

The Ghost

“From the interviews with his neighbors, we missed him by five minutes.”

“You know if we lose another one the Director is going to have our heads.” Jose told the console operator. Even though José was a tenured Federal employee he wasn’t going to risk the loss of his benefits or employment.

Yu Yan nodded back at her Supervisor. Her assignment to this post started just last week and she wasn’t sure what the Supervisor meant by, ‘have our heads’ or ‘lose another’. She spoke excellent English with barely a trace of an accent but still had some difficulty with American ambiguities. Just today at the cafeteria she had choked on her coffee and was laugh at when she said, “It went down the wrong throat”.

“Standard search of all traffic cams and ATM cameras with a ten clock radius. He had to be warned about the FISA warrant for his arrest. Check with the NSA for all of his calls, inbound and outbound for the last twenty-four hours too.”

Hugh had slammed the old fashion phone back into its receiver when he had heard “John?” from the handset. A wrong number was to be the impression. Hugh new it was code for ‘get out now’! He pulled the stove out away from the wall to access and pop off the panel to the hidden storage behind. The bright red Get Out Of Dodge backpack loaded with a few days’ worth of provisions, clothing and the loaded

handgun (a minimum ten year federal sentence) he quickly removed from the wall cavity. He placed everything on the kitchen counter before replacing the panel and pushing the stove back into place. He wetted a dish towel to wipe the linoleum in front of the stove in case any marks had been made. The handgun he shoved between his pants and belt. He carried the GOOD to the back porch. He didn't know if that was good or bad that the warning call had come an hour after dawn. Daylight they could see him leave the house. At night he'd have thermal from the drones to be concerned about. *"It is what it is"* he thought as he looked through the porch windows looking for any signs of danger. Seeing none he put on the red plaid hunting coat that had hung by the back door along with the bright orange hunting hat before slinging the GOOD on his back. He lifts the trap door in the porch floor and went down the ladder to the basement. Without wasting any time he took the few steps to the outside entrance door, open it enough to take another quick look for danger before exiting and heading to the tall arborvitae bushes that separated Hugh's backyard from his neighbor's. *"With a little luck..."*

"Nothing Sir from the ATMs or traffic cams. NSA said it will be forty-eight hours before they can retrieve any cell phone traffic."

"Any drones in the area?"

"No Sir. I checked with the military, Alphabets and the local law enforcement. None had any drones in the air Sir."

"I don't trust the local police. They have been squirrely with us in the past."

“Squirrely Sir?”

“Down the wrong throat” he still chuckled remembering that. Now add *‘Squirrely’*. “Not always honest with us. Acting weird like something might be wrong.”

“Sir I don’t think they were squirrely.” She looked at the Supervisor to see if she had used the term correctly before continuing. “I checked with the FAA and there wasn’t any flight plans filed by the locals. I do have access to an EU satellite that is overhead. I could check the video history?”

“Do it!”

“Technically don’t we need permission from...”

“I am giving you a direct order. Access the EU satellite on my responsibility without delay. You understand me Yu Yan?”

“Yes Sir.”

From the temporary safety of the bushes Hugh watched his neighbor’s house. Hugh had made it a point to learn of his close neighbor’s habits and mannerisms. This neighbor was a Widow and avid Photographer. Weekdays he’d be up by seven to walk to the nature preserve. Saturdays was lawn and house chores. Sunday was early mass at the church at the corner, breakfast at the diner and the afternoon watching sports and dosing. With the revised carbon tax and the nation going green, almost all travel was done by foot. Monday, neighbor should have left an hour ago for the preserve. Terrible timing if he should bump into his neighbor now. Hugh knew he didn’t have much choice

when he heard the tires screech in front of his house. Hugh took a camera from the coat pocket and hung it from his neck before leaving the concealment of the bushes. Hugh walked calmly but directly towards his neighbors' house. With practice ease Hugh picked the lock to the back door and silently entered the house. Hugh had walked half way to the front door when he heard a congested cough coming from down the hall. Hugh's cover story was that he wanted to borrow some eggs, the back door was unlocked and no one had answer but it would be hard to answer why he was dressed like his neighbor. Another cough encouraged Hugh to keep going. Just as he softly shut the front door behind him, Hugh heard padded footsteps coming down the hallway. Hugh kept his presence of mind by stopping to smell a rose before continuing down the sidewalk towards the nature preserve.

