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Knowledge is the ability to predict. A little knowledge is dangerous, of course. But dangerous to whom?

AN AGENT IN PLACE

It will be very interesting to find out whether I can write this one down and get it published. I'm asking a science-fiction writer to polish it for me, and it will go out under his by-line if only because a habit of anonymity is hard to break; but none of that should make any difference. Whatever else they have their eye on, and I know they're spread thin, they have their eye on me. There is no doubt of that.

Which sounds paranoid until you know the facts. Such as my profession, which is Special Agent, and who *they* are. They're Central Intelligence—not the CIA, though around Washington we've mostly given up trying to make the distinction; Congress can think what it likes, and our appropriation comes out of the "Miscellaneous" barrel anyhow. CIA is mostly an international net specializing in data recovery, though like everybody else they take on other jobs now and then. Central Intelligence is "specifically nonspecialist," as the Director put it once to a House Committee: we do a little of everything from spy-eye work to protective guarding, and sometimes we make a connection that somebody looking at only one area might miss. We don't get into the news much but we earn our pay. Until recently I didn't know just how thoroughly we earned our pay. But, as I said, they're spread thin. This report may have a chance of getting through. And you might like to know where our small piece of your tax dollar is going.

The Director was telling me that he had access to files "not quite as extensive as Hollywood's Central Casting, but adequate for our purposes," and I was wondering just what sort of impersonation deal I was up for, since to my knowledge I didn't look much like anybody in the news. It had to be that: why mention Central Casting otherwise?

So I slumped a little in the chair next to his desk, and took one long, sad drag on my cigarette, and said: "All right, sir. Who am I supposed to be?"

He didn't congratulate me on the deduction. He wastes very little time. "You don't like impersonation work, I take it?"

"Frankly, sir: no," I said. "You're loaded with makeup and memorization, and you have nothing to do but wait until somebody tries to pot you. It may be useful; it may even be necessary now and then; but it's depressing."

"This isn't quite the usual thing," he said. He frowned at my cigarette. He'd given me a lecture about the Surgeon General once—but only once. "There isn't much makeup, and there isn't much memory. You're going to be triggered for one phrase—we can do that under depth hypnosis, but I'll tell you what the phrase is and what your action will be; beyond that, we won't tamper with you at all."

The Director is very big on keeping things as open as he can with the rest of us. I've heard him say that we were "valued professional aides, and not chess pieces"—in that same Committee hearing. It irritates me to think about that, now.

"And nobody will try to pot me?" I said. "It *sounds* unusual."

"Well . . ." He pushed an ashtray across the desk to me and I stubbed out the cigarette. "I wouldn't quite go that far," he said. Which made matters clear, if not comforting.

"All right," I said. "So ... who's in danger? Who am I supposed to be?"

"A man named Welkin—Beer Barrel Dave Welkin," he said. "And, as for who's in danger—"

He went on with quite a speech about the election year, and everybody being in danger, the spate of assassinations in this country since 1963, the job the FBI and the Treasury men were trying to do, and the fact that we were spread so thin we couldn't cover every danger-spot or even every possible target:

"We have to confine ourselves to what we can see and know, which isn't much," he said, but I, was trying to get Beer Barrel reduced to a nickname instead of an insult. It isn't the beer anyhow, and never has been; it's the way I'm built.

By the time he was through I was calmed down enough on Beer Barrel to realize that I had never heard of anybody named Dave Welkin, with or without the descriptive pendant.

"Welkin," I said. "All right, sir. If you say so. Who is he?"

"Oh," the Director said, "he's a bum. A Bowery bum."

I didn't ask, "Why?" because I don't like wasted time either. If he'd wanted me to know why he'd have told me; he really does like to be as open as he can with us. Of course he has to decide how open that is.

All the same, as I was picking up what background there was on Beer Barrel Dave Welkin, letting my beard grow, allowing Cosmetics to skin-tone me an unattractive and very dirty gray, and getting used to the clothing, both for wear and for smell, I was trying to get the answer for myself.

All I had to go on was that the job wouldn't last over thirty days, and that the hypnotic trigger business was the phrase *Czechoslovakian boundary disputes*, which, when I heard it, was going to make me move rapidly toward whoever had said it. It was a good trigger; wandering around the Bowery I wasn't likely to hear it by accident.

I learned that Beer Barrel Dave Welkin would be held under hypnotics in a New York cubby-hole of ours, returnable after I reported in, and I learned that he had a great fondness for beer, had been on the Bowery "over five years" and was about my age, though he looked fifteen or twenty years older, and that his preferred method of panhandling was heading for crowds and bumping his way through them. He sounded as if he might have wanted to be a pickpocket if he'd been a little less bleary; as it was, he probably thought that crowds gave him more handout chances per square panhandling foot.

The trigger sounded as if I were in for a political impersonation job, but nothing else did; Beer Barrel Dave (after the first few days I got so I could hear the phrase without wincing, even inside) was hardly the type. And as far as I knew—and I think I'd know—there were no Czechoslovakian boundary disputes going on anywhere in the world, unless you count a perennial tendency toward revolt against Moscow as a boundary dispute.

