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The Picture in the Black Bag

by Arthur Hondros

It was the kind of gorgeous day, bursting with spring, that makes you feel so immortal you could start smoking. So I bummed a cigarette from a bus driver near the park and lit up. Inhaling the nicotine along with the warm, grassy smells and odors from crepe myrtle blooms, I regretted giving in to the habit. Then I decided to enjoy it, since there was a contract out on me.

The more people the better, if I had to risk going out. I was just across the street from the White House, so at least there were security people around and trolls on rooftops. Here in the park, there was a demonstration for Tibet gearing up. I was supposed to meet somebody. I sat on a bench and blew smoke rings that looked like targets. A family of tourists stopped to ask me where Lafayette Park was.

"You're in it," I told them.

How can I describe my line of work? A generation or two earlier, I might've used scissors and glue to paste Lee Harvey Oswald's head onto a photo of a body that wasn't his. Or painting in those extra Soviet guys Stalin wanted in his pictures. There isn't really a name for it. Not a polite one, anyway. But it's what I've come to in life's blindsiding path.

Washington, DC is an expensive place for an artist to try to live. Or anyone, for that matter. Artistic expression is about as welcome here as an elevator fart at the Environmental Protection Agency. Sure, we have the National Gallery and all, federally subsidized. But mostly tourists go there. It makes things look good, which is the majority of people's jobs in this city. That or making things look bad.

Who can blame them? Not me. And if I feel this way, it's a good question to ask why I don't move away. I'd thought about it, but every time I was ready, I'd be taken in again by the seduction of lucrative work. A weak spot for me, I suppose.

Obviously, my work gave me this death sen-

tence. Only partially my fault, but I'll take all the blame. That's what I'd tell Orion if he ever showed up.

Orion was acting as liaison between me and my presently-disgruntled clients. I doubt that's his real name, but he spoke pretty straight and was my only chance. He was a headhunter; he found work for people with specific talents. The liaison work he did as a favor to me, either because he liked me or he didn't know many image retouchers. He confirmed to me that my life was in danger. Anonymous death threats had already arrived both on my answering machine and in the mailbox of my apartment.

Here in Lafayette Park, some of the protesters were dressed like Elvis impersonators with buzz cuts. The King had his capes, and these were robes, but there was a resemblance just the same. There was still no sign of Orion, and I'd have been nervous if not for the cigarette. I wondered what kind of persuasion it'd take to borrow some protest duds, to blend in until he showed.

Then he was there, standing beside the bench. His tie was loosened for the spring heat, shirt sleeves rolled up. One talent of his was appearing out of nowhere, like some shaman or mystic. Orion was around 65, but he was not about to let anyone walk over him. He always wore oversized black eyeshades, the kind for post-op cataract patients. I assumed it was a disguise, but maybe he'd had a lot of cataracts.

"Why such a loud place, Didge?" he said, using the shortened version of my nickname, Digital Dave.

"It's open. Crowded. The White House is right there. I feel somewhat safe."

Shrugging, Orion waved a hand at nothing. His hands were huge and weathered like oars. He could've crossed the Potomac River in no time with those things. "You're outside," he said. "That's enough. It doesn't happen on the street in



this town.”

“So how would you know?” I said.

“I just know. Look, I’m not sure why we’re talking. As far as taking work without my referral, you don’t do it. It’s my duty to prevent conflicts of interest.”

“I know.”

“Conflicts of special interest groups” would’ve filled out the phrase better. Something Orion had told me was never to piss off Big Oil, Big Tobacco, and Big Medicine. Especially the last one, since they had all the prescriptions. I’d crossed the line with some of them on a few occasions, at least one of which Orion knew about.

“Didge, you’ve become a prostitute who walks both sides of the street.” He said it with more tenderness than disdain, as if he were an old madam himself.

My problem, besides selling out long ago, was that I loved my work. Putting apples with oranges, even tossing in a key lime if it helps the client’s cause. Juxtaposition is everything in a photograph. It invigorates me, reassures me of my place in the random universe. Many artists are fueled by political or social causes, and they put it into their work. I, however, am the most unpolitical, cause-ignorant artist you’d meet. In most any art community, this alone is cause for a death warrant. Though it wasn’t artists who underwrote mine.

Which brought me to a question I had for Orion. I trusted his answers, though he would end up wrong about two things today. “Who do you think wants me dead? The Democrats or the Republicans?”

“The Dems probably want it, but they don’t know the right people. It’s the GOP’s sanction. You turned against them first, didn’t you?”