"We did a Level One search on the entire house Sir. We found an empty hidden compartment in the wall behind the stove. We're are dusting for prints and gathering DNA now. We did find a working phone, that's a little unusually in this day and age..."

"He left his cell behind? What's so unusual about that, he didn't want to be traced. Is it his or some else's? Is it locked?"

"It's not a cellular phone Sir. Its old fashion push button desk type phone."

"You're kidding. Text the telephone number associated with it to me."

"Yes S..."

“Yu Yan. Bring up case 463-534. See if the report has any mention of a phone landline to the resident. If it does get a NSA history started on it along with this number to...” José looked down at the screen on his secured smart phone. “... 303-555-3498. If the report doesn’t state then send a Field Agent out to find out! ASAP.”

“Yes Sir.”

“We may have just gotten our first break.”

Keeping the bill of the Hunter orange cap pulled low and walking leisurely Hugh had time to rethink his previously planned escape. Biggest threat right now is a camera capturing his face. Homeland Security had taken enormous strides in facial recognition. Every intersection with stop lights had cameras reportedly to control the lights based on traffic. He knew H.S. also used them to find and track ‘Deplorables’. By circumstance he lived on the fringe of the city so he had only two of the camera intersections to cross. The hour walk to the nature preserve went quick but nerve racking considering Hugh was expecting a black Suburban to block his path at any second. He if entered by the Nature Preserve main gate he knew facial recognition or paying by credit card would alert the Authorities to his location. Just outside the entrance (and out of view of the cameras) was a bank of Port-A-Johns under a roof. The roof provided Users a degree of protection from any inclement weather. Hugh picked one at random and slid the lock closed on the door. From his GOOD bag he removed a light weight gray jacket and a hat to match and put them on in place of the plaid coat and hat he had worn. The plaid coat and the hat (weighted down by the camera) he dropped down the hole and

watched them disappear under the blue/brown soup. Hugh waited ten minutes before leaving the Port-A-John and exiting from under the roof from a different direction.

“Nine minutes before our Agents arrived, Hugh Douglass received a call. Caller said one word, ‘John’. Same thing reference case 463-534 except the one word was, ‘David’. Calling Party trace was inconclusive. We believe the calls were made by someone familiar with the workings of the telephone network and made the calls by tapping directing into the two phones lines. ‘John’ and David’ are obviously warning code words. Director we also access the only satellite that was overhead at the time.”

“One of ours?”

“No Director.”

“I see. Video from the Sat?”

“Subject entering the house at 5:33 PM. No one else entering or exiting before our Agents arrived. They did find a third entrance that lead to a basement. It is possible the subject left by this route. The angle of the satellite prevented coverage of this exit. We widen the satellite view to cover more of the neighborhood. This video we are examining now.

“There could be a Deplorable on your staff Director.” The Supervisor knew that he was taking a big risk mentioning to the Director about a spy on the Director’s staff. He also knew every communication secured or not, was recorded by the NSA and now the Supervisor would have recorded proof that he had warned the Director.

He had purposely picked a storage unit towards the back of the complex that faced the perimeter fence. By cutting the chain-link fence he hoped he could access his unit without any camera surveillance. This was easily confirmed by acting concerned about security the day he first rented the unit. The Attendant addressed Hugh concerns by inviting him into the guard shack to show him all of the different camera views. Hugh paid for a year's rent using the credit card he had taken from his Employer's desk without his Employer's knowledge. CFO was always hounding the Owner about receipts the Owner forgot to turn in, lost, or whatever. Hugh felt that the storage unit was safe and untraceable back to him. Hugh had borrowed a company truck, kept his cap bill low as he reached out to scan his access card to open the gate. Just as an additional safety measure he parked the borrowed truck between him and the nearest camera as he unloaded or a more accurate term would be to stock the storage unit.

