

THE O'LEARY ENIGMA

Phil waited with me in the lobby until White Suit drove up. We had just left the building's parking lot, when I told him to pull over. When we stopped, I handed him the note, saying, "I want you to drop me two blocks from this address at 5:25."

"Honey, this isn't the place for lone wolves. Let me set up the meet properly."

"There isn't time."

White Suit considered what I had just said, then replied, "Okay, I'll drop you off one block from the address. Then I'll tail you."

At 5:20, we pulled over, and I started to get out. When White Suit said, "Wait," I halted. Reaching into the glove box, he handed me a cell phone.

"Keep this on at all times. I can track you that way." I nodded.

"Okay, my name is Roger. If you want to make a report, if you want support, call me. If you're in a jam, use any other name in the address book.

They're all monitored 24/7."

"Got it."

"You sure you want to go ahead with this?"

Putting the cell phone in my pocketbook, I answered, "Yes."

Then, for the first time since we had met, Roger spoke with regard. "The address is one block up ahead on the right side." After a pause, he added, "Be careful and good luck."

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I began walking down the side of the road since there were no sidewalks. It was a poor neighborhood, and I soon got comments from both the men and women, who assumed I was a prostitute.

Two minutes before the appointed time, I arrived at the address, which was opposite a bus stop. A woman who was waiting for her bus told me in a loud voice to go away. All the while, I was looking for Estelle. Was this her idea of a joke?

The bus came down the street. At least the woman who was yelling at me would leave. Behind the bus was an ancient, but well-preserved, Renault econo-box. Was it Estelle? There were no other cars, only two trucks in the distance.

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The bus stopped and the Renault pulled over to my side of the road and stopped in front of me. Estelle said in English, "Do you need a lift?" Trying to be cool, to use Phil's favorite expression, I replied, "*Oui, Madame.*"

Impatient, she ordered, "Don't talk; get in."

I ran around the front of the car and got into the passenger seat. Estelle popped the clutch, and the car tucked back in front of the bus as one of the trucks roared past in the opposite lane.

We flashed past Roger, who seemed to be absorbed in reading the paper.

* * *

At first, in the fading daylight, we made good time toward wherever we were headed. Both hands on the wheel, Estelle concentrated exclusively on her driving, saying nothing to me and ignoring my attempts at conversation. I thought she was being hostile, but then I realized that, as the light faded, our trip was becoming increasingly more dangerous. The traffic we were encountering was a mixture of trucks, cars, pedestrians, and animal-drawn vehicles moving anywhere from breakneck to walking speeds.

Near the equator, darkness comes in the early evening and with it the real danger of running into an unlit cart or people walking alongside the road. Other cars compounded the risk by not using either their headlights or their running lights.

Although it was dark, Estelle only slowed down a few miles per hour. I was sure we would have an accident, but I relaxed, somewhat, because she seemed to anticipate trouble and slowed without hard applications of the brakes.

Unexpectedly, without warning or comment, we turned onto a compacted gravel road. No longer did we encounter motor vehicles, only carts and pedestrians. If Roger had been following us on the highway, the absence of any headlights told me he no longer was behind us.

Uneasy, but not yet scared, I contemplated grabbing the steering wheel but decided to wait until we slowed or stopped.

This was the Third World. We drove through villages, some with a few lights, some completely dark. I glanced at my watch; it was 8:15. Estelle must have seen me, because she said, "It will not be long now."

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True to her word, ten minutes later, after passing through another village that had two visible lights, we slowed and turned onto a rutted track. When the headlights illuminated a small concrete building, Estelle stopped the car, pocketed the keys and said, "Stay here. I'll be back in a moment."

I waited and listened to the sounds of the African night. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I saw, protruding from behind the concrete building, the front end of an SUV. Fear, which had been absent, came to me in a rush. I considered running off and trying to reach the highway on foot. Rejecting that alternative, I reached into my pocketbook and began fishing for the cell phone that Roger had given me.

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Estelle's voice startled me. "Come. I'll introduce you."

Not much relieved by her innocuous invitation, I followed the woman into the concrete building. All about me were racks of technologically ancient radiotelephone equipment, and, in the corner, was an old, worn, wooden desk upon which lay technical drawings. Relieved, I sardonically observed to myself: Things could be worse; this could have been a torture chamber.

Estelle introduced the two Chadian men who emerged from behind the racks. Henri, the older one, was probably in his sixties and wore a long-sleeved shirt and pants. He spoke both French and Arabic. The other man, Hamza, was much younger, probably a twenty something. Dressed in a white robe and wearing a white skullcap, he conversed only in Arabic. Alarmed, I tried, without much success, to calm my fears by rationalizing: 1) Arabic was commonly spoken in Chad; 2) Hamza's speaking the language did not mean a priori that he was affiliated with Arab terrorists; and 3) oh shit, what have I gotten myself into?!

