

**DEAD MAN BELOW
DECK**

A Village Mystery

J.E. Rohrer

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Ordering Information

The Books in the Dead Man series by J.E. Rohrer are available from lulu.com

This book is dedicated to the fine people of
Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.

CHAPTER 1. THE BEGINNING

I walked past the dead man without noticing him. Well, not right past him; he was about ten feet away. This failure to notice what some people might regard as noteworthy caused the police to be suspicious. But the honest truth is I just did not see the body. After all, it was six in the morning. I was going out to pick up a newspaper and some bananas at the convenience store down the block. I was half asleep, not expecting anything unusual like a body by the door. Not exactly by the door; we have a second floor condo with a deck-type balcony. The body was directly under my deck on the neighbor's patio. My front door opened at least ten feet from that spot so, as you can see, it was not directly in front of my eyes.

Okay, maybe some people would have noticed it. But I was not your average person. The convenience store was a block away. I wandered over there in the usual way, my early morning ritual on a summer morning being unvaried if at all possible. I circled the building,

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staying on the sidewalk and stepping over the dirt. The building was new, so we had a lot of dirt. The dirt was sometimes a little wet and I didn't want mud on the bottom of my shoes. Then, I always followed the same route. I walked on the left side of the street until I was across from the convenience store. I crossed over and went in, being careful of cars seeking gasoline. The return trip was a mirror image of the first leg.

The convenience store was bright, clean, and airy. It was a very nice store. The people who worked there were wide awake, cheerful, neat and clean, and looked wholesome. The store had fresh bananas, donuts, and milk along with the usual conveniences. I always picked up the Milwaukee paper and this morning, a Saturday, my wife wanted me to get the Advertiser. An inveterate yard sale fanatic, she was looking forward to a full morning. Rather, she was looking to fill what would be left of the morning after she finally got up and dressed. That would be several hours from now.

Let me clarify so you don't get the wrong idea: we didn't read the Milwaukee paper because we were in Milwaukee. We didn't like Milwaukee. Nobody did. Milwaukee was not

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like the rest of Wisconsin. It was more like Chicago. And we really didn't like Chicago.

On the other hand, the Milwaukee newspaper was better than the one printed in Madison. The Madison paper did not even have the Dilbert comic strip. So we were driven to settle on the Milwaukee paper. Just don't think that meant we liked Milwaukee or were the slightest bit interested in what went on there.

Quite the opposite in fact. As Milwaukee grew, it pushed its boundaries out. Those of us with homes in small towns like Fort Atkinson were in danger of some day becoming part of the 'Milwaukee area.' When that happened, we would be painted with the same brush, the brush that said urban problems – crime, pollution, traffic, and racial conflict. This was unfair and not our fault. If we wanted urban problems, we would live in the city for Pete's sake. In fact, we proved our innate good sense by not living in the city. For the city to invade us was just not right. They could damn well grow in the other direction. That would be into Lake Michigan. Let them live in houseboats or in bubbles under the lake (the one they polluted whenever they got the chance).

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While I was paying for the bananas and papers, a police car raced by the store, lights flashing and siren screeching. This was painful at the early hour and really not necessary. After all, there was not much traffic that had to be warned out of the way. Those guys liked to make a fuss just for the fun of it sometimes. The noise jarred our ears and caused all of us in the store to pause and gaze briefly out of the window before turning back to our respective tasks without comment.

The young woman behind the counter asked me if I had purchased gasoline (no) and would like a bag for the bananas (no). This proved to be a mistake. Since I was walking, a bag might have made it easier to carry my purchases. And, maybe, I did not look my usual debonair self with a bunch of bananas under my arm. Yes, I probably should have taken a bag, but until I had at least two cups of coffee, my brain cells did not function very well. Two large cups of coffee.

Back I went to the condo. Imagine my surprise when I saw the police car parked next to my building. Imagine my surprise when I saw the authorities clustered around the patio of the condo, right below my deck. Imagine my surprise when I saw a body on the ground

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not ten feet from the front door. Imagine their surprise when a middle-aged guy carrying bananas tried to push through the crime scene.

“You can’t come in here, sir. This is a crime scene.”

“But I need to get in my front door.”

“I’m sorry, sir. But you can’t come this way.”

Naturally, I wilted a bit. No coffee? I had put the pot on before leaving the building. Fresh coffee awaited, unreachable. And where was I supposed to go? The car was in the garage. The keys were in the condo. The automatic garage door opener was in the car. This was a difficult problem to solve without coffee.

I could sit down somewhere and try to struggle through the paper without coffee as unlikely as that sounds. But the only place to sit was on the gurney they had brought which was next to the body, right in the middle of their precious crime scene. Impossible. So I turned away. Probably, I was going to walk slowly in aimless circles until the problem resolved itself or I fell into a coma. More likely, both would occur with my mind drifting away as my feet did their thing.

Perhaps it was just as well that one of the

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officers called me back. “Sir, do you live here?”

“I’m in the upstairs unit.”

“Right above this body, sir?” The implication escaped me, but a feeling of unease began to disturb me.

“We would like to ask you a few questions.” He said with a stone face.

“Can we do it over coffee? There is a fresh pot upstairs.” Clever of me, don’t you think? A chance to get at the coffee and I leapt on it.

The policeman stared at me for a moment. He seemed to think I was not displaying the proper regard for the gravity of the situation. After all, there was a dead man below my deck. Perhaps I should have been all a twitter - horrified, fearful, and excited. But heck, I saw dead bodies all the time on TV. It was no big deal. Well, if I had noticed it, I would, of course, have called it in and felt important for being so civic minded and alert. However, since I missed my chance at that moment of glory, I just wanted my coffee.

The policeman considered the situation for a moment. I thought maybe my offer of fresh coffee had dented his resolve about the sanctity of the crime scene. No such luck. “Stand over here, sir. Someone will question you later.”

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Stand around waiting for someone to question me? Arms full of bananas and newspapers? This could take hours. A couple of brain cells clicked together under duress and I whipped out my cell phone. I called my wife, hoping she would hear the phone ring. I did not expect her to answer it. She kept it inside a bag, inside her purse, which was usually inside a larger bag. The chances of getting through all of those barriers before the phone stopped ringing were a flat zero. But she would call me back.

And she did. “Ed! Are you all right?”

Panic.

“Yeah, fine.”

“Where are you? What’s wrong?”

“I’m just downstairs.”

“Are you hurt? Why don’t you come up?”

Trying to cut through all the fear and panic, I interrupted her and spoke as quickly as possible. Repetition was important under these circumstances so that she would hear my message even if she tried to talk. “THE POLICE ARE DOWN HERE THEY WANT TO QUESTION ME ABOUT SOMETHING PLEASE BRING A CUP OF COFFEE DOWN DON’T WORRY NOTHING WRONG BODY BELOW

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DECK BRING COFFEE.” That should do it.

Silence. “I’m coming down.”

“Thanks. Don’t forget my coffee.”

CHAPTER 2. ENTER THE COPS

When Betty opened the front door she was, of course, in danger of stepping into the crime scene. She peered carefully around then handed me the coffee, reaching over the tape that had been affixed to the outside wall at the door frame.

She was a sight for sore eyes, let me tell you. She had thrown on slacks and a shirt, her hair was tousled, and she had that suspicious look she gets in her eyes every once in a while. Her first reaction was always the same; I must have done something dangerous to cause this mess. This unjust view of my place in the world could be annoying, but when she handed me the coffee I knew she loved me, I loved her, and all was right in our little world.

Betty was a Wisconser through and through. Or should I say Badger? Or Cheesehead? I think she preferred Cheesehead. Anyway, she grew up on a dairy farm in the north-central part of the state. Her view of the world was forever shaped by arcane and exotic experiences that I could barely imagine. A

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curly-headed little scamp running madly around the barnyard, she played with her kittens and engaged in other important little-girl business. From what she told me, stepping barefoot into cowpies was a significant activity. Forgive me for not appreciating the joys of such behavior. I was the kind of kid who could not stand to have his hands sticky. Even today, I would not eat fruit unless it was cut up because of the juice. An apple I could stand if I ate it standing over the sink where I could wash up immediately. Stepping into a cowpie would be something I could handle only if I was wearing waders. I was not what Governor Arnold out in California called a “girly man.” But barefoot into a cowpie? No way in hell.

A childhood of neglect on a farm full of feces must explain why my dear wife was the way she was. Not that there was anything stranger about her than there was about me. But she was more than a little odd. Take, for example, the thing about boxes and bags. She couldn't throw them away. And they accumulated. Perhaps they bred amongst themselves in the dead of night. How else could there get to be so many of them? They filled up every available bit of storage. Empty boxes and empty bags had appeared in all

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unused locations in every home where we had lived.

Her cousins were the same way. They were fascinated by sacks and crates, boxes and bags. They saved them for some unforeseen cataclysm, like maybe an invasion of aliens that would only spare people from slavery if they could produce one thousand cardboard boxes that appealed to alien sensibilities.

Something happened on that farm to make those girls the way they were. I shuddered to think what it might have been. Perhaps an old German lived in the woods, occasionally coming to the door of their farmhouse late at night shouting that a ransom of paper sacks must be thrown on the porch. “More sacks, more sacks! If you don’t give me more sacks I will throw you into the oven like I did Hansel and Gretel!”

Okay, maybe that wasn’t what happened. But it had to be something pretty strange.

The policeman stood ready to intervene if either of us stepped into the crime scene. He seemed a little disconcerted by our ability to reach over the crime scene tape to accomplish my selfish goal of obtaining coffee. This was beating the system. This was finding comfort when only discomfort should prevail. I

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wondered what he would have done if I had asked her to hand over a folding chair.

That proved to be unnecessary. An unmarked sedan pulled up disgorging what I imagined were two detectives. One was a beefy older man in rumpled polyester. The other was a hard looking bottle blonde with a styrofoam coffee cup in her hand. She struck me as the sensible type, no doubt because of the coffee, while he seemed like a doofus ready for retirement. This first impression proved to be completely backward.

They walked over to the little grouping Betty, the policeman, and I had formed by the door, taking in the situation at a glance. "These folks live in that unit up there," our uniform said to the detectives with a significant look in his eye.

The female detective took the hint. "We would like to ask you two a few questions. May we come in?"

Finally, I would be able to sit down and drink my coffee. "Sounds good," I said. "We can open the garage door and go in that way if you want."

The female cop looked at me. Her gaze was professional and cool. What I am trying to say is that she looked at me like I was a bug, a

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bug under a magnifying glass that she had caught in the back yard. She was studying me to decide where to stick the pins that would nail me to a board when she added me to her collection of trophies. Not that I would be an important addition to the collection since I was not a very interesting bug.

What she was seeing was a middle-aged guy, average in every respect. White, five feet nine inches tall (with shoes on) and weighing 170 pounds (with shoes off), you could say I was fairly average. My hair was completely white and two inches in length all over. The clipper had a two inch comb on it and I just ran it forward and backward over my head about once a week. My beard, if you can call it that, had a moth-eaten look. With glasses, jogging shoes, jeans, and a polo shirt that I got on sale at Target, she was seeing your typical guy on vacation. Not particularly fit because I don't lift weights or jog, but at least I could say I was no longer fat. I had lost 50 pounds since I topped out at 222 pounds eighteen months previously. The holiday pictures had horrified me, providing the motivation to change my eating habits. Even though I was not anywhere near movie star caliber, I was satisfied with my average appearance. It was a big step up for

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me.

The heavysset older one stuck out his hand. “My name is Sergeant Bill Broder and this is Sergeant Schmidt. Let’s go in and have a chat.” He looked like he wouldn’t mind resting his feet for a few minutes.

Broder lifted the tape to let me step under and we went up the steep stairs to our second floor apartment. Betty led the way, followed by me, then Schmidt and Broder. When we got to the main floor, I pulled out a chair at our kitchen table and sat down. “Our living room furniture won’t be delivered until next month, so we better sit here,” I said.

“You’ve just moved in?” Broder was looking around at our sparsely furnished home away from home.

“Yep. This is our summer place. We just got it this year. We’re still fixing it up.”

Apparently, that was enough small talk for Sergeant Schmidt. She flipped open her notebook and clicked her ballpoint pen into the working position. “Names?” she asked.

“Ed Schumacher. This is Betty Betz. We’re married.” I always felt obligated to add that last part. Betty was afraid that people would think we were just living together.

“Occupation?”

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“College professors. Texas Tech.” I could be succinct, too.

Schmidt looked up in confusion, so I clarified. “We have summers off, so we bought this place. It’s cooler here in the summer.”

She nodded, not really interested. “What can you tell us about the body downstairs?”

“Nothing. I didn’t know it was there until I got back with the paper this morning.” My answer sounded weak even to me.

Schmidt narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “You walked out that door at what time?”

“About six.” I felt compelled to elaborate. “The body might have been there, but since I was pretty sleepy, I wouldn’t have noticed it.”

Schmidt and Broder exchanged disbelieving glances. Since Schmidt seemed at a loss for words, Broder broke in.

“So you’re a college professor,” he said with an indulgent smile.

“Yep. Absent-minded professor.” I appreciated the excuse he was giving me.

“What were you doing last night?”

“We got here from Texas about five p.m. We were pretty tired, but Betty called her cousin and we made plans to go out for a fish fry. No food in the house, of course. Betty, what time did we get back from that?”

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Betty looked startled. “Around seven probably,” she said. “We watched some TV then went to bed early. We were tired.”

No doubt about that. Driving up from Amarillo would have been tiring enough. But the night we spent in a motel outside Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri provided no rest at all. Our decrepit and neurotic cat was traveling with us. Betty had given him something to relax him for the drive since he goes nuts in the car. The tranquilizer did not make him sleep, but we found out that it relaxed him in ways we did not anticipate. In the middle of the night, I got out of bed to turn down the air conditioner. The cat was in my spot when I got back to the bed. Naturally, I picked him up and dropped him on top of Betty. Then I lay back down, only to discover something hot, wet, and smelly was all over me. Perhaps it was my fault. Maybe I squeezed him when I moved him and that forced a nasty squirt out the back end. Whatever the cause, we spent the next hour wide awake. The bed was a mess, I was in shock (imagine that stuff on your naked body), and Betty was trying to clean up. The cat seemed to be happy enough, though.

Broder wrote this down. Not the part about the cat squirt since I didn't tell him that

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story, but about our going to bed early. Maybe I should have told him the cat story. It would have proven I was not capable of murder. With all the provocation the cat gave me, the possibility of killing it never crossed my mind. Drop kicking it off the balcony would not have been out of the question, though. Maybe it was just as well I did not tell that story to Broder since we had sneaked the cat into the hotel room without asking permission. What if the hotel had called in a report on us for making a strange and noxious smell in their hotel room.

