

Unsolved Mystery

Wil A Emerson

Murder comes easy for me. Either I see an opportunity to advance an agenda, strike an agreement and follow orders or I go the traditional route and kill to right a wrong. A snake in the grass or a soldier? Doesn't a farmer strike with a shovel to chop off the head of a venomous beast?

Not long after my tenth year as a pro, I was asked to alter the daily routine of a member of congress. The well-schooled but non-conforming fellow often referred to himself as Stardust. Fairy tale believers thought it meant he could make dreams come true. As his following grew to exponential numbers, the down and outs on the street, along with adversaries, understood why he often used slang to describe his endeavors. 'I'm lit', a favorite. Or 'busted' when the polling numbers didn't work his way. When a bill he promoted got overturned, he'd say 'my frenemy let me down'. Somehow in the end, it all worked in his favor.

Saved by a recount, he retained his congressional seat. Then his nefarious bill got tweaked at the last minute. Victory.

Among other things, a well-healed group of opposites were aware this designated fellow was 'bi-polar'. His moods shifted like the tides. It wasn't from eating jam and jelly. For the record, his family became tremendously wealthy by selling a variety of jams and jellies on the international market.

What the public didn't recognize was the fact this notorious family had paid for their son's seat in Congress by aiding transformational political zealots who wanted nothing more than to change the face of the United States and American democracy. Campaign reform, they called it.

The opposition knew why and how this dynamic, dangerous family intended to gain power. One mayor, one governor, one congressman. Godly men do the right thing...and others just follow a false promise.

So, I signed a contract with the opposition. Not because I had it out for Stardust, not that I hated Mr. King of Stardust Jams and Jellies—it was because I hated drugs and knew most of those imported jelly jar boxes were packed with heroin grown in distant lands from which the family had their origin. Thus, in the underworld, in their very lucrative business circle, they were the Kings of Stardust. Their drugs had caused far too many problems on our streets.

It seemed like the right thing to do: stop this Congressman's dirty habits and improve his overall health condition, too.

I didn't hesitate when the designated time arrived. I dressed for the occasion, not my usual attire, either. A simple outfit, worn by dozens on the street. Black and gray running gear, white and black sneakers, sweat band, ear plugs and drug store sunglasses. Run, I can do. Jog or walk and observe my surroundings within a moving crowd.

Two pops. Four blocks from Stardust's condo as he waited for an Uber driver. Discreet. I'm a

pro. Trained by experts, work for experts.

How many trash cans along a city street? Enough to toss a muzzled weapon. Next block discard black and gray shirt, bright red tee underneath. Alley, pull on the shorts stashed earlier in the day.

Only two minor incidents had the potential to interfere in the stealth get away: first, another jogger, similar black and gray spandex, treading in the opposite direction, who tripped and staggered to recover. I lent a helping hand, pulled him to upright position. A quick thank you. But I remembered every nuance of his face, his hands, what he wore. Ray-Bans from the Ferrari collection. Habit of mine to mentally catalogue every encounter. Second intrusion: a dog walker, three blocks from my apartment. The red shirt must have triggered the bulldog demeanor. It growled. I skirted around the nasty brown and white, four-legged creature.

The owner, female, gray curly hair, queen size blue jeans, green tee-shirt with daisies on it, called out, "Oh, Oscar is very friendly."

I decided, why not. Not wanting to be perceived as an unfriendly stranger, a suspicious one due to what had occurred not too far from this meet and greet spot. Safety first. Don't attract unwarranted attention. I returned her smile and offered the back of my hand to let the mutt take a sniff. I'd have kicked the dog to high heaven if it bit me but that might have caused more attention than I wanted.

So, as I jogged the last blocks to home, I planted pictures of the encountered people in my mind. Perhaps one of my back-ups. Accident or intended. I might never know.

After the event, I went home and fell into a deep coma. Nothing to aid me, just the satisfaction of a job well done. It happens that way. An honest person knows the difference between duty and global destruction.

