

Author's Note

Many years ago, when my parents came down to visit me in New York City, I decided to put them up at the Mercer Hotel. It was a bit of mischief on my part. The Mercer is chic and exclusive, the kind of place where the famous and the fabulous stay. My parents—and particularly my father—were oblivious to that kind of thing. My father did not watch television, or go to the movies, or listen to popular music. He would have thought *People* magazine was an anthropology journal. His areas of expertise were specific: mathematics, gardening, and the Bible.

I came to pick up my parents for dinner, and asked my father how his day had been. “Wonderful!” he said. Apparently he had spent the afternoon in conversation with a man in the lobby. This was fairly typical behavior for my father. He liked to talk to strangers.

“What did you talk about?” I asked.

“Gardening!” my father said.

“What was his name?”

“Oh, I have no idea. But the whole time people were coming up to him to take pictures and have him sign little bits of paper.”

If there is a Hollywood celebrity reading this who remembers chatting with a bearded Englishman long ago in the lobby of the Mercer Hotel, please contact me.

For everyone else, consider the lesson. Sometimes the best conversations between strangers allow the stranger to remain a stranger.

INTRODUCTION

“Step out of the car!”

1.

In July 2015, a young African American woman named Sandra Bland drove from her hometown of Chicago to a little town an hour west of Houston, Texas. She was interviewing for a job at Prairie View A&M University, the school she'd graduated from a few years before. She was tall and striking, with a personality to match. She belonged to the Sigma Gamma Rho sorority in college, and played in the marching band. She volunteered with a seniors group. She regularly posted short, inspirational videos on YouTube, under the handle “Sandy Speaks,” that often began, “Good morning, my beautiful Kings and Queens.”

I am up today just praising God, thanking His name.
Definitely thanking Him not just because it's my

birthday, but thanking Him for growth, thanking Him for the different things that He has done in my life over this past year. Just looking back at the twenty-eight years I have been on this earth, and all that He has shown me. Even though I have made some mistakes, I have definitely messed up, He still loves me, and I want to let my Kings and Queens know out there to that He still loves you too.

Bland got the job at Prairie View. She was elated. Her plan was to get a master's degree in political science on the side. On the afternoon of July 10 she left the university to get groceries, and as she made a right turn onto the highway that rings the Prairie View campus, she was pulled over by a police officer. His name was Brian Encinia: white, short dark hair, thirty years old. He was courteous—at least at first. He told her that she had failed to signal a lane change. He asked her questions. She answered them. Then Bland lit a cigarette, and Encinia asked her to put it out.

Their subsequent interaction was recorded by the video camera on his dashboard, and has been viewed in one form or another several million times on YouTube.

Bland: I'm in my car, why do I have to put out my cigarette?

Encinia: Well, you can step on out now.

Bland: I don't have to step out of my car.

Encinia: Step out of the car.

Bland: Why am I...

Encinia: Step out of the car!

Bland: No, you don't have the right. No, you don't have the right.

Encinia: Step out of the car.

Bland: You do not have the right. You do not have the right to do this.

Encinia: I do have the right, now step out or I will remove you.

Bland: I refuse to talk to you other than to identify myself. [*crosstalk*] I am getting removed for a failure to signal?

Encinia: Step out or I will remove you. I'm giving you a lawful order. Get out of the car now or I'm going to remove you.

Bland: And I'm calling my lawyer.

Bland and Encinia continue on for an uncomfortably long time. Emotions escalate.

Encinia: I'm going to yank you out of here. [*Reaches inside the car.*]

Bland: OK, you're going to yank me out of my car? OK, all right.

Encinia: [*calling in backup*] 2547.

Bland: Let's do this.

Encinia: Yeah, we're going to. [*Grabs for Bland.*]

Bland: Don't touch me!

Encinia: Get out of the car!

Bland: Don't touch me. Don't touch me! I'm not under arrest—you don't have the right to take me out of the car.

Encinia: You are under arrest!

Bland: I'm under arrest? For what? For what? For what?

Encinia: [*To dispatch*] 2547 County FM 1098. [*inaudible*] Send me another unit. [*To Bland*] Get out of the car! Get out of the car now!

Bland: Why am I being apprehended? You're trying to give me a ticket for failure...

Encinia: I said get out of the car!