“Did you folks hear or see anything unusual last night?”

Betty and I both shook our heads.

Broder apparently had finished his assessment of us and concluded we were not dangerous. We might have killed the guy below the deck, but we weren't likely to kill someone else right away.

“Thank you for your time. Sorry to have disturbed you.” Then he smiled at me. “We might have a few more questions.” His smile broadened. “Don't leave town.”

CHAPTER 3. A CLUE POINTS AT ME

When the detectives left, we tried to get back into our Saturday routine. Actually, it was our every day routine when we were in Wisconsin. We read the paper and drank coffee. The big news item was the presidential campaign. Wisconsin was seen as a battleground state. Both major party candidates were stumping in Madison, Milwaukee, and the smaller cities. A few weeks before, the Green Party had rejected Nader and picked someone else as its nominee. All this was pretty exciting politics for those who were interested.

Betty eventually showered and went to an estate sale.

“If you see a bike that’s in good shape, I wouldn’t mind having it,” I said.

She gave me an odd look. “For you to ride?”

“Sure. Why not? You said you’ve seen several bikes at sales that were really cheap.”

She still had that mystified look.

“I don’t want one with skinny tires or lots

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of gears. Just a plain bike. And I want a banana seat.”

“Banana seat. I remember those. They were from the sixties, right? I don’t think they make them anymore.”

“A banana seat would be a lot more comfortable than a regular seat.”

She just stood there for a moment, shaking her head. Then she put her arms around me. “I’m very lucky to have you,” she said.

“And I am very lucky to have you,” I answered.

“You better believe it, buddy,” she said. Then she went out in pursuit of junk and, hopefully, a cheap but functional bicycle.

I went into the spare bedroom we have set up as an office and got on the internet. After checking my email accounts, I did a little computing for a few projects. I didn’t get paid for summer work, but when a project was hanging out there ready to progress to the next step, I couldn’t resist. My job was to test hypotheses using data collected from surveys. It made me feel good to find the answers to life’s little questions, even if no one else was really interested.

Frankly, I forgot all about the dead guy under my deck. It was really none of my

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business and, besides, the police were handling the problem. I didn't even look for the story in the Milwaukee paper because I figured it was too soon. Not that Milwaukee papers would care much about a single body found out in the boondocks. They had bodies all over the place in that town.

By noon I was ready for a break. After a few pushups to get the blood circulating and to tone up the flab, it was time for my walk. The village of Fort Atkinson, "Fort" for short, was a real jewel. Our place was on the edge of town, but we could walk downtown in just thirty minutes. Traffic was fairly light if you stayed on the residential streets. The Rock River ran through the center of town. I peered over the wall and watched the water for a few minutes, then strolled over to the hardware store. The ad for True Value that was in the morning paper said they sold small engines.

There was a kid working in the power tools section who looked like he was about 15. I figured he had to know more about small engines than I did, so I hit him with my question.

"Do you have a gasoline motor that can be mounted on a bicycle?"

He looked at me like I was nuts.

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“You know, on the axle. So I won’t have to pedal.” You have to draw a picture for some people.

“Why don’t you buy a skooter?”

See, this was the problem with teenagers. They didn’t understand service. I asked the guy a simple question and he gave me guff.

“A chain saw turns a chain. A bike has a chain. Would a chain saw drive a bike?” I was giving him hints, hoping his brain might start to work.

“I don’t think that would work. The chain saw would cut your leg off.”

What an idiot. Not getting any help, I left, planning to go back later when an adult might be working there.

Have you ever noticed that everything cost a lot of money and was a lot more complicated than it needed to be? Back before all homes had utility lines, some washing machines were made that had gasoline motors. Creative teenagers put those motors on their bicycles - instant motorcycle. Now, you had to spend thousands to get a motorcycle. Then you had to register the monster, get plates and insurance, and worry about theft. Or, if you didn’t want to go 100 miles per hour, you could buy a scooter. The state of Wisconsin

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still wanted you to register it, and, of course, it would have to be in compliance with a bunch of safety regulations.

Why did a vehicle have to cost thousands of dollars? I bet you could mass produce Model T's with little modern engines for about \$500 bucks each. Heck, you could put a lawnmower engine on a golf cart and drive it around Fort. More to the point, why were we paying a lot of fees for safety inspections and vehicle registration? To pay our share of road maintenance costs, you say? On the other hand, if you rode a bicycle, you didn't have to register it and it did not have to pass inspection. You were still using the road, so what was the difference?

The answer had to be the bicycle lobby. Those guys and gals in the spandex pants who were spending hundreds on whiz bang racing bikes had the money that swung votes and made favorable laws. You think I am kidding? The Yuppie lobby got what it wanted. Heck, the Democratic nominee was one of those spandex guys. The Yuppies even had their own presidential candidate. Now that was political power.

Where was I? Oh, after striking out at True Value, I walked back to the condo. We were

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the first and, so far, the only people living in the place. We had purchased it sight-unseen, based on location and price. It was either a very smart move, or we were just lucky because we were quite satisfied with it. Of course, a number of small issues had to be resolved as with any new construction. Trim, tile work, and some painting were still needed. The window in the garage had not been finished.

With all this going on, I was not surprised to find the garage door open when I got back home. On the other hand, I did not expect to find our friendly neighborhood detectives standing by my garbage which they had apparently seen fit to dump on the floor of the garage.

They seemed surprised to see me when in I wandered like a lamb to the slaughter. Detective Schmidt turned to me, then held out a baggie with a wallet in it. "Have you ever seen this before, Mr. Schumacher?"

After a brief perusal I answered, "No. Where did you find it?" Perhaps the exercise had moved all of my blood into my feet. Otherwise, I would have guessed where they found it right away.

Broder pulled out some handcuffs and

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grabbed me by the arm. “You have the right to remain silent...” I didn’t hear the rest. Apparently, if your jaw falls open wide enough, it makes you go deaf.

CHAPTER 4. THEY TAKE ME DOWNTOWN FOR THE THIRD DEGREE

It was my first ever ride in a police car. I guess I should have paid more attention to such a memorable event. Wasn't that always the way? When the really important things were happening to us, we were too caught up in the moment to appreciate just how momentous it was.

They led me into an interrogation room and told me to sit down. There was a mirror on one wall, so I knew we were being watched by a steely-eyed police Lieutenant. This person would decide whether or not to call the District Attorney. If the DA said they could make a case against me, I was toast, innocent or not.

That was when I remembered Betty. When she got back from shopping, she would wonder where I was.

"Don't I get to make a phone call?" I sounded a bit grouchy and scared, even to myself.

Schmidt glowered at me, then said, "Yes.

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Use that phone in the hallway if you have the right change.”

What century was she living in? I whipped out the cell phone and called Betty, who answered right away.

“Where are you?”

This was going to be tricky. “I’m with the police detectives. They had a few more questions.”

“Are you all right?” She sounded panicked. I could not be sure she had understood what I was saying.

“I am at the police station.”

“I can’t hear you. You’re breaking up.” She was wailing.

“I AM AT THE POLICE STATION
COME GET ME POLICE STATION CAN
YOU HEAR ME NOW?”

“What?”

“POLICE STATION POLICE
STATION POLICE STATION!” I was shouting to make myself heard.

Schmidt took the phone away from me. “You abusive bastard,” she said. Broder just shook his head at me. What were you supposed to do besides yell if the person couldn’t hear you?

Personally, I liked to read books that were

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over thirty years old. Forty or fifty years old was even better. If this book is being read by someone fifty years from now, you may not understand the importance of the cell phone in transforming human society. Almost no one had a cell phone a decade before the dead guy was found under my deck. By 9-11, when the terrorists knocked down the Twin Towers in New York City, the cell phone had become more than ubiquitous, it was a necessity. When family members were interviewed after 9-11, they invariably spoke about how frightening it was not to be able to reach their loved ones immediately. Immediately? Before cell phones there was no immediacy to telephone communications. You called the person. They were certain not to be at home. You left a message on the answering machine. If you did not hear back in a couple of days, you figured the person had heard the message but forgot to return the call. So you called again. But in the early 21st century, we were thrown into a panic if we could not communicate instantly.

It should be fairly obvious that lack of instant communications was not inherently more dangerous today than it was ten years ago. Yet in 2004 people panicked if they

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couldn't speak to each other. People used cell phones to talk to each other on airplanes, in public restrooms, while shopping, and even while driving. Half the people in the country seemed to have their cell phones permanently jammed into their ears. The mystery to me was what they found to talk about all the time. The state of panic people experienced when disconnected was an artificial result of a technological change.

Do you get it? The technology made us crazy. And we did not know it was happening to us.

Where was I? Oh, the interrogation room. Schmidt sat across from me. Broder stood to one side. The lights were bright and I was stinking in my own sweat. The questions were coming rapid-fire. The chair was hard. I had to urinate, but I was not going to ask to go yet. I would try to tough it out. After all, we had only been in the room five minutes.

“How do you know Jack Wilson?”

“Never met him.” Cool under pressure, that's me.

“Why did you kill him?”

“Didn't kill nobody.” Started to crack at this point.

“Then how do you explain his ID being in

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your trash?”

“Can I go to the bathroom now?”

“NO!” Schmidt leaned across the table with a sickening smile. “Now, Mr. Schumacher, why don’t you make it easy on yourself? Just tell us what happened. Maybe this guy was a burglar. You surprised him in the house, there was a fight, you threw him off the deck, then left him there hoping no one would notice.” After she heard what she just said, she frowned. Obviously, it did not sound quite right even to Detective Schmidt.

The door opened and a guy in a nice suit stepped in. “Officer Broder” he said. “May I have a word with you?” Broder got up.

“Wait!” I was getting upset now. “You aren’t going to leave me in here alone with her, are you?”

Broder gave me a funny look.

I didn’t want him to think I was a wimp. “That’s okay. I can take it. Go ahead. Take your time.”

He left and Schmidt glowered at me. She, obviously, was uncertain about what was happening out in the hallway. Fortunately, we did not have long to wait because the suspense was killing us both.

Broder was back in five minutes and he

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said the magic words. “You can go now. But we may have more questions later, so don’t leave town.”

“That’s great. Where’s the men’s room?”

After taking care of the necessities, I wandered out of the building wondering where the nearest bar might be. A car screeched to a stop right in front of me. It was Betty.

“What’s going on around here?” She was really cranked.

“Heck if I know,” was all I could think of to say.

She took me home. Fortunately, there was beer in the fridge.

CHAPTER 5. COCKTAILS AT THE COUNTRY CLUB

That evening I was sitting on the deck, smoking my pipe. A Miller High Life was resting comfortably in my stomach and a pad of notepaper was in my hand. My best thinking happened with a pipe in my hand and some paper for taking notes. I used a mechanical pencil to jot down stray thoughts. A pen would work but not as well.

The time had come to review events. Betty had asked what was going on. It was a good question. Here is what I had written down.

Friday p.m. – returned from Texas.

Saturday a.m. – dead man below deck.

Saturday p.m. – police station (wallet in trash).

It was a short list. The emotional impact of those events did not come through. I had the feeling that events were building up to some kind of cataclysm. What, really, was going on?

I started to write down more specific questions.

1. Who was the dead guy?

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2. Who killed him and why?
3. Why was he under my deck?
4. Why was his wallet in my trash?
5. Why did the police let me go?

That last question was a good one. Why did they let me go? The evidence, though circumstantial, seemed to point right at me, provided I was an idiot. After all, it would not have been very smart to kill the guy then leave him right under my own deck. On the other hand, for all the cops knew, I could be crazy or stupid or even both. Some folks had certainly thought so in the past. But since I was writing the list and I knew I was not guilty, my alleged craziness or stupidity was irrelevant.

“Hello up there!”

Bob Johnson was down on the sidewalk, looking up at me. Bob was a nice young fellow. He sold us the condo. As far as I could tell, he was one of the owners of the development company. The building we were in was an eight-plex. Three more eight-plexes were planned to fill out a square that would contain 32 units. Bob and his partners would clear a tidy sum when the rest were sold.

And that was not the whole story, either. Our complex was at the edge of town. Most of the housing out there was relatively new at the

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time. Acre after acre of new homes, duplexes, and apartment buildings was spreading to the south of us. Demand for housing, Betty and I theorized, was coming from people who were commuting into Madison. If a couple had jobs in Madison and Milwaukee, Fort Atkinson was a central location. Property was cheaper in Fort than it would be in either city. One spouse could jump on the interstate headed west and the other could head east.

“I hear you had some excitement around here,” Bob said.

“Yup. Just a little.”

“Yah, if a dead body is ‘just a little’.” I didn’t answer, so he went on. “That’s really too bad. You guys are new in town and something like this has to happen.”

He had a point. “Not exactly like the Welcome Wagon, is it?” he asked.

“Meat wagon is more like it.”

“Is everything cleared up ok? Are the police going to leave you alone now?”

“Guess so. They took me down to the station today, but then decided to throw me back. Too little to eat, I guess.”

Bob chuckled. “You guys must be pretty shook. Tell you what, the company has reservations out at the Fort Atkinson Country

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Club for tonight at seven. Why don't you let us bring you as our guests? Have a couple of steaks and relax."

That sounded pretty good. "Let me ask Betty. Steak would just about hit the spot."

Bob was ready to move on to his next task. He was an energetic guy. "Tell you what, we will just plan on seeing you there. Hope you can make it." He turned to go then turned back. "Oh, our senior partner, Moody Jorgenson, especially was hoping you guys could make it. He would like to make up for the poor hospitality you have gotten so far." Then with a wave, he was off and running to the next money making opportunity. Those business guys are something else.

My pipe was out, so it was a good time to go ask Betty about dinner. She was sitting on the bed, reading. When I walked into the bedroom, she looked up with a frown.

"I had a strange dream last night."

Uh oh.

"I dreamed about a first aid box. There was a big billboard in my dream with a picture of a first aid kit."

"Really?"

"What do you think it means?"

"Maybe it means you're feeling anxious."

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“Why would I be feeling anxious?”

“Because you are a Nervous Nellie.”

“No, I am not!”

“Yes, you are.”

“Am not!”

“Are too.”

“I think it means there is going to be an accident. I think it means I should go out and buy a first aid kit.”

“Okay, buy a first aid kit. By the way, Bob Johnson invited us out to the Country Club for dinner. His company has a table and they wanted to be nice since I nearly got the electric chair today.”

She considered this. “We don’t have any food in the house.” She thought some more. “I could wear my new shoes.”

“What new shoes?”

“Well, you asked me to buy you a bicycle at the estate sale, but I found some shoes instead. They are really nice. You will enjoy seeing me in them. They’re red and they have heels.” She jumped off the bed and whipped open a shoe box to reveal a bright red pair of suede shoes with one-inch heels.

“Those will kill your feet,” I observed.