It took Hugh most of the day to reach the Bar & Grill that was close to the storage unit. This B&G was one of his favorites haunts. The Owner didn't allow bar tabs (in these economic times and with people disappearing) the Owner couldn't be blamed. So what some of the regulars did was pay in advance, kind of like a bar tab in reverse. That way if a customer was running short or too drunk the Owner was covered with no hard feelings, actually it Hugh who started with the idea. As Hugh sat in a booth eating what he figured was his last good meal he knew that there would be no credit card recorded of today's visit, only those of the normal customers this evening. From his booth he had a good view through the large front plate glass windows. To his back were the public restroom and the double barred rear door. The

barred rear door was against fire codes but the Owner was robbed once a few years back and that is how the robbers gained entry. Hugh figured from either direction, front or back he would have time to get to the restroom, locking the door would buy him a few more seconds, using the sink as step, he could pop a ceiling tile and reach the roof entrance. An easy jump to the next roof and after that he hadn't had the opportunity to explore. At dark Hugh rose and nodded at the Owner to acknowledge the bill was to be subtracted from his balance. Leave by the front entrance and take a roundabout way to the rear of the storage lot, cut the fence, retrieve his Bug Out Bag, rifle and moped. Mopeds were a common method of transportation these days for those that could still afford the heavily taxed gasoline. 12.48 Euros a gallon!

"Update on Douglas?"

"We expanded the coverage of the Sat video, nothing unusual. We went back and recanvas the neighborhood and including a Dan Miller. Dan Miller was missed the first time because he didn't answer his door. Field Agents assumed he wasn't home. He answered this time. He said he hadn't left the house since Sunday afternoon because of a sinus infection. Monday a coughing spell woke him up. He got up to take another antihistamine when he saw footprints across his hardware floors. Saturday he had dry mopped his floors and thought it was strange there would be what appeared to be boots prints from the rear door to the front door. He said the prints were wet, just like someone had walked across his dew covered yard before entering his house. He

checked and both doors were still locked. Actually he had forgotten all about it until our Agent asked about anything unusually.”

“I don’t see what this had to do with Douglass.”

“Our analyst Yu Yan went back over the Sat footage. Monday morning we have video showing Miller leaving the front of his house, stop to look at some flowers before walking east.”

“So Miller is mistaken?”

“We don’t believe so Director. Yu Yan checked the tapes for the proceeding week. Every week day we can see Miller leaving his house between seven and eight AM. He said he takes pictures at the nature preserve as a hobby.”

“But you saw him leaving Monday when he said he was home all day?”

“It appears that way Director. But there was difference. Yu Yan zoomed in closer. On Monday the person who appears to be Miller wearing his customary red plaid coat was also carrying a red knapsack. Blended in very well with the jacket. We brought in a tracking dog. Dog followed Douglas’s scent from the basement door straight to Miller’s back door, through Miller’s house, out the front door and the east along on the sidewalk. The dog lost the scent at some portable outhouses by the nature preserve entrance. We found an orange hat, plaid jacket and a camera in one of the outhouse’s pit. Douglas left his house unobserved by the basement exit, left the foot prints across Miller’s floor and changed his outward appearance in the outhouse. We are now in the process gathering possible video of the portable outhouses to track down him leaving.”

“This is the best lead we have had. Keep me informed.”

“Yes Director.”

Hugh decided to go with Plan B which was to spend the day hidden inside his storage unit. His pursers would be estimating his rate of travel and expanding their search ring further and further out. By delaying his departure by a day they would be looking for video that didn't exist yet. At least that was his theory. He briefly thought about staying until he had the chance to grow a beard to make facial recognition harder but thought that would be pushing his luck too far. Sooner or later someone with a brain would think about the possibility and this was a bad place to be trapped in when they did. He will leave tonight.

“Douglass was middle management at ELTEC. An electrical contractor company that had a few government contracts. Douglass was a crew dispatcher and therefore wasn't mandated to have security clearance. We searched his work locker and found nothing incriminating. While we were there we searched all of the lockers. We found the usual contraband, a preband NRA magazine, poor quality counterfeited work permits, etc. We arrested six.

The Owner of ELTEC...a Jerome Prienciple's record is clear and he was very cooperative. Especially when we told him we didn't need a warrant because of his company's government contracts. I have a team of Auditors going through ELTEC's books now. Perhaps a lead on Douglas or at the very least something to fine the Company.”

