

A Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis

or

**How a sack full of racoons saved the world, a fat man missed his
breakfast, and an Englishman lost his trousers.**

By

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The Cuban pulled himself into the doorway of the aeroplane, the star-filled night whirling and roaring magnificently around him. With a nod to the pilot, he stepped into the Louisiana sky, tumbled briefly and pulled his ripcord. In his inside pocket were copies of letters from Khrushchev and Castro detailing their plans to station nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba. In his other pockets were six gold bars, also stolen from Castro's safe, more than doubling his weight to just under four hundred pounds. Instantly, the pre-war, soviet-made parachute rushed from its pack and tore itself to shreds. It was July 1962, and the first missile of the coming crisis had just been launched. The Cuban hurtled towards the ground like a giant Roman candle. He crossed himself, remembered his mother and disappeared into the trees.

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Fifty-seven hours later, an Englishman arrived at the Heart Attack Grill on the Catahoula Levee Road. His nervous eyes peering from his pink, square, unshaven face, thinning, straw-coloured hair sticking to his forehead. One lens of his steel-rimmed glasses was missing, and mud stained his cheeks. In fact, mud and sweat stained everything about him: his ruined shoes, his short-sleeved khaki shirt and his sagging Y-fronts. The Englishman had lost his trousers.

Inside the restaurant, the jukebox played *Walk on the Wild Side* by Jimmy Smith, and the smell of frying bacon, coffee, and cigarette smoke filled the air. Despite the ceiling fans, it was hotter and more humid in here than in the surrounding swamp. An immensely fat man in a wide-brimmed fedora levitated near a table in the front window. He wore a luxuriant black beard and what appeared to be a cross between a suit and a surgical gown. The fat man's garments had been cream in colour at some point in their history but were now elaborately mottled with brown sweat patches. The Englishman surmised that there must be a chair under the fat man, hidden by his trunk-like legs or that he was indeed floating. In his

current state, he was prepared to believe either possibility. The fat man had small hands and childlike eyes, which made it appear that he was trapped inside the enormous body. 'Are you Morel?' blurted the Englishman.

'I am indeed JJ St Bernard Morel,' Answered the man as slowly as a bayou at slack water, 'and you, sir, must be the gentleman I have been speaking to on the telephone. You will excuse me if I do not stand to greet you. I am feeling somewhat indisposed, but if you would bring over a chair, perhaps we could avail ourselves of a little breakfast while we converse?'

'You have to help me.' Said the Englishman.

'Yes, yes, I see you are distressed, Mr....? I'm sorry, you have the better of me; I still do not know your name.' He waited, but the Englishman did not respond. 'A chair then.' Said Morel, gesturing to a spare seat. 'I apologise for the informal surroundings but a man of my dimensions can eat for free at this establishment. My presence serves as an ironic advertisement.'

The Englishman pulled over a chair and sat down. He did not want to make small talk. 'I need more dogs.' he demanded.

Morel thought for a moment, stroking his beard. He was as pale as a boiled boudin sausage and sweating profusely. 'I furnished you with two of my finest dogs and a talented handler not two days ago, Mr...?' Still, the Englishman did not proffer his name. 'I feel you owe me some explanation before I entrust you with more of my precious hounds. I am responsible for their safety and for the safety of the young lady. And sir, I cannot help but notice that you are not wearing pants, which suggests to me that things did not go well.'

Presently, a waitress came to their table. 'What can I get for you, gentlemen?'

The fat man ordered first. 'The Coronary Breakfast for me, please Diedre.'

The waitress smiled benignly and turned to the Englishman. 'And for you, Sugar?' Her continued charitable smile suggested that she had registered his missing trousers but that any friend of Mr Morel's was a friend of the Heart Attack Grill.

'Do you have something vegetarian?' Enquired the Englishman.

'We got cigarettes?' She answered.

The Englishman ordered eggs and coffee, and as the waitress pocketed her notepad and turned away, he quickly returned to his theme. 'Look Morel, the woman... your tracker... Dog handler... Daughter?' He looked at Morel and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Morel shook his head, 'She is not my daughter but she is indentured to me by way of a substantial debt, so her safety is of more than sentimental importance to me.' The fat man's eyes rolled in his head as he spoke, and he dabbed his face with a purple silk handkerchief, which he waived to indicate that the Englishman should continue his story.

'I had to give her the slip.' continued the Englishman, relieved that his audience would forgive his poor treatment of a girl whom he had abandoned in the swamp. 'She was plainly deranged. When she came to pick me up, she had a sack filled with god knows what on the front seat. It was only when they started writhing and biting through the sackcloth that I identified them as racoons. Drugged racoons! Although they were plainly coming round by the time I became intimate with them.' The Englishman warmed quickly to his tale and was in a reverie as he continued to recount the events of the previous two days. 'I think perhaps I would have trusted her a little more had it not been for the racoons, Mr Morel, but if she would drug a racoon, what might she have done to me? And the maniacal laughter and the missing tooth? Not to mention the fact that I could hardly understand a word she said.' He waived his arms frantically as sweat dripped from his chin, and the one remaining lens of his glasses began to steam up. 'Anyway, the racoons were jettisoned outside of some awful tin shack, where god knows what fate awaited them, and we drove a few more miles to