“Sometimes a woman has to suffer to make her man happy,” she said sadly.

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Off we went to the Country Club after looking up the address in the telephone book and consulting the city map. As you might expect, it was an impressive building sitting on the edge of what looked like a pretty nice course. Too nice for me to play. I was a duffer, myself. Duffers should not waste money on good courses.

Jorgenson and Johnson were already there when we arrived. Bob introduced us to Jorgenson, who was a beefy guy with a big smile and a loud laugh. He welcomed us like long lost cousins, called the waitress for a round of drinks, cracked a few jokes, and generally started the evening off on a warm and friendly footing.

The steak was good and the beer was welcome, also. I had already consumed one back at the condo, so the one I had at the Club kind of went to my head. Alcohol was disinhibiting which in me resulted in a tendency to be mouthy. My opinions, never far from the surface, would start rising to the top like soap bubbles. When those bubbles burst into a conversation, sometimes they caused a bit of a disturbance. I was not sure why; people should be able to enjoy a bit of controversy without getting mad.

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Unfortunately, once I got going on politics or religion, a lot of folks got downright hostile.

In this case, I started talking about regulations that prevented your average citizen from driving any kind of inexpensive homemade vehicle that he could dream up. That led me to several related topics, culminating in a call for the elimination of the federal income tax. I was warmed up at this point and started on my lecture about how much money the government wasted on unnecessary tomfoolery, such as high school teachers. Just give the kids a box of computer programs and send them home for Pete's sake. Once a kid could read and write, he could teach himself anyway. "I don't remember any teacher ever teaching me anything," I asserted loudly. "I just learned it by reading the textbook."

At this point people all around the room were looking at me. Woops. One thing I had learned was that you can attack a lot of sacred cows, but if you go after the school system, you are going to make a lot of people really mad. Teachers worked their tails off, they didn't get paid much, and they had to put up with parents who thought their kids were smarter than they really were. It was a tough

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job. So they got mad if you said they were inefficient.

But what really made them mad was if you said teens didn't need the social interaction they learned at school. Why this upset them so much was a mystery to me. But the fact was, and it was a fact I had just pointed out at length, most of the bad habits teens picked up they learned from other kids. Spiked hair, tattoos, pierced body parts, drugs, and pregnancy all resulted from interaction with other kids. The obvious solution was to keep them away from each other.

Then what would we need the teachers for? They could organize and manage internet courses. Of course, this would require smarter teachers. Ouch. This was usually where somebody threw something at me.

Finally I shut up. All eyes stared at me for a moment, then returned to their meals. I figured my name was mud and our hosts were feeling humiliated. We would never be allowed into the Country Club again.

But Jorgenson's smile was a mile wide. "Ed," he said, "You have some fascinating ideas. We are going to have to get together and have some serious conversations. Sometime soon." Then he called for the check.

CHAPTER 6. MY COUNTRY WANTS ME

The next morning was a Sunday, so we went to church. We were Presbyterians in Texas, but since Betty grew up Lutheran, we decided to be Lutherans in Wisconsin. We preferred a traditional service backed by liberal theology, so the Irish Lutheran church was just right for us.

Betty wore her denim skirt and one of my old shirts with the sleeves turned up at the ends. I wore a black blazer with khaki work pants and a bolo. This made me the most dressed up fellow in the sanctuary. The other guys were coatless and wore open-necked shirts. It was a pretty casual group. Most of the parishioners were even more casual; they did not show up at all. We had visited this place three times now and it was never even half full. Even so, they had three pastors running the service. One was a comedian, one might have been senile, and the third wanted to hug all the

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women.

“How can they afford to have three pastors?” Betty wondered aloud.

“Hopefully, they aren’t paying the old guy. He doesn’t seem to be all there. And the masher probably would be willing to work just for the feels.”

Lutherans were different from Presbyterians. Both groups were mainline protestant, of course, but the Lutherans were close cousins to the Catholics. Betty didn’t like it when I said that, but it seemed true to me. It was amazing to me that during the Reformation Lutherans and Catholics went around killing each other. After all, they were theologically pretty close together. They agreed on about everything except the old guy in the big hat in Italy. And, frankly, it seemed to me that even the Catholics ignored him most of the time.

I could afford to be objective about it since my ancestors were Anabaptists. The Anabaptists were pacifists, so both the Catholics and Lutherans could kill them without too much trouble. They deserved killing apparently because they thought you should only be baptized once as an adult. That way you might understand what you were

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signing up for which, as any marketing expert could tell you, was bad for business.

It seemed to me that Anabaptists had to learn to be good at running away. If they could not fight back and everyone wanted to kill them, then they must have slipped out of a lot of back doors. Otherwise, they would have all died and I would not be writing this book.

Anabaptists must have been naturally cantankerous. Otherwise, they would not have chosen to be on the side that was guaranteed to lose every time. The natural selection process would have favored those who were smart enough to leave town before they were drowned by the authorities. All this could explain why my natural opinionated stubbornness was counterbalanced by a healthy survival instinct. It was bred into me.

The Lutheran church service had nice music that sounded as if it was written for a harpsichord. They also had a standardized service that repetitively used the same prayers and other liturgy from one Sunday to the next. This was a good plan since human failings and spiritual problems tended to repeat themselves as well. Lutheran pastors were weak on sermons, but all were good singers. Pastors who could not sing must have joined another

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denomination. Maybe this was why pastors in the fundamentalist churches always seemed so angry; they wanted to be Lutherans but weren't allowed because they couldn't sing.

Of course, you could find a Lutheran church that was fundamentalist if that was what you wanted. The Missouri Synod was pretty hard core as were the Norwegian Lutheran and the Wisconsin Synod. Farther south, a small town may have ten denominations of churches within its boundaries. In Wisconsin, a town of the same size would have ten varieties of Lutherans. And one Catholic church which, as I wrote earlier, was pretty much the same thing except for paying lip service to that guy in the Vatican.

You might be wondering why I am spending so much time on churches in this chapter. Don't worry. It will prove to be quite relevant later on.

The service was relaxing and brought us all a sense of peace as it was designed to do. In fact, it was so relaxing that one of the parishioners fainted during his kid's baptism. That happens when you stand up too fast after falling asleep in church. They just propped him up in a pew and went on with it. The rest of us

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appreciated the drama since we were getting a little dozy as well.

After the service, we chatted with Betty's cousin Andrew for a few moments on the sidewalk outside of the church. It was a nice cool morning with a gentle breeze. Andrew was a nice guy who did some kind of investigative work for state government. We made plans to look for each other at the concert in the park that was scheduled for Monday evening.

Betty and I drove back to the condo, then I went into the den for a little work. After checking for email messages, it was time to do a little computing. Some colleagues had asked for a report on a survey we had done, so it was time to run the basic descriptive statistics which then were imported into a word processing file. The output did not look quite right for a nice report, so I started editing. Move this, delete that. 'Type 'p=.0000'. Copy, paste, delete, type. Copy, paste, delete, type, faster and faster. I was going to make a mistake if I did not slow down. Copy, paste, delete, type. My eyes were tired and I was filled with a nervous tension. Copy, paste, delete, type. I had to quit. Just a little more. Had to stop. Almost done.

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I had to physically tear myself away from the computer. Staggering, I ran out of the den. In the living room, I dropped for twenty-five pushups. When I got up, my face was hot and I was still jittery.

So I set out for my daily walk. The compulsion to keep at the repetitive motion on the computer had never before been this bad. Other times, I just kept going until I was too tired to stop which was no later than six in the evening. That was not a big problem. I have known guys who didn't stop computing all night long, eventually collapsing in their offices onto the floor. Then they would go out and get a big cup of coffee and start again. Compared to that, my little bout of compulsiveness was peanuts.

A walk around a small town in the Midwest was a good cure for almost anything. Fort Atkinson was like most such towns, but it was also unique in several ways. Take, for example, the Milk Shrine. You might think that having a Milk Shrine meant that the locals worshipped dairy cows like some sort of strange Hindu cult. However, reality was even stranger.

Way back when, one of the early governors

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of the state of Wisconsin was a fellow by the name of Hoard. Governor Hoard thought that the schools should teach in English rather than German. This argument was reminiscent of contemporary concerns about Spanish in the public schools. Anyway, the voters kicked him out of office for being anti-German. (Lesson for politicians who insist on language purity in the public schools—the growing Hispanic population might get even with you in the end.)

Ex-Governor Hoard started a newspaper in Fort Atkinson. He was a big believer in the dairy farm and promoted dairy farming constantly in his newspaper. Not surprisingly, the Milk Shrine, which was really a museum, contained a lot of stuff about Mr. Hoard.

Anyway, you walked into the Shrine expecting to find an altar, then you noticed it was a museum. You also noticed a lot of propaganda about how great the family farm was. I was okay with that point of view, being a bit of a populist myself. For the Shrine to promote farmers was kind of nice in a state like Wisconsin.

But wait, the story is not over yet. After you made it through most of the display, you started to realize that a lot of what you were

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seeing had to do with the mechanization of modern agriculture; machinery that no small independent farmer could hope to buy. If he did, he would not be a small farmer any more.

By the time you got to the end of the show, the sponsorship of the Shrine had become evident. It was Big Agriculture all the way. What appeared to be idealistic promotion of the small dairy farmer was actually heavy-handed lobbying by large corporations.

What did this tell us about Fort Atkinson in particular and the state of Wisconsin in general? It told me that the core values of the general public lie in populism, but the insidious forces of financial consolidation were quietly transforming the economy in ways the average person did not like. At his core, the average guy knew what had happened and it made him cynical and embittered. But he did not know what to do about it, except perhaps to attend county fairs and try to enjoy the best of small town life for as long as it lasted. After all, we could not control or predict in what ways the big corporations would choose to change it.

Twenty-five minutes after I started my walk, I was in McDonald's, resting and drinking a well-earned Diet Coke. When Betty came with me, it took quite a bit longer to get

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to McDonald's. She was a slow walker. Besides, this day I was cranked up by my computer work.

A smiling fellow in a nice suit slid into the seat opposite me. "Mind if I sit down?" Very polite, but he was already sitting which spoiled the effect.

"Sure. I was just leaving anyway."

"My name is Will Johnson," he said sticking his hand out. (The reader will note that our developer who was introduced earlier also was named Johnson. That coincidence has absolutely no significance to this story, so you can ignore it. Johnsons are all over the place in Wisconsin.)

For Will Johnson to try to shake hands was a little unusual. If I had been back in Texas, I would not have taken notice because people were very friendly there. They shook hands on any occasion and always said hello when they saw each other or even when they saw strangers. I think it was a Baptist thing. Of course, they also got quite angry very easily and would not hesitate to pull out a concealed handgun and shoot you if you got out of line. They seemed to believe this was necessary because of the high crime rate by which they meant Mexicans. Mexicans carried knives and

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stabbed each other all the time over women the Anglo Texan thought. The Anglos carried guns so they could defend themselves against the Mexicans. It was ridiculous, of course. Mexican-Americans were very nice, polite, kind, and considerate people, except maybe outside of a Gentlemen's Club at one in the morning. People could get hurt under those circumstances. But there was no good reason to be there anyway, so who cared?

People in Wisconsin were less likely to shake hands, say hello, or even look you in the eye. This was how they showed courtesy; they didn't want to intrude. So when Johnson introduced himself, I knew he was selling something.

"Ed Schumacher. Nice ta meetcha". There was a certain way to exchange the ceremonial greeting, including correct pronunciation of words. I was working on blending in.

"How's it goin'," he asked with a smile.

"Just fine. Nice weather for a walk, don'cha know."

"Yah. That's for sure."

It was my turn, but I couldn't remember what came next, so I just let an awkward silence develop. After a moment, I chugged down my soda and stood up.

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“Well, I guess I better get back to it,” I said.

“Mind if I walk along?” This guy definitely wanted something. But I didn’t really want a new friend.

“Well, I’m getting my exercise. Can’t mess around.”

Johnson’s demeanor became a little more serious, a little less friendly. “This will only take a minute. Maybe we can have a chat while you walk.”

This guy was official. Police, no doubt. Always one to support law and order, I didn’t argue with him. So out we went.

I headed in the direction of the hardware store where I had unfinished business. The way to get there from McDonald’s was down an alley behind the store. This was out of the way of prying eyes and gave Johnson a chance to make his pitch.

“What can I do for you?” I asked.

“Maybe I can do something for you. I bet you have a few unanswered questions about the police matter over at your place.”

“Yup.”

He waited for me to reel out my unanswered questions, but I just looked at him, so he went on with his line.

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“Mr. Schumacher, the police made a mistake with you, but it really wasn’t their fault. You were set up.”

“Set up? How so?”

“Saturday morning at about six somebody called the police and reported the body. The tipster implied you had a fight with the dead man the night before.”

“No kidding?” I was shocked. And angry. How are you supposed to defend yourself against false accusations delivered anonymously?

“Calm down,” Johnson said. “We know you didn’t do it.”

Taking a deep breath, I relaxed a little. “Okay, that’s good. How do you know?”

“Because you have just about the best alibi I have ever run across in twenty years of law enforcement.”

“I do?” I was feeling pretty smug about being special until it occurred to me that being in bed with my wife was not all that strong as alibis went.

“Yes sir. You see, the medical examiner placed the time of death as being Thursday night. You were not even in town. We traced your credit card expenditures to a motel outside of Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. We

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called the place and they were able to give an accurate description of you with no trouble at all.”

He suppressed a grin. “The manager seemed to be a little upset with you. Something about a very bad smell being left in the room you rented. I wouldn’t recommend going back there if you can help it.”

Oh, the incident with the squirting cat. “That’s a big relief,” I said. “Wait a minute. Are you saying that the dead guy was under my deck from Thursday night until Saturday morning?”

“That’s correct.”

“You mean, I not only didn’t notice him Saturday morning, I also didn’t notice him when we got back in town Friday evening?”

“That’s correct.” He gave me a break. “Well, I guess there was no reason to look under the deck.”

Maybe not, but I had walked right past the spot when I went out to check the mail Friday evening. Since the authorities had a lot on their minds and shouldn’t be burdened with unnecessary information, I did not bother to mention the business about the mailbox. I was sure the body had been there in its usual spot. I just was not paying attention, as usual.

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“Thanks for sharing this information. Your buddies, the detectives, didn’t tell me anything except not to leave town. Which raises an interesting question: why are you telling me about this now? Not that I don’t appreciate it.”

“Mr. Schumacher, this is a little awkward, but please hear me out. First of all, I am not with the local police. I am a Secret Service agent.” He let that sink in for a moment.

“We have a problem. Word has reached us that an assassination attempt will be directed at the Democratic presidential nominee, John Kerry, within the next week. We traced the information to Fort Atkinson.” I was completely lost. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Mr. Schumacher, have you ever heard of a militia group called the Fist of God?”