When the doorbell rang, I adjusted my pillow to ignore the intrusion. I'd never had a visitor. The wrong address, quick finger, mistake. A drop-in? Couldn't be. No long-lost friends would track me down in this unlikely neighborhood. If anyone had received an invitation to foster a friendship, it had been in the far distant past.

Another adjustment and I was back to hugging the pillow.

But, like the mailman, the doorbell rang twice. I glanced at my watch. Not even midnight. I needed at least seven hours straight to feel refreshed, spiritually renewed, enough to tackle the day. And whatever job awaited me. Could be immediate or a many weeks delay.

But then the mind I'd groomed, nurtured to be on alert and super speculative, wasn't trained to let go easily. Late UPS delivery? Impossible. Like a data collection system, neurons buzz and dendrites whirl. It took a few more seconds to focus on the intrusion and conclude there might be a matter of importance on the other side of my door. Another ring, bing, ding.

Okay, grab a cover up, glasses on. Enough. Get rid of the intruder.

Like a few other renters in my apartment building, I'd hung a green wreath on the door. Picked up at Hobby Lobby, it represented the 'friendly' neighbor persona. But I'd never had the occasion to consider the effect it had on the inside of the door.

To my chagrin, I suddenly realized I'd created a problem. The peephole was covered and left no visual access to the person only inches away from a straining eye.

A big mistake. Not that I feared anything, but awareness is preparation for the unexpected.

There wasn't a single reason in this world or the next for anyone remotely connected to my professional job or day job to be at my door. Logic worked at full capacity. The person whose knuckles rested on the wood, who wrapped and fingered the little button could only be there for one reason. Trouble. Capital T.

I braced my back against the wall, next to the door jam and waited a few seconds. To add to the suspense, I deftly removed my slipper and pressed it lightly but with surety on the door. As if I'd approached and leaned into the peep hole.

A nanosecond and two ping, pings. Silencer. Rapid fire. Right through the peep hole.

I heard the scuffle of feet in the hallway. The sound carried to the stairwell at the north end closest to the subway station, closest to throngs of people out for late night pleasure. An easy exit and one would be lost in the hoopla of frivolity.

I slide down to the floor, my palms sweaty, my heart rate at NASCAR speed. The attack nearly shattered the essence of my Charlotte, North Carolina upbringing. If you lived an honest life, worked hard, did the right thing, you'd be protected by a higher power. Like Bubba Wallace on a winning day, though, I was relieved and happy beyond belief that I'd followed my instincts, mimicked an eyeball gander with the shoe trick and denied my intended assassin's victory.

There wasn't much I could do to right the injustice of the moment. By making even a small gesture, like calling the police, my cover would be blown. I did the next best thing. Altered the tell-tale signs of the event, dug the pellets out of the wall, patched the spot with some toothpaste and baking soda, hung a picture over the area and went back to bed.

I would still get in a full seven hours of necessary slumber if I cut breakfast short.

The next morning took a little ingenuity to not make it obvious the assailant had failed at the mission. Like the professional I am, I rearranged my hair, adapted a style with different clothes, a cane, orthopedic shoes, and a small oxygen tank and snuck out the door. My apartment is near the stairwell, so I gingerly took a flight down, walked the length of a lower-level hall, took another stairwell down to the next floor, walked to the middle of the hall and pushed the elevator button. At six in the morning, few people wandered those halls or stairwells. It made walking in and out of the confines undetected very easy. Unlike many in my building, a multitude of techies working at home, I was a steady on-sight employee.

But I did have to be on high alert. The unthinkable had happened. Was this revenge for my earlier dastardly deed? I had taken a human's life. Everyone involved in the process had taken great care to not leave a trail. Not the slightest, most remote, unlikely piece of evidence left at the scene. There was a designated sweep-up crew before the police arrived. If the weapon was found during the investigation, all recognizable ID had been destroyed. Preparation had taken several months, coordination, tracking, security measures of the highest level. Approval had come from the top.