Bland: Why am I being apprehended? You just opened my—

Encinia: I'm giving you a lawful order. I'm going to drag you out of here.

Bland: So you're threatening to drag me out of my own car?

Encinia: Get out of the car!

Bland: And then you're going to [*crossstalk*] me?

Encinia: I will light you up! Get out! Now! [*Draws stun gun and points it at Bland.*]

Bland: Wow. Wow. [*Bland exits car.*]

Encinia: Get out. Now. Get out of the car!

Bland: For a failure to signal? You're doing all of this for a failure to signal?

Bland was arrested and jailed. Three days later, she committed suicide in her cell.

2.

The Sandra Bland case came in the middle of a strange interlude in American public life. The interlude began in

the late summer of 2014, when an eighteen-year-old black man named Michael Brown was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. He had just, allegedly, shoplifted a pack of cigars from a convenience store. The next several years saw one high-profile case after another involving police violence against black people. There were riots and protests around the country. A civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter, was born. For a time, this was what Americans talked about. Perhaps you remember some of the names of those in the news. In Baltimore, a young black man named Freddie Gray was arrested for carrying a pocket knife and fell into a coma in the back of a police van. Outside Minneapolis, a young black man named Philando Castile was pulled over by a police officer and inexplicably shot seven times after handing over his proof of insurance. In New York City, a black man named Eric Garner was approached by a group of police officers on suspicion that he was illegally selling cigarettes, and was choked to death in the ensuing struggle. In North Charleston, South Carolina, a black man named Walter Scott was stopped for a nonfunctioning taillight, ran from his car, and was shot to death from behind by a white police officer. Scott was killed on April 4, 2015. Sandra Bland gave him his own episode of “Sandy Speaks.”

Good morning, my beautiful Kings and Queens....I am not a racist. I grew up in Villa Park, Illinois. I was the only black girl on an all-white cheerleading squad....Black people, you will not be successful in this world until you learn how to work with white

people. I want the white folks to really understand out there that black people are doing as much as we can...and we can't help but get pissed off when we see situations where it's clear that the black life didn't matter. For those of you who question why he was running away, well goddamn, in the news that we've seen of late, you can stand there and surrender to the cops and still be killed.

Three months later, she too was dead.

Talking to Strangers is an attempt to understand what really happened by the side of the highway that day in rural Texas.

Why write a book about a traffic stop gone awry? Because the debate spawned by that string of cases was deeply unsatisfying. One side made the discussion about racism—looking down at the case from ten thousand feet. The other side examined each detail of each case with a magnifying glass. What was the police officer *like*? What did he do, precisely? One side saw a forest, but no trees. The other side saw trees and no forest.

Each side was right, in its own way. Prejudice and incompetence go a long way toward explaining social dysfunction in the United States. But what do you do with either of those diagnoses aside from vowing, in full earnestness, to try harder next time? There are bad cops. There are biased cops. Conservatives prefer the former interpretation, liberals the latter. In the end the two sides canceled each other out. Police officers still kill people in this country, but those deaths no longer command the news. I suspect that you may have had to pause for a

moment to remember who Sandra Bland was. We put aside these controversies after a decent interval and moved on to other things.

I don't want to move on to other things.

3.

In the sixteenth century, there were close to seventy wars involving the nations and states of Europe. The Danes fought the Swedes. The Poles fought the Teutonic Knights. The Ottomans fought the Venetians. The Spanish fought the French—and on and on. If there was a pattern to the endless conflict, it was that battles overwhelmingly involved neighbors. You fought the person directly across the border, who had always been directly across your border. Or you fought someone inside your own borders: the Ottoman War of 1509 was between two brothers. Throughout the majority of human history, encounters—hostile or otherwise—were rarely between strangers. The people you met and fought often believed in the same God as you, built their buildings and organized their cities in the same way you did, fought their wars with the same weapons according to the same rules.

But the sixteenth century's bloodiest conflict fit none of those patterns. When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés met the Aztec ruler Montezuma II, neither side knew anything about the other at all.

