

**From *Reykjavik*, a play for two characters  
Richard Rhodes**

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**Characters:**

**Ronald Reagan, President of the United States**

**Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the  
Soviet Union**

**Time: A weekend in October 1986**

**Place: Reykjavik, Iceland**

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**Reagan** But how do we get beyond our mutual suspicions and learn to trust each other?

**Gorbachev** [*Quickly, regaining the initiative*] We started something in Geneva. A dialogue. It's fallen out of step more than once, but we're still talking. Yet on the main question—how to lift the terrible burden of nuclear danger off of our shoulders—there's no movement at all. More than a hundred proposals have been tabled in Geneva. None has advanced. That's what this "base camp" is about—so that you and I can arrive at agreements that we can sign when we meet in Washington next year. Don't you agree?

**Reagan** Yes, certainly. [*Thinks*] Or at least clear some of the lumber away.

**Gorbachev** Good. Then let me introduce a fundamental principle to guide our discussions: common security.

Common security means I can only be secure if I take your security needs as seriously as I take my own. We can only be secure if we work together to make us both secure.

I first heard these ideas from Willy Brandt, the German Chancellor.

Common security means talking instead of threatening. Working toward the same goals. Nothing else makes sense in a nuclear world.

Usually in negotiations each side tries to pick the other's pocket. But with common security, both sides can leave the table with their pockets full.

Here's my point: We want—in careful stages—to reduce our strategic nuclear weapons to the lowest possible number.

By strategic, I mean nuclear weapons capable of reaching our cities and destroying them.

**Reagan** You mean reducing our intercontinental ballistic missiles? Our ICBMs?

**Gorbachev** Not only ICBMs, Mr. President.

**Reagan** [*Overlapping*] Your boys have been trotting that one out for years.

**Gorbachev** This is new and much more comprehensive. As you know, we have three kinds of delivery systems: ICBMs, but also cruise missiles and bombs on long-range bombers. They can all carry nuclear warheads. And they're all strategic—they can all attack our homelands.

But you have medium-range missiles in West Germany with nuclear warheads. They also threaten my country. They can reach Moscow in less than ten minutes, which means there's no warning time. Even ICBMs give us a little time to react.—thirty minutes at least.

**Reagan** [*Disgusted with the whole idea*] If you call thirty minutes “warning time.”

**Gorbachev** Thirty minutes is better than eight minutes. Your medium-range missiles in Europe are uniquely dangerous to us. They can hit us, but our medium-range missiles can't reach you on the other side of the world. That's an inequality we need to address.

Battlefield nuclear weapons we can discuss at a later time —mines, artillery shells, anti-tank and anti-aircraft rockets . . . .

**Reagan** Anti-aircraft rockets? Using nuclear weapons to shoot down aircraft is insane.

**Gorbachev** Yes, and both sides have thousands of such battlefield weapons. But they're short-range. We can't hit each other's cities with them.

Here at Reykjavik, we're concerned with strategic nuclear arms and with medium-range nuclear weapons in Europe—yours and ours.

**Reagan** Yes. But—

**Gorbachev** Let me finish. Along the way to reducing our strategic nuclear arms, at every stage, there should be equality and security for the USA and the Soviet Union—*common security*.

Anything less would be incomprehensible, unrealistic, and unacceptable. I'm sure you agree.

**Reagan** I'm no champion of Armageddon, that's for sure.

*Reagan consults his cards.*

**Reagan** The hard question here is verification. You know the old Russian saying [*He pronounces it with a Midwestern American accent*]: "Doveryai no proveryai": "Trust, but verify." You and I were optimistic in Geneva about reducing our medium-range missiles in Europe. We can certainly make progress on strategic weapons as well.

**Gorbachev** Good. I'd like to offer my proposals now.

*Gorbachev sorts among his documents, briefly reviews one. Reagan senses an opportunity to lighten the mood.*

**Reagan** Reminds me of a joke. Two Sovietskis are walking down the street and one says, "Have we really achieved full Communism? Is this it? Is this full Communism?" And the other one says, "No, hell no, things have gotta get a lot worse."

