

AGENT GLEASON ANSWERED the doorbell and warmly ushered the three friends into his apartment. "There's no water, I'm afraid. Water-main break this whole side of Prague. I had just enough of the bottled stuff to make coffee." The four intelligence officers were officially assigned to the U.S. Embassy. Once a week they met socially for drinks, dessert, and—not poker, that was too uncerebral a pursuit—contract bridge. The evenings were rotated among their homes in the old section of Prague, as was the responsibility for dessert. Gleason's guests accepted the lack of water with humor. Levy contributed the expected bathroom jokes, then unveiled a cake topped with red marshmallow frosting and a candied cherry. "My wife made it; so, no cracks."

"I thought it was my week," Morales said, placing a bag on the counter. "I bought some Czech pastries, Gleason's favorite. What am I saying? He'll chow down anything. Hey, congratulations, Gleason, if I haven't said it before."

The heavyset Gleason had just been promoted to Internal Security. This secretive branch had the directive to root out moles and counterespies throughout Eastern Europe, still a hotbed of espionage despite the end of the Cold War. Morales himself had been up for the post and competition had been fierce. "So, did you get briefed yet?" Morales teased. "You know, all those telltale ways of ferreting out moles: vaccination scars, dental work, old tattoos."

Levy was the director of Internal Security and put an end to the shoptalk. "That's on a need-to-know basis. Let's play. Dessert and coffee after the first rubber."

The fourth player, Paterno, was Gleason's best friend, in or out of the embassy. Gleason and Paterno grabbed beers from the refrigerator and sat down to play against Levy (scotch on the rocks) and Morales (coffee, black). In keeping with their routine, the bridge table was set up with one deck instead of the usual two, giving them a little more time between hands. The cards fell evenly and the first rubber took over an hour. At some point in the proceedings each of the four men was dummy, the nonplaying partner. In each case, the dummy

took advantage of his break, getting up to stretch his legs or refill his drink. Morales had just warmed up his coffee and picked up another beer for Gleason when Levy put down his cards with a frown. "These are sticky. Time for a new deck."

Gleason, the host, gathered up the old cards, dropped them into a wastebasket, then went and fished around in a sideboard drawer. "Here we are. I knew I had one." Gleason tossed the unopened box to Paterno, who unwrapped it and began to shuffle.

Gleason stretched his arms and wandered away from the table. A minute later, just as he was crossing back to join the others, the overweight agent began to breathe heavily. Sweat dripped from his brow. He swayed, then collapsed to the floor. Special Agent Gleason was dead.

Despite their familiarity with death, the three agents couldn't believe the obvious signs. For several minutes, they tried reviving the dead man. Finally, following a nasty hunch, Levy bent down over the corpse of his newly appointed assistant and smelled his breath. "Cyanide," he muttered. "Cyanide?" echoed Paterno. "That's impossible. How? What the heck was he eating?"

"Are you kidding?" Morales said. "Gleason? The human vacuum? God only knows what he's been munching."

Paterno pushed Levy aside and vainly tried to resuscitate his friend. "Must be a heart attack. It can't be . . . I mean, if it's cyanide, then that means one of us . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

"Yes," agreed Morales with startling frankness. "Either it's suicide or one of us."

Whodunit? (1) Who killed Agent Gleason? (2) How was the poison administered? (3) What clue fingers the killer?