Why was I chosen for this particular job? Because I had an untraceable profile, a persona

depleted of wrongdoing. It worked so well, it afforded me and the organization the opportunity to perform a string of duties as never before imagined.

But someone decided, I concluded during my unfashionable, disabled person's walk to my workplace, I needed to be either eradicated or used to teach a lesson. The intention had been to murder me. Murder the professional who had just assassinated a member of Congress. Murder the professional who had erased the vile person who led a duplicitous life, who had no concern for his constituents or any other American citizens. However, what I had done was essentially an act of treason or at the very least, a federal crime.

Caution, as never before, needed to be my best friend.

I entered the walkway that led to a seldom used back door in a small garden area behind St. Cecelia's rectory. Yes, I'd kept an eye on my back even though the street was empty as I shuffled along the two blocks to the sanctuary. I unlatched the bolt, twisted the handle, and then slide the key into the keyhole. Done in that sequence or the door would not open. Rigged by a special locksmith who also worked for the organization. Inside, I slipped into a small closet, pulled the cord for the ceiling light, squirmed out of the frumpy apparel, salt and pepper wig and folded all the items neatly to store them in the footlocker which had a combination lock. After smoothing out my day wear, I pulled out a pocket comb and rearranged my hair. Normal attire, ready for the day.

At some point, the garments in the footlocker would be taken out and replaced by another nonthreatening, uninviting, unassuming outfit. I often delighted in the artistic ingenuity of my clever, unknown dresser. Bless their soul, everyone has something to contribute in the effort to keep the United States of America a free and decent place to live. I can't reveal all the personas assumed by wearing these intriguing outfits, but imagine what you'd see at any time on a major city street. Where every type of entertainment is available along with every type of cuisine, every fad to buy or sell, every religion to represent. So many assumed characters.

Before sitting at my desk, I fully opened the slated blind over the largest window in the office. After each assignment, I adjusted the individual slats of the blind to an exact specification to reveal what message needed to be conveyed to my team. At the day job, I signaled either task completed, general communication, pertinent information, help, or SOS. Six modes of transmission.

This time, due to the late-night incident, I debated what should be passed on to the higher ups. My task master, of course, should be first on the chain of alert. But I had to consider the risk. What if I was no longer deemed worthy of the required tasks? With all the information I carried in my mind, would I just be retired to become a veteran of these *special forces*?

Who could I trust? Mistake number one. I'd never formed a cohesive bond.

Mistake number two. I didn't plan ahead for the personal long gray road. What would I do when nerves gave way, sight filtered through milky gray eyes, foggy recollection or when heaven's reward, the overwhelming goal was reached, and pockets were full of money? What if the United States of America was no longer a target for the zealots, idealists of reform, the dangerous power-brokers whose only desire is total control of the world. What happened then?

In this select institution, of which most my adult years had been spent, where did all those old

warriors go? Retirement on a beach or permanently retired?

As I studied options, it came to mind that, other than an occasional encounter with my task master, I had no real knowledge of who my superiors were, their rank and file in this clandestine service—or their routine employment. Not all were doctors, lawyers, business moguls, in a work environment where they acquired retirement benefits and lived securely ever after. What happened to the undercover librarian, metal welder, bus driver, teacher, the grocery store clerk, those with full-time jobs but at a moment's notice could be reassigned?

It was known, after being vetted, proven trustworthy, one could achieve what they desired in the organization if time and good graces were on their side. Move higher on the chain of command? A fellow professional with a strong constitution and expert-level talents, would be given priority when a call for advancement came. Those select people were then supposed to be protected with lifetime status. But what about those, such as myself, who preferred to remain at the expert level? Those who wanted to be embedded in the web and full of critical information but didn't sign a lifetime commitment?

At present, during the day, I performed as an assistant in a rather small rectory office. An inconsequential assistant who on any given day could/would be moved to a different location, adapt to a new boss, and still provide crack-shot expertise as the organization deemed necessary.

Was I really a critical member of the team? Or had my experience become the sword in my side? Too much knowledge, a great risk?