*Gorbachev observes Reagan levelly, decides to let it pass.*

**Gorbachev** May I proceed?

**Reagan** Please.

**Gorbachev** Spasíba. [Thanks.]

As we've already established, a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Therefore it follows that all our strategic nuclear weapons must be reduced to the lowest possible numbers. In stages, to build confidence that we can work together.

*Reagan doesn't seem to be listening. Gorbachev stops and observes him.*

**Gorbachev** Mr. President?

**Reagan** [*Starts, comes to focus on Gorbachev*] I was just remembering. . . [*abruptly intense*] Good Lord, Mr. Gorbachev! We almost blew each other up! "A nuclear war cannot be won . . ." Do you remember when I first used that phrase?

*Gorbachev shakes his head—he's trying to recall.*

**Reagan** That damned NATO exercise. Able Archer . . . In 1983. November.

**Gorbachev** дерьмо! [Shit!] We thought you were preparing a first strike!

*Three years later, Reagan is still frustrated and resentful about the close call.*

**Reagan** I can't believe you thought we'd attack you. Why would we do that? What do you take us for?

*Gorbachev nods—I'll show you!—and searches among his documents, finds the one he wants, picks it up and prepares to read from it.*

**Gorbachev** [*Coldly ironic*] Mr. President, at your first press conference after your inauguration, you said: [*Reads*] "The Soviet Union has declared that the only morality it recognizes is what will further its cause. They reserve the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain their goal of world revolution."

**Reagan** I was simply quoting Lenin. As you know very well.

**Gorbachev** After which you doubled the American defense budget.

**Reagan** [*Getting the drift*] After you had spent the previous ten years in an enormous military buildup.

**Gorbachev** Which followed your threat to wipe us out during the Cuban missile crisis.

**Reagan** Which followed your Mr. Khrushchev trying to sneak nuclear missiles into Cuba.

**Gorbachev** Which followed your President Kennedy threatening a nuclear war over Berlin.

**Reagan** [*Throwing up his hands*] I still don't see why Mr. Andropov thought we were preparing to attack you back in '83.

*Gorbachev sighs.*

**Gorbachev** Your defense buildup. Your belligerence. You called us an "evil empire."

**Reagan** [*Dismissively*] Oh, good Lord.

**Gorbachev** Did you think we could shrug all that off as rhetoric? Your navy was pulling all sorts of high-jinks, sailing into our waters and then lighting up to challenge our radars. Your air force was overflying Sakhalin—

**Reagan** —You moved your nuclear missile submarines into the Atlantic near our East Coast—

**Gorbachev** —And then, on top of it all, your NATO held that insane field exercise. Able Archer. Tanks, planes, artillery. . . .

**Reagan** As we do every fall. It's an annual thing. Not provocative. What's the matter with you people?

*They're both caught up in the confrontation. Maybe Gorbachev stands up for his next speech and Reagan follows.*

**Gorbachev** [*Strongly*] You took your nuclear weapons to full alert. Heads of state participated!

**Reagan** I didn't participate—deliberately, so you'd know it was only an exercise!

**Gorbachev** Mrs. Thatcher did!

*They've almost come to blows. Simultaneously they both realize it and step back, take a deep breath, gesture, sit back down fiddling with their papers, glancing at each other and looking away. Finally Gorbachev breaks the silence.*

**Gorbachev** All the more reason for this meeting.

*Reagan tries to lighten their mood.*

**Reagan** Looks like we called it just in time.

*Gorbachev laughs ruefully. A beat.*

**Gorbachev** Shall we continue?

**Reagan** Be my guest.

*Gorbachev nods, reviews his papers, sets them down and picks up where he left off.*

**Gorbachev** I confirm again that the Soviet leadership is interested precisely in deep, fifty-percent reductions in strategic nuclear weapons. All strategic nuclear weapons—ICBMs, cruise missiles and bombs on aircraft.

Second. Medium-range missiles in Europe. Europeans want those missiles out. Yours and ours.

Therefore: we propose the total elimination of both the USSR's and the USA's medium-range missiles in Europe.

**Reagan** [*Surprised*] Only yours and ours? I thought you wanted the French and the British to eliminate their missiles as well.

