

I
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The assassins pursuing me are probably two in number. It is possible there are three, the third unknown to the pair—he described in tradecraft as an “insurance agent.” The pair or trio will likely try to creep up on me when I am least prepared to confront them. They will probably use the garrotte or high-impact-plastic knives, as firearms are now so much more difficult to move through international airlines. In any event, they will likely need to draw close in order to ply their bloody craft. Should I continue my escape, or should I try to turn the tables on the murderers? These are the questions I have pondered these many hours—and, as yet, with no solution.

Were I not now in such a cowardly dither about my personal safety, I should not have lost my way in such a foolish manner. Glancing again and again in the rear-view mirror I have thus missed the turn-off to the Interstate. I find myself on a country road, evidently little traveled except by large gray lorries laden with bits of gravel that blow off and strike my windscreen again and yet again. The road sign, bright white letters on a green background, reads “Balona, A Friendly Place,” and I presume that in this little out-of-the-way Northern California hamlet I can acquire enough petrol to see me safely on my journey again, via back roads. I will thus not have to worry about murderous agents

sent across great expanses of sea and land by Lady Demelza's swinish suitor, at least for a time.

I cross a bridge over a trickle of stream labeled *Yulumne River*, see a petrol sign on my left, turn round-about in the middle of the street and pull into the station. Building needs a fresh coat of paint. Petrol pumps haven't been wiped clean in perhaps years. Office window filthy. I am almost atremble with indignation. The help nowadays, anywhere, is truly atrocious.

A short stout youth is polishing a motorcycle next to the pump. "Clean my windscreen, if you please," I say politely. He barely looks up from his task.

"I don't please. You pay in there first. Then you can clean your own damn window." This is my initiation, my welcome to Balona, A Friendly Place.

I do as I am told. Anticipating future needs (the Manual constantly urges one to sharpen one's "anticipation skills"), I pause to select a handful of picture postcards from a fly-blown display just inside the door. "Vistas of Balona" proclaims the sign at the top of the rack. Upon close inspection one can see that the cards are of scenes circa 1955 and feature "Front Street, Balona" buildings in sepia-tone. Nevertheless, I need the cards to keep open the connection with dear Mum. A surly youth at the counter, a boy with fire-red pimples, takes my currency and turns away without giving me change. "My change, please," I say.

"Change? You gim'me a ten, and you, like, get them cards in your hand and nine dollars of gas. So, like, go ahead and get it. You don't get no change. I don't keep no change on account of foreign Arabs and stuff."

While filling the tank, I set my case atop the car and get out the road map, being careful to lock the case, even on such a brief occasion. My caution is based on recent experience when I have left the case on the same roof under similar circumstances and have driven off with it teetering there. Fortunately, I always keep my boxes in the boot, so there is little chance of their becoming lost unless I should lose the car. I chuckle at the thought of someone's finding my boxes and the puzzlement at how one might open them.

Balona looks as if it has died.

“So this is Balona, a friendly place,” I say, again attempting to initiate friendly banter with the young motorcycle-polishing citizen.

No response.

I remain in pursuit. “Have you a hotel in Balona?”

“Burnt down last year.” The response is sullen-sounding.

“Well, are there rooms to let, perhaps?”

“To let what?”

“Ah, to rent. Rooms for rent.”

“Ask at Kuhl’s Real Estate. Over there on Front Street.”

“That would be...?”

“Yeah.” The youth completes his cosmetic chore, climbs on his cycle, and speeds off in a cloud of smoke, fog, and dust.

I decide that Balona is truly not the friendly place it advertises itself to be, and that I should be seeking the Interstate and thence another location in which to disappear. With that and lost in thought I replace the petrol hose, climb in my vehicle, and return the way I have come—at perhaps a faster clip than that at which I had arrived. The fog-fuzzy sun is beginning to set and masses of insects thrash themselves against the glass. I have forgotten to clean the windscreen. I wonder if I have remembered to replace the fuel tank cap.