Whoever rang the doorbell the night before could have been of the same mind-set.

Beware. Caution must be taken.

More questions loomed. Why now? Outlived my usefulness? Retirement pending? As required, no matter the assignment, my routine had to remain stable.

My day boss rarely arrived before eight-thirty which gave me time to alert my task master via the code method about the recent event and if a call came through after my signal, I would attend to that undercover business. If there were an emerging problem, I'd receive a response within a half hour. If I displayed the abominable SOS, help would arrive in less than five minutes. Lucky for me, I had never tested the extraordinary service

During the waiting period, I tuned out and switched into a form of complete concentration, the opposite of mindlessness. Every aspect of mental control was used to train this invaluable organ, gray and white matter, which so many individuals neglected. I thrived on constant adjustment and training. As exercise, I played out previous tasks performed. Each step of preparation, execution and the finale revisited. Around each curve at an exact speed, eye on the counter-intuitive obstacles, also alert to tailgaters. Out for the win. Nerves of steel, ready, aim, fire. No mistakes.

If no response arrived from my task master, I could then review the calendar of events for my day boss. Assume the ordinary and do the work for what I was paid.

But on this day, this very unusual day, the day after a congressman had expired by my hand, I had an unresolved dilemma. It had to be dealt with. Which made me hesitate a couple minutes longer than usual.

What exact signal should I send to my task master? General communication? Pertinent information? Help? SOS seemed far too radical. No harm had come my way but...and it was a big what if.

Who could I trust? I decided to go with number two signal. Task completed. Simple. No red flags raised. The mode: Two of the slats angled in the opposite direction. No specific slats, just two. Random mishap for the outdated mode of limiting light into the old rectory office. A rustic form of air-conditioning. When I first sat down at that desk, I would have appealed to my benefactor to replace the hideous blinds. Funds limited in the church coffer for updates.

And now the thirty-minute wait. Eyes on the clock, mind centered on routine. I decided to forgo the review of my previous accomplishment. That vivid picture would remain for some time. Savor it later. I went back to an earlier task, performed two months before. It had required more dexterity, more clever concealment, more diversionary tactics. The target wasn't a political figure but a member of the spoilers. In an appealing, more feminine attire, I'd carried out the task. That, too, had been risky, when factoring in no extra cover for the weapon I carried. The steps used to achieve the required outcome were firmly fixed, like gorilla glue, in my mind.

Tick, tock, tick. Thirty minutes went in a flash.

Because I had not taken time for breakfast, I went to our break room, a converted office space used on occasion for counseling sessions. A nice tufted blue couch, an antique table with wrought iron legs and four high-backed wooden chairs with blue and white checked pads on the seat. All donated items from a generous parishioner. A bookshelf and a gray metal file cabinet were in a corner. On top of the file was our eight-cup coffee pot and a wooden wicker basket that held the accouterments for the more adventurous coffee aficionado. Water for the coffee maker was carried from a utility room at the end of the corridor.

I or my boss brought in the supplies, no schedule as to who or when, as the need arose. One or the other refilled the basket with creamers, flavored syrups, sugar substitutes and an assortment of designer coffee brands. Donated, of course. First arrival brewed the coffee during the week, last to leave washed the cups. On the weekend, I had no knowledge of who did what but I knew the room was often used. On Monday, coffee was still in the pot and several unwashed cups or paper plates sat on the scarred table. Why be concerned about who left it there? It felt good when the room was tidy, so clean-up satisfied my thimble-size domestic need and offered a few minutes reprieve from phone calls, calendar, or ledgers.

On more than one occasion, I found the day boss taking a nap on the couch. I'd never be one to deny him quiet time. The lord he answered to knew what had been required of him during the wee hours, rain or shine. As a matter of fact, I never inquired as to whose funeral he attended, the weddings he performed, the hospital visits he made. His calling; to each his own.