“No. Who the heck are they?”

“They are the same kind of people who blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City.” Johnson could not repress a look of anger. With an effort, he smoothed his features and got back to business. “The only terrorist group in this area is the Fist of God, so they are probably the ones who are planning the assassination attempt.”

“What good does it do them to kill John

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Kerry?”

“This group is very right wing. They think the federal government was taken over by communists a long time ago and that state governments are almost as bad. They consider themselves to be true patriots because they want to restore the government to the principles that it started with. Or at least, they want to change the government to the way they would like to believe it originally operated. That means a lot fewer laws, less government involvement in education, no income taxes, no environmental protection laws, and that sort of thing. And, of course, they are radical fundamentalists when it comes to religion.”

“Militant Libertarian fundamentalists?”

“Sort of, except that a lot of Libertarians are in the ACLU. These Fist of God guys don’t like lawyers.”

“That’s pretty weird. But what does it have to do with me?”

“The Fist of God is the action arm of a movement. Basically, they provide the foot soldiers who are willing to get killed for the cause. But they don’t have a lot of education, they don’t have high paying jobs, and most of them are just not too bright. Organizing terrorist campaigns takes money. You have to

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arrange travel, purchase guns and explosives, buy vehicles. These guys don't have any money, so somebody is financing them."

At this point, Johnson took a breath, looking at me appraisingly. "We need to find out who is financing the Fist of God, so we can shut them down." He put his hand on my shoulder. "You can help us with that. Mr. Schumacher, your country needs your help."

Well, of course. It was about time they recognized it. "How can I help? I don't know any of these people."

"But you do, Mr. Schumacher, you do. And they are very impressed with you. If you play your cards right, you might be asked to join them."

"This is nuts. I don't support any militias. Hell, I'm practically a socialist! Why would they think I would join them?"

"Because you had a nice conversation at the Country Club last night. You sounded off about government regulations and generally came off as a right-wing nut case."

This hit a little too close to home. "Well, maybe I did get carried away a little."

Johnson smiled indulgently. "We all do once in a while. In this case, it works to our advantage. Jorgenson is involved somehow

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with the flow of money into the Fist of God. We need you to make nice with them, gain their confidence. You're a smart guy; you can do it. Just tell them you supported Pat Buchanan."

"I did not support Buchanan!"

"You support the Reform Party."

"That's Ross Perot's party! Buchanan's people hijacked the party during the last election. I would never support Buchanan!"

"Calm down, Ed. I know that you know that, but Jorgenson doesn't know that. You can let him think you like Buchanan, can't you?"

This was going to be harder than it had first appeared. Pretend to like Pat Buchanan? Ouch!

"We need you to meet with Jorgenson when he asks you out for that little chat he wants to have with you. Go along with him. Find out what you can. But be cautious. The Fist of God is a dangerous group."

We agreed that Johnson would meet me at McDonald's at one p.m. every day for the next week to check on progress. How was I to know what a mess this would get me into? After all, when your country needed you, you really had a duty to respond. And respond I

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did in my own special way. Maybe that was the problem. Johnson really didn't know who he was dealing with. My wife says I am a little nutty. Of course, she really shouldn't talk. People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, right?

CHAPTER 7. ENTER THE MILITIA

When I got back to the condo, I checked the mail. A slip of paper was in the box telling me that I had a package to retrieve from the post office. By this time, Betty was back from lunch with her cousin, so we jumped in the car and set off for the post office.

The package was a cardboard box about the size of a suitcase. It was addressed to me. We jumped back in the car and headed home.

“Aren’t you going to tell me what that is?” Betty asked.

“What what is?”

“The package.”

“Oh that. No big deal.”

“You’re not going to tell me?”

She was looking pitiful, so I relented. “Look, we will be home in a minute and I’ll open it. Then you’ll see.”

Five minutes later I was running my pocket knife down the seam that closed the box. Out came my pride and joy: a bicycle motor. It was

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beautiful.

“What is it?” Betty asked.

“It’s a motor for a bicycle. I ordered it off the internet.”

“You don’t have a bicycle.”

“Yes I do. I went across the road to Goodwill and got one this afternoon on the way back from my walk. It’s down in the garage.”

Installing the motor was easy, even for a guy like me who had no mechanical aptitude. The motor was electric and would take me up to 20 miles per hour for 25 miles. Pretty cool. It assisted the pedals rather than replaced them, so I could get my exercise while riding without being in danger of having to pedal up a hill that was too steep for me. Any hill would be too steep for me.

Betty didn’t like it. “You’ll kill yourself.”

“Any kid can ride something like this!”

“You’re not a kid.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But I am worried about it. That proves it’s dangerous.” Yeah, right.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Then why am I worried about it?”

“Because you are a Worry Wart.”

“Am not!”

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“Are too.”

“Am not!”

“I’m going for spin. See you later.”

Later that evening as I was resting on the deck, smoking my pipe, and considering my new assignment, a voice called up from below.

“Hello up there!” It was Jorgenson.

“Hey,” I replied.

“Mind if I come up?”

“Nope. Door’s unlocked. Come on in.”

We met at the top of the stairs. “Care for a beer?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said with a grateful grin.

We cracked open a couple of Millers and made ourselves comfortable in the wicker chairs on the deck.

“How’s it goin’?” I asked him.

Jorgenson stretched his legs out in front of him and settled into the chair. He took a long swallow from his bottle before answering me.

“Good. Busy.” He sighed. “You would not believe how much hassle the government puts you through to run a business these days.”

“Bureaucracy, eh?”

“Bureaucracy, taxes, inspections, fees, accountants, lawyers, delays. If it’s not one

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thing, it's another. It's amazing that anybody can make any money any more."

He sighed again. "Well, that's my problem." He switched gears. "Bob tells me you and Betty are college professors. Texas Tech, isn't it?"

"Yup. We have summers off and Betty has family in Wisconsin, so we decided this should be where we locate our summer home. It's too hot in Texas in the summer."

"Makes sense to me. You're liking it okay, I hope?"

"We like it a lot. Nice town. And we really like our condo. You guys did a nice job."

"Thanks. We put a lot of thought into it. By the way, a fella moved into the unit behind yours. Older guy. Met him yet?"

"Nope. I should go around and say hi."

"Do that. We want everybody to get along." Jorgenson hesitated.

"What do you teach at Texas Tech?" he asked.

"Not much teaching. Mostly I do research. Statistical analysis of surveys."

"That's pretty impressive. Never did understand statistics myself. More of a deal maker, I guess. But we occasionally need some help understanding our data. Do you know

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anything about market research?”

“Marketing and epidemiology are a lot alike. In epidemiology we study whether certain groups in the community have worse health or different behaviors. Marketers study market segments. It’s pretty much the same idea, using similar statistical methods.”

Jorgenson leaned forward. “Maybe we could help each other,” he said seriously. “Our business is expanding faster than we can keep up with it. In addition to this complex, we have projects going on all over the area. We operate with a lot of credit. If we make a wrong move, we could get overextended. For example, look at this development. Just two units sold. Six empty in this building. The second building is going up soon. If we get ahead of ourselves, we could be in trouble. Some forecasting could help.”

“I couldn’t promise accuracy. No crystal balls in my closet.”

“No, no, of course not. But I would sleep better if I had some numbers that said we were headed in the right direction. If you could take an objective look at our data, you might save us from making a mistake.”

“Be happy to give it a shot. What kind of arrangement were you thinking of?”

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“Oh, a retainer would be best for us. Can’t predict how much work we would throw your way, so I would like to just keep you on the payroll in case we need you.”

He hesitated. “I will have to think about how much I can offer you.” He leaned back again. “Well, that’s enough business. Let’s talk politics. Did you really mean those things you were saying at the Club?”

Now we were getting down to the real business he was concerned about. I tried not to look nervous. “Sure I did. We waste a lot of money in this country. Tax dollars. The average person would be better off if we cut out a lot of the baloney.”

“Darn right,” he said enthusiastically. “Did you see some of the dumb ideas the Democrats plan to talk about at their convention this week? Those guys promise everything to everybody. And who is going to pay for it? I can tell you who. Me and you.” He was steamed.

“Can’t argue with that. Of course, the Republicans aren’t much better. Bush has run up the deficit in nothing flat.”

Jorgenson groaned. “Ain’t that the truth. Sometimes I wonder what the hell he thinks he’s doing.” He hesitated then said, “Some of

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us would like to turn the system in a different direction. A direction that lets the business man do what he does best without a lot of hassles. Business is what makes America great. But we are going to kill the business climate if we keep going this way.”

Now was my chance to be helpful. “It isn’t just opportunities to make a profit that are at stake from my point of view. It’s quality of life. Wouldn’t it be great if everybody with energy and a brain could be his own boss, live his life the way he wants, and have enough left to save up for a rainy day? Wouldn’t it be great if we didn’t have to pay \$25,000 for a car, if every kid didn’t need a college education just to do office work, and if retired people didn’t have to pay taxes on the money they earn off their pensions?”

Jorgenson loved it. “Damn right,” he said. “Damn right.”

He stood up a happier man. “Well, I guess we can’t solve all the world’s problems right now. Have to get on with making a living, putting bread on the table.” He turned to go. “You know, a group of us likes to meet in the bar at the Club every now and then to grouse about all this stuff. Would you like to join us some time?”

ENTER THE MILITIA

“Be happy to. That would be fun. Just tell me when.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Bingo.

After Jorgenson left, Betty and I settled in for the evening. As she flipped through the television schedule, she mentioned a few shows that looked interesting. “BBC has something called ‘The Village.’ Have you ever heard of that?”

“Sure. Old reruns. Patrick McGoohan. He’s a spy that has been captured by some unidentified bad guys.”

“Never heard of it. What else was McGoohan in?”

“Remember ‘Secret Agent Man’? He was in that. It was a good show. He was a spy in that, too.”

“‘Secret Agent Man’? I remember the song, but I didn’t know there was a television series.” She looked up quizzically. “Hey, you were singing that song this afternoon.”

“Me?”

“Sure, you were dancing around the living room singing Secret Agent Man.”

“Not me. Must have been somebody else.”

CHAPTER 8. MONEY GROWS ON TREES

The weather on Monday morning was nice as usual. After showering and putting the coffee on, I traipsed down to the convenience store to pick up the paper and bananas. When I got back to the condo, I took a quick peek under the deck to make sure no surprises had been deposited there by unknown benefactors. It was mercifully clear of corpses.

Betty and I read the newspaper, she still in bed and I in my chair. The Democratic Convention was scheduled to begin that evening in Boston. The Republicans were saying that the whole show was just a show. Which, of course, it was, as would be the Republican Convention in September.

The story about an unidentified dead fellow in Fort Atkinson still had not appeared in the paper. It was old news by now, so my guess was that it would not be reported in the Milwaukee paper at all. The slim chance that a reporter would call me for an interview had

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evaporated. Fifteen minutes of fame was allocated to us all. This must not have been the event that would give me my quarter hour.

The paper finished, I retired to the den for some much needed computing time. This time the ghost in the machine did not attempt demonic possession of my spirit, so it was every bit as relaxing as it should have been. My latest survey was giving up its secrets without too much difficulty. After learning that people who have a mentally ill family member are at greater risk of suffering from frequent mental distress themselves, I declared victory and quit.

It was about noon and I was eager to check in with my personal secret service agent. Hopping on my newly motorized bicycle, I zipped over to McDonald's for a little discreet lurking. Agent Johnson did not appear. After fifteen minutes (patience had never been my strong suit), I motored home. Of course, there was some pedaling involved but not much.

Munching on a granola bar and slurping a Diet Coke, my brain began turning over the situation as it stood at the moment. The questions seemed to be these:

1. Was Jorgenson really the financier for the Fist of God?
2. How could I worm my way into his

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confidence enough to find out?

3. How could I accomplish number two without being detected as a spy?

4. What would happen to me if I was caught? This one did not bear thinking about. At this point another question occurred to me.

5. Why was Johnson listening in on my conversation at the Country Club with Jorgenson before I had agreed to spy for him? The answer to that question seemed obvious: Jorgenson was under surveillance and my presence was just fortuitous for him. But, frankly, I did not much like the idea that someone was listening to what I had to say without getting my permission first.

6. Was there any connection between the dead guy being under my deck and the Fist of God investigation? The answer to this one appeared to be 'no,' but the chances of two very odd circumstances happening to me in the same week were slim. After all, my life up to this point had been very quiet and uneventful. No connection between the two events was evident, but I had a nagging feeling that something had to tie them together.

At this point, I ran out of questions. And I definitely was short on answers. With a sigh, I returned to the computer for a chore that was

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no fun at all: online banking. It was something that you just had to do once in a while, like cleaning the toilet. Since our bills were going to our address in Texas, it was prudent of me to check my bank balance online periodically and to occasionally fire off payments for utilities and the like.

Doing the little chores life assigned us on schedule instead of putting them off was a sign of virtue and responsibility I had always felt. Of course, the people I would deride as procrastinators might just say that I was overly compulsive. In this case (as in so many others), my point of view on this issue was proven to be correct because a little surprise was waiting for me in the computer: an unexpected and unexplained deposit had appeared in my checking account. It could have been a deposit that I had forgotten to record, one that I had completely lost from my memory in regard to where the money came from and what it was for. After all, forgetfulness had always been part of my nature. On the other hand, even I would have trouble forgetting \$100,000. Someone had deposited 100K in my bank account. For some reason, this struck me as odd. I thought about mentioning it to Betty, but she would just have said there was

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something dangerous about receiving 100K for no reason. She would probably want me to report it to somebody. And she would expect me to figure out to whom I should report the windfall. This was too difficult to deal with and no reason for urgency presented itself, so I just logged off and went on about my business. I could tell her about it later when I had more information. No need to worry the poor woman. Thinking of my dear wife, I knew just what would make her happy.

“Betty!”

“Yes?”

“Let’s go over to Culver’s and get some ice cream?”

Silence. A moment later she was standing in the doorway. “Did you just say you want to walk to Culver’s for some ice cream?”

“Yup. Sound good to you?”

“Always. But what about your diet? You never want to break your diet.”

“Oh, we’ve been pretty good lately. We deserve a treat.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, nothing. Just feeling rich at the moment.”

So off we went for ice cream.

CHAPTER 9. CONCERT IN THE PARK

That night a couple of hundred people were gathered around the bandstand. The tubas, the horns, and the various other instruments along with their players were already in place when we arrived. We saw Betty's cousin Andrew leaning against a tree, so Betty and I dragged our folding chairs in his direction.

“Hey, Andrew. How's it goin'?”

“Just holding up this tree to make sure it doesn't fall down.”

“You're doin' a fine job. It's not even lookin' wobbly.”

