

The Virginia Beach Job

By Lewis Woodson

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Part One

The Job

ON A STREET south of the old port and east of the new one, he stood on a sidewalk with his back turned against the wind, his hair over his ears and feathering at his forehead and his hat tumbled away to the south. He patted the right pocket of his jacket and found it empty, then gripped his left wrist behind his back and watched. The hat slid down the middle of the street and butted against the tire of a slowing Citroën and he stepped leeward, then stopped when it arced around the car and continued down the street sliding and rolling. It bumped over a curb and came to a halt under a man who knocked it against his leg and flashed it overhead for the owner to see. The American turned into the wind and shuttered at its cold, pulled his jacket closed against it. He spun his watch around his wrist and started north.

An early spring mistral swept food wrappers and other refuse through the streets. Plastic bags flagged violently on light poles and a crushed empty soda can rocked restlessly against a wall in an alley. He stopped at a fruit stand to buy a tangerine, *La Provence* flipping in the wind threatening to fly and saying that Marseille and Lille had drawn, and he thought about her eyes. The wind masked what the vendor had said, he shouted back in French and continued north past grocers and textile shops and graffiti and younger men moving between French and English and Arabic and not noticing him. His watch told him he had half an hour.

In a window, *pain au chocolat*, and he moved his hand over his mid-section. He wore wire glasses, a check pattern shirt under his long jacket, and age spots that worked their way up his arms from the backs of his pale hands. He said aloud, "She won't touch it," and continued.

A noise from behind and a passenger on a small motorbike shoved him aside and two young men sped by in a streak of red and white, behind them a waft of soap and cologne and exhaust thin in the wind and gone. He had backed to a storefront with fingertips on glass, and watched

them weave down the sidewalk missing people and bollards and small cars half parked on the street. The passenger turned and looked back before his head swung out into the road and behind an old bus.

North into the cold, he stopped in shops, bonjouring on entry and a giving wave on leaving. He entered a small corner shop and saw on a high shelf behind the counter small figurines of different sizes and shapes that the shopkeeper said were crystal. He asked for a bird, was handed another and the owner leaned on the counter both looked away to a loose window shuddering at a strong gust. He held it up, the facets reflecting the colors of the shop and the light of the windows. It was smaller than his thumb and probably a fox, though its hindquarters were misshapen and more resembling that of a horse. Lines on his face gathered into a frown.

He'd left with her only once and she had hugged herself with thin arms against the cold and he ushered her down the windy alley, half-turned and reassuring the Frenchman with a raised hand. The Frenchman leaned against a wall and watched them. The sandwich shop was two plastic chairs and one small plastic table that rocked alone in an alley, the traffic an echo between five story towers where most roll-up doors stayed shuttered and covered with spray paint and the walls spotted with weathered decals. She looked under the table and held its leg down with her foot, and ate hunched over her food protecting the crumbs. He told her about the things he'd seen in the city and on television, about a photograph he took of a pelican sitting on the prow of a rowboat down at the harbor. A lull in the wind brought the smell of stale urine, and sound from a television and murmur of conversation from a windows somewhere above.

When the Frenchman over her shoulder shouted out she looked back and bounced her leg on the ball of her foot, shifting the table, and he held it steady. The Frenchman blew smoke that tumbled around him and called out "*cinq minutes,*" and her eyes moved up and away. Dark,

round eyes. At “*trois*” her leg shook and she looked at his hand, and he turned his palm up. The Frenchman stood away from the wall with legs apart and his left arm raised before him. At “*deux*” she looked behind her again, then past the American and down the alley, her narrow fingers curled before her mouth. He moved to take her hand, but her leg moved again and she sat back in her chair. He tapped the table with the tips of his fingers, and nodded.

At “One minute,” she straightened her back and said that they should go and she put her hand on top of his and told him thank you in English. They stood and he said goodbye and she walked back to where the Frenchman stood stabbing his cigarette into the wall.

The American twisted up the figurine in three small sheets of tissue paper and tied it off with string and walked north into the wind. When he reached the building a man stood with his hand high on the door, told him in French, “She's not here anymore.”

“*Où est-elle?*”

“She's not here. Go away.”

“When will she be back?”

“She's gone. Maybe took vacation in Canada—who knows? Go away. Don't come back.”

The American left the figurine on the window and a girl in an apron sat staring out at the alley looked down at the gift then back at the American who turned and walked away.

When he returned, a man grabbed him by the collar, slapped and shoved him. He reached into his pocket for the blackjack and the younger man grabbed his wrist and pulled it high above him and smashed his wrist against the wall until it fractured and the weapon fell to the ground. He stumbled and fell against the wall on the other side of the alley. The man told him he had no reason to return.

He slipped, his feet kicking aside a plastic bottle and creased shopping bag. In his fall he had broken a downspout from the gutter above, but he couldn't rejoin the two halves with one hand. Someone in an apartment overhead closed their shutters. He braced himself against the dumpster to his side, breathed deeply and rested his arm on his midsection, then wiped rust from his sleeve and removed his glasses and rubbed them on his shirt. He brushed his jacket off again and left, continuing north.

When he reached his hotel that night he stamped his feet on the hard brown tile and shook the chill from his jacket and trousers, and the young man behind the desk admonished him for not returning earlier, asked about his face and the cast. The American waved at him, assured the younger man that he was still strong, and started toward the stairs. The night man reminded him about the coffee and croissants, but the American ignored him and went to his room.

The one called Jasper had been on the same flight, and at the baggage carousel stood opposite Bonny looking up at a television monitor and patting his leg with his cap. The photocopies she studied on the flight were torn and in an envelope she held close to her side. The lining of the wood oven, cracked and falling away piece by piece, it could collapse entirely any day. Two people made manager in as many months. She got her bag first and rounded a corner and discarded the envelope and walked out into the heat. A large white