**Gorbachev** You noticed! We're making a major concession here: We propose to exclude the missiles of Britain and France from the agreement. We won't insist on counting them.

**Reagan** Well, that's certainly—

**Gorbachev** [*Refusing to be interrupted*] We hope that the United States will make a concession as well: concerning our nuclear weapons in Asia—yours and ours—all of them.

**Reagan** Yes, we have a problem with those. What are you proposing?

**Gorbachev** I'll get to that. First, though, your SDI. Star Wars. In 1972 our predecessors signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. It specifically banned missile defenses.

SDI is a type of missile defense.

The USA has proposed that both sides abide by the ABM Treaty banning missile defenses for five years, followed by a period of negotiations over what to do next. We now propose to abide by the treaty for at least ten years, followed by a period of —

**Reagan** —Now hold it right there.

**Gorbachev** Let me finish, please.

That means you would not deploy any Star Wars system for at least ten years. You could do research. But no testing in space. Nothing would leave the laboratory.

*Reagan shifts and frowns.*

**Gorbachev** Without such a limit, you could acquire a dangerous advantage.

Your SDI wouldn't stop a barrage of our missiles, but it might stop some. So if we cut our nuclear arsenals, when we got down to just a few missiles, you could hide behind your SDI shield and attack us first.

**Reagan** [*Bristling*] Why, so could you.

**Gorbachev** We aren't proposing to build a strategic defense. You are.

*Gorbachev gathers himself.*

This is our proposal: Fifty percent reductions in both sides' strategic nuclear weapons, zero medium-range missiles in Europe, negotiate nuclear weapons in Asia and extend the ABM Treaty for ten years with no testing in space.

Let our staffs work out draft agreements, here in Reykjavik, and you and I can sign them when I visit Washington next year.

*He's finished. Proud of himself, he sits back expectantly.*

*Reagan shuffles through his cards, increasingly impatient not to find what he's looking for.*

**Reagan** [*Improvising*] Well, Mr. General Secretary . . . well . . . what you've just said gives us cause for hope.

*Still shuffling. Reagan covers himself with a question.*

**Reagan** [*Confidentially*] When did you have the nuclear briefing?

**Gorbachev** You mean about launching nuclear weapons? The destruction that would cause? [*Shrugs*] Within a month of taking office.

**Reagan** I put it off for as long as I could. Didn't want to hear it.

**Gorbachev** Neither did I, but once I became General Secretary—

**Reagan** I've never been so depressed. You know what President Eisenhower said about nuclear war? He said there wouldn't be enough bulldozers to scrape the bodies off the streets.

*They both think about it.*

**Gorbachev** If it came to that, could you push the button?

**Reagan** Well, I sure wouldn't want to. [*Bristling, defensive*] But damn it, if you attacked us, I'd have to, wouldn't I. I wouldn't have a choice.

*Beat*

What about you?

**Gorbachev** I found my answer at Chernobyl.

**Reagan** [*Sympathetically*] What a terrible disaster for your country.

**Gorbachev** The worst kind of accident: careless and irresponsible. Da, it opened my eyes. It told me what my country had become—not my people, they're deep and solid, but some of our leaders. I knew that everything had to change.

[*To Reagan*] Detonating even the smallest nuclear warhead would equal three Chernobyls.

**Reagan** Really? One warhead, three Chernobyls?

**Gorbachev** Yes. And both of us have tens of thousands, Mr. President. So it wouldn't matter what I did. If you attacked, or if I attacked, we'd both be doomed to an agonizing death—first, from our cities burning, or later, from the fallout. The radiation. Retaliate or not, it's suicide either way.

**Reagan** Well, that may be—but would you push the button?

**Gorbachev** [*Fiercely*] Yes I would, by God. Don't ever doubt that!

*Beat*

But what are we going to do about it?

**Reagan** [*His cards back in order, he consults one*] I just don't understand why you're so opposed to SDI. I think it's the greatest opportunity we've ever had for real peace.

You just said that Mutual Assured Destruction is madness. Both sides with hair-trigger weapons and no defenses! Minutes away—minutes—and millions of people killed, the civilized world destroyed. Isn't that a sad commentary on the human condition?