As we settled in for the show, Betty and Andrew exchanged small talk about relatives, some of whom were throwing guilt trips her way about not visiting them yet. We were living in Wisconsin now, why hadn't we come to see them? The relatives sent these guilt trip messages through Andrew. He was the nearest family member and so it fell on him to pass the guilt on to Betty. It sounded a bit convoluted

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to me, but I was not one who could judge these things. Usually, when someone threw a guilt trip at me, I didn't even notice.

The concert was pleasant. The quality of the music was a little uneven, but when they got to the Army and Marine anthems the band did an excellent job. John Phillip Sousa's work was delivered with verve. You could tell the band had practiced marching music quite a bit.

By the time we were allowed an intermission, it had become apparent to me that the audience could be broken into several distinct groups. First, we had retired people. This was the largest group. They must have arrived first because their folding chairs were clustered closest to the bandstand.

The next largest group was the kids, who were busy playing on the swings and jungle gym. They yelled and had a good time until a stern-looking woman from group A came over to shush them.

The third largest group, oddly enough, was the bicyclists. At least twenty people clad in spandex were scattered around, their bikes on the ground next to them. These people did not have folding chairs, instead they just sat on the grassy turf. Personally, I would have been reluctant to do that. Chiggers leave a nasty bite

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when they get their teeth into me. While I have never been the recipient of a chigger bite in the butt, I would be reluctant to take the risk.

The cyclists were scattered between our tree and the old folks. They chatted among themselves in a desultory way during the intermission. Betty, Andrew, and I did, also.

Andrew had a bone to pick with us. "Hey, you guys didn't tell me about the excitement you had over at your place."

"Excitement? Oh, you mean the dead guy."

"Yes, I mean the dead guy. That's big news. Why didn't you call me? All the relatives will want to hear about it."

"Nothing to tell. Dead man below deck. End of story."

"That can't be all of it," Andrew protested.

"Yep. Except they took me downtown for the third degree. Then they let me go."

"That must have been pretty scary. Did they tell you what it was all about?"

"Nope."

"Well, why did they let you go? You look pretty guilty to me." What a jokester.

"They let me go because I didn't do it. In fact, I couldn't have done it because the guy was killed on Thursday when we were still

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driving up here from Texas.”

Betty looked over. “How did you find that out?” Damn. She never misses a trick.

“Andrew, tell me this,” I blustered on. “What possible reason could there be for a murder in Fort Atkinson? I mean, why would somebody leave a body lying around in plain site?”

“I don’t know. We don’t have many murders around here. A suicide now and then is all we get and that is usually a cop doing himself in.”

“Maybe it was politics?” I asked.

Andrew looked at me like I was from Mars. “Politics? We don’t get that excited about politics.” He thought for moment. “Most likely, it was some drug deal out of Milwaukee. Or Chicago. You know how those city people are. If they didn’t have money, we wouldn’t even let ‘em get off the highway at Fort Atkinson.”

“What’s their money have to do with it? Are you saying it’s okay to do business with drug dealers?”

“Well, it’s okay to sell them ice cream.”

The band started up again, so we turned eyes front. I am afraid I dozed off soon after that.

CHAPTER 10. THE OLD GUY AT THE BURGER JOINT

It was raining on Tuesday morning, so I drove to the convenience store. The Democratic convention was still the big news item. The nomination was locked up by John Kerry, so the whole thing was theater. Even so, the press seemed to think it was important for reasons that escaped me.

My computing that morning focused on cancer. Dr. Lee, an oncologist, was interested in why some people with terminal cancer chose not to be resuscitated while others preferred that everything possible be done for them. My opinion was that when you were a goner, you might as well check out. Interestingly, our survey data showed that the closer to death the patients were, the more likely they were to want heroic efforts to keep them around. Maybe my own attitude would change if I was at death's door. I hoped I would be more consistent than that, but you never could tell, could you? And that was Dr.

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Lee's point: people changed their minds and doctors should listen to what patients preferred in extremis, not what they originally thought they would prefer.

With these morose thoughts in my head, turning off the computer at noon was not difficult. Betty was about to go out for lunch with her cousin Wendy. Wendy worked at the Fort Atkinson hospital. She was a dietitian.

"Hey, Jorgenson called this morning," I told her. "He invited me over to the Club for drinks this afternoon."

"That's nice. It's a boy's thing, I assume."

"Yep. No girls allowed."

"I didn't want to go anyway."

"Well, you can't even if you want to."

"You couldn't make me."

We grinned at each other. "Oh," she said. "Wendy invited us to a church supper tomorrow evening. I told her I would check with you."

Wendy and her family were members of some kind of bible church. I hesitated.

"You don't want to go, do you?"

"No, I don't mind."

"Really?"

"Really." This would be an opportunity to probe the secrets of the bible thumpers. It

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might help me understand the Fist of God crowd.

Cranking up the chariot, I headed over to McDonald's to meet my supervising secret service agent. While I was nursing a cup of coffee in my usual spot, a smiling fellow whom I had never met sat down across from me.

"Thought I better introduce myself," he said, "since we are neighbors. I'm Skip Cavanaugh."

"Neighbors? Oh, you must have the unit right next to ours. Nice ta meetcha."

We shook hands. Cavanaugh appeared to be in his sixties. He was a dapper fellow, wearing Dockers, a nice pair of shoes, a sport shirt, and a fishing hat.

"We don't make too much noise for you, I hope?"

He smiled at that. "No problem there."

"Oh, by the way, I have a router for my internet connection. You might be able to get a free connection since you are right next door." I was trying to be neighborly in my own geeky way.

This amused him. "I'll keep that in mind," he said with a broad smile.

"You're a fisherman, I guess. We saw your boat parked by your garage."

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“Yes indeed,” he said. “I get out whenever I can.”

“Lived around here long?”

“No. I just retired. Used to be in banking. Moved here from Madison.”

He seemed to be a nice fellow, easy to talk with and interested in everything. Before long I was telling him about the mystery of the corpse. I even spilled the beans about the mysterious deposit into my account, something I still had not confessed to Betty. I figured since he was a banker he might have some useful ideas about what to do with that situation.

Cavanaugh thought about it for a few minutes, stirring his cream into his coffee thoughtfully. “Well,” he said. “The first question is, of course, how did they get your account number? Your bank has your account number, so, most likely, they made an error. If so, then they will figure it out eventually. When that happens, they will take it back. So you better not spend it.”

That seemed like good advice. He was more interested in the dead body. I could not give him any theories about why the murder was committed or why the body was placed under my deck.

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“What do think might be going on with that?” I asked him.

Skip grinned. “Bankers always think everything can be traced back to money,” he said. “Somebody is protecting money or trying to get more.”

“How does killing somebody help you get or keep money?”

“Look at it this way,” he explained. “What might you expect would be the consequences of this death?”

We mulled that over for a minute when an idea struck me. “A dead body could slow down sales of the condos, don’t you think?”

“Sure it could. Buyers might be put off by that. And there have been no new sales since it happened.”

“Why would somebody want to derail the development?”

Cavanaugh had an explanation for that one. “These small towns often have a strong resistance to economic development. Local folks are concerned that the quality of life they have always enjoyed will go downhill. Traffic increases, crime waves hit, prices go up. Some places have passed strict ordinances to make it hard for developers because they don’t want village life to change.”

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This made him chuckle. "When I was in banking, I hated that attitude. Now that I'm retired, I am a lot more sympathetic to the local yocals. After all, I am one."

It was a pleasant chat, but both of us were ready to move on with our day's activities. We split up and I mounted my trusty steed to head for home.

Before I could go, however, a sedan pulled up next to me. My old friends, detectives Broder and Schmidt, leaped out and stood on either side of me. This looked ominous.

"Still in town I see," said Broder.

"Yes sir."

"That's good because we have some concerns that we need to discuss with you."

"Oh? What's up?"

"There's been another murder."

"No kidding. Who?"

Schmidt leaned over toward me. "Don't play dumb with us," she snarled.

Now I was getting nervous. "Why would you think it had anything to do with me?"

"Because the stiff is a friend of yours, fella by the name of Johnson. You were seen talking to him right here a few days ago."

This shook me up pretty badly and the cops noticed my reaction.

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“What can you tell us about it?” Broder asked me.

“Well, it’s kind of a long story.” They waited with blank stares. “It’s like this. Johnson was a secret service agent. Somebody from this area was threatening a politician and he wanted me to keep my ears open.”

Their faces showed frank disbelief. “You don’t expect us to swallow that cockamamie story, do you?” Schmidt’s irritability was straining her ability to control it.

“It’s true.”

“Yeah and maybe the real truth is that you killed him.”

“That’s crazy! Why in hell would I want to do that? I had no reason to want to kill him!”

“Really? We figured you had lots of reasons.” Broder was giving me the once-over like I was already convicted and sentenced. “Like maybe a hundred thousand reasons.”

“What?” Then it hit me. One hundred thousand reasons. Uh oh.

“We will be talking about this with you soon. Don’t leave town.” Broder was about as menacing as anybody could be without actually attacking you.

My ride back to the condo was a blur. How did they find out about the money? I had

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to admit, now that they knew about it, they had to think it looked suspicious. How was I going to explain why I suddenly had that big wad of cash? Damn. What a mess.

CHAPTER 11. ENTER THE LION'S DEN

Back at the condo, I figured I should clean up a bit for drinks at the Country Club. After all, my Levi's, jogging shoes, and gray T-shirt were a bit on the casual side. After carefully considering my options, I changed into my Justin black boots and threw on the black blazer. Blazers looked good with T-shirts, don'cha know.

The question running through my mind was this: why was I even going? The secret service agent who had enlisted me in the undercover assignment was dead. This provided two reasons to bail out. First, I no longer had a boss. Second, his death proved this was dangerous business.

On the other hand, a chance to drink beer with some guys, no matter the circumstances,

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was still a chance to drink beer with some guys. Ultimately, I decided that the undercover role was over, but that didn't preclude me from having some fun.

The group clustered around Jorgenson at the Club was about what you would expect: middle aged white guys in polyester suits. Introductions revealed that they included an insurance agent, a commercial real estate appraiser, a banker, a building contractor, and a fellow from the zoning office of the local government. The conversation revolved around how hard it was to make money since the government was always throwing up obstacles to prevent entrepreneurs from doing their patriotic duty (i.e., driving the economy).

Since I was no longer under cover, I felt free to tell them what I really thought. When Jorgenson teased me about seeing me whizzing around town on my motorized bike, it gave me my opening.

“Yep, ten dollars for the bike and a couple of hundred for the motor. It gets me where I'm going. And how much did you pay for that caddy you're driving, Moody?”

Jorgenson laughed. “You've got a point there, Ed.”

“You wouldn't believe how hard it is to do

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something economical. The other night we went to a movie that showed a scene from India. Lots of motorized rickshaws or whatever running around. Miles per gallons for those little vehicles must be pretty good. That's all we need for running around Fort Atkinson most of the time. And if more people drove them, we would reduce our dependence on foreign oil. This would mean that we would be less involved in military action in the Middle East, which means the average Joe in the Middle East would have less reason to hate us, which would mean that we would not have to worry about terrorism. And to top it off, we could manufacture that stuff locally instead of having to build it in Korea and pay to ship it half way around the world."

I was warming to my subject. "So little fuel-efficient vehicles are in the public interest, besides being cheaper. Almost anybody can afford to buy and drive something like that. But for some reason, the economy does not make it easy to get them. You should be able to yank a bike motor off the shelf at Walmart. Heck, they're afraid to sell a scooter because of state regulations against them, much less a bike motor. Briggs and Stratton has stopped making motors that might be used to power a

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homemade vehicle because they are worried that some dope will kill himself and the family will sue them under product liability laws.”

Now I was making myself angry. “I bought my bike motor off the internet. Before I ordered it, I went into a bike shop down in Whitewater to ask about bike motors. The guy running the place said he could fix me up with one that cost over five hundred dollars. Any other product was just imported junk, he said. Then he gave me a flyer for the company upstate where he buys his bike motors. Turns out the upstate guy gets his bike motors from, where else? Overseas via the internet.”

By now, I was standing up. “The bike store fellah is doing alright. He has a lot of high end stuff in there, including a Lee Iacocca motorized bike on sale for nine hundred dollars. So I said to him, ‘Look, I know you want to market to yuppies so you can meet your income goals. But if I paid those prices, I would just be supporting the yuppie materialist culture. What happened to Henry Ford’s philosophy of an affordable car for everyone? The Wright brothers were bicycle shop guys. They built an airplane out of spare bike parts. What happened to the spirit of frugal creativity, making things everyone can enjoy?’

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He had no idea what I was talking about. So I walked out.”

At that I sat down. After a pregnant pause, the group broke into cheers and applause. They didn't particularly care what my opinions were, they just enjoyed the show. That's the great thing about beer with the guys, unless it leads to a fight.

Jorgenson clapped me on the back. “You're right about one thing. We sure don't have anything that equates to a Model A these days.”

He grinned at me. “You know, business is tough right now. My construction projects are way ahead of sales. Cash flow is a bitch. Getting together with the guys like this once in a while takes some of the pressure off. You added a heck of lot of entertainment value today. Just wanted you to know I appreciate it. Hope you can make it some other time.” He seemed to be completely sincere.

I had to take advantage of this brief moment of guy-type intimacy to ask him a question. “Hey, have you ever heard of a group called the Fist of God?”

He was completely mystified. “Never heard of it. But I don't listen to rock music, so I'm the wrong guy to ask.”

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Back at the condo, I settled into my usual spot on the deck with pipe in mouth, notepaper in hand. Jorgenson was convincing and I believed him. He had no knowledge of the Fist of God militia. It was starting to look like Johnson had been completely wrong about this investigation. On the other hand, something had gotten him killed. I just could not believe that Jorgenson had anything to do with it.

Betty stuck her head out past the sliding glass door. “How was your little party with the boys?” she asked.

“Just fine. And the girls who popped out of the cake were really sweet.”

“I’ll just bet they were.”
“Yep. I would have to say they were downright wholesome.”

A voice called from below. “Hello up there.” It was Cavanaugh, our neighbor.

“Hey Skip. Betty, this is Skip Cavanaugh. He lives next door. Skip, this is Betty. She runs things around here.”

“Nice to meet you, Betty.”

“Skip, if you have a minute, come on up. I have something I want to ask you about.”

Betty looked at me quizzically.

“Financial matters, dear, you wouldn’t be

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interested.”

She hit me then went downstairs to let Skip in.

I told Skip the whole story, leaving out nothing. I told him about the undercover assignment, the dead secret service agent, and how the cops thought the 100K in my account was payment for a hit on said agent. I told him about Jorgenson and the Fist of God and how I believed him to be completely innocent of any involvement with a militia group. “He’s just a business guy trying to do the right business thing. He would not go in for any violent insurrection. Hell, he’s a capitalist. Violence disrupts business. He would regard bomb-throwing as a giant pain in the ass.”