Cortés landed in Mexico in February of 1519 and slowly made his way inland, advancing on the Aztec capital of

Tenochtitlán. When Cortés and his army arrived, they were in awe. Tenochtitlán was an extraordinary sight—far larger and more impressive than any of the cities Cortés and his men would have known back in Spain. It was a city on an island, linked to the mainland with bridges and crossed by canals. It had grand boulevards, elaborate aqueducts, thriving marketplaces, temples built in brilliant white stucco, public gardens, and even a zoo. It was spotlessly clean—which, to someone raised in the filth of medieval European cities, would have seemed almost miraculous.

“When we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments,” one of Cortés’s officers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, recalled. “And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream?...I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about.”

The Spanish were greeted at the gates of Tenochtitlán by an assembly of Aztec chiefs, then taken to Montezuma. He was a figure of almost surreal grandeur, carried on a litter embroidered with gold and silver and festooned with flowers and precious stones. One of his courtiers advanced before the procession, sweeping the ground. Cortés dismounted from his horse. Montezuma was lowered from his litter. Cortés, like the Spaniard he was, moved to embrace the Aztec leader—only to be restrained by Montezuma’s attendants. No one *embraced* Montezuma. Instead, the two men bowed to each other.

“Art thou not he? Art thou Montezuma?”

Montezuma answered: “Yes, I am he.”

No European had ever set foot in Mexico. No Aztec had ever met a European. Cortés knew nothing about the Aztecs, except to be in awe of their wealth and the extraordinary city they had built. Montezuma knew nothing of Cortés, except that he had approached the Aztec kingdom with great audacity, armed with strange weapons and large, mysterious animals—horses—that the Aztecs had never seen before.

Is it any wonder why the meeting between Cortés and Montezuma has fascinated historians for so many centuries? That moment—500 years ago—when explorers began traveling across oceans and undertaking bold expeditions in previously unknown territory, an entirely new kind of encounter emerged. Cortés and Montezuma wanted to have a conversation, even though they knew nothing about the other. When Cortés asked Montezuma, “Art thou he?,” he didn’t say those words directly. Cortés spoke only Spanish. He had to bring two translators with him. One was an Indian woman named Malinche, who had been captured by the Spanish some months before. She knew the Aztec language Nahuatl and Mayan, the language of the Mexican territory where Cortés had begun his journey. Cortés also had with him a Spanish priest named Gerónimo del Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked in the Yucatán and learned Mayan during his sojourn there. So Cortés spoke to Aguilar in Spanish. Aguilar translated into Mayan for Malinche. And Malinche translated the Mayan into Nahuatl for Montezuma—and when Montezuma replied, “Yes, I am,” the long translation chain ran in reverse. The kind of easy face-to-face interaction that each had

lived with his entire life had suddenly become hopelessly complicated.*

Cortés was taken to one of Montezuma's palaces—a place that Aguilar described later as having “innumerable rooms inside, antechambers, splendid halls, mattresses of large cloaks, pillows of leather and tree fibre, good eider-downs, and admirable white fur robes.” After dinner, Montezuma rejoined Cortés and his men and gave a speech. Immediately, the confusion began. The way the Spanish interpreted Montezuma's remarks, the Aztec king was making an astonishing concession: he believed Cortés to be a god, the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy that said an exiled deity would one day return from the east. And he was, as a result, surrendering to Cortés. You can imagine Cortés's reaction: this magnificent city was now effectively his.

But is that really what Montezuma meant? Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, had a reverential mode. A royal figure such as Montezuma would speak in a kind of code, according to a cultural tradition in which the powerful projected their status through an elaborate false humility. The word in Nahuatl for a *noble*, the historian Matthew

* The idea that Montezuma considered Cortés a god has been soundly debunked by the historian Camilla Townsend, among others. Townsend argues that it was probably just a misunderstanding, following from the fact that the Nahua used the word *teotl* to refer to Cortés and his men, which the Spanish translated as *god*. But Townsend argues that they used that word only because they “had to call the Spaniards something, and it was not at all clear what that something should be.... In the Nahua universe as it had existed up until this point, a person was always labeled as being from a particular village or city-state, or, more specifically, as one who filled a given social role (a tribute collector, prince, servant). These new people fit nowhere.”

Restall points out, is all but identical to the word for *child*. When a ruler such as Montezuma spoke of himself as small and weak, in other words, he was actually subtly drawing attention to the fact that he was esteemed and powerful.