I am halfway to the Interstate, whistling to myself, when I observe that my case is not on the seat next to me. I have again left it on the roof of the car. “Blast!” I exclaim.

I stop at once but, of course, the case is gone. It has slipped away somewhere between my present location and the petrol station in Balona.

I determine to retrieve the case at once, for it contains not only most of my funds, and my means of access to the rest, but also papers of momentous import, a treasured photograph, my vocabulary builder, Great-uncle Sweeney’s best razor (an heirloom), my officer’s swagger stick, my flask of English Leather, clean argyles, et cetera.

I watch the roadside most carefully, slowing down significantly to do so, thereby evidently creating some bit of havoc among the

lorry drivers sounding their klaxons behind me. Red and blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror stimulate me to pull entirely off the roadway. Soon a stout fellow in uniform approaches. I lower the window.

“Had a couple too many, have ya, fella?” The round red nose twitches. Beady eyes search the interior of my vehicle.

I respond politely, “Sir?”

“Been at the brewski in Mello Fello Pizza, have ya?”

“Pardon?” I remain courteous.

“You been drinking, have ya?” The fellow wears a silver metal star on his dark-blue bosom and a large white cowboy hat with a hole in the crown. The hole is edged with dark gray. It appears to resemble a bullet hole. I am in the Far West at last. John Wayne Country perhaps, although a weatherbeaten sign at the side of the road testifies that this is Carp Country. Some wag has modified the letters of the first word. John Wayne speaks again: “You’re driving slower than the flow of traffic and you’re on the wrong side of the road.”

Betrayed by custom. Of course, at home in Britain one drives on the left-hand side of the road, and here I am on the left-hand side again in a right-hand-side world. I at once create a cover story for the constable. “I fancy myself a scientist looking for appropriate specimens, sir.”

“Oh, well, then. That’s okay. I guess you’re a foreigner, too?” He has discerned my origins, possibly in my accent.

“Yes, and a philanthropist.” I smile at my quick creativity, another trait the Manual emphasizes.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Birds. Well, we got plenty around here. You find any?”

“No, I’m losing the light, y’know.”

“Well, good luck, but get on the other side of the road.” The officer readies himself for departure. “Dumb foreigner,” he mutters loudly enough for the rudeness to be overheard. Louder: “You more like to find samples on the West Levee Road. Anybody knows that. Oh, well, it’s a free country.” The sheriff’s voice is high and he lisps. He also walks as if his cowboy boots might be pinching. He turns and fumbles in his shirt pocket,

brings forth a large red plastic button printed with a photo and the legend in white letters *Anson Chaud for Sheriff*. “Here, you wear this and it’s as good as a stay-out-of-jail card, ha ha ha, since I’m this guy here.”

He licks his thumb and wipes it across the photo before handing the button to me. He drives off, sounding a brief *woop* on his siren as he departs.

After fastening the button to my coat lapel, I feel the familiar urgent need to pen some notes about the experience, this time necessarily on a three-by-five card I find on the floor of the car. I fervently wish for my notebooks, now reposing in the lost briefcase. That thought reminds me of the pre-eminence of my mission, and I return to examining the roadside, with more speed now but no success.

With the setting of the sun I realize I must find some place to rest, else I shall need to spend another night in the car. I decide against returning at once to the Interstate and seeking a roadside motel, for such establishments would be among the first places searched by the assassins. Inhospitable Balona will have to do.

I turn on my headlamps after a vehicle passes me on the right, sounding its horn vigorously, the driver shouting something and gesticulating rudely with a finger. I have slipped into old habits and am again driving on the left-hand side of the road. I realize that if I am not more careful, I shall be completing the repulsive Mr. Tudwick’s very aim: to do away with me. If only Lady Demelza had been able to explain to the high-tempered ignoramus.