Skip carefully considered all that I told him. He seemed to accept my conclusions without question. He did not appear to harbor any doubts that maybe I really was a hit man.

“Well, you certainly have gotten yourself into a tangled mess, haven’t you,” he said sympathetically.

“Just minding my own business and trying to be helpful.” It seemed like a weak answer. Was it possible that I was somehow responsible for the mess I was in?

“Ed,” he said forcefully. “Try not to worry

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about all this. It will resolve itself sooner or later. Just relax.”

“But what about the cops thinking I killed Johnson?”

“You didn’t do it, so it should turn out okay. If they decide to press charges against you, then just get a lawyer. After all,” he paused with a grin, “you have a hundred thousand bucks you can use to hire a good one. For a fifty-fifty split, a good lawyer should be able to get you off the hook.”

It seemed like a good point. I had nothing to worry about.

CHAPTER 12. HOMESCHOOLERS ARE HARDNOSED

Wednesday started badly. The cat decided it would wake me up a bit earlier than usual. It walked on me for a while, it stuck its paw in my face, and when I tried to burrow under the covers, it kept poking me with its paw. They say cats stroke their owners because that was how they got milk to let down from their mothers' breasts when they were kittens. I doubt it. If a kitten poked it's mother in the breast the way that cat poked me, it would go hungry for awhile.

After I had slid even deeper under the covers, the cat started knocking around the items on the bedside table. Glasses went on the floor along with the cell phone and a paperback book.

Enough. I got up, started the coffee, and showered. For some reason, I was tired. Most likely, the stresses of the past week were getting to me. Dead bodies, police inquiries, undercover work, more dead bodies, more

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police inquiries...it wasn't fun anymore. Then, when I weighed myself, I was up two pounds. Didn't that just add icing to the cake?

After trucking down to the convenience store for the paper, I took Betty her half along with her coffee. She took hers with cream whereas mine was black unless we were driving somewhere. Under those circumstances, you couldn't trust what you were buying, so I asked for sweetener. Better safe than sorry, right? The stuff may have been sitting on the burner for hours.

The paper contained some interesting commentary on the Democratic convention. The Democrats were coming on strong for national security. This stance appeared to make them indistinguishable from the Republicans on that issue. The Democrats wanted to spend a lot of money on new social programs, of course. They could get away with saying that because in the Clinton administration the federal budget was balanced whereas the Bush administration had run up the deficit. The Republicans had lost their ability to present themselves as the gurus of fiscal responsibility.

For most of us, these were not the real issues at stake in the election. The two major parties were asking us to choose between two

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rich guys who never had to worry about paying the light bill, who never bought bologna in order to stretch the meat budget. One party wanted to give our tax money to corporations, the other wanted to give it away to other groups, some of whom deserved it and some who did not. What a choice.

Shrugging off politics, I went in to work on the computer. Dr. Lee's cancer project, a bioterrorism drill project, and revising a manuscript for a journal all danced around the screen. I was multitasking to beat the band and it was stressing me out. Why did I do it? I was on vacation for Pete's sake. I guess I did it because not doing it stressed me out more. By noon, I was exhausted and needed a break.

Dragging my tired brain out to the deck, I stretched my legs out and tried to calm down. Jorgenson was rushing by, his fat legs moving at a rapid clip on the sidewalk below. "Hey, Moody! How's it goin'?" I called down to him.

He slowed down then turned to walk back toward me. "The usual thing," he said. He looked pretty harried.

"Come on up and have a cup of coffee. You look like you need a break."

He hesitated then replied, "I think you're right. Be up in a second."

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After making a brief call on his cell phone, he climbed the stairs. Coffee mugs in hand, we settled on the porch.

“Read the paper this morning, Moody?” I asked him.

“Sure, I flipped through it. Politics, politics, politics.”

“Yep, both parties are big spenders, aren’t they? But neither one seems to understand what the little guy needs.”

Moody looked at me. “You know, Ed, I can’t figure you out. Sometimes you sound like a Libertarian, other times you’re a Green. What gives?”

I tried to put it succinctly. “It’s like this, Moody. Like it our not, lots of people are working for low wages with minimal benefits. We can’t keep increasing taxes so we can give them financial help. That would require perpetual economic growth, raping the environment, and constant pressure on the people who are actually paying the taxes. Keeping the cost of living low would be a better idea. We don’t need to constantly come up with new consumer goods that are just overpriced toys. Slow economic growth is better than a mad frenzy. Otherwise, we will all end up going crazy.”

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He wasn't buying it. "Yeah, yeah, I understand your words. But why do you care so much about the little guy? You're smart, you seem to have made good money. You don't have to worry."

"I couldn't disagree with you more on that one. None of us are safe. You and I are only about six months away from being greeters at Walmart. A lawsuit, a big health problem, or a bankruptcy could destroy our revenue stream and wipe out our retirement assets. Heck, after retirement it is almost guaranteed that, if we live long enough, we will end up broke. When we get to that spot, we will want the cost of living to be damn low."

I leaned forward. "Fact is, the reason I worry about the little guy is simple: 'there but for the grace of God go I'. And I can't think of any reason why God should continue giving me all the lucky breaks."

His faced turned gray and his shoulders slumped. "You may be right," he said. "Maybe we are all just one step from the poor house."

He stood up slowly. "Well, enough philosophy for one day. Time to get to work. Sometimes there is no getting around doing the tough things and making the hard decisions. Business is a gamble and sometimes

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you just have to take the risks and deal with the stresses.”

I was not sure what he was talking about, but since I had upset him enough for one day, I let him go away without further comment.

Back I went to the computer, getting more and more stressed as I tried to deal with my anxieties by getting more accomplished. The faster I worked, the more I worried about making mistakes and misjudgments. But my value in the world depended on providing what people expected of me: intelligent work, delivered faster than anyone else. Maybe I was just like Moody Jorgenson, hustling to stay alive.

By five o'clock my back was killing me and my head hurt. Betty found me on the deck and reminded me that we had agreed to attend a church social with her cousin. I groaned.

“You said you would go,” she pointed out.

“I know. I'll go. Just let me smoke my pipe for fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. I'll be getting ready.”

The church social was actually a good thing. I found it relaxing. The group was small and appeared to be composed of regular people, mostly working class folks. If they were like most Americans, they tended to want

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bigger houses and better cars. No doubt, they lived mostly on credit from paycheck to paycheck.

We took our paper plates through the food line, eating several kinds of 'hot dish'. I parked myself and my plate at a table with Betty and her cousin. It was a large round folding table, so a few other adults joined us. Betty's cousin Wendy had a husband and a couple of kids who were seated at another table with several teenagers. The man and wife who sat with us were sober in appearance. The man wore a white shirt and tie and black slacks. He had a bushy black beard. The woman was dressed in a rather plain print dress.

We chatted about home schooling for awhile. All of the people in the church seemed to be into that form of education. Apparently, they helped each other in order to share the load. We talked about the differences between virtual education and home schooling. From their point of view, virtual education was a bad idea because it involved supervision from the school. The parent was provided computer programs and other curricular materials which she passed on to the child. About every two weeks, more often if needed, the teacher from the school would touch base by email to see

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how the student was doing.

It sounded perfect to me. Kids would only advance if they mastered the material, teachers could handle a lot more students than they could in face-to-face instruction, and the kids would be exposed less to the bad habits they might pick up from other kids. Why wasn't virtual schooling the way we could get local school budgets under control? The only thing wrong with the idea that I could see was that virtual schooling seemed to have started with the primary grades. I could envision it being more useful for high school kids. High school was largely a waste of time when I went through it. You could have learned everything you needed to learn in about half the time if virtual schooling had been available.

The people at my table disagreed strongly. They were homeschoolers through and through. They wanted no involvement from the school system. And, they either wanted their property taxes cut since they didn't use the schools or they wanted the school district to pay them back for the value of the education they provided. They were pretty hard core.

"But why are you so set against getting help from the school system? They can buy

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materials like computer software in bulk and get better prices. They can come up with a standard curriculum, so you don't have to do that."

This really got us to the heart of the matter. "Because of government propaganda," the man with the bushy beard asserted loudly. "The government pushes crap like evolution and accepting homosexuality. The government wants us to become Godless and accept a secret dictatorship."

His wife hushed him. There was a moment of silence. "This is interesting. I sure would like to hear more about your point of view," I said.

The man and his wife exchanged looks. "Sorry," he said. "We are better off keeping our opinions to ourselves. Government agents have been known to persecute people like us when they realize we are onto their agenda."

This made me chuckle. "That seems a little paranoid. It's not like you're the Fist of God militia or something."

The man and his wife looked startled. "What about the Fist of God?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I backpeddled. "I thought it was an urban myth. Does it really exist?"

"No," he said belligerently. "It does not

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exist and never has.” With that he and his wife got up and left the table. No one else would speak to us, so Betty and I went home. Add that church to the list of places I can’t revisit because of my big mouth.

CHAPTER 13. A NEAR MISS

Wednesday had been a bad day, but Thursday proved to be much worse. I woke up exhausted, having tossed and turned all night. The room had been stuffy and my senses were acutely tuned to everything that was going on around me. The cars that drove by on the highway a quarter of a mile away seemed to lack mufflers. The water heater was noisy. The air conditioner sounded like it was powered by a jet engine. I got up twice during the night to use the bathroom. Betty was snoring, something she didn't usually do. When I finally got to sleep, the damn cat stuck his paw in my mouth.

Staggering out to make coffee at five a.m., I felt like it would take a gallon of the stuff to get me going. After showering, I went out for the newspaper in a daze. The woman at the counter looked at me oddly; I probably looked like I was hung over. The paper contained nothing remotely interesting, so I went back to work on the computer.

The task that morning was to develop a

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bioterrorism drill for a municipal health department in Texas. The scenario I had dreamed up was for a militant group to start dousing the public swimming pool with nasty bacteria that would cause dysentery. I was going to send data about the hypothetical cases of sick kids to the health department to see if they could analyze it accurately and rapidly. By ten o'clock it was shaping up, but I was ready to quit.

Betty wanted to check out some shops in a little town just past Whitewater called East

Troy. This sounded fine to me, so off we went. East Troy had a nice little square at the center of town with a few shops encircling it. The weather was nice, so I sat on a bench smoking my pipe while Betty picked through a gift shop. By eleven o'clock, we were ready for an early lunch. We decided to try a mom and pop restaurant facing the square.

Usually I liked these little independent restaurants. Ordinary people trying to make a living providing a useful service to the community was an activity worthy of support from my point of view. The waitress was friendly, revealing a couple of missing teeth while she chatted with us. The water glasses did not look very clean, though, and the potato

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chips were stale. I ordered a hamburger but could not finish it. It tasted bad. Sniffing it, I could not say for sure that the meat was spoiled, so I tried to eat the thing. But I just could not get it down. Being a burger kind of guy that was an unusual experience for me. In fact, I don't think it had ever happened before. We left that place a little disappointed.

During the twenty minute drive back to Fort Atkinson, my stomach started to give me trouble. Belches started to demand release. Betty was worried that I had food poisoning and was tempted to make me drive to the hospital in Fort Atkinson rather than home. Aside from the gas and some tingling in my arm, my symptoms were not that bad, so I just drove home.

The gassiness cleared up after I drank a Diet Coke, but I didn't feel like going back to work in the den. A brilliant idea struck me; maybe I needed to take the afternoon off. I would go fishing. While by no stretch of the imagination could anyone describe me as a fisherman, I did have a license and a pole. Catching anything has never been important to me; the fresh air and quiet rush of the river were the sources of satisfaction that came with dropping a line in the water.

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Fastening my pole to my bike with a bungie cord, I set off for the river. My route led down Madison Avenue through the center of town. Traffic was light, even at the main intersection in the village which was right by McDonald's. I caught the green light and continued on through town toward the hospital. Turning left, I was on the river road in another five minutes.

As I peddled along, I was reminded of why we had wanted our summer home to be in a small town. It was very peaceful. Life was good. In a few minutes, all the businesses and houses were gone and I was alone on the heavily wooded road. The river glimmered off to the right, visible only occasionally through the trees. A gentle breeze was blowing in my face.

At this point a couple of people on ten speed racing bikes pulled up level with me. The bikes looked like they were top of the line and must have cost them quite a bit to buy and maintain. The bikers were wearing, of course, spandex biking shorts that looked pretty silly, but if they had padding in the seat, they might have been worth wearing. My tail end was already pretty sore. Maybe not; a guy has to have some standards. The bikers also had

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helmets on with visors pulled down over their faces. That looked a bit over the top in regard to the level of protection a person really needed, but there was a reason for everything.

I nodded a greeting to them, not speaking to conserve my wind. I was peddling to assist the bike motor which made me huff and puff a little.

The biker on my left did something that surprised me quite a bit. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a switchblade knife which he clicked open then swung at me viciously. I gasped and pulled my bike to the right, wobbling and slowing down. The biker on my right was not accommodating. He also had a knife and was driving it straight toward my side. Opening up my throttle to its maximum, I jammed the pedals as hard as I could and accelerated just out of reach.

Now I was cranking the pedals as fast as I could. Unfortunately, the bikers could easily match my pace. They were on racing bikes and they knew how to operate them. The only reason I was not already lying on the road with knife wounds was simple; racing bikes required the rider to have his butt up in the air as he hunched over the handle bars. This made swinging a knife rather awkward.

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But not awkward enough. They caught up with me and renewed their attack. I dodged their swings as best I could. Even so, they managed to inflict some cuts on my arms that burned like fire.

By now we were starting down a steep hill. This enabled me to pick up some speed. Since the road was rough, the bikers had to devote their attention to controlling their bikes. They held off their attack for a moment, no doubt waiting until our speed was again reduced.

As we raced down the hill at a fast pace, I saw with horror that the road made a sharp turn to the left at a bend in the river. How was I going to get out of this? I would have to slow down to make the turn. These maniacs would get me for sure. I could sense a feeling of murderous satisfaction coming from my attackers. This spot was where they had wanted me to go all along. They had been herding me like a lamb to the slaughter.

I couldn't slow down or they would get me. As I bounced down the road toward the turn, I could see a glimmer of river water through the trees. There was no choice; I had to go for it.

So I did not slow down at all. The bikers dropped back a bit, no doubt wondering what

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I was doing. The bank dropped off steeply from the road to the river. Shortly after leaving the road, I was fifteen feet in the air, aiming for a gap in the trees. Branches slapped my face and my back wheel banged off of a branch. Then I was out in the sunlight. The bike and I cartwheeled in the air. Afraid of landing on it and breaking a leg, I kicked it away from me in mid air. Then there was a splash and water was all around me. Not sure which direction I should go to find the surface, I just swam until I bobbed to the top.