“The impossibility of adequately translating such language is obvious,” Restall writes:

The speaker was often obliged to say the opposite of what was really meant. True meaning was embedded in the use of reverential language. Stripped of these nuances in translation, and distorted through the use of multiple interpreters...not only was it unlikely that a speech such as Montezuma’s would be accurately understood, but it was probable that its meaning would be turned upside down. In that case, Montezuma’s speech was not his surrender; it was his acceptance of a Spanish surrender.

You probably remember from high-school history how the encounter between Cortés and Montezuma ended. Montezuma was taken hostage by Cortés, then murdered. The two sides went to war. As many as twenty million Aztecs perished, either directly at the hands of the Spanish or indirectly from the diseases they had brought with them. Tenochtitlán was destroyed. Cortés’s foray into Mexico ushered in the era of catastrophic colonial expansion. And it also introduced a new and distinctly modern pattern of social interaction. Today we are now thrown into contact all the time with people whose assumptions, perspectives, and backgrounds are different from our own. The modern world is not two brothers feuding for control of the

Ottoman Empire. It is Cortés and Montezuma struggling to understand each other through multiple layers of translators. *Talking to Strangers* is about why we are so bad at that act of translation.

Each of the chapters that follows is devoted to understanding a different aspect of the stranger problem. You will have heard of many of the examples—they are taken from the news. At Stanford University in northern California, a first-year student named Brock Turner meets a woman at a party, and by the end of the evening he is in police custody. At Pennsylvania State University, the former assistant coach of the school's football team, Jerry Sandusky, is found guilty of pedophilia, and the president of the school and two of his top aides are found to be complicit in his crimes. You will read about a spy who spent years undetected at the highest levels of the Pentagon, about the man who brought down hedge-fund manager Bernie Madoff, about the false conviction of the American exchange student Amanda Knox, and about the suicide of the poet Sylvia Plath.

In all of these cases, the parties involved relied on a set of strategies to translate one another's words and intentions. And in each case, something went very wrong. In *Talking to Strangers*, I want to understand those strategies—analyze them, critique them, figure out where they came from, find out how to fix them. At the end of the book I will come back to Sandra Bland, because there is something about the encounter by the side of the road that ought to haunt us. Think about how *hard* it was. Sandra Bland was not someone Brian Encinia knew from the neighborhood or down the street. That would have been easy: *Sandy!*

How are you? Be a little more careful next time. Instead you have Bland from Chicago and Encinia from Texas, one a man and the other a woman, one white and one black, one a police officer and one a civilian, one armed and the other unarmed. They were strangers to each other. If we were more thoughtful as a society—if we were willing to engage in some soul-searching about how we approach and make sense of strangers—she would not have ended up dead in a Texas jail cell.

But to start, I have two questions—two puzzles about strangers—beginning with a story told by a man named Florentino Aspillaga years ago in a German debriefing room.

Part One

Spies and Diplomats: Two Puzzles

Fidel Castro's Revenge

1.

Florentino Aspillaga's final posting was in Bratislava, in what was then Czechoslovakia. It was 1987, two years before the Iron Curtain fell. Aspillaga ran a consulting company called Cuba Tecnica, which was supposed to have something to do with trade. It did not. It was a front. Aspillaga was a high-ranking officer in Cuba's General Directorate of Intelligence.

Aspillaga had been named intelligence officer of the year in the Cuban spy service in 1985. He had been given a handwritten letter of commendation from Fidel Castro himself. He had served his country with distinction in Moscow, Angola, and Nicaragua. He was a star. In Bratislava, he ran Cuba's network of agents in the region.

But at some point during his steady ascent through

the Cuban intelligence service, he grew disenchanted. He watched Castro give a speech in Angola, celebrating the Communist revolution there, and had been appalled by the Cuban leader's arrogance and narcissism. By the time of his posting to Bratislava, in 1986, those doubts had hardened.

He planned his defection for June 6, 1987. It was an elaborate inside joke. June 6 was the anniversary of the founding of the Cuban Ministry of the Interior—the all-powerful body that administered the country's spy services. If you worked for the General Directorate of Intelligence, you would ordinarily celebrate on June 6. There would be speeches, receptions, ceremonies in honor of Cuba's espionage apparatus. Aspillaga wanted his betrayal to *sting*.