While in the coffee room, I heard the rattle of his office door. Earlier than usual, I thought, but went about my chore. I waited for the coffee to brew and rummaged through the first drawer of the cabinet file to see if any cookies or treats had been stored away. Those items were seldom left in sight. Temptations in a sugary form led to an increase in his waistline, he said too often. The food chain was never ending, though, as matrons of the church seemed to be on a constant mission to

nurture the faith leader who stood between them and the pearly gates of heaven. I gathered by my timeline as his employee, if this continued, a few rungs on the ladder to heaven would collapse by undue stress if strict avoidance wasn't practiced.

Preacher, I am not, though. Everyone left to their own devices or vices. I just wanted one cookie or, perhaps, a donut to provide a little sustained power.

A bag of luscious home-mades, the bag itself, was caught between the first drawer tract and the drawer below, so I fiddled to unleash it. I smelled pecans and peanut butter. Would this be a double lucky find? A few jiggles, wiggles and the second drawer slide out. Ready to grasp the zip lock bag and breathe a sigh of relief, I was halted by the sight beneath the bag. Resting between two files in the second drawer was the butt of a black metal weapon.

I know my weapons and while I would never pick up an unknown firearm to investigate its lethal potential, loaded or unloaded, I also knew not to leave fingerprints behind. This was not my business. Perhaps the day boss felt justified in defending himself. Although a hidden gun wasn't much of a deterrent to crime, this wasn't my business.

Hunger pains needed to be satisfied. I picked up the goody bag and gently closed the drawer. The light on the coffee pot blinked green so I added sweet-and-lo to a large mug and filled it to the brim with the dark brew. Two bites of the sweet treat and I was ready to move on. Two steps and I heard the phone ring. Someone in need. The day had officially begun.

The phone abruptly stopped ringing. Unheard of. The boss never answered the phone. A cardinal rule. It could set him back an hour if the person on the other end had a tale of woe to share. My job, one of many, was to be the screener.

I heard a voice and shook my head. Time to juggle meetings.

As I reviewed his schedule, I finished the delicacy, rested back in my desk chair, and sipped on the delicious coffee, a brand sent via express mail from Vermont by a wealthy parishioner. This sanctuary leader had good taste buds and appreciated a nice gift. Especially, coffee, baked goods and whatever other delicacies that kept his waistline in a constant distended state. Happy man. Bless his soul.

However, I still had a serious problem playing havoc in the back of my mind. Two slugs through the peephole at my apartment. Someone after me.

Who could I trust?

I needed another cookie. So, I went back to the break room, munched on one and then pocketed another for a later time. I happened to glance at my watch again. Exactly eight-thirty, the time when day boss usually entered his office.

Ah, but he had already arrived. Okay, habits formed are meant to be broken.

I entered my office and sat at my desk in the high-backed wood chair, a donated relic from the past. The phone rang and before I could push the on button, it stopped. The day boss taking another call? Wonders never ceased. And then I looked at the window. The largest window in the room, the one with the blind that conveyed my recent message. The slats were now a new variation. My number two signal, *task completed*, had been changed. Someone had deliberately adjusted the

blind over the largest window in my office to the number three signal. Three in a downward angle. In my organization it only meant one thing, Pertinent Information.

WTF. Another topic? Who altered the blind?

Under any other circumstance, I would have concluded it had been done by a shift in the air. If not, a ghost had altered the air flow. But in my profession, there are no coincidences.

Beware. Caution. The opposition at work?

No mistake about it, the window covering with its separated cords, open, close, adjust height, had been altered. Pertinent Information?

I slowly rose from the chair, took a deep breath, and went to the doorway, a quick peek toward the boss's office. Two voices. I pressed against the wall and started to move stealthily down to the first exit door. I turned just in time to see my day boss, dressed as usual in his black pants and white shirt with the black collar, come from his office and stop in the middle of the hall.

"Good morning," he said. His most chipper voice.

"And to you, too," I said. Should I stay or should I go? Never blow your cover: high on the top ten of a long list of rules. Very close to the top. Safety first, sits as number one. Fight or flight, number two, then a matter of circumstances.

