

For a guy who killed people for a living, he was just about the most boring bastard I ever saw.

I had been tailing him for two days, as he made his way from Woodstock, Illinois, where he owned an antiques shop on the quaint town square, to...well, I didn't know where yet.

So far it had been every little town—on a circuitous route taking us finally to Highway 218—with an antiques shop, where he would go in and poke around and come out with a few finds to stow in the trunk of his shit-brown Pontiac Bonneville.

If it hadn't been for the explosion of red hair with matching beard that made his head seem bigger than it was, he would have been a human bowling pin, five-foot-eight of flab in a gray quilted ski jacket. He wore big-frame orange-lensed glasses both indoors and out, his nose a potato with nostrils and zits, his lips thick and purple. That this creature sometimes sat surveillance himself seemed like a joke.

I was fairly certain he was on his way to kill somebody—possibly somebody in Iowa, because that was the state we'd been cutting down on the vertical line of Highway 218. Right now we were running out of Iowa and the flat dreary landscape was threatening to turn into Missouri.

Soon there would be fireworks stands—even though it was crisp November and the Fourth of the July a moot point—and people would suddenly speak in the lazy musical tones of the South, as if the invisible line on the map between these Midwestern states was the Mason-Dixon.

Some people find this accent charming. So do I, if it's a buxom wench with blonde pigtailed getting out of her bandana blouse and cut-off jeans in a hayloft. Otherwise, you can have it.

Right now my guy was making a stop that looked like a problem. Turning off and driving into some little town to check out an antiques shop was manageable. No matter how small that town was, there was always somewhere I could park inconspicuously and keep an eye on Mateski (which was his name—Mateski, Ronald Mateski...not exactly Bond, James Bond).

But when he pulled off and then into the gravel lot of an antiques mini-mall on the edge of a town, I had few options. Pulling into the lot myself wasn't one of them, unless I was prepared to get out and go browsing with Mateski.

Not that there was any chance he'd make me. I had stayed well back from him on the busy two-lane, and when he would stop to eat at a truck stop, I would either sit in my car in the parking lot, if that lot were crowded enough for me to blend in, or take a seat in the trucker's section away from the inevitable booth where Mateski had set down his big ass.

This time I had no choice but to go in and browse. Had there been a gas station and mini-mart across the way, I could have pulled in there. But this was a tin-shed antiques mall that sat near a cornfield like a twister had plopped it down.

Mateski's penchant was primitive art and furniture—apparently it was what sold well for him back in rustic Woodstock. He didn't have his truck with him (a tell that he wasn't *really* out on a buying trip), so any furniture would have to be prime enough to spend shipping on; but he did find a framed oil that he snatched up like he'd found a hundred-dollar bill on the pavement—depicting a winter sunset that looked like your half-blind grandmother painted it.

I stopped at stalls with used books and at one I picked up a few Louis L'Amour paperbacks I hadn't read yet, making sure I was still browsing when he left. Picking him up again would be no problem. He'd be getting back on Highway 218 and heading for somewhere, probably in Missouri. Hannibal maybe. Or St. Louis.

But when I got back on the road, I thought I'd lost him. Then I spotted his mud-spattered Bonneville at a Standard pump, said, "Fuck," and took the next out-of-sight illegal U-turn I could to go back.

When I got there, he was inside paying. I could use some gas myself, so I turned my dark green Ford Pinto over to the attendant and went into the restaurant side of the small truck stop and took a piss. Mateski was gone when I got out, which was fine. I paid for my gas, bought gum and a Coke, and hit

the road again, picking him up soon, always keeping a couple cars between us.

This is just how exciting yesterday and today had been. Not the Steve McQueen chase in *Bullitt*. But despite his fat ass and his thing for lousy art, Mateski was a dangerous guy. That he usually worked the passive side of a two-man contract team didn't mean he hadn't killed his share himself. The Broker had always insisted that the passive side of a duo had to take the active role once out of every four jobs. Keep your hand in. Use it or lose it.

The Broker had been the middleman through whom I used to get my assignments. I much preferred the active role, coming in for a day or two and handling the wet work, rather than sitting for a couple of weeks in cars and at surveillance posts taking detailed notes as to habits and patterns of a target.

Don't get me wrong. I don't enjoy killing. I just don't mind. It's something I learned to do overseas, as a sniper, where I developed the kind of dispassionate attitude needed for that kind of work. Killing is a necessary evil, as they say, although I don't know that it's all that evil in a lot of cases. War and self-defense, for instance.

