

It has been eleven years since I fled that other life; eleven years ago that I changed my identity and went deep into hiding. Who was I then? Well you might ask. Names are not important; suffice it to say that I had been but one of the thousands of employees of a company quite simply but mysteriously referred to as *The Company*.

Research and analysis. That's all I was supposed to do. Information gathering, if you will. Specific assignments versus general information-gathering projects assigned to new covert assets, or, operatives, to use a more recognizable term. Having had a very cosmopolitan upbringing, I was fortunate to find a use for such a varied background. My role involved frequent travel, something I was already accustomed to doing. Travel had sometimes been within the United States, but increasingly more often than not to foreign countries. Some of my passports - I had six - became worn over time. There was a passport to Asian countries with a name and background devised to blend with Asian assignments. There had been another for Central and South American countries, and a third passport, well-used, for European assignments. The remaining three passports had rarely been used, for which I was profoundly grateful. Russia and Eastern-Bloc countries had a darkness about them that always made me feel not just exposed, but very vulnerable. Fortunately it wasn't often necessary for me to be extracted from there, as I was normally able to leave of my own volition. The last two passports were for emergency extractions from any country, and for which I would be required to drastically alter my appearance. I'd only used them twice, and each time I hoped it would be the last.

It became the norm for me to feel like an actress changing roles, performing a part, falling

in and out of love, or in and out of bed. My favorite role, the one I liked best, had been when I was cast as a nun. Sans cosmetics, wearing the modified habit of the modern nun, I was quite nondescript and could blend easily into crowds. Sometimes it was simple to disappear right under the nose of an adversary. A nun wearing glasses would enter an airport restroom, a woman with dark glasses and spiked hair would emerge, clad a white tank top and navy miniskirt and wearing bright red lipstick. The abbreviated wimple, white blouse and bulky navy skirt had been stuffed into the rubbish. No one ever noticed the sandals were the same, for *plain* worked very well. With the advent of a lengthy assignment at headquarters in Washington, D.C., analyzing and processing data, I could actually begin to taste what a normal, average life would be like. Living in a suburban apartment, grocery shopping, cooking, enjoying movies and walks in the park, and sleeping soundly without a gun near to hand.

In all those years of field work, there had been only one time that I had come close to being unmasked. I'd been on assignment in a Hong Kong banking firm, acting as a translator and pool typist. The Company correctly suspected that monies were being funneled from foreign accounts into an American-owned account . . . one which supplied funds to purchase companies in the United States, companies which manufactured components for computers and satellites. It wasn't a very complex scheme. They would buy a manufacturing company, switch to substandard materials leading to the failure of the components which in turn caused the computer, or satellite feed, to fail. The resultant information to the American government would be faulty or altogether absent. When the contractor tried to contact the supplier, they found it no longer existed. After seeing foreign westerners arrive late one afternoon, I'd stayed after hours, ostensibly to complete a project report. I'd ducked into the loo until everyone on the floor had

departed. When I returned to the darkened area, I heard voices from the Senior Vice Presidents wing. He was suspected of being in complicity with foreign parties so I crept to the door to eavesdrop. As I stood listening, the door had been flung open and a Caucasian man abruptly emerged, and glared at me. I had been caught quite off-guard and played it just that way. I stammered an apology to Mr. Yee, the Vice President who was hovering in the background. I told them I'd heard voices and came to see if something was amiss, but perhaps I could be of service? I had been compromised and knew it, for evening meetings were commonplace. They knew I was lying, but my feigned innocence must have been enough for them to let me go on the off chance I wasn't a plant, merely a nosy employee.

I left the building quickly, certain The Company would recall me immediately when I reported the incident. Instead, they sent me back into the lion's den, reasoning that an innocent person would return. They hoped I could gather more Intel for them. That was not to be, for the staff watched me carefully after that, giving me only the blandest of documents to translate. I had been rendered obsolete.

Shortly afterwards, something occurred which curtailed my involvement altogether. Upon returning late to my flat after an evening out, I had been assaulted as I entered the dark room. It happened before I had even a moment to sense anything out of the ordinary. Being punched around is unpleasant in the extreme, and quite painful. At least nothing worse had happened, and I escaped with my life. The attackers - Asian men, judging by their accents - suggested I return to Ohio, or wherever I was really from.

This time, The Company had me on a flight to Hawaii inside of six hours. I can't begin to

imagine what my fellow passengers thought, me sporting a cut lip that had swelled alarmingly, and a black eye even cosmetics couldn't disguise. Murmuring something about a car crash, I had a stiff drink and slept the entire flight. I ended up debriefing in Honolulu for ten days; my reward, I suspect, for the damage that had been done to my face.

My easiest assignment, one of the first assignments, in fact, had also been the most dangerous. I had infiltrated a group of students, reactionaries bent on destroying the fragile peace between the Americans and the Soviets. We had gathered in Reykjavik, Iceland, supposedly to interfere with the planned peace talks between the American President, Ronald Reagan, and the Russian Premier, Gorbachev. I soon learned that the so-called students were, in reality, insurgents who were essentially radical extremists with a variety of explosives, and who planned to bomb the site of the peace talks. Further, they were attempting to obtain weapons-grade plutonium for their next big-bang project.

Consequent to having made this discovery, I used some of their plastique, a small clock radio, and some other bits and pieces to construct a simple bomb. Using duct tape, I secured it to the underside of the kitchen table where the group gathered each evening in the rented flat. That done, I went out for a beer. The resulting explosion was 100% successful, and I flew home to debrief.

There have been myriad changes since that time. We can say the true name of The Company when we speak of it, and Hong Kong is no longer under the thumb of the British. There's more, much more, of course, but I'll reserve that for another day, another bottle of Scotch. Besides, I left the life behind eleven years ago now. That's who I was then. Who am I now? Well, these days I teach Chemistry in a local community college. Not that I particularly

like chemistry, or even students, for that matter. I just happen to be good at chemistry, and I want to be sure the kids don't learn to build bombs.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to Chemistry 101. I am your teacher, Miss . . .”