably also on the other side of whatever deal was taking shape...

Those three were no stooges, but they were a funny mixture. The leader, nearest to us, looked Asian but not Chinese. It was hard to tell much more, because he never moved or spoke. In fact he looked curiously plastic, like a G I Joe toy enlarged and brought to life. Was he a real person inside a top-quality rubber mask? A bargain from Madam Tussaud's Waxworks? Or was "Mr Android" an experimental robot?

His colleagues – south or southeast Asians - looked and acted more normal. They sat opposite, and chatted with, the two remaining members of the host party. But those two younger Europeans looked decidedly strange themselves. They had lank shoulder-length hair, seemed uncomfortable in suits, and had an unsavoury air. Were they non-bathing computer geeks who had cut off their pigtails for the occasion? Extras from some TV serial about the Tower of London? Or simply junior Agamemnonites, conceived when Mr Agamemnon was still trim enough to interlock with the pertinent parts of his wife?

Our bland dinner out had turned into a spicy evening, with a great floor show. The VIPs negotiated intensely. The goons were sadly unable to drink more than colas while on duty, but they clearly enjoyed their steak and pasta. In fact they were loudly recalling good times from previous engagements (better not to ask for a translation, we decided). In fact the heady testosterone drifting in from the goon table added a tasty tang to our red wine....

Of course, on one interpretation we might at that moment be sitting in the most dangerous place in the city. But on the bright side, we felt totally safe from street crime and nuisance. No flower seller or gypsy violinist who valued life and limb was likely to trouble us tonight!

We lingered as long as we could, wondering how to join in. We couldn't discuss hair-styling with the goons -- there really isn't much to say about shaven heads and number 1 trims. Pretending to go outside for a smoke to sniff out the security there might lead to unhappy complications. The restaurant staff chatted amiably with us, but evasively - if they knew anything they weren't saying.

If we couldn't join in, could we take home a souvenir? Despite our best contortions, we found no tolerably subtle way to take romantic dining pictures of one another that accidentally captured the rest of the scene. Our best surveillance shot below shows shaven-headed goons on the right, and the VIP table beyond (Mr Agamemnom nearest to camera, just behind the flower, with the impassive Mr Android opposite).



Eventually we drifted out and walked away. The security outside was either very bad (because we didn't see any) or very good (because we couldn't spot it).

Back in the hotel bar, we speculated over nightcaps. What had been going on? The situation didn't add up -- too much low-tech local muscle for any reasonable need, and that restaurant was not exactly Michelin 5-star diplomat country. We explored our observations and thoughts through to three plausible options:

1. Mr Agamemnon was the Greek Finance Minister selling government bonds to remote Asian nomads (after all, who else might buy them?). And a bulk contract for local muscle was all the security Greece could afford these days
2. The geeks had written computer programs to hack NATO defence systems. The Chinese or Iranians or somebody were checking it out, and Mr Agamemnon was a middleman. Perhaps a stolen nuclear missile was a potential part of the deal?
3. Our host country, funded by a secret worldwide venture capital consortium, planned to surprise at the 2011 Rugby World Cup and decimate the bookies

We had two choices now.

- Call local media representatives (yes, there was a struggling and harassed English-language paper), with "Have we got a story for you!"
- Think of the evening as an entertaining postscript to our work in the "near abroad", and retire for the night...

We chose to go prudently to bed. But if the unexpected turns up on CNN, from their "near abroad" correspondent, remember you heard it here first...