He met up with his girlfriend Marta in a park in downtown Bratislava. It was Saturday afternoon. She was Cuban as well, one of thousands of Cubans who were guest workers in Czech factories. Like all Cubans in her position, her passport was held at the Cuban government offices in Prague. Aspillaga would have to smuggle her across the border. He had a government-issued Mazda. He removed the spare tire from the trunk, drilled an air hole in the floor, and told her to climb inside.

Eastern Europe, at that point, was still walled off from the rest of the continent. Travel between East and West was heavily restricted. But Bratislava was only a short drive from Vienna, and Aspillaga had made the trip before. He was well known at the border and carried a diplomatic passport. The guards waved him through.

In Vienna, he and Marta abandoned the Mazda, hailed

a taxi, and presented themselves at the gates to the United States Embassy. It was Saturday evening. The senior staff was all at home. But Aspillaga did not need to do much to get the guard's attention: "I am a case officer from Cuban Intelligence. I am an intelligence *comandante*."

In the spy trade, Aspillaga's appearance at the Vienna embassy is known as a *walk-in*. An official from the intelligence service of one country shows up, unexpectedly, on the doorstep of the intelligence service of another country. And Florentino "Tiny" Aspillaga was one of the great walk-ins of the Cold War. What he knew of Cuba—and its close ally, the Soviet Union—was so sensitive that twice after his defection his former employers at the Cuban spy service tracked him down and tried to assassinate him. Twice, he slipped away. Only once since has Aspillaga been spotted. It was by Brian Latell, who ran the CIA's Latin American office for many years.

Latell got a tip from an undercover agent who was acting as Aspillaga's go-between. He met the go-between at a restaurant in Coral Gables, just outside Miami. There he was given instructions to meet in another location, closer to where Aspillaga was living under his new identity. Latell rented a suite in a hotel, somewhere anonymous, and waited for Tiny to arrive.

"He's younger than me. I'm seventy-five. He's by now probably in his upper sixties," Latell said, remembering the meeting. "But he's had terrible health problems. I mean, being a defector, living with a new identity, it's tough."

Even in his diminished state, though, it was obvious what Aspillaga must have been like as a younger man, Latell says: charismatic, slender, with a certain theatricality

about him—a taste for risks and grand emotional gestures. When he came into the hotel suite, Aspillaga was carrying a box. He put it down on the table and turned to Latell.

“This is a memoir that I wrote soon after I defected,” he said. “I want you to have this.”

Inside the box, in the pages of Aspillaga’s memoir, was a story that made no sense.

2.

After his dramatic appearance at the American embassy in Vienna, Aspillaga was flown to a debriefing center at a U.S. Army base in Germany. In those years, American intelligence operated out of the United States Interests Section in Havana, under the Swiss flag. (The Cuban delegation had a similar arrangement in the United States.) Before his debriefing began, Aspillaga said, he had one request: he wanted the CIA to fly in one of the former Havana station chiefs, a man known to Cuban intelligence as “el Alpinista,” the Mountain Climber.

The Mountain Climber had served the agency all over the world. After the Berlin Wall fell, files retrieved from the KGB and the East German secret police revealed that they had taught a course on the Mountain Climber to their agents. His tradecraft was impeccable. Once, Soviet intelligence officers tried to recruit him: they literally placed bags of money in front of him. He waved them off, mocked them. The Mountain Climber was incorruptible. He spoke Spanish like a Cuban. He was Aspillaga’s role model. Aspillaga wanted to meet him face-to-face.

“I was on an assignment in another country when I got a message to rush to Frankfurt,” the Mountain Climber remembers. (Though long retired from the CIA, he still prefers to be identified only by his nickname.) “Frankfurt is where we had our defector processing center. They told me a fellow had walked into an embassy in Vienna. He had driven out of Czechoslovakia with his girlfriend in the trunk of his car, walked in, and insisted on speaking to me. I thought it was kind of crazy.”

El Alpinista went straight to the debriefing center. “I found four case officers sitting in the living room,” he remembers. “They told me Aspillaga was back in the bedroom making love with his girlfriend, as he had constantly since he arrived at the safe house. Then I went in and spoke to him. He was lanky, poorly dressed, as Eastern Europeans and Cubans tended to be back then. A little sloppy. But it was immediately evident that he was a very smart guy.”

