

Invoking the Fifth

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I moved along the freezing platform with the noisy crowd, pushing to board the soot-covered, maroon Pennsy coach. Although it was after 11 p.m., people jammed the platform. I had turned up my collar and pulled down my fedora against not only the cold, but also prying eyes. The riskiest thing I could do on this job was to make eye contact.

In front of me, a woman with her head bowed under a broad-brimmed hat turned on her heels without warning. Her elbow, bent to a point as she held onto the strap of her shoulder bag, caught me just below my sternum. It found the only spot not padded by the wads of coupons and rolls of cardboard tokens in the vest under my shirt. The blow stopped me in mid-stride.

She lifted her head, and, looking into my face, said, “Beg your pardon. How clumsy of me.”

She was beautiful: perfect nose, full lips, dark eyes that held mine longer than I knew was safe.

“That’s okay,” I said, gasping. She walked on and didn’t look back. I could have watched that swaying figure all night. After an inexcusable delay, my gaze left her. Focusing on the ground with my shoulders hunched, I shuffled toward the train.

Lewis’ number one rule is, “*Don’t get involved with anyone or anything when you’re working.*” Eye contact is a sure way to get involved ... and remembered. But I always had a hard time when a good-looking woman was the involvee. The trips were beyond boring without some visual diversion.

As I climbed into the car, I turned and glanced around the station. Always good to know who was behind me. I spotted the woman talking to a porter. She stood out from the crowd, not because she wore any bright, flashy colors. Just the opposite: she had on a black coat and matching hat with a white scarf draped around her neck. It was this stark black and white combination that contrasted so dramatically with the dull brown, olive drab, and khaki uniforms worn by the enlisted men and officers milling around.

My garb wasn't much better. It matched the *de facto* uniforms of grey suits, grey coats and grey hats worn by civilians. Even the dark pea coats of the occasional sailor blended into the shadows cast by the dim bulbs suspended below the concourse's dark skylights. Steam from the trains hung a milky fog in which duller colors were lost, but from which her deep black plus pure white stood out.

Ever since Pearl Harbor, transportation, especially into and out of D.C., was overcrowded. Rationing cut the availability of gas, oil, and tires for personal use. So I had to rely on trains and buses like most of my fellow citizens.

When I walked through to the last car on the train, there were, to my surprise, several empty seats. This car must have been pressed into service in a hurry because a number of the seat backs were still set opposite the direction the train was headed. I found two unoccupied pairs of seats that faced each other. I sat on the aisle looking toward the rear of the car, and placed my coat on the window seat beside me.

The jostling passengers were noisy settling in. Almost all were soldiers. Two notable exceptions were a sailor and, I assumed, his girlfriend, across the aisle two rows behind me, also facing the rear. They were stuck in a liplock, making out hot and heavy, oblivious to anyone else.

With the war on for almost three years, nearly every guy my age had either enlisted or been drafted. I thought of signing up. But my draft board sent me a letter, probably instigated by my principal, saying that, because I was a high school chemistry teacher, I had been granted a critical skills deferment. Apparently, the patriotic thing for me to do was to educate the next generation so they could help make better instruments of war.

I was safe from battle because I could teach. But that was just another way to starve. Being single, my wants weren't many. Even so, I could barely afford a room and the meals I made myself each day. Not that goods were plentiful even if I had money. But it was easier to track down a little extra butter or sugar or meat if a few spare dollars could be burned to light the way.

And what good was it that most males were overseas and women were a dime a dozen? If I didn't have a dime, I still didn't get any.

So, I took the courier job. Every Friday after school, I'd go downtown to Lewis' office, pick up a briefcase, grab dinner, and hop a train from 30th Street Station to D.C. I'd get in around ten p.m., go to the office on Connecticut Avenue, put on my loaded vest, and make it back to Union Station to catch the return train to Philly.