On the other hand, there was one notorious asshole in the trade who specialized in torture. I mention him in passing now, but eventually it will have some importance. File it away.

As for me, my name is unimportant, but when I first started killing people for money—not counting Vietnam—I worked through the Broker. This tall, slender, dapper, distinguished-looking man of business, who might have been a banker or a CEO, recruited people like me, who had unwittingly learned a trade in the employ of Uncle Sam. He was something of a pompous ass—for example, he called me Quarry, which was a sort of horseshit code name, derived from my supposed coldness ("Hollow like carved-out rock," he said once) and also ironic, since the targets were *my* quarry.

So Broker's people that I worked with called me "Quarry" and I got used to it. On occasion I even used it as the last name of a cover identity, and as it happens, this was one of those occasions. John R. Quarry, according to my Wyoming driver's license, Social Security and Mastercard. So for our purpose here, that name will do as well as any.

I should probably clue you in a little about me. I was closer to thirty than forty, five ten, one hundred-sixty-five pounds, short brown hair, but not military short. Kept in shape, mostly through swimming. Handsome enough, I suppose, in a bland, unremarkable way. When was this? Well, Reagan hadn't been president long enough for his senility to show (much), and everybody was hurting from the recession.

Well, actually, I wasn't. Hurting. I lived quietly, comfortably and alone in an A-frame cottage on Lake Paradise near Geneva, Wisconsin. I had no one woman, but the resort area nearby meant I was rarely lonely. I had a small circle of friends who thought I sold veterinary medicine, but really I was semi-retired from the killing business.

"Semi" because I still kept my hand in, but not in the old way. After the Broker betrayed me and I got rid of him, I sort of inherited what today would be called a database, but back then was just a small pine file cabinet. Within it was what was essentially a list of over fifty names of guys like me, who had worked for the Broker—detailed info on each, photos, addresses, down to every job they'd gone on.

Since I was essentially out of work, after killing the Broker, I'd had an intriguing idea. I could see how I could use the Broker's file, and keep going, in a new way, on my own terms. After destroying the information on myself, I would choose a name and travel to where that party lived and stake him or her out (a few females were on the list), then follow said party to their next job.

Through further surveillance, I would determine their target's identity, approach that target, and offer to eliminate the threat. For a healthy sum, I would discreetly remove the hit team. For a further fee, I might—depending on the circumstances—be able to look into who had hired the hit done, and remove that threat, as well.

The risks were considerable. What if a target—approached with a wild story from a stranger claiming to be a sort of contract killer himself—called the authorities, or otherwise freaked out?

But I was well aware that anyone designated for death was somebody who had almost certainly done something worth dying over. Targets of hitmen tend not to be upstanding citizens, unless they are upstanding citizens with down-and-dirty secrets. And weren't they likely to be aware that they presented a problem to some powerful, merciless adversary? The kind of adversary who would be capable of such an extreme solution...?

From the start, I felt confident that such people would welcome my help. After all, their other option was to take a bullet or get hit by a car or have one of those accidental long drops off a short pier. And the fee I could charge—most people value their *own* lives highly—would mean I'd only have to take on these risky tasks perhaps a couple of times a year.

On the other hand, those "couple of times" required a huge amount of spec work. First, I always chose from the Broker's list names whose preference was passive, meaning I was guaranteeing myself a considerable amount of surveillance—but this was necessary, because if I followed the active participant to a kill, the passive half might already be in the wind, leaving a dangerous loose end. Both halves needed removal.

I had been lucky a few times, and staked out parties who within a few weeks had gone out on a job, minimizing my lay-out of time. But professionals in the killing game—again, because of the risk and the high fees—seldom take more than three or four jobs a year. At least the teams working for the Broker didn't.

That meant I could sit stakeout—renting a house across from a subject, for example, sitting in car like a damn cop drinking coffee after coffee from paper cups—for literally months. This had happened several times. So I had begun to take measures to limit my expenditure of time.

Ronald Mateski was a good example.

Once I had determined Mateski was an antiques dealer, I began to call his Woodstock shop once a week from a series of pay phones in the Geneva area. If I got Mateski, I would ask for the business hours. If I got a clerk, usually a female, I would say that I had an item I wanted to bring into the shop for Mr. Mateski to appraise—would he be around next week?