Miraculously, my glasses were still on my face. However, they were spotted with water droplets, so that I could not see much at all. I could tell where the trees were - that was the bank. That was not the direction I wanted to go since my evil friends would no doubt be waiting for me. I starting swimming out into the center of the river, figuring that was the only safe way to go.

I have never been a strong swimmer and my clothes and shoes were weighing me down. But I had no choice. I just kept up my awkward stroke until I was too tired to continue. Then I treaded water while I caught my breath. I've always had a knack for dog paddling.

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No movement from the bank seemed to be coming toward me. Perhaps they were watching me, but at least they had not jumped in after me. After five minutes or so, I struck out for the bank on the opposite side of the river.

When I reached it, I was exhausted, so I just held onto a friendly branch for awhile to rest. Then I dragged myself out of the water and struggled my way up the bank. Muddy and tired and dripping wet, I shook off my glasses and looked around. I could see no sign of my attackers and could hear nothing that sounded threatening. So I started the long walk home.

It took nearly three hours to find the nearest bridge then walk home. This gave my clothes time to dry, though my jogging shoes were still squelching a bit when I got to the condo. Taking them off inside the door, I trudged tiredly up the stairs.

Betty was standing at the landing looking down at me sternly. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing much."

"Your face is scratched. Your clothes are ripped. Your shoes are wet."

"Okay, okay. I went fishing."

Her face cleared up a little. "Oh. You fell in?"

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“Yep.”

Then she got angry. “You shouldn’t go fishing without me. You might have drowned,” she stormed.

“A guy can go fishing without taking his wife!” Now I was mad. She was always trying to baby me.

“Never again,” she insisted. “Promise me you will never go fishing again without me!”

“That’s ridiculous. Next, you’ll have me wearing diapers.”

We didn’t speak to each other for a couple of hours. Finally, I figured enough was enough. “Look, I know you were upset. I’m sorry. How about if I take you out somewhere?”

Betty gave me her scared and angry look for a minute, then softened. “Where are you going to take me?”

“You like that Club 26 place down the bypass south of town. How about that?”

This was acceptable, so off we went. Instead of going into the restaurant, we sat at the bar which was a very impressive circular affair made of heavy wood. Betty had a fancy martini and I had a couple of ales. Then, we went over to Culver’s for ice cream. Forgiveness seemed to have been achieved.

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When we pulled into our garage back at the condo, Betty looked around quizzically and asked, “Where’s your bike?” Damn. She never misses a trick.

CHAPTER 14. TIME TO GET SERIOUS

Thursday night I slept like a log because I was exhausted. I woke up in a terrible mood. I was stiff all over. And I was seriously angry.

The only good news was that somehow two pounds had disappeared off my weight. Apparently, being chased by homicidal maniacs on bikes, swimming a river, and walking several miles to get home was a good routine for losing weight. Maybe I could start a new weight loss program. How much, I wondered, would people pay to go through that routine?

The previous evening Betty had extracted a full confession from me about the events of the day. “I told you that you would kill yourself on that motorized bicycle,” she scolded me.

“I didn’t kill myself. I’m still alive.”

“Pure luck!”

“The bike didn’t almost kill me. Those damn yuppies with the switchblades did.”

She grabbed me by the shoulders. “Look at me,” she said. “I want you to report all of this

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to the police tomorrow. Promise me.”

“Okay. No problem.”

She was dead right. Enough was enough. These guys should be tracked down and arrested. Then they should be thrown into the slammer for a very long time.

I woke wrathful and ready to take action. Broder probably would not be in his office until after eight, so I went about my usual business until then.

When I called the police station and asked for Broder, he wasn't immediately available. Leaving a message for him that basically said I wanted to report an attempt on my life, I hoped for a quick response. And quick it was. He called me back in about five minutes. We agreed that I would come down to the station to make a statement that morning.

Since I was once again a pedestrian, it took me about 25 minutes to get there. He led me into the same interview room where he had given me the third degree. Schmidt was already there with a tape recorder. I did not know who might be watching from behind the one-way window.

After I had recounted the whole story about the attack of the bicyclists, there was a moment of silence. Then Broder asked, “And

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why do you think these guys would want to kill you?”

“The best theory I can come with is drugs,” stealing the idea from Betty’s cousin Andrew. “What else is worth killing people for?”

“Why would drug dealers want to kill you?” Broder was deadpan. I suspected he already knew the answer.

“On Monday, we went to the concert in the park. We were talking about the dead body you found at my place. The drug theory came up. And here is the interesting part -several people with racing bikes were sitting around us. They could have heard the whole discussion and thought I was getting too close. Maybe they wanted to shut me up before I drew attention to them.”

Broder and Schmidt exchanged glances. “Actually,” Broder said, “you might have something there. For your information, we are now operating on the theory that the hundred thousand was deposited in your account to frame you for the murder. That’s a lot of money. Nobody is going to throw away a hundred K unless a lot of money is at stake. That points to drug dealers, probably a big distribution network.”

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This was great news, but I had to ask, “Why did you decide I was being framed?”

Schmidt and Broder avoided my eyes for a few seconds. Finally, Schmidt could not contain herself. “Because you have friends in high places. We were told to operate on the theory that you were a chump instead of a perp. Personally, I’m keeping an open mind on the subject. We might still tag you for that killing.”

Broder put a restraining hand on her arm. “No, no. We don’t think you had anything to do with it. You can forget about it.”

Then he got back to the attack. “Do you think you can identify the guys who attacked you?”

“I didn’t see their faces, but I saw their bikes. I might be able to recognize them. And the helmets were pretty distinctive: they had blue visors that completely covered their faces. And, of course, they had those stupid shorts on.”

Broder looked doubtful.

“Hey, I bet if you interviewed some people who were at the concert in the park you would be able to get at least one name for one of the bikers who was there. I know I would recognize some of those guys. If you had some

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names, you could search their homes for bicycles, shorts, helmets, switchblades, and drug paraphernalia. You might be able to build up quite a bit of evidence.”

Broder twirled his pen around for a minute. “Would you be willing to look at people in a lineup? Would you be willing to testify?”

“Damn right. I want to get these guys.”

He stared at me, dead earnest. “I have to warn you that this crowd has proven they can be dangerous. That means you have to watch yourself. I would suggest that you avoid dark alleys for a while.”

That sounded like good advice.

Trudging back home, I had a lot to think about. I was feeling very virtuous about my commitment to nail the drug ring. I was also scared from the top of my head right down to the bottoms of my feet.

When I got home, I happened to run into Skip Cavanaugh. He could see that I had a lot on my mind, so he invited me up to his place for a chat. I updated him on all the events of the last 24 hours. He didn't look greatly surprised. “You sure are getting in deeper and deeper, aren't you?” he said gravely. “You'll be lucky if you don't end up getting yourself

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killed.”

“You’re right about that. I just don’t know what else I can do at this stage.”

“Well, hang in there. Things can’t get much worse”

He was wrong about that as it turns out.

CHAPTER 15. LOOSE ENDS

This next part is difficult to write about, so I will try to keep it short. The good part or what at first seemed like the good part was that my new bike motor arrived that day. I had never intended to stop with a little electric bike motor. A 40cc gasoline motor was being offered on the web for \$250 on sale, so I jumped at it. It was illegal, of course, but if you rode it on the sidewalk you didn't break the laws about having licensed motorized vehicles on the street. Go figure.

The motor arrived, and I spent the day trying to put it on a new Schwinn I had picked up at Kmart. After several hours, it looked about right, but I could not get it to start. In frustration, I ran it over to a motorcycle shop where the manager treated me like an idiot. He agreed to work on it for a few hours, after which it still did not run. The purchase price for the motor and new bike plus the charge for the labor made my new motorbike a thousand-

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dollar waste of money. So much for doing things the cheap way.

While I was wasting time and energy on the motor bike, Elric the cat was dwindling away. He had begun to lose bowel and bladder control a bit at a time a few days before. The vet gave him some medicine and told Betty that she could not allow the cat to turn the condo into a toilet. By midday, it was clear what had to be done.

Betty could not do it, so I took Elric over to the vet's office to be put to sleep. I stroked him while the vet injected him, then held his paw while he went to sleep. They gave me his collar to take home. That evening, Betty and I sat out on the deck and had a good cry. It was not a good day. Elric had been with Betty a long time.

CHAPTER 16. ANOTHER BODY

The man was wearing a black ski mask pulled down over his face. He was carrying two heavy five-gallon gasoline cans. It was very dark around the building. He appreciated his luck; the night sky was overcast, so there was no light from the moon or the stars. Building lights had been turned off.

Moving quietly, he walked to the nearest door. Bending over it, he did something with the knob and it swung open. He slipped inside the building, bringing the gas cans with him. The door closed without a sound.

Inside the room, he quickly opened one of the cans and laid it on its side. The gasoline gurgled out onto the carpet in large gulps. Leaving it to empty itself, the man carried the other can into the next room where he opened it and began pouring it directly onto the rug. The gasoline splashed out and quickly formed a large pool around the man's feet. The entire downstairs area was rapidly filling with fumes. The man began to get a headache. Empty, he

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tossed the can aside. Then he returned to the first room, emptied what was left out of the first can, and tossed it into a corner. He was in a hurry now. He had to finish this task and disappear before he was noticed.

He walked to the door and opened it. Propping it with his foot, he took out a book of paper matches and struck one. The brisk breeze blew it out. He tried again with the same result. Stepping back into the room and allowing the door to close almost entirely, he lit the third match and threw it on the floor.

Betty and I were sleeping like the dead when the door bell began ringing incessantly. I jumped out of bed and ran out on the deck wearing only my pajama pants. Skip Cavanaugh was down below. "Fire!" he shouted. "Get out! Now!"

He was right. The next wing of the building was on fire. The unit on the ground floor was spewing smoke and flames out of its front door. I ran back into the bedroom and thrust an armload of clothes at Betty. "Fire. Get downstairs. Now. Go out into the garage."

I grabbed some clothes for myself and followed her down. "Get in the car," I shouted, hitting the automatic door opener with my elbow.

ANOTHER BODY

“Wait,” she screamed. “Elric is still up there!”

“No, Elric is not up there,” I said. Then she remembered, a crushed look on her face. Damn cat. I missed him, too.

I tossed her the keys. “Move the car out to the street. I’ll be right back.” His collar was on the counter. I swept it up and ran back down, out through the garage, and over to the street where Betty was pulling up to the curb.

We could hear sirens and then a fire truck screeched around the corner on two wheels. A heavy rain was falling and we were soon drenched. We dressed hurriedly under the downpour while the firemen grabbed their equipment and went to work. It would have been more modest to dress in the car, but we simply were not that limber any more. Just getting into and out of the car was a challenge; putting on clothes would have been impossible. Modesty would just have to take a back seat to expediency.

By dawn it was apparent that the alarm had been called in time. The rain had probably helped a good deal as well. The building was blackened on one wing, but the fire had not spread to the upstairs unit or to any of the other wings. We did not have a strong odor of

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smoke in our condo, though outside the building the stench was overpowering. The air conditioner, cable television, internet service, water service to the units, and the lawn sprinkler system were all out of commission. Bob Johnson, who showed up about five a.m., assured us that everything would be in working order by the end of the day. He would have to wait until a complete damage assessment had been made before he could say how much new construction would be required to repair the burned wing. However, he fervently hoped the building was not totaled. So did we.

Betty and I went to one of our favorite restaurants for breakfast, feeling like something the cat dragged in. Or like something he would have dragged in if Betty ever let him out of the house. We probably smelled like we had just come from Hell.

Eggs over easy, wheat toast, and lots of coffee were what I needed. Betty needed some pancakes as well. She was pretty shaken up. The waitress did not ask us what was going on, though she had to wonder. This was Wisconsin and it would have been nose-y to pry into other people's business.

We went back to the unit. We still had no water, so we could not get cleaned up. There

ANOTHER BODY

was nothing else I could do, so I went out to my favorite spot and lit my pipe. The situation had gotten so bad I was smoking at seven in the morning. This had to be a very bad step for me.

The firemen were gone, but a couple of guys were poking around in the burned part of the building. Then, a car pulled up and my buddies, the police detectives, disembarked. They walked over to my deck and looked up.

Broder said, "Trouble follows you around, doesn't it?"

"No kidding. I hadn't noticed."

Even Schmidt had to chuckle at that one.

"Mr. Schumacher, we're going to put a man on duty out here for you." He looked at me carefully to see if I understood his implication.

It took me a minute. "Hey. You're not telling me that this was aimed at me, are you?"

Broder just shrugged his shoulders. "We don't know the cause of this fire. But it is quite a coincidence, don't you think? Anyway, better safe than sorry. We will provide twenty-four-hour coverage for a couple of days. A car will be parked out front."

I thanked him, still stunned. The likelihood of a connection between the fire and the attack

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of the rabid bikers had escaped me.

As Broder and Schmidt started to get back into their car, a man from the burned apartment ran over to them. "You guys are cops, right?" he asked.

They must have said yes because then the fellow burst out with the news. "You better look at this. There's a body in here. Burnt to a crisp, I'm afraid. Not a pretty sight."

"Ah shit," Broder said. "Not another stiff." But it was indeed another stiff. I was happy that this time it was not right below my deck. It was at least thirty feet away.

Another crew was summoned. The crime scene was carefully studied and catalogued. The body was bagged and taken away. I sat on the deck most of the day watching people work. The internet was down and I was completely lacking in energy, so I just sat there.

About four in the afternoon, Broder came back. Once again, he did not bother to walk up the stairs but just stood down below and spoke up in my direction. "Mr. Schumacher, you happen to know a guy named Jorgenson?"

"Sure. He's the developer for this complex. Nice guy." I chuckled sympathetically. "He's gonna be pissed when he hears about this mess."

ANOTHER BODY

Broder shook his head. “Not much danger of that. That stiff we found in the ashes was your buddy Jorgenson. Do you have any theories about how that ties in with your nasty network of drug dealers?”

For once, words failed me. Jorgenson? What the heck was he doing in that building in the middle of the night? And why was he dead?

CHAPTER 17. THE PIECES FIT TOGETHER

Betty had gone over to her cousin's place for sympathy while I loafed on the deck all day. She correctly figured that she would get more emotional support from her cousin than she would get from me.

When Betty got home, she told me, "I called my cousin Andrew and told him about the fire. He invited you out for a beer tonight. He said Salamonie's at six. I figured you would want to go, so I told him you would meet him there. If you don't feel like it, I can call him back and tell him."

"Sounds like a great idea," I said. "I want to run some ideas past him. Maybe we can figure out what's going on around here."