Inside of eight hours every week, I made triple my monthly teacher's salary. Not bad and, I convinced myself, what I did wasn't illegal. I was just a courier delivering what I was given to deliver.

I settled into the corduroy-covered seat, my briefcase tucked between me and the inside armrest. I never took chances with it in the overhead rack where anyone could snatch it. If someone did, what kind of courier would I look like without a briefcase?

My nostrils discerned a light, exotic fragrance quite different from the swirl of tobacco smoke and cleaning agents that produce the distinctive railroad coach smell. I looked up. The woman in black from the platform stood in the aisle.

“Is that taken?” She pointed to the window seat across from me.

I shook my head. She shimmied past my knees, took off her coat and hat, placed them on the aisle seat facing me, and sat.

“Oh, you’re the man I bumped into getting to the train, aren’t you? I must really apologize. I just wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Lewis was shouting in my ear, “*Remember Rule Number One: Don’t get involved.*”

“Don’t worry about it.” I said.

Her dress, as black as her coat, was a snug fit that accentuated her curves. *Why does she have to be so damned sexy?* I slid down in my seat, tipped my fedora forward over my eyes, and pretended to doze off to avoid further conversation. It was bad enough she remembered me.

Outside the train a conductor wailed, “All ‘board,” echoed by another one farther down the platform. A loud hiss and chug-chug reached us as the engine strained under its load. The couplers clanked, and our car jolted.

The other passengers quieted and the clatter from the tracks filled my ears. Occasionally a whistle pierced the cold night outside. The conductor collected tickets, and the lights were dimmed until the first stop: Baltimore.

Although I intended to pretend to sleep, I must have actually dozed off because the next thing I knew I was awakened by the lady in black tugging on my sleeve.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Would you please watch my coat? I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

From beneath my hat I said, “kay.”

I remained motionless, trying to clear my head, my hat still low over my eyes. Two men in grey suits, or at least grey trousers, which were all I could see, came semi-staggering down the aisle and stopped beside me.

“Is this where she was sitting?” one guy whispered to the other.

“Yeah,” was the reply.

“Do you think she spotted us?”

“No, but let’s take this slow. You sit up front and I’ll sit back there. Don’t lose her whichever way she leaves. And no trouble on the train. Wait ‘til we get to Philly.”

One pair of legs walked toward the rear of the car. The footsteps of the other grey suit receded toward the front. They may have wanted to keep their conversation private, but I couldn’t have heard it better if I they had been speaking right to me.

The lady in black returned carrying a cardboard cup. I remained slouched when she climbed past me to her seat. My eyes widened at the aroma of coffee that overwhelmed her subtle perfume. She said nothing, but sipped while gazing into the blackness outside.

I’m a sucker for a pretty face; I stared at her profile. But no way was I going to warn her and draw attention to myself. She looked calm, alert. Not once did I see her lids droop.

Nothing happened during the stop in Baltimore. However, as we pulled out of the station at Wilmington, the conductor waddled up to my seat and leaned in front of me toward the lady in black. In a stage whisper he asked, “Ma’am, are you Miss Hurley?”

Her answer was a hesitant but audible, “Yes.”

“A man in the station asked me to give you this.” He reached forward and grasped her hand. When he released it she held a folded piece of paper that had been pressed into her palm. The conductor walked away.

A scowl crossed the woman’s face. She unfolded the paper on her lap and read it before tearing it, over and over. She put the pieces in her purse.

Her body tensed as she raised her head and scanned the front of the car. Feigning a yawn, she covered her mouth and turned to view the rear seats. Before facing front again, she shuddered with what must have been the shock of recognition. Her hands clutched her bag, kneading it like bread dough as she stared ahead.

“Philadelphia ... 30th Street Station ... three minutes ... all those getting off in Philadelphia gather your belongings ... Philadelphia ...” the conductor announced.