“They didn’t pay me.”

“They underpaid you. It was a miscommunication.”

“Can you tell somebody the hit is a miscommunication?” I asked, though I knew he probably couldn’t. Orion was not quite a mobster and not

quite a lobbyist. Somewhere between those.

“Is that why you did a piece for the other side?” he said. “You know how bad that is for you? If not for your health, at least for your career.”

“Career?” I almost laughed. I’d finished the cigarette and wished for another. “Visual misinformation? That’s a career?”

“You’ve lived well on it, while paying rent and sending monthly child support payments to Ohio.” When he saw me, which wasn’t often, Orion would make a point of saying something else he’d learned about me. Intimidation tactics—his way of keeping me in line—which hadn’t worked. But my actions hadn’t been in defiance of Orion. It wasn’t greed, either. Just a love of my work, and a chance to get even with people who had shortchanged me.

Some of the Republicans had tried to get a bill passed for oil drilling in Alaska’s Ingluck Island. During such congressional battles, visual aids are often used for persuasion. Sometimes slide photographs provide the visuals. In this case, the opposition was shown a picture of a caribou nuzzling the Alaska Pipeline, to show how little environmental impact the oil business had there.

The photo was flawless. I had married two images into one. Who’s to say those beasts aren’t actually sweet on oil hardware? But the Republicans didn’t have all year to wait for a real picture. So they had someone call Orion, who called me.

I didn’t think it made a strong case, but they were paying for my talent, not my opinion. However, I wasn’t paid in full. What I got was more of a kill fee after their bill was defeated.

Later they wanted a blessing for offshore rigs near San Diego, close to the Mexican border. They didn’t call me. Through a fluke, I met a Democratic operator and wound up doing a piece for the other side. Thirty years earlier, a tanker had spilled near Baja California. The only recorded images were of the ship itself. Not much impact there. They gave me a photo from a deceased naturalist’s collection—a group of pelicans clustered on the beach. I scanned it and covered those birds with the most

convincing petroleum shampoo you'd ever seen.

Putting a scanned image back onto a slide transparency was always the tricky part, but that was my secret. I needed anything I could get for a renewed lease on life.

Somehow the press had gotten wind of things. A reporter from the *Post* had left me a voice mail, which was closely followed by the death threats.

Orion hadn't sat on the bench and wasn't going to, apparently. That way we looked like strangers talking about the protesters. He glanced at me through his shields of black oblivion, saying, "You take it for granted, Didge. You can do your job without having to fit in here. You're a shadow service. You don't need a suit and tie, dry cleaners, all that bullshit. I bet you don't own a pair of wingtips."

"What's that have to do with keeping an agreement, with paying somebody what's owed them?" I asked. "Are we talkin' appearances or principles?"

"Look, you coulda kept making pictures look pretty for the nonprofit foundation world. You left principles behind with that. You know what you got into."

Partly true. But I'd been a casualty when the big nonprofit I'd worked for streamlined into the shark-like specter of capitalism. So I became something of a capitalist too, after being severed. I could've searched for something else legit, but I was too weak.

I was ashamed, and I was tired of how this meeting was going. "You're right about everything," I said. "It's my doing. Not to waste any more of your time, I'll just ask: can you help me or not?"

"Didge," he said, indicating the robed activists who looked a long way from singing "Love Me Tender" but not far from "Jailhouse Rock." "You know why Tibet hasn't been freed? Why these people are always shouting?"

"Why?"