"A little off schedule," he said. He looked at the watch on his wrist.

Was he lying, covering up? "Five minutes at the most," I said.

"Not sure you were in." He stepped toward his door.

A strange comment I thought. Although he seldom greeted me on his arrival, I usually made a point to acknowledge him after he'd settled at his desk for a few minutes. Habit, nothing more. And then I'd be right back on the phone. If he were unusually late, he still would have settled behind his desk and greeted me only on my approach.

And then his office door opened. We both turned at the sound, the appearance. Cookie lady, the matron nurturer who supplied the sweet treats. The chubby matron who was known to frequent the parish Sunday services and hall social gatherings, one of the most devoted members of the church. The one member who did her best to make sure the faith leader had a full, round belly.

"Mrs. Lafferty, an early morning pleasure."

She looked at him and then her dark eyes turned on me. Suddenly open, wide, surprised like a deer caught in the headlights, as if she had seen a ghost. No mistake about it.

"Good morning, Mrs. Lafferty," I said. "Thanks for answering the phone earlier." I smiled.

I had to give her credit; she didn't overreact. She just nodded as the color drained from her face.

It had been a clever disguise, the one she wore on the street. And the added bulldog as a confirmation of her status. A clever prop. Unique.

Remember, I never forget a face. Never. A talent I didn't share with my trainers or the public. No professional reason to do so.

A decision had to be made. Leave immediately or resolve a dire situation. I had been discovered,

tracked by the opposition. They, she in particular, had failed the mission.

I decided to go about the expected routine and left the two *faithful* friends in the hallway, went back to my office and adjusted the slats one more time. SOS. I walked nonchalantly to the small break room, opened the second drawer of the file cabinet and, drew out the black metal weapon. A Bonds Arm Derringer. Yes, I know my weapons. I held it behind my back for safety reasons.

A few more steps and I was at my day boss's office door. I smiled, fired. Pop, pop, pop. Loud, no means to silence the Derringer, and stepped back. The faithless matron fell flat on her traitor face. My day boss made the sign of the cross.

"Have a nice day, Father. I actually did this for your safety." And then I left the room. Went to the front entrance of the historical neighborhood church and got into the blue sedan idling at the curb. As promised, they did respond in less than five minutes. A lot less than five.

Gone, gone, gone. Out of the picture. On to another location.

The incident received a lot of media coverage. A hideous murder took place in the once quiet neighborhood. Church relics had gone untouched, the murderous thief took the poor box, though. A representation of how disenfranchised people, ravaged by drugs, were infiltrating our United States of America's streets. Killed the innocent to steal donations that probably only amounted to a few hundred dollars.

The opposition was in a tight place. Too much hoop la about the demise of one of their own would bring in a lot of unwanted investigators. The faith leader, with his black pants, white shirt and black collar, would be transferred in the near future. Publicity, good or bad, can be too much for any institution to bear.

How I'd blown my cover never came to light. Relocated to a sunnier location and with new, certified credentials, I found the new day job a little more interesting than the previous one. As a copy editor for a small newspaper, the written word does become a sword. The pay isn't very sufficient but a few letters, lines here and there can alter the intent of an article. My nature thrives on doing the right thing.

They tell me, via messenger, there's a possibility I'll be given a higher rank in the organization. Something to consider.

Time catching up with me? It has been more than ten years of intermittent stress. It can wreak havoc on the eyes, this professional work I've done. No glasses needed, yet. Perhaps in the future, a professional instructor in the organization will fit my needs. Let another generation solve the problem if it still exists.

Are instructors allowed to retire? Or is the only way out permanent dismissal by someone who believes in the importance of protecting democracy? The reality is, I carry with me from job-to-job extensive knowledge on how the face of this organization operates. Am I still a valued employee or a potential risk?

Then it hit me. Had my cover really been blown? Was it the opposition who rang the apartment doorbell, ring, ding, ding on that one exceptional night? Or a fellow professional?

Unsolved mystery. A lot to ponder while waiting for the next assignment.