By this time the water was back on, so I showered and changed clothes. Then I headed out on foot. The patrolman out front stopped me. "Where are you going, sir?" he asked.

"Just over to Salamonie's for a beer with a friend."

THE PIECES FIT TOGETHER

This clearly created a dilemma for him.

“Why don’t you stay here?” I suggested.
“Betty is upstairs.”

“I don’t think you should go out, sir.” He was not liking my plans.

“Don’t worry. It’s only a ten minute walk. If you give me a phone number, I can call you when I get there.”

He agreed to that plan, though reluctantly.

The best way to walk to Sal’s was to go straight over on Commonwealth, turn left on a side street, then cut through the back parking lot of the Citgo station. That brought you out only a block from the restaurant. I called the patrolman when I was in front of Sal’s to tell him the coast was clear.

When I walked in the door, Andrew was already sitting in the bar. “Hey, Andrew. How’s it goin’?” I asked.

“Better for me than for you, I bet.”

“That’s a sucker bet. But I’m sure glad you suggested this. I want to go over the whole story with you and see if you can figure out what’s going on.”

We ordered Millers because this clearly was going to be thirsty work.

“Okay,” I said, “first we find a dead body under the deck. That’s Saturday morning. A

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secret service agent tells me the body had been there since Thursday, so I'm in the clear. But the agent also tells me a militia group called the Fist of God wants to assassinate the Democratic presidential candidate, John Kerry. Supposedly, this group is in Fort Atkinson. He tells me that a real estate developer is tied in with the Fist of God crowd. He might even be their financier. The theory is that business types don't want Kerry elected because he would be bad for business. So they manipulate this militia group into knocking him off. The militia does not like Kerry because they think he is a Godless communist or something. Are you with me so far?"

Andrew nodded. "Sure. I get it. It's pretty farfetched, but I can follow the argument.

"Okay, let's see. I guess the next thing that happened was that somebody snuck a hundred thousand bucks into my checking account."

"Wait a minute. I haven't heard about this part. A hundred grand? Who did you have to kill for that?"

"Terrible choice of words, Andrew. My secret service agent turned up dead and the cops originally thought that I killed him for the hundred K. But later they decided it was a set up. I was being framed for the murder. But

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since 100K is a lot of money, the cops figured that the murder had nothing to do with politics. Instead, it must be connected to drug dealers somehow.”

“Ah hah!” Andrew said. “I knew it.”

“Yes, you did know it. You said drugs were probably tied in with the first murder. And you must have said it a little too loudly at the concert in the park last Monday. The drug dealers probably overheard you say it. That’s the only reason the cops and I can come up with for why some guys would first try to frame me then try to kill me. The dealers thought I was getting too close. Now I’m a witness who might be able to help identify them and they really don’t like that.”

“Wait a minute,” Andrew said. “Why would they think you were a threat to them before you could identify them? This doesn’t hang together right.”

“That part is a little murky. And here are some more murky parts. Who was the first dead guy and why was he killed? Why was he left under my deck? Why was the secret service agent telling me some malarkey about militia if he was really after drug dealers? And if he really was after drug dealers, why did he want me to check out the real estate developer? And

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here is the latest bit of murk. Who set fire to our building and why did the real estate guy turn up in the ashes burnt to a crisp?”

Andrew just shook his head. “We’ve got too many players in this game,” he said. “There are too many theories about what is going on. Militia, real estate, and drug dealers can’t all be involved. It’s too much.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you another theory. This one is from my neighbor Skip Cavanaugh. Skip said that maybe the local anti-development crowd is against real estate projects and they stashed a body next to my building to throw off sales. This would cause the real estate guys to go bankrupt and development would stop.”

Andrew frowned. “That won’t hold up,” he said. “Nobody is radical enough around here to commit murder to stop economic development. We might not like development, but we wouldn’t kill to stop it.”

“Okay, then you tell me how it all ties together.”

Andrew gave it his best shot. “Try this. We can work backwards from today and see if we can determine what might have caused each event. First, we have the real estate guy fried in his own building. If I knew nothing else about

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the situation, I would guess that he was setting the fire and got caught in it. He screwed up big time.”

This made sense to me. “You mean he was in danger of going bankrupt because the units weren’t selling, so he needed to clear out the inventory. And the insurance money would help to settle his debts.”

Andrew nodded. “Sure. It happens all the time.”

He considered how to explain the rest of it. “That brings us to the biker attack. It does appear to be an escalation of a campaign against you. The frame-up didn’t work, so they had to take drastic action. The question is why were you dangerous to them? You didn’t really know anything about them before they attacked you. What were you doing that they would regard as a threat?”

“All I was doing was hanging around with the real estate guy to find out if he was connected to the militia.”

“That must be it,” Andrew said. “They didn’t know why you were hanging around with the developer, but they could see you were doing it. If that was threatening to them, then they were connected to the developer somehow. You might learn what that

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connection was if you kept on.”

“Keep going. You’re doing fine. What could the connection have been between the drug dealers and the business guy?”

Andrew was on a roll. “Money, of course. The problem with drug dealing on a large scale is that you end up with a lot of cash that you can’t explain. So you need to launder it by running it through legitimate businesses. The developer needed cash and the drug dealers needed a place to unload their cash. It was perfect for both of them.”

Now it all made sense. I started running with Andrew’s theory. “They killed the secret service agent because they could see he was investigating something and, having guilty consciences, they figured he had to be after them. So they took him out.”

Andrew jumped in again. “The first dead guy was probably another cop who got too close. Same story. Kill him before he can figure out what’s going on. Leaving the body under your deck and the wallet in your trash was just a matter of convenience. You were a convenient patsy.”

I finished it. “And my developer friend was still losing money. Only now he didn’t just owe it to the banks. He owed it to a very nasty

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crowd of drug dealers. He was desperate to raise enough cash to settle up with them, so he tried the arson thing. He was no good at it and died in the attempt.”

Poor Jorgenson. He just wanted out from under debt. I bet if he had pulled it off he would have retired and become a greeter at Walmart. And been grateful he got off easy. He just got in too deep, chasing the businessman’s dream of a big profit.

Andrew had figured it out. We ordered another round on me. I toasted him for his brilliance. Then we called it a night.

As I walked out the door, I wondered: What did the Fist of God have to do with all this?

CHAPTER 18. CONFRONTATION

It was amazing how a couple or three beers could lead to brilliant thinking. The beer and the brainstorming had explained everything. I was feeling pretty smug as I walked back home. That lasted until I got behind the Citgo station to cut over to my street. It was dark back there. That was when I remembered the drug ring still wanted to kill me. Didn't Broder tell me to avoid dark alleys? Maybe beer didn't make me as smart as I had first thought.

When I looked over my shoulder, I could see someone on a bicycle quietly rolling toward me around the corner of the gas station. And when I looked forward, I saw another biker coming around the other corner of the station. This was not good. I couldn't outrun them when I had wheels. What chance did I have on foot?

All I could do was try, so I sprinted directly away from the station and down the side street. The bikers had to negotiate past a cement barrier that had been placed behind the

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station to prevent cars from using it as a through street. That gave me a few seconds to gain some distance on them. My only chance was to run between houses, cutting through yards, and trying to dodge around obstacles that would slow down the bikers. I had to avoid open spaces. If I ran into a field or a parking lot, they would have no trouble running me down.

I ran as fast as I could. Dodging around houses kept the speed down a little which was good for me. I was not a runner and had never been one. Now I was a 49-year-old college professor who smoked a pipe. The hundred yard dash would have taken me a week to complete.

As I ran through one back yard after another, dogs were starting to bark and I could see lights going on in the backrooms of the houses on the street. If I could just keep away from the bikers until somebody called the cops, I might survive this experience after all.

Then I stopped. I was facing a board fence and could see no way past it. The bikes skidded to a stop on either side of me. My breath was coming in harsh pants and I felt a stabbing pain in my chest. I kicked out at one of the bikers and heard a sharp grunt of pain.

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Grasping the opportunity, I jumped directly onto him and he went down. Rolling over him, I staggered to my feet and started running again. Skidding around the corner of the nearest house, I nearly fell over a recycling bin filled to the brim with empty cans and bottles. I dumped it over as I went past. It made a welcome racket, a racket that was repeated when my attackers followed me around the house.

My left arm went numb and I was running with an awkward gait. I staggered across the street and stopped, leaning on a lamp pole. I was in bright light. Surely they wouldn't do anything here.

The bikers had no intention of leaving until their task was finished. They pulled up on either side of me. I couldn't breathe. The pain in my chest was unbearable. Gasping, I fell to my knees, then over onto my back. One of the bikers stood over me, then he knelt on my chest. Darkness was clouding the corners of my vision as I fought for air. He hesitated a minute, thinking perhaps that mother nature would do his job for him.

Then he decided to make sure. He brought his arm back for a vicious swipe at my neck with his switch blade. I could see his face

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clearly since he was not wearing the visored helmet. I guess he was committed to leaving no witnesses this time. Then, just as he started to swing his arm down toward my throat, I heard a sharp sound like a firecracker. The biker's face dissolved into blood and he fell directly onto me. As everything went black, I heard more shooting.

CHAPTER 19. CONCLUSION

When I woke up in the hospital, the nurse gave me some ice water and let me rest. My first visitor was Skip Cavanaugh. “It looks like you’re going to make it,” he said.

“Yep, ‘fraid so.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Most of it. But I don’t know who shot the biker. Whoever t was, I owe him a big favor.”

Skip smiled. “That would be me if it ever happened. But there is something you need to know before you start talking to people about it. We had to clean up the scene a little bit.”

“Clean it up? How much?”

“Well, we got rid of the two dead drug dealers. No one actually saw them except you. Officially, they were never there.”

“I don’t get it. Why was that necessary?”

Skip cleared his throat. “Speaking hypothetically, if a government agency was investigating a situation that involved national security, our new laws would permit a high level of discretion to be exercised by the

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relevant authorities.” He could see I was mystified. “It’s like this. Suppose a bunch of drug dealers killed a drug enforcement agent who was investigating them. The agency would be very eager to catch these guys. If the case involved a terrorist group, then the agency could skip all that stuff about warrants, keeping complete records, and reading people their rights. If we grab the terrorists, we can hold them until they get old and gray, especially if no one knows we have them.”

“Okay, I get that part. But what do drug dealers have to do with national security?”

“The case has to do with national security. The drug dealers are involved with the case, so we can do what we want.”

“You mean like moving in next to me, tapping into my computer, and listening through my walls?”

“Yes, just like that.” He grinned without any embarrassment whatsoever. “Look, Ed, at first we did not know your role in all this. We thought maybe you were with the bad guys. As soon as I figured out you were clean, I did what I could to keep the cops off of you.”

“And I appreciate it.” I hesitated, “Skip, were both the guy under my deck and Johnson DEA agents?”

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“No, just the guy under the deck. Johnson was a genuine secret service agent following up on a potential threat from a suspected terrorist organization.”

“The Fist of God.”

“Right, the Fist of God.”

“Okay, this is the loose end that’s killing me. What is the story on the Fist of God?”

This made Skip chuckle. “One of the local bible churches is tied in with home schooling. Some of their teenagers must have had too much time on their hands, so they invented an on-line role playing game in which they were fighting the US government. They were religious revolutionaries. One of their scenarios was to assassinate John Kerry.”

“You mean it was all a game?”

“Yes. The National Security Agency picked up on their email discussions from monitoring the internet for key words and phrases. At first reading, they seemed to be quite real. So, NSA alerted the secret service which sent in Johnson. The drug dealers killed him on the false premise that he was investigating them. Since it was labeled a national security case, we were able to exercise extraordinary powers to get it cleaned up.”

“What happened to the kids?”

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“We told their parents to make them quit. We also told them that the government is watching them very closely to see if they might be teaching their kids anti-American attitudes.”

“That will do a lot for their paranoia.”

He laughed. “Well, I don’t think they could get much more paranoid.”

He got serious. “Ed, you won’t be seeing me again. In fact, you never saw me. I never lived behind your place.” He gave me a pat on the shoulder. “It was nice working with you. You did pretty well, considering how much we kept you in the dark.”

“Thanks. I wish I could say I enjoyed it.”

Skip turned to go, but I stopped him. “Skip. Good luck. And take care of yourself.”

“Thanks. I always do,” he said and quietly slipped away.

After he left, a couple of women in white coats came into my room. “Hi. I’m Dr. Baker, your surgeon. This is Sarah Spivey. She was helping in the operating room.”

“Hi. I behaved okay, I hope. I don’t remember anything about the surgery.”

The two women exchanged smiles. “You were one of our most memorable patients, Mr. Schumacher. We enjoyed working on you.”

At this point, Betty burst in. She was giving

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me hugs and kisses and asking if I was alright. Dr. Baker said I appeared to be mending well, so she moved on to the next patient. She said she would check on me later. So did Nurse Spivey.

“The staffs’ bedside manners are great,” I told Betty. “Who says the quality of health care in America is poor?”

Betty gave me a funny look. “Well, you are something of a celebrity.”

“How so? Because of all the criminal activity that’s been going on around us?” No, not that. My cousin Wendy tells me that you caused quite a stir in the OR. The whole hospital is talking about it.”

“What did I do?”

She sighed. “Anesthesia does funny things to people sometimes. For some reason, a certain part of your anatomy was rock hard all through the triple bypass. The nurses enjoyed that.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault. But it reminds me that there is something we have been forgetting to do lately.”

“You’re darn right. And we should start doing it more often.”

She took my hand. “That’s what I wanted

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to tell you before all these nurses start thinking you aren't being taken care of at home. We are going to do that thing a lot more in the future."

"Why put off till tomorrow what you can do today?" I asked.

"You aren't suggesting..."

"Yes, I most certainly am. Come over here."

"You dirty old man. You're BAD."

CHAPTER 20. EPILOGUE

They let me out of rehab in time to go back to work at our jobs in Texas. A few things had changed in our lives. For one thing, Skip did such a good job ‘cleaning up’ after the case that there was no proof left concerning much of what happened to me. Since there were no drug dealers, there was no attack on me either at the river or before my heart attack. The police told Betty I had hallucinated the whole thing and that she should put me into some kind of treatment program. Betty now claimed she never met Skip Cavanaugh. Bob Johnson said the unit behind our condo was never occupied. It appeared that the only people who believed my story were the bible thumping home schoolers. Maybe they should be in treatment, too.

Betty thought maybe I had been working too hard and lost my grip on reality. She figured if I kept acting like my usual self the university would want to push me into early retirement which might be the best thing for

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me. We would settle down in Fort Atkinson year round. I would still have to work because I'd get anxious if I didn't. So I figured I'd start a little retail outlet for affordable transportation. Maybe I would buy used bicycles, import motors for them, and sell them on the cheap.

After all, what else was I going to do with that extra hundred thousand dollars?