“You need to speed this up José. So far I’ve managed to cover for you with the Chief of Staff. But if you don’t find Douglass soon or the other Deplorables that have gone dark...” The Director purposely left his sentence unfinished to emphasize his implied threat.

“Yes Sir.” José smiled briefly as he hung up the phone. He had warned the Director that the Director had a spy in his staff. José now had proof that more Deplorables had advanced warning of their arrest and that information could only come from the Director’s staff. On the other hand the Director had survived numerous turf wars and why take an unnecessary risk? “Yu Yan. Anything back from NSA?”

“No Sir.”

“Include ELTEC and tell NSA we needed it yesterday. Otherwise Homeland Security Director Lance will be making life very difficult for their Admiral Young!”

“Already done Sir. I have been sorting through ELTEC’s credit card purchases for the last year. And I’m bamboozled. Why would they need to rent a storage unit close to one of their largest warehouses?”

“Store supplies for a local job? Text the Auditors and have them ask the Owner.”

“Yes Sir.”

Hugh had check the supplies he was taking with him and had them loaded on the moped. Moped gas tank held four liters which gave the moped a range of just over a hundred miles. Making a beeline to his destination wasn’t smart. A moped too far into the country was

unusual and could be a red flag. Again traveling by the day risked visual discovery and at night the moped's thermal image would be too easy to spot by drones and if he was determined to be high priority target satellite. He had two hundred miles to go. Checking his zig zagging route with his finger. Ride for an hour to "disappear" into these woods. Push the ped and come out of the woods over here. Ride twenty miles to the culvert. With the culvert hiding him from aerial observation, eat and rest for the afternoon before proceeding. Hugh's finger jumped ahead. "Right about here the ped will run out of gas." He thought to himself. "This cow pond would be an excellent place to dump it. Another day on foot would bring him to his designation.

On his way in Hugh had torn the weather seal off one side of the overhead door of his storage unit. This left ½" gap that left some fresh air in. And Hugh had previously cut two holes in the ceiling. One for a small fan that pulled air from outside and out into the attic. Storage unit could become almost unbearable with the summer sun beating down on it. The larger hole was for his escape in an emergency. Property had one gated entrance through the eight foot chain link fence topped with razor wire before the steel overhead door to his unit. It would only take one man just to lock the overhead door from the outside to trap him inside. So he had made an exit to the attic. From the attic he could crawl across the other units to one of the attic vents on the gabled ends. Kick out a vent and jump to the ground. *"With a little luck..."* Hugh opened the cot and settled down to get some rest before nightfall.

“Sir. NSA reports no suspicious conversations were intercepted from the Douglass subject, ELTEC, a Dan Miller or Jerome Prienciple for the last thirty days. They want to know if you want them to go back further? If you do they would have to prioritize your request. Could be up to a month before they could fulfill your request.”

“Not at this time. Any leads on the expanded search?” José was studying the large wall mounted computer screen. The center of the screen showed a birds eye view of the area Douglass was thought to have been last seen (Port-A John’s). A digital clock was shown on the top right of the screen showing the estimated time that had elapsed since the last presumed location of Douglass. Radiating out from the center were circles alternating between solid lines and dashed lines. Solid lines represented how far Douglass could have traveled on foot and the solid lines if he had acquired transportation. Every camera that Homeland had access was also displayed. A flashing camera icon indicated the camera footage had not been checked as yet, solid icon meant it had. José noticed that all of the cameras leading out to the country were solid red and cameras leading back into the city where still blinking. “Yu Yan. How long before the City cameras are checked?”

“I would estimate another twelve hours Sir. You wanted to keep the compartmentalized so I’m only using our personal...Sir. The Owner of ELTEC denies ever have renting or authorizing the rental of any storage unit. Do you want...”

“Yes! Get a team rolling now!”