"There's no oil under it. Otherwise there'd be

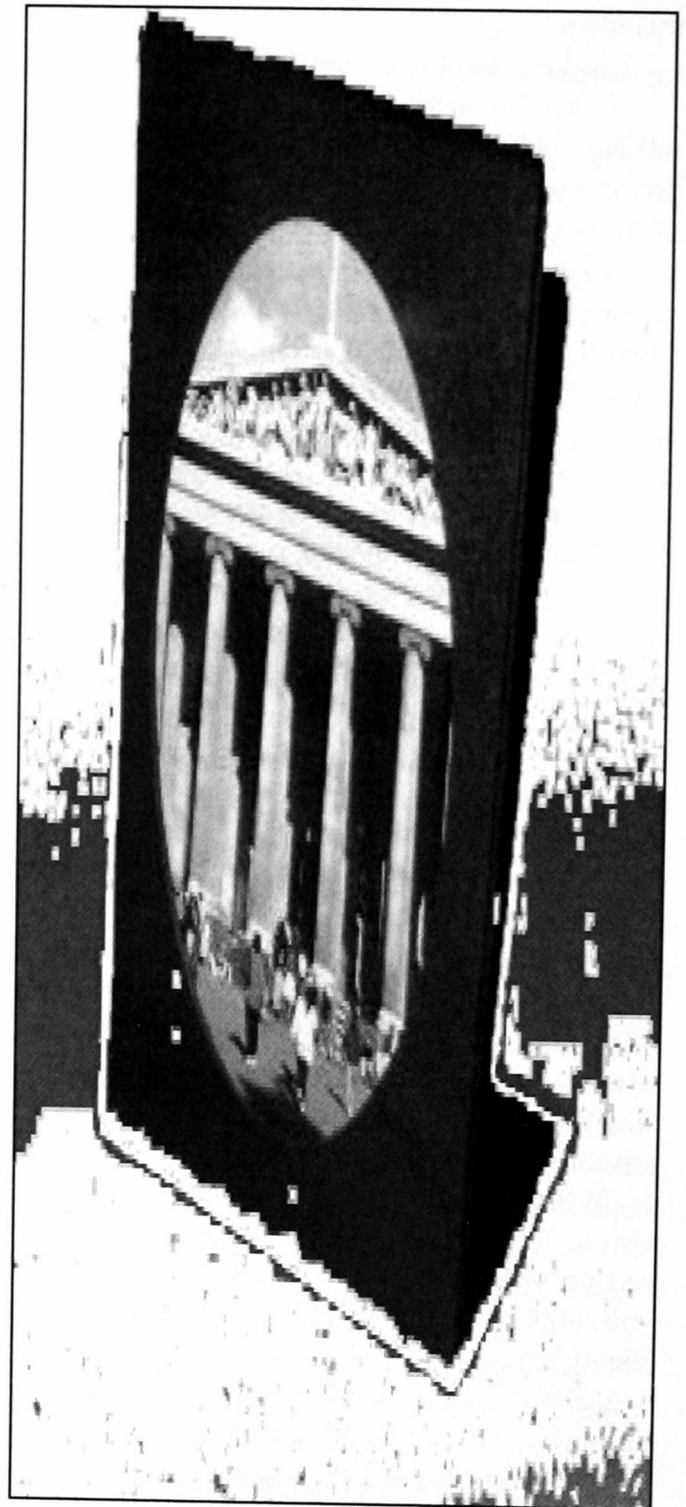


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

negotiations, or troops, or something to change that. But a bunch of Buddhists in a high, rocky place? We won't give a shit."

I tried to interpret this, but the possibilities were

too wide. "And for me that means...?"

"You'd improve your chances of freedom if you just get out. Never show your face around DC again. And use another name, grow a beard. But don't try to stay."

I resigned myself to this consideration. My wanting to stay was about more than prosperity. Convenience was a big player too. Though it wasn't worth my life, I'd have to abandon all the digital equipment at home. The scanner, computers, the conversion gear for the slide format. Way too much gear to break down and carry when skipping town. It was damned expensive stuff to replace and recalibrate. Not as big a bullet to bite as the alternative, but I had to face it.

There was also the question of where to go. Not Ohio, at least not the parts they'd look for me. I'd have a job someplace touching up family portraits in the corner of some massive discount store. Or tweaking spot visuals for websites at a sweatshop's pace.

"Orion, what if I just hid somewhere 'til this thing blew over? They can't stay this angry. I've done a lot for them."

The old man looked at the ground, shaking his head. He knew all the work I'd done. Besides the oil-loving caribou, I'd helped his people with other causes. There was the image of the child exposing himself in front of a debatable piece of public artwork, which helped them in slaying some humanities funding. There was the satellite image of a Middle East town with missiles that were actually in Nevada. This had won the White House a bombing campaign. I'd done some good pieces, and none of them were exposed as fakes. Not a mask line or a color anomaly to be found in any of them. Besides payment, I always got compliments. From Orion, that is. It was more of a don't-ask-don't-tell policy with the lawmakers themselves.

This was the center of the free world, a place too powerful to ask for forgiveness. But I wanted it anyway. A long shot, like some of their crazy

bills.

Orion said, "It's beyond my abilities, the fix you're in. You screwed up, kid, though I admire your guts. You made yourself the centerpiece of an underground Civil War between the lawmakers. This may be a Southern town, but you're in big danger."

"This isn't a Southern town. Not with all these statues of Union generals."

"So don't stay," Orion said. "Are you hungry? I am."

"Not really." The last few days I'd had the stomach only for pretzels or chips.