I came up with quite an assortment of theories. The first notion was that I was being sent in as an agent in place—an inconspicuous type who does nothing at all until the word comes through, and then pops up from within an organization and starts wrecking it. But agents in place have tours of duty that tend to start at twenty years and go straight on up; and moving toward a person who spoke a single phrase didn't look much like helping to wreck anything. Not to mention the fact that nobody could call the collection of Bowery bums among whom Beer Barrel spent his time an organization, and even if it was it didn't look like one anybody was very anxious to overthrow.

The big question was: who would want to pot a Bowery bum? And for that I developed a variety of ingenious answers. Here are a few:

1. The bum had managed to drift by and hear part of a supersecret conversation, maybe in involving some brand-new scientific breakthrough, and couldn't be left alive to repeat it to anybody else.

Objection: super-secret conversations are seldom carried on around the Bowery, and it was doubtful that, if he'd heard anything, Beer Barrel would retain much of it for any longer than ten minutes—recoverable under hypnosis, maybe, but that implies that you know exactly who and what to look for. Improbable.

2. The bum had picked up a bit of some super-secret scientific paper, and had to be rubbed out before he could pass it on. Objection: the same as 1. To begin with, there is really very little super-secrecy going on near the Bowery. And one other question hard to answer: why would Beer Barrel hang on to the paper? If he did happen to stuff it into the one pocket of his clothing that didn't have a large hole in it, what was so tough about simply getting the paper back, and letting Beer Barrel drift on down the street? Of course, if he'd read the paper, and it was known that he'd read it, the contents might be recoverable hypnotically . . . but that chain of reasoning gets even more improbable than the previous one. No.

3. The bum was really an agent in place for somebody else. That made a certain amount of superficial sense until I wondered about the thirty-day limit, and about returning Beer Barrel to the Bowery after the job was over. The usual procedure with agents in place, if discovered, is either a) watch carefully, and try to dig up the communications link and from there the rest of the apparatus, or b) dispose of immediately. This didn't fit either procedure, and I couldn't come up with any reasons why not.

4. The bum was really a being from outer space, and ...

Well, that will give you an idea. What I'd be doing impersonating a being from outer space who was impersonating a Bowery bum, for thirty days or less, I was completely unable to imagine.

And what any of these ideas, or any one of several others I dreamed up, had to do with my hypnotic trigger and response, I couldn't see at all. The thing was, as far as I could get into it, absolutely senseless; the only trouble was that we're not much given to senseless assignments.

Though that gave me a brand-new idea: suppose the whole thing were a loyalty test, designed to see how far I'd follow orders even if I didn't and couldn't understand the reasons for them ...

I've been with Central Intelligence since 1947. It was a very strange time to pull a loyalty test on me, after twenty-five years.

That was my last theory. By the time I had tossed it out I was on Third Avenue near Canal Street, and I was Beer Barrel Dave Welkin.

Three weeks went by as quickly as if they'd been decades.

You have no idea how slowly time passes for a Bowery bum who doesn't drink very much. I spent all of the time I wasn't sleeping in a scratch room or an alley, or panhandling for small change in the cheap bars that straggle all the way up to Fourteenth Street, but I did a lot less beer-drinking than I seemed to be doing. I couldn't afford to be too hazy when the trigger came, or I'd miss hearing it, or be unable to move quickly, or something. And there are a lot of simple techniques for getting rid of a drink without making it obvious you're doing so—especially around the Bowery, where getting rid of a drink is just not what people are looking to see happen.

I found a lot of crowds, mostly at the uptown end of my run: the Bowery meets both N.Y.U. and the East Village up there, and Stuyvesant Town is only two blocks away from Fourteenth and Third, so I made my way through a variety of student rallies, young-politics meetings, just plain political rallies and an assortment of rush-hours, mostly evening: Beer Barrel didn't usually get up too early.

There was, of course, one candidate most of the students and youngsters favored; you know all about that. Normally, maybe he'd have left the whole area off his speech route, but he needed some big youth-appeal and student-appeal footage for the evening TV shows, so he scheduled an appearance at Union Square—the uptown western edge of my daily travels—for a Friday evening.

Naturally, there was a crowd, a nice big one.

Naturally, Beer Barrel Dave was on hand.

And just as naturally, that speech went on for fifteen minutes and hit the sentence I was, by then, half-expecting:

"It is not in our interest—in the interest of the people of this country—to charge out to settle every possible disagreement in the world, from possible arguments over Japanese fishing rights to putative Czechoslovakian boundary disputes—"

And I was triggered. I started for the candidate a good deal faster than Beer Barrel Dave was used to moving.

Of course I never reached him. Somebody potted me instead.

I woke up in our New York cubby-hole, hospital section—where the original Beer Barrel had been stacked away while I worked his tour. I had a large ragged hole in one shoulder, and a variety of bruises and abrasions from hitting the pavement and being slightly trampled in the rush to collect the character who'd tried to shoot the candidate. He was collected, naturally, before he could get off another shot, and a small bag of psychiatrists is still going around and around about whether or not he's sane, or legally insane, or what. The one sure thing—and it is sure: our section checked it out, and we don't report what we don't know for certain—is that he was an individual, acting entirely on his own, with a specific grudge against this one candidate.