When he walked in, the Mountain Climber didn’t tell Aspillaga who he was. He was trying to be cagey; Aspillaga was an unknown quantity. But it was only a matter of minutes before Aspillaga figured it out. There was a moment of shock, laughter. The two men hugged, Cuban style.

“We talked for five minutes before we started into the details. Whenever you are debriefing one of those guys, you need someone that proves their bona fides,” the Mountain Climber said. “So I just basically asked him what he could tell me about the [Cuban intelligence] operation.”

It was then that Aspillaga revealed his bombshell, the news that had brought him from behind the Iron Curtain to the gates of the Vienna embassy. The CIA had a network

of spies inside Cuba, whose dutiful reports to their case officers helped shape America's understanding of its adversary. Aspillaga named one of them and said, "He's a double agent. He works for us." The room was stunned. They had no idea. But Aspillaga kept going. He named another spy. "He's a double too." Then another, and another. He had names, details, chapter and verse. *That guy you recruited on the ship in Antwerp. The little fat guy with the mustache? He's a double. That other guy, with a limp, who works in the defense ministry? He's a double.* He continued on like that until he had listed dozens of names—practically the entire U.S. roster of secret agents inside Cuba. They were all working for Havana, spoon-feeding the CIA information cooked up by the Cubans themselves.

"I sat there and took notes," the Mountain Climber said. "I tried not to betray any emotion. That's what we're taught. But my heart was racing."

Aspillaga was talking about the Mountain Climber's people, the spies he'd worked with when he had been posted to Cuba as a young and ambitious intelligence officer. When he'd first arrived in Havana, the Mountain Climber had made a point of working his sources aggressively, mining them for information. "The thing is, if you have an agent who is in the office of the president of whatever country, but you can't communicate with him, that agent is worthless," the Mountain Climber said. "My feeling was, let's communicate and get some value, rather than waiting six months or a year until he puts up someplace else." But now the whole exercise turned out to have been a sham. "I must admit that I disliked Cuba so much that I derived much pleasure from pulling the wool over

their eyes,” he said, ruefully. “But it turns out that I wasn’t the one pulling the wool over their eyes. That was a bit of a blow.”

The Mountain Climber got on a military plane and flew with Aspillaga directly to Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington, DC, where they were met by “bigwigs” from the Latin American division. “In the Cuban section, the reaction was absolute shock and horror,” he remembers. “They simply could not believe that they had been had so badly, for so many years. It sent shock waves.”

It got worse. When Fidel Castro heard that Aspillaga had informed the CIA of their humiliation, he decided to rub salt in the wound. First he rounded up the entire cast of pretend CIA agents and paraded them across Cuba on a triumphant tour. Then he released on Cuban television an astonishing eleven-part documentary entitled *La Guerra de la CIA contra Cuba—The CIA’s War against Cuba*. Cuban intelligence, it turned out, had filmed and recorded *everything* the CIA had been doing in their country for at least ten years—as if they were creating a reality show. *Survivor: Havana Edition*. The video was surprisingly high quality. There were close-up shots and shots from cinematic angles. The audio was crystal clear: the Cubans must have had advance word of every secret meeting place, and sent their technicians over to wire the rooms for sound.

On the screen, identified by name, were CIA officers supposedly under deep cover. There was video of every advanced CIA gadget: transmitters hidden in picnic baskets and briefcases. There were detailed explanations of which park bench CIA officers used to communicate with their

sources and how the CIA used different-colored shirts to secretly signal their contacts. A long tracking shot showed a CIA officer stuffing cash and instructions inside a large, plastic “rock”; another caught a CIA officer stashing secret documents for his agents inside a wrecked car in a junkyard in Pinar del Rio; in a third, a CIA officer looked for a package in long grass by the side of the road while his wife fumed impatiently in the car. The Mountain Climber made a brief cameo in the documentary. His successor fared far worse. “When they showed that TV series,” the Mountain Climber said, “it looked as though they had a guy with a camera over his shoulder everywhere he went.”

When the head of the FBI’s office in Miami heard about the documentary, he called up a Cuban official and asked for a copy. A set of videotapes was sent over promptly, thoughtfully dubbed in English. The most sophisticated intelligence service in the world had been played for a fool.

3.