Balona seems to be if not dead, then asleep already, its main thoroughfare dimly lighted, its businesses closed, its advertising limited to a flashing furry red-and-green neon announcement of Hannibal Chaud’s Funerals. But several establishments midblock emit pale yellow shafts of light through the fog. The sidewalks are dark and wet.

I park and lock the car, stride across the street into Frank’s Soupe de Jour, noting the execrable employment of French, a language I have recently been studying for strategic reasons. Before entering the establishment, I pause only to drop another air-mail postcard in the curbside box—one of my many frantic apol-

ogies to Mum. The postboxes in this country are blue, and more difficult to notice in the fog than the fine recognisable red boxes of Britain.

I enter the place and sit at the counter, order coffee. A very tall fellow wearing a soiled apron serves me at once. The frayed embroidery on his shirt pocket declaims the name *Frank*.

“I’m famished,” I say. “What’s good to eat?”

“Well, uh, my, y’know, Franksburger is, y’know, great.”

“What are those gentlemen having?” I point discreetly at the eager wolfings of two nearby elderly blokes.

“Well, uh, those’re, y’know, korndogs.”

I decide. “I’ll have one of those, please.”

The item appears vaguely similar to a toad-in-the-hole, but neater. Comfortingly familiar image on a dark wet afternoon in a strange land.

“Korndogs in Balona don’t got no stick, y’know.” Frank appears to demonstrate the traditional korndog’s inserted stick using a finger and gestures. “With Balona korndogs, you don’t only just spell ’em different, they just lay there.”

Taken completely unawares by this intelligence, I shrug, not knowing what to make of it.

“I mean, y’know, you don’t pick up a Balona korndog, like a corndog somewheres else, or like one of my fine Franksburgers. No, you got to eat it where it just lays there, y’know, on the plate.” He frowns. “Well, y’know, you don’t absolutely got to. It’s just most people do. They eat ’em in pairs, y’know.”

“I see. It does. Well, that’s certainly interesting. I’ll have two.”

“Yeah, well, suit yourself.” He leans in, examines my new button. “You working for, y’know, Anson Chaud, are you?”

“The sheriff was kind enough to provide this button.”

“Yeah, well, just for, y’know, your information the county election isn’t until, y’know, June.”

“Ah. Is there a motel near here, sir?” I can hear myself reverting to my occupation-habituated subservient habits of speech.

“Motel 5 at the end of the West Levee Road. Maybe three miles west.” He wipes at the counter with a grossly soiled rag. I can smell the grease but resist offering advice as to how he might fold

the cloth so as to gain more effective use of the cleaner surfaces of the fabric.

I inquire, “Nothing in Balona?”

“Well, you could ask, y’know, Kenworth Kuhl, down the street.” He snickers in his chest, joined in the snicker by the two elderly countermates consuming korndogs and coffee.

I complain moderately, “Everything looks closed.”

“Everybody’s saving on lights is why, on account of the PG&E bill. You just go on down there and, y’know, try the door. I betcha there’s, y’know, somebody in there right now. It’s only four-thirty or so. Everything, y’know, should be open till five.”

The korndog is superb. Much superior to our banger. The coffee is execrable. It reminds me of Mum’s coffee, and my eyes mist. I ask, “What is the composition of this sauce, please? It’s quite, mmm, piquant. Very flavourful. Travels so well with the, mmm, korndog.”

“Travels, yeah, well, it’s, y’know, a secret sauce. I mean, y’know, we don’t, y’know, tell strangers the, y’know, the recipe.” Frank does not smile.

“Ah. Pity. It is jolly good, y’know.” I show my teeth, pay the bill and include a small tip, always appreciated by those in service. I thank Frank for his personal attention and trudge down the street, noting how yellowed weeds are growing up through cracks in both tarmac and sidewalk. Indeed, Balona, a friendly place, seems like a poor village in Wales. Soon appears the window whose sign reads *Kenworth Kuhl Real Estate*. The door is indeed open and I enter, hoping to find a friendly face in this forsaken place.