So I found out what my assignment had been. Bodyguard for the candidate, against an assassination attempt.

For a little while, this made no sense at all to me. You've probably ironed out all the wrinkles, but it took me a little longer, being under medication while the shoulder put itself back together.

Obviously, we can see into the future.

We can't see very far, and we can't see anything but the specific matter we try to see (or, first, there'd have been no attempt at all, and, second, there would *never* be a successful attempt—I hope; but wait around). But we can look through time and see a tiny piece of the near future.

Which is changeable.

Somebody saw that the shot was going to be fired right after that *boundary dispute*, and that it would hit the candidate unless deflected. Now, guards are one thing: people are used to guards, what with the President and his Secret Service and all. But a bulletproof shield, completely surrounding the candidate, is something else again. A lot of people would feel it made the candidate look like a coward, or somehow made a personal appearance no better than a TV spot, or . . . anyhow, politicians and their managers feel that way even about the breast-height combination shield-and-podium gimmick that's now being used here and there. I've heard them. A whole bulletproof shield? Ridiculous, they'd say. Lose the election right then and there.

(Which may or may not be logical, or reasonable. But politicians and political managers aren't logical or reasonable except in spots—thereby making them fair copies of the rest of us.)

No, the only acceptable deflection for a bullet is a special agent, I suppose. Somebody, maybe, took a look and saw that, in one possible future, I would be just where I was in the crowd, and I started moving toward the candidate at just the right time. Then matters were carefully gimmicked so that I was set up in the crowd (apparently just that much gave them a future which put me in the right spot inside that crowd) and started moving on cue, at speed.

Sure. Somebody juggled alternatives. Let the bullet hit its mark; let it hit me instead; bulletproof the candidate (out, unacceptable, ridiculous); get the assassin out of the way beforehand; arrest him on the spot with his weapon—and, out of that bag and one or two more minor possibilities (maybe in one future the bullet hit some *really* innocent bystander), somebody settled for me. Beer Barrel Dave Welkin, the human target. The fat and tattered X marking the safest spot. I think I know why.

Let's say that the future involved a successful assassination. If it's going to be changed, two things have to be considered, and the first of these, simply, is: what's the least possible change required? Clearly, you don't want to add in any more factors than you have to, because every new factor has new results of its own, and so forth . . . so you find a real Bowery bum, someone who would legitimately be in that crowd anyhow. And you replace him (keeping the bum in cold storage, so to speak, and putting him back on the street in a slightly damaged condition, with a hole in his memory due to a month under hypnotics—but a hole in a bum's memory is just not all that unusual, especially after he's been, theoretically, shot at and trampled some); that way the bum's life goes on with minimal interruption and no stir anywhere, and the replacement is a setup to intercept the bullet. Given a shut mouth and a career of other odd actions for the replacement type, anyhow, you get the least possible amount of change.

The second thing to be considered, I'm afraid, is that you want to keep your time-viewing top secret. (Which is why you don't even *mention* a bulletproof wraparound to the candidate's people—not even if one of them, in a fit of political insanity, might agree.) Hauling in the assassin beforehand needs explanation—in these days of maximum courtroom civil liberty, it needs a *lot* of explanation. Grabbing him with his gun, on the spot, needs explaining, too: it's hard to say that he got careless and made it visible too soon, when he did his shooting, with that short-barreled .38, through the pocket of his jacket, and never showed the gun at all. (And maybe, in the future or futures that carried that alternative, the guy managed to get off a shot or two while being grabbed . . . and hit somebody more consequential than old Beer Barrel.)

No: being able to see the future, and wanting to keep the ability secret, is the only explanation that fits the facts.

When I got out of my hospital bed I asked the Director about it. "Our job is doing our job," he said,

"not wondering about it."

Which may be true. But ... whoever can see into the future, right now, in the United States, is also involved in changing it. For the better? That depends . . . what do you mean by *better*? In this country, it's supposed to be the people who do the deciding; but if somebody is rigging the dice by choosing his own favorites among possible futures . . . (See what I mean? Are you sure that this Somebody would *never* allow a successful assassination?) . . . then Somebody is doing enough deciding, all by himself, to deserve that capital letter. And that is an idea I don't like at all.

The Director knows how I think about public knowledge and public decision-making: my dossier's on file, and has been for twenty-five years. And he knows I know about time-viewing, too. So, no matter how thin observers are spread, I know that whoever, or Whoever, does the viewing, in Central Intelligence or further up the line, has an eye on me.

But maybe not all the time—and not very far into the future.

And just maybe, when I come to think of it, the viewers, too, want the rest of us to know that such a thing exists and is being used—and picked me for the impersonation job at least partly because they knew I *would* do something like this. Letting the news out this way looks to me like doing it with a minimal amount of change ...

I hope that's it, I really do; it would show that, up there in the higher echelons, there is as much faith in the people as I hope there is, and think there had better be. But we'll find out ...

I'm writing this four months after the event. It will be very interesting, as I've said, to see if it gets through.