And when at last I'd been told Mr. Mateski would be gone for two weeks on a buying trip, going to estate auctions and the like, I thanked the girl, hung up, and smiled to myself...knowing that Mr. Mateski was heading out on a job.

And the length of time he'd be away meant that he was, as usual, taking the passive role.

That had meant a comparatively painless (if still painful) two days of tailing Ronald Boring Mateski to wherever the fuck he was heading—Iowa? Arkansas, God me help me?—and determining his target: the person he would be gathering information on for the active half of the team, the killer who would be arriving at some indeterminate time in the near future.

Indeterminate because these killing teams—particularly now that the Broker was out of the picture—sometimes maintained surveillance for several weeks, and other times for as little as a few days.

My prep for this trip had been minimal. Select an I.D., pack clothes including a couple of nondescript sport coats and suits and white shirts and ties and the sweatshirts and polos and jeans I preferred, a few guns (my nine millimeter, a noise suppressor, and a back-up .38 snubnose revolver), a hunting knife in sheath, switchblade, lock picks, canister of chloroform, rags, several pairs of surgical gloves, some duct tape, a coil of clothesline. The usual.

And of course I'd driven a good distance from my home area to buy the 1980 Pinto, which cost a grand cash, the kind of nothing car that helps nobody notice you.

Around four o'clock, Mateski pulled off and drove twenty miles—longer than any previous antiques-buying detour—into Stockwell, Missouri, whose WELCOME TO sign included all the requisite lodges and an interesting designation: "Little Vacationland of Missouri."

We'd barely got past the city limits before he pulled into a row-of-cabins-style motel called the Rest Haven Court. It looked clean and well-maintained, and even had a small tarp-covered swimming pool. But it obviously dated back to Bonnie and Clyde days. Mateski stopped at the slightly larger cabin near the neon sign to check in.

Directly across the street was a modest-size Holiday Inn and that's where I pulled in, but for now I just sat in the lot, watching across the way in my rear view mirror. Mateski must have had a reservation, because it took him under three minutes to register. Then he was back in the Bonneville to drive over to the farthest of twelve cabins, where he parked. Only three other cars were in the spaces at cabins. From his trunk, out from under the crap paintings he'd bought, he withdrew a small suitcase, and went over to the door marked 12 and let himself in.

I got out, stretched, yawned, making something of a show of it. Got my fleece-lined leather bomber jacket out of the back seat and slipped it on; I was otherwise in a sweatshirt, jeans and running shoes.

*Was he in for the night?*

Surely he would have to get settled. He might not even start surveillance till tomorrow. I decided to risk it.

At the desk, I asked for a second-floor room facing the street. The female clerk, a pleasant, permed platinum blonde in her twenties wearing big-frame glasses (much nicer than Mateski's and minus the rust-color lenses), informed me that I could have just about any room in the place.

"This is the start of off-season," she said chirpily. She had big brown eyes and a Judy Holliday voice—well, it was the Holiday Inn, wasn't it?

"An off-season for what?"

Very nice, very white smile. She might be worth cultivating as a source and, well...cultivating.

"Stockwell Park is the nicest fun spot this side of the Ozarks," she said. "People come from all over."

"Oh?"

She nodded and that mane of frizzy hair bounced. "Trails, trees, all kinds of greenery, so much space. Tennis courts, volleyball, playgrounds, swimming pool. Duck pond, too. Also, Stockwell Field is near there—we have a triple-A ball club, you know."

"In a town of twenty thousand?"

"Oh, Stockwell really hops in the summer. If we hadn't had this cold snap...and, uh, you know, the recession...we'd be doing land-office business, even now."

"Must get a little dull around here, then."

"It can be. We have live music in the lounge, on the weekend, if you're planning to stay that long."

This was Thursday.

"I might be here a week or more," I said. "Is there a reduced rate for that?"

"There is, if you pay a week in advance."

So we did the strictly business thing, and I got all checked in as John Quarry, but our eyes and mouths were being friendly. Maybe I could get laid on this trip. I already felt like I deserved it, after two days of Ronald Mateski. She seemed like a nice girl, and with her working here, so convenient.

I went up to the room, which I will not insult your intelligence by describing, and placed my suitcase

on the stand, got my toiletries distributed on the counter in the john. Shower, no tub. The TV was a 21" Sony, which was nice, and they had a satellite dish, so I'd get a lot of stations. The double bed's mattress seemed a little soft, but I'd live. I went to the window, drew back the curtain, and *shit*, Mateski's car was gone.

I'd managed to fuck up already.

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