"You can snack on something, can't you? I could use something from one of these vendors. It'll be my goodbye treat to you, Didge. I'm sorry, but you gotta take a new path." He started walking toward the street. "C'mon. I'll even pay your ticket to whatever destination."

I got up and followed. I still didn't want to leave and hoped to buy some plead time during the snack. The sidewalks of tourist Washington were adorned with silver vending carts, tended by happy Ethiopians or Middle Easterners selling hot dogs, sodas, and candy bars. We found one on the edge of Lafayette Park, past the protesters. I convinced myself that the people with cameras were there to shoot pictures and nothing else.

Tourists in wide shorts holding popsicles moved out of our way at the snack cart. I said, "You sure there's nobody you can talk to?"

"Didge, I may be an old man, but I still have to work, you know?" To the vendor he said, "Two dogs, all the way."

Relish wasn't my thing, and I scraped most of it off before taking a bite. Orion didn't seem to mind.

"Damn," he said through his food. "I was so hungry, this tastes like a steak." We strolled toward the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the park, which was closed to vehicle traffic but not to pedestrians and in-line skaters. I thought of antique photos—daguerreotypes—of the White House,



the bare patches of its lawn filled in with painted grass of a crafty retoucher. There by the iron fence, guards kept a stoic eye on a vagrant black woman who shouted her version of a commercial jingle: "Gimme a break, gimme a break, gimme that god-damn Kit-Kat bar!"

I finished the hot dog rather fast, hungrier than I'd realized. I belched, feeling a bit closer to normal life, and said, "So that's it? No more propaganda work for me, period?"

"You know it isn't my call," Orion said. "I'll be lucky to find another photo doctor like you." He'd almost finished his dog when he stopped chewing, his mouth turning a slight frown.

"What?" I said. "Any ideas? What if you made deliveries and told them I was a different person?"

"Urk," he said in a strange whisper.

"Say what?"

Orion's knees buckled, and as he went down he clutched his throat with one giant hand and my arm with the other. I squatted down, or, rather, was pulled down. "Urnrrk," he wheezed.

His color didn't look good. "Hey!" I yelled. I heard running feet nearby, and jingling metal.

"It might be a heart attack," I said to the guards. One of them was on a radio. There'd be paramedics handy with the protests nearby. Well, he could've picked a worse place.

I opened his collar, pulling his tie further down. Orion fought for breath, and I realized he was trying to talk to me. Because I'm selfish, I hoped to hear his response to my last question. But I didn't get that. He pointed one arm in the general direction we'd walked from and said in a hoarse voice, "Son... Sonovabitch... Gave me the wrong... one..."

I let go of him and stood up. Others attended him now. I just stared. Someone removed the eye-shades from his face. It would be the first time I saw his eyes. But I didn't. He either kept his face turned or squinted his eyes shut while clucking those awful guttural noises. Even in his death throes, Orion

the headhunter wouldn't look me in the eye.

I thought of how the vendor hadn't been Ethiopian or Lebanese; he was an old white guy. A healthy-looking old white guy, too, not beaten down. It was easier to picture him in fly-fishing gear than in an apron slinging dogs and nachos. Well, he'd gotten his left and his right mixed up.

The in-line skaters yielded to an ambulance that cruised into the sealed block of Pennsylvania Avenue. Someone asked me what the victim's name was. I didn't have an answer. Orion's pockets were searched. They brought a gurney and an oxygen mask, but I knew he was past that.

Seeing that scene was what I needed. Even a faked photo of me with my throat cut wouldn't have had the impact of watching Orion squeak out his last breath, pink and purple like some native blanket. I had believed my life was in danger, but that was all. Like a more intense awareness of traffic while riding a motorcycle. I mean, it was DC, not Sicily.

Still, it had happened on the street. That was the first wrong thing Orion had said that day—that hits didn't happen on the street here. The other thing was him saying I didn't have a pair of wing-tips. I did. Only I had to leave them at home with everything else. My clothes, furniture, equipment—I ditched it all. Even the family albums, full of photos I'd never alter. *Hasta la vista*, digital equipment. I hope whoever found you used you for good causes.

To his credit, though, Orion was on the mark about a continual Civil War under that big white dome. Public knowledge or not, it had casualties besides the ones on battlefields overseas.

Later that afternoon at Union Station, I bought a whole pack of my own cigarettes before getting on the train. Call it elation, an epiphany, or plain old foolishness, but I wanted to see what would get me first: the tobacco or the random rules of the universe.

