

Let's see. If I look out my window directly across from my building, I see another building. If I look to the left, west that is, I see down west 71st St., towards the unfolding republic. However, looking east, my view is partially blocked by a tree, and the remaining clear field reveals an old age home. It's oddly appropriate that the home for the old folks would be behind, in the direction of that part of America forsaken for the hope that the other end promised. Needless to say, I am reminded of time, or missed opportunities, or whatever one gets reminded of, by the almost quotidian arrival of an ambulance to fetch some poor, ailing and departing soul, clutching his secrets.

There's not much else I can see from my window, but I suppose that's enough.

These ruminations lead me to thinking about secrets. Secrets are what I do for a living. I was actually taught them. Like a law student being taught logic, I had pedagogically revealed to me the science of being ulterior. A law student thinks he knows what logic is on his first day of school. I mean, logic. You're thirsty, you drink. If the sandman comes, you get supine. But, then the professors reveal to him the truncheon that clear thinking can be. It's the same with secrets. They are harmless until you know how to brandish them, except that they can only be rattled in silence, among those chosen few.

It was before that, though, that I had no idea about secrets. I mean secrets as I had come to know them. Before my intimate acquaintance with the secret life, a secret to me was where you had put the quarter you stole off your father's bureau, or the fact that you had smoked cigarettes as a freshman, when you had at least to be a sophomore to do so.

I think secrets increase in girth, as you grow older. When confronted with the enormity of the things I have to keep hidden, I shudder. It is unnatural for a man to have to keep things like safe houses, names of agents I've turned, and bent ambassadors silent. I had a dream once that I screamed the name of our illegal hood in Moscow to an entire senate subcommittee, press and all. I woke up and puked. My relief, upon being conscious, that I had not compromised my microcosm of the intelligence establishment was entire.

Christ.

Sometimes having my head is like carrying a too-full bag of groceries. I see my apartment, close, up ahead, and I think, "I'll make it, I'll make it....". Then the bottom falls out, and all that was hidden is seen. That's not allowed.

What I do for a living is pretend to be things when I am the opposite. Meeting people in dark places, late at night. Last August, in Marseilles, I actually rendezvoused with a guy who was wearing a beret and carrying a baguette. A union guy from the French longshoreman's association. We pull a lot of bauxite through there. Bauxite. Can you imagine?

We were keeping secrets. Secrets about data or statistics, or secrets about propensities. Things on the quiet. Things valuable, the fewer the people who know them.

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9/8/01

All things have their beginnings. My career as a hood began in Boston. I was a history student there. Always brilliant, I had the cachet of the advanced. Some called me a sesquipedalian, or sententious, but I knew my stuff. I had worked hard at my supercilious

countenance. Anyway, one day at the beginning of the winter semester, I was approached by a guy in front of Fenway Park. Afterwards, I would realize that I had noticed him in two different places before he opened his mouth. For chrissakes, I was being followed! He beamed an unmistakable Episcopalian rectitude. Everything about the guy was immediately recognizable as northeastern. He could have been a double for Phillips Brooks. I would soon find out that he was a scout or talent spotter as we came to call them. Ethan Caldicott Hockmeyer was the ne plus ultra of the eastern establishment. He had a Massachusetts accent that could make your ears bleed, but that he thought, as did his people, sounded precisely like an American should speak. If I remember correctly the conversation went something like this:

“Mr. Athy?” He said.

“Yes”? I replied So far, so good. I mean he didn’t seem like an invert, or that he was going to make my life miserable.

“My name is E.C. Hockmeyer. I happen to have heard about you from Professor Machlin.”

My face a rictus of puzzlement.

“Professor Machlin has been speaking to people about me”? I was on the horns of anger and intrigue. I mean Machlin. For fuck’s sake. I had aced everything I ever had to write, consider, or think through for that wordy prick, but I was sure he considered me an ignoramus.

“Peter Machlin and I have shared the names of extraordinary students for years now”, he offered. “He has been of inestimable help to me in finding the kind of young people I need for my company. You graduate in June, don’t you”?

“May, actually”. I suddenly felt undergraduate. Who, for the love of Christ, was this guy?

“Ah, yes. May. May in Boston. I can think of a paucity of items as gratifying as that time of year in this town”.

Paucity of items? Had this guy just come from some George Plimpton party?

“You know Boston”? I was trying to be elder-respecting and tea-party pleasant.

“Young man, I was born here. Women’s Lying Inn. My family lived in Louisburg Square”.

I started to get the kind of nervous you get when you realize that the hostess has found you out, and that you’re going to get busted for crashing the gavotte. Louisburg Square! Heyzeus!

“I am sorry, Mr.....”

“Hockmeyer”

“Mr. Hockmeyer. What is it exactly that you require of me? I have to buy some tickets here and get back to school”.

He grinned. “I was intending to offer you a job. Peter, I mean Professor Machlin, indicated to me that just about everything you have submitted to him in not only acute in its logic, but factually sound. He actually called you someone who, with a little more work, could be a Phd. with no trouble. Is that your intention?”

I had to call an end to this.

“Look, Mr. Hockmeyer, I have known you for approximately four minutes. Would you mind telling me why I should reveal to you anything about myself”?

“Now, that”, he said, “is a distinct example of exactly the kind of quality we.....I mean I am looking for in a rookie”. Rookie. In front of Fenway Park. This guy was a pisser.

“Mr. Athy, I can offer you upon graduation, forty-six thousand dollars to start, and cover any moving expenses you have. If you are interested, it would be necessary for you to move to Washington”.

“Well, I...”