[*Solemnly*] A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

**Gorbachev** You keep saying that, Mr. President, but then you exempt SDI. You want to expand the nuclear arms race into space.

**Reagan** No I don't.

**Gorbachev** My scientists tell me your SDI won't work—you can't shoot down thousands of warheads flying through space faster than bullets. So what's the real purpose of this new program of yours? Nuclear bombs in orbit? Are you preparing a first strike?

**Reagan** [*Impatiently*] For God's sake. Of course we're not. We're proposing to cut back our first-strike weapons—our missiles. SDI would be our protection from surprise attack. Yours too. A sort of gas mask.

You're too young to remember, Mr. Gorbachev, but back in 1925, all the countries that fought in the First World War agreed not to use poison gas again. But they kept their gas masks, just to be sure.

We should go forward to rid the world of the threat of nuclear weapons—but keep our gas masks.

**Gorbachev** Ah yes, your gas masks. You told me about them in Geneva.

**Reagan** [*Hardly stopping—caught up in his vision*] I'd been looking for a way out of the madness for years. I didn't see how we could do it — eliminate nuclear weapons — with nothing more solid to go on than a treaty. Treaties are a trap. No nation that placed its faith in parchment or paper ever lasted long enough to write its own history.

[*Deeply felt*] You can't believe people's promises.

*Beat*

Back when I was governor of California, I visited our North American Air Defense Command deep in its bunker under Cheyenne Mountain. One of our scientists accompanied me—Dr. Edward Teller, speaking of immigrants. Hungarian, I believe.

**Gorbachev** We know your Dr. Teller.

*Reagan nods and returns to his story.*

**Reagan** [*Referring to the bunker*] Blast doors three feet thick.

**Gorbachev** Yes, we also have such places.

**Reagan** The computer display covered an entire wall. They tracked everything that came over the horizon. Even an astronaut's lost glove. Imagine that!

[*Kidding Gorbachev*] They're watching out for your warheads, Mikhail.

**Gorbachev** [*Responding to Reagan's use of his first name*] Then they're wasting their time. Ronald.

**Reagan** Ron.

**Gorbachev** [*Shrugging*] Ron.

**Reagan** But even though we can track them, Mikhail—there's nothing we can do to stop them. We can track an astronaut's lost glove, but we can't stop a missile coming through. We're defenseless. So are you.

**Gorbachev** Hardly defenseless. You can retaliate, suicidal or not. You just told me you would.

**Reagan** You mean deterrence. [*With disgust*] A loaded gun to each other's head. [*Brightening*] Then Dr. Teller briefed me about the idea of strategic defense. The X-ray laser.

**Gorbachev** [*Pouncing*] Weapons in space. You see?

**Reagan** Not weapons. Defense. A shield over our heads to keep out missiles as a roof keeps out rain. The missing piece to the great puzzle of how to protect the nation against nuclear attack.

The two of us won't be around forever, Mikhail. You and I might agree on eliminating our strategic nuclear weapons, but what about after we're gone? What if someone comes along who wants to cheat? A madman, another Hitler? We need a guarantee that nobody can start the whole damned madness all over again.

**Gorbachev** [*Annoyed and impatient*] Mr. President. Ron. You look for answers in your cards. But you find only the old answers, because my proposals are completely new. So you respond with the same tired words. I must consider your remarks preliminary, or we might as well pack up and go home.

**Reagan** [*Quickly*] Of course we want to review your proposals before responding.

**Gorbachev** I hope that you'll study them and respond point by point—what you agree with, what you disagree with and what bothers you.

About SDI. Don't worry. We've found a way around your magic umbrella. What concerns us is that you're moving the arms race into space.

**Reagan** [*Testily*] We'll talk further this afternoon.

**Gorbachev** [*Slapping the table impatiently*] Nu, khoroshó ["All right, fine"]. So we continue this afternoon.

*Gorbachev abruptly stands and briskly leaves the stage.*

**Reagan** [*Unhappily*] Hell, this isn't a base camp to a summit meeting. This is a summit meeting.

*Lights down.*