Fortunately, my fluency in French obviated the need for Estelle to translate from English, since Henri and I had no difficulty communicating. After a while, Henri, who had a dry sense of humor, was making witty remarks. Several times, I caught myself about to laugh at his *bon mots*¹.

¹ *bon mot*: a humorous remark or observation.

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Using Arabic, Henri and Hamza seemed able to converse about the technical aspects of the radiotelephone installation. However, right from the start, there was a tension and an argumentativeness in their exchanges.

“Before we go too far,” said Henri, “we should clarify our respective situations. We have a point of common interest. You need to make contact with the kidnappers; we want to get our telephone system operational.”

Tentatively, I asked, “What assurances do I have that—that you won’t harm me?”

“If we harm you now, how will we get our telephone system fixed?”

Realizing I had a bargaining chip, at least for the present, I asked, “What do you propose?”

“This station is similar, almost identical, to the one that is no longer operating. We have reason to believe that a failure to perform routine maintenance is the cause of the problem. After I show you what has to be done, you will go to the station that is not working, perform the maintenance and make the system operational.”

Henri’s plan made some pretty big assumptions, but it did have one nice attribute: separation from my captors. I decided not to raise any objections.

* * *

For the next four hours, Henri took me through the intricacies of the old crossbar switches and their support equipment. He was a good teacher, and I had no difficulty mastering the details of the old system. Sometime during the period, while I was learning my new skill set, Estelle left unannounced.

Initially, I supposed that Hamza would play a role in my instruction, but he did not. Although he never touched the equipment, Hamza appeared to understand what Henri was saying. As the night progressed, although I could not understand the Arabic portions of their conversation, I recognized in their exchanges the English and French technical terms the two men were using. This changed my perception of Hamza’s role. Apparently, he was monitoring my instruction and keeping tabs on Henri. Often Hamza pushed his way forward to see what I was doing. Once, when I smiled at one of Henri’s remarks, Hamza growled at Henri, who did a slow burn.

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With their body language and their tone, the two men impressed upon me that they had a strained relationship. Of course, I had no knowledge why this was the case. So, I hid my interest and surreptitiously observed what was happening.

On three occasions, Hamza used his communicator. During these calls, I got the impression that he was talking to a demanding superior. Immediately after completing his calls, Hamza's tone toward Henri became strident and he glared at the older man, who maintained his demeanor in spite of Hamza's provocations.

For my part, I avoided all involvement with Hamza, believing him to be unstable and, consequently, dangerous.

* * *

Around two in the morning, Henri asked, "Do you think you can repair the equipment?"

Figuring I was being handed my opportunity to escape, I tried not to show any emotion when I said, "Yes. I can do it."

"Good. You should get some rest."

"Before I do, may I ask a question?"

"Yes," replied Henri.

"You're the expert. Why don't you fix the exchange?"

"It is much too dangerous for me to go there. That is why we are sending you."

"You're afraid of being arrested by the government?"

"No," explained Henri. "The government will send only large units into the area. I could easily avoid them."

"Why will it be safe for me and not you?"

"It's not safe for anyone. The chaos is total; anarchy rules."

"Oh," I gasped, before asking, "What if I refuse?"

"That certainly is your option," replied Henri. "I will inform the Central Committee of your decision. They will decide what will be done with you."

"Let me understand this. If I go and try to fix the exchange, I may be raped and murdered. And if I refuse, I could be shot at dawn."

"More correctly, you *will* be shot."

I assessed my options. I could overpower Henri. Hamza was a much more questionable proposition. Even if I succeeded, where was I then?

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Could I escape Henri's Central Committee colleagues? Could I find my way back to safety in the middle of the night? I decided to take my chances in the morning.

"Just one thing, before I go to sleep, I'd like to use the facilities and freshen up. I left my pocketbook in the car. Can I get it?"

Henri said something to Hamza, who initially balked. Earlier, from the tone of their conversations, I had sensed there was tension between the two men, but this was the first overt expression. After several more exchanges, the younger man relented and Henri told me, "Go ahead. Hamza has a flashlight."

In the car, I found the pocketbook on the seat where I had left it. Taking it with me, I followed the younger man, who unlocked the lavatory door. Expecting years of filth and a hoard of bugs, I was pleasantly surprised to find the facilities were clean. After closing the door, I fished through my pocketbook. Estelle had removed the cell phone Roger had given me.