This is what makes no sense about Florentino Aspillaga’s story. It would be one thing if Cuba had deceived a group of elderly shut-ins, the way scam artists do. But the Cubans fooled the CIA, an organization that takes the problem of understanding strangers very seriously.

There were extensive files on every one of those double agents. The Mountain Climber says he checked them carefully. There were no obvious red flags. Like all intelligence agencies, the CIA has a division—counterintelligence—

whose job it is to monitor its own operations for signs of betrayal. What had they found? Nothing.*

Looking back on the episode years later, all Latell could do was shrug and say that the Cubans must have been really good. "They did it exquisitely," he said.

I mean, Fidel Castro selected the doubles that he dangled. He selected them with real brilliance... Some of them were trained in theatrical deception. One of

* The CIA makes a regular practice of giving its agents lie-detector tests—to guard against just the kind of treachery that Aspillaga was describing. Whenever one of the agency's Cuban spies left the island, the CIA would meet them secretly in a hotel room and have them sit for a polygraph. Sometimes the Cubans would pass; the head of the polygraph division personally gave a clean bill of health to six Cuban agents who ended up being doubles. Other times, the Cubans would fail. But what happened when they did? The people running the Cuban section dismissed it. One of the CIA's former polygraphers, John Sullivan, remembers being summoned to a meeting after his group gave the thumbs-down on a few too many Cuban assets. "They ambushed us," Sullivan said. "We were berated unmercifully.... All these case officers were saying, 'You guys just don't know what you're doing,' et cetera, et cetera. 'Mother Teresa couldn't pass you.' I mean, they were really very, very nasty about it."

But can you blame them? The case officers chose to replace one method of making sense of strangers (strapping them to a polygraph machine) with another: their own judgment. And that is perfectly logical.

Polygraphy is, to say the least, an inexact art. The case officer would have had years of experience with the agent: met them, talked to them, analyzed the quality of the reports they filed. The assessment of a trained professional, made over the course of many years, ought to be more accurate than the results of a hurried meeting in a hotel room, right? Except that it wasn't.

"Many of our case officers think, 'I'm such a good case officer, they can't fool me,'" Sullivan said. "This one guy I'm thinking of in particular—and he was a very, very good case officer—they thought he was one of the best case officers in the agency." He was clearly talking about the Mountain Climber. "They took him to the cleaners. They actually got him on film servicing a dead drop. It was crazy."

them posed as a naïf, you know... He was really a very cunning, trained intelligence officer... You know, he's so goofy. How can he be a double? Fidel orchestrated all of this. I mean, Fidel is the greatest actor of them all.

The Mountain Climber, for his part, argues that the tradecraft of the CIA's Cuban section was just sloppy. He had previously worked in Eastern Europe, up against the East Germans, and there, he said, the CIA had been much more meticulous.

But what was the CIA's record in East Germany? *Just as bad as the CIA's record in Cuba*. After the Berlin Wall fell, East German spy chief Markus Wolf wrote in his memoirs that by the late 1980s

we were in the enviable position of knowing that not a single CIA agent had worked in East Germany without having been turned into a double agent or working for us from the start. On our orders they were all delivering carefully selected information and disinformation to the Americans.

The supposedly meticulous Eastern Europe division, in fact, suffered one of the worst breaches of the entire Cold War. Aldrich Ames, one of the agency's most senior officers responsible for Soviet counterintelligence, turned out to be working for the Soviet Union. His betrayals led to the capture—and execution—of countless American spies in Russia. El Alpinista knew him. Everyone who was high up at the agency did. “I did not have a high opinion

of him,” the Mountain Climber said, “because I knew him to be a lazy drunkard.” But he and his colleagues never suspected that Ames was a traitor. “It was unthinkable to the old hands that one of our own could ever be beguiled by the other side the way Ames was,” he said. “We were all just taken aback that one of our own could betray us that way.”

The Mountain Climber was one of the most talented people at one of the most sophisticated institutions in the world. Yet he’d been witness three times to humiliating betrayal—first by Fidel Castro, then by the East Germans, and then, at CIA headquarters itself, by a lazy drunk. And if the CIA’s best can be misled so completely, so many times, then what of the rest of us?

Puzzle Number One: Why can’t we tell when the stranger in front of us is lying to our face?