disembark from the pickup truck somewhere out in the heat of that appalling swamp.’ He gestured out of the window, clearly disturbed by the thought of the place. ‘The hounds picked up the scent instantly, and we were off, but within an hour, it was pitch bloody dark and the damn frogs, and god knows what started that awful nocturnal cacophony. I am a trained survivalist, Mr Morel, but we could go no further. Besides, it seemed an ideal opportunity to shake her off. I got her talking by the campfire and plied her with a little whiskey and a mixer of old-world charm. She told me all about her desire to see Paris and wear ‘channel’ and to go to the ‘opry’. So I spun her some yarn about nights in Montmartre and the Champs Elysée after the war. I almost felt sorry for her. Mr Morel had her eating out of the palm of my hand by the end of the evening. I wasn’t uncharmed myself, it’s true. In a certain light, you’d say she was rather attractive in a boyish sort of a way. As long as she didn’t smile and reveal her ghastly gapped teeth. But all that works both ways; I’m pretty sure she’d never met anyone like me before in a rustic environment like this, so of course, her head was turned. She even showed me the little silver flask of Micky Finn that she’d used on the racoons. So, while she was off powdering her nose, I laced her whiskey with the stuff. She was out like a light in no time, and I made my escape, along with the dogs.’

Morel’s eyes bulged as he listened to the Englishman’s feverish narrative, his apparently rapt attention spurring the storyteller on to even greater enthusiasm of delivery. ‘Well, now I was out there alone with the frogs and the alligators and that awful moss that hangs everywhere and the dogs moving at such a pace all the time. I was damn near drowned or eaten on umpteen occasions.’ He continued to describe the privations that he had suffered in the heat and funk of the swamp, the alligators that turned out to be logs, the sounds of beasts that he could not identify and the constant fear that someone was watching him. He had seen shapes in the trees, scurrying figures in the gloom. The Englishman had feared not only for his safety but for his sanity. ‘I could barely stand it,’ he went on, ‘so I wasn’t at my

best yesterday evening when I found... The dogs found... the thing I was looking for... Just hanging there... staring at me... contorted like a...’ The Englishman paused, realising that he had said too much. He swallowed and wiped his forehead with a crumpled napkin, then gathered himself to continue. ‘But instead of standing aside and allowing me to retrieve the thing, the tyrants stood guard over it. I tried to appease them with my rations, but they just ate the lot and redoubled their defensive efforts. That big brown one looked like he'd happily tear my throat out, so I helped him off with a stick. Just when I thought I had the better of him, the other one caught me by the breaches. I thought the monster would drag me to my doom, so I remembered my hand-to-hand combat training and slipped my trousers off. The beast duly tore them to pieces, along with my wallet and passport... It has taken me all of last night to get back here in the dark and...’ The Englishman seemed to be welling up with tears. ‘So I'm rather stuck, which is why I need your help, Mr Morel...’

The Englishman looked up imploringly, but the fat man was motionless. His mouth was open, and his eyes gazed straight ahead. The Englishman had seen his first corpse only yesterday, and now he was seeing his second. The victim of one too many breakfasts and a massive heart attack, JJ St Bernard Morel, was dead.

The waitress had arrived at the table again and was standing at the Englishman's shoulder, holding one *coronary breakfast* and one plate of scrambled eggs. ‘You just can't buy publicity like JJ Morel.’ She said, smiling indulgently, ‘I'll call someone, but the boss'll be calling the papers too, honey, so you might want to get along if you don't want to be caught with your pants down.’

‘I need to use the telephone first... Please! It's urgent!’ He said, panicking and unable to believe that his last hope was now sitting lifeless in front of him. The waitress stood aside, nodding to a telephone on the counter. He got up and lurched across the room, picked up the

telephone receiver and dialled the number that he had memorised in his communications training.

The telephone was answered in the Russian Embassy in Washington DC by Major Andrucha Turgenev of the People's Committee for State Security.

‘It's me,’ said the Englishman. ‘I think I need help.’

Major Turgenev responded in a tone of world-weary resignation. ‘We had been wondering when we would hear from you, comrade.’

‘There's been a setback. I need more dogs...’

The Major interrupted. ‘We are aware of the situation, comrade. You are too late. Our sources tell us that the items are already in the hands of our enemies. However, as a favour to you, I can tell you that your cover has been compromised. You would be wise to avoid returning to your home. Neither will you be welcome in Moscow. Good luck, comrade.’ At which, he hung up, leaving the Englishman gaping like a catfish at the counter of the Heart Attack Grill.

The Jukebox burst into *Blue Moon* by the Marcells as he put down the receiver and stumbled out into the street. The swamp seemed to be closing in on the tiny town of Catahoula as the orchestra of frogs rose to a deafening crescendo.

On the sidewalk, a shirtless man who had been panhandling outside the restaurant handed the Englishman a bottle in a brown paper bag. ‘I see you lost your pants.’ He said sympathetically, ‘CIA got my shirt, so I guess we're in the same boat.’

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Just under a hundred miles away at New Orleans International Airport, a young woman was boarding a plane, first-class to Paris. She wore a Chanel suit and dark glasses that made her look like a smaller version of Jackie Kennedy. She reached into her handbag and took out a silver flask, unscrewed the top and took a sip of pure Louisiana moonshine.

She put the flask back into her bag and took out her ticket, which she handed to the stewardess. 'Welcome aboard,' said the stewardess. The young woman nodded and smiled a smile as broad as the Atchafalaya Basin, revealing a brand new gold tooth.