Few and fewer people were renting storage units because more and more people were selling their “surplus” in order to survive in today’s economy. Because of that the odds of another Renter pulling it just when Hugh was ready to leave were slim to none. But that is exactly what happened. If he had heard the tires on the gravel. A second later he would have had the overhead door open and would have been totally exposed. Now he was blind and cornered too! He glanced up at his ceiling emergency exit and then shook his head. Long odds and he’d rather go down fighting. He quickly removed the two pieces of the AR from the moped and put them together by pushing the two pins through the lower. Silencer screwed on the end of the barrel. 40 S&W was in the holster on his right hip. Spare magazines for the pistol and AR on his left hip. That gave 122 rounds. If given the time more were in the ammo boxes he would leave behind. In front by the overhead door was the moped. Across the center of the unit was the what the current government would consider contraband and at the rear was the cot he had slept in. Moped and contraband would provide a small level of protection. He heard the vehicle stop; its headlights were shining through the crack where the door’s weather seal had been. Hugh flipped the rifle’s safety off. Then he heard the vehicle start to back up and its headlights no longer was shining directly into his unit. Hugh peeked out the gap at the overhead. Hugh heard the overhead at the unit beside his open and then close. From the headlights reflection he saw the Driver place a box in the car’s trunk. As quickly as the car had come it left. Hugh didn’t waste any time. He had the AR disassembled and repacked. Moped pushed out of the storage unit, overhead closed and locked before the sound of the car engine was lost. The hole in the

fence cut higher to allow the moped through. When he felt he was far enough away Hugh kick started the moped and headed south.

“Are we sure this is where Douglass hid José?”

“Yes Director. His finger prints were found on the scene. They haven’t inventoried everything yet. They have reported three assault rifles with large capacity magazines. About five hundred rounds of NATO 5.56, MREs, bottled water and a detailed map of the city. Definitely a terrorist cell Sir! Excellent intel Director.” José didn’t believe for a minute they had found a terrorist cache and he didn’t think the Director believed it either. José was trying to save his position by offering the Director a way out.

“And Douglass?”

“Just a matter of time Sir. All indications are he is still in the city. Once we found his cache and cutoff his escape route he’ll have no other choice. Just a matter of time before we get a facial recognition hit and he’s arrested.”

“I see. Well...”

“Here it comes.” thought José.

“...keep me in the loop on any further developments.”

“Yes Sir we will.”

“Supervisor. I was able to break the security on the storage lot’s LAN. We now have access to all of the video for the last...for the last seven days...”

“Yu Yan it’s been a long thirty eight hours and you did excellent work. Please call me José. Let’s celebrate the conclusion of this intensive manhunt by celebrating a little. I know a Japanese restaurant just around the corner that I know you will enjoy.”

“Thank you Sir... José. I am tired and I sure my makeup ... I must look like a shock. I’m sticky and I need a shower.”

“I’ll make you a deal Yu Yan. Let’s celebrate first then I’ll sign out an agency car and take you home in style. You’ll still get home quicker than you would taking public transportation. And as late as it is I’d be concerned about your safety.”

“You idiot!” thought Yu Yan. *“I’m Chinese and our food is completely different. Suppose we look all alike to you Latinos too! Well she had been ordered to learn as much as she could about this agency.”* Yu Yan gave José a smile as she crossed her legs purposely exposing more of her right thigh. “If you think this is best... José.” Would he take the bait she wondered? José did.

The best way to defeat a system is to learn how that system worked. Then you could formulate a way to defeat it. That had been Cory Lowler’s (aka Hugh Douglass) assignment. By working at ELTEC he had access to detailed blueprints of several Federal buildings. Lowler would make detail analyses of those buildings and pass this information up the chain. Direct attack was no longer an option because the domestic

enemy was too entrenched. But a camera, listening device or other type of bug placed in the ideal location could return enormous results. Just two months ago information gathered in such a manor allowed the Assistant Director of the FBI to “disappeared”. Lowler was sure every method of interrogation was used before the Assistant Director disappearance became permanent.

There WERE a lot of Keyboard Warriors bragging about what they would to restore the Union but when push came to shove...the Three Percent actually kept their oath of office to do so. Lowler had been given a new identity. A new background and false fingerprints were successfully unloaded into the Federal system. This time “Robert Barnes” was tasked with discovering how the Chinese had infiltrating Homeland Security and how to counter it. Target subject was a José Rodriguez.

The End