I sat up. The lights in the car brightened. People rustled from sleep, put on coats, and moved suitcases into the aisle. Across from me Miss Hurley was also busy. She had produced a parcel the size of a paperback book from somewhere. Although she tried to shield her actions with her bag, I saw her wedge the package between her seat cushion and the side of the car. When she stood to leave, no signs of it were visible.

I pictured Lewis sitting behind his desk pontificating, “*Rule Number Two: Never get caught with the stuff on you. Ditch it if there’s any chance you’ll get picked up, or, worse yet, hijacked.*” Miss Hurley, or her boss, must have subscribed to that same philosophy.

Wearing her hat but carrying her coat, she pushed to the front of the car. I turned my head to watch her bump into people as the train shifted and rocked on the turns leading into the station. But drooling over her wiggling backside was a luxury I couldn’t afford right then. I

reached across the seat she had vacated, retrieved the parcel and slipped it inside my overcoat which I grabbed in the same motion.

The grey suit from the rear muscled his way through the car's crowded aisle. When he came abreast of me he stopped and grunted a "Scuse me" as he bent over my knees. He looked at, under, over and around the seat that the woman had occupied. Growling something I couldn't understand, he continued to where his partner sat, both of them waiting behind the lady in black.

My briefcase lay flat on my lap. Up ahead, the grey suits were eyeing Miss Hurley. I eased the package into my briefcase.

"Rule Number Two," Lewis was shouting, *"Never get caught with the stuff on you."*

The train glided to a controlled stop. Steam hissed below the windows. A mad rush broke from the doors. The woman disappeared into the crowd. The grey suits plunged in after her.

I let the aisle clear and then stood up. The sailor and his girlfriend were asleep amid all the commotion. She was in his lap and they were still joined at the mouth. He was keeping his right hand warm inside her blouse. I couldn't help feeling a little envy.

I stepped from the train. The platform bustled with activity as it had in Washington. I climbed the stairs to the station's street level amongst a contingent of marines. As I strode through the gigantic marble cavern, I scanned the crowd for anyone paying too much attention to me, the way Lewis said to do. I saw no lady in black, and no followers in grey suits. They had evaporated.

I left the station, walked past the line of taxis engulfed by the arriving passengers, through the lighted parking area, across Market Street toward 31st and into the chill morning darkness.

I passed the grain elevators beside the trestle over Market Street leading to the rail yard behind the station. A green and silver Speedy Cab turned east onto Market and approached me.

Before I became a courier, I had wondered why there was never a shortage of taxis. They were everywhere. Rationing must have hit taxi companies like everyone else. So my question had been, “Where did they get their cars, tires and gas and oil?”

Speedy Cab was a prime example. It had been a two-car operation when the war started. But now it had a fleet second only to Yellow Cab. It was a remarkable success story that made its owner, Big Eddie Granito, rich.

I hailed the cab and got in. The driver and I exchanged greetings and we took off toward center city.

This was the part that baffled me. Why couldn't I just go home when I got back to town? No, there was a procedure, one of Lewis' unnumbered rules: “Let the cab drop you near the office no matter what time it is, like you were goin' there to finish your business. Go in, turn on the lights, put the briefcase in the filing cabinet, hang around a couple minutes, then leave.”

His damned paranoia. Who's watching anyway? Procedures, procedures, rules, rules.

As the cab crossed over the Schuylkill, I began another of Lewis' procedures that I had executed many times. I opened my overcoat and jacket, and unbuttoned my shirt. I reached inside and undid the snaps that released the vest I wore in place of an undershirt. I pulled the vest and its straps out through the front of my shirt making sure that nothing fell from the fourteen pockets sewn into it. I folded it and stuffed it under the driver's seat. I buttoned up, rearranged my tie and coat, and sat back.

“Thanks, kid,” the cabbie said.

I still had a few minutes. Now was my chance to examine the package. Holding my briefcase so the driver couldn't see it in the rear view mirror, I raised its flap. The package was mixed in with the legal papers I carried as decoys. Without removing it from the briefcase, I unwrapped one end exposing several paper-covered rolls about the diameter of a dime. I took one out. The end was open but curled around the edge to retain its contents that were red cardboard discs embossed with a "D."

Ration tokens like the ones I'm carrying. From the size of the package there must have been two, three thousand dollars worth, maybe more, if they were sold to a fleet operator like Granito. My imagination took off. *Lewis and I can be rich. This can be the nest egg we need to set up our own coupon exchange instead of just running them around for the dealers.*

Rules, rules, rules ... Lewis, again, shouting in my ears, "*Rule Number Three: Never get greedy ... understand? It don't pay in the long run.*" What to do?

The cab stopped a block from the office. As I got out, the driver said, "Bye, kid. Take care a yerself."

"You too, Big Eddie."

I climbed to the second floor office. A lamp inside backlit the lettering on the door: "Ives Courier Service, G. David Lewis, Regional Manager."

I used my key. Lewis looked up from the only desk. A stratified haze rose from his perpetually-lit Camel, layering the upper third of the room.

"Well, how'd it go?" he asked. He removed a tobacco speck from his tongue, rolled it around between his thumb and middle finger, then flicked it away.

"Funny you should ask."

"What the hell does that mean?"

I sat in the chair in front of the desk and spent the next ten minutes telling him the story right up to my dilemma in the green and silver cab.

“You ass hole,” he said. “Don’t you remember the rules? I didn’t make them up for nothing. Not only were you already at risk by having our stuff on you, you go and get greedy and get more that’s not even hidden.” He sucked on the cigarette and exhaled.

“Well, at least you didn’t try and go out on your own. Your tail would a really been hangin’ out then.” He lit a new cigarette from the one he held. “So, let’s see the stuff.”

“Don’t have it.”

“What?”

“Your rules must have sunk in, or maybe your paranoia. I don’t know. I decided perhaps I shouldn’t get greedy. So now Big Eddie has a present he wasn’t expecting. Could be, one day he’ll throw some extra business our way to return the favor.”

Lewis looked at me and gritted his teeth. “I’m makin’ up Rule Number Four right now,” he said. “Rule Number Four: Don’t be stupid. Never give anything away for free.”

“I thought about that. But I figured what if this is a setup? It was just too easy. It was like she wanted me to have the stuff, and those two guys were putting on a show for me. And what was with her goring me with her elbow? I think she was trying to find out if I had my vest on.”

“Real-ly?” Lewis frowned, emphasizing the first syllable of the word. “Are you sure she didn’t just want to look into those dreamy eyes of yours?”

“Yeah, maybe she wanted to be sure it was me. But she still couldn’t frisk me. So an accidental collision gave her a one-shot chance to feel if I were armor plated ... and she hit my soft underbelly which didn’t tell her what she wanted to know. That meant she had to plant something on me if they wanted to nail us.”

“Man, you’re in fantasy land. You need some sleep.”

“You’re right. I was too tired to think straight. I just kept getting more confused. So I decided, to hell with it. We aren’t countin’ on this stuff, so no big loss.”

Lewis said, “Ya know? I got rules so you don’t need to think ... Damn ... Goodbye, Easy Street.” He coughed on the next drag. “You keep any souvenirs? Maybe a roll or two?”

“Nope, it’s all in the cab.”

More gritting of teeth. “You just better remember Rule Number Four from now on. Understand?”

As if in answer to the question, a loud knock rattled the office door. I jumped. Lewis glared at me, then at the door. I rose, walked in no hurry across the room, and turned the knob.

In the hall, standing at military-style attention, holding silver badges in their left hands, were the sailor and his lipmate from the train. In the sailor’s right hand was a sheaf of papers with “Search Warrant” printed across the top.

“I think you have something you shouldn’t,” he said.

Ignoring him, I turned to Lewis and said, “Rule Number Five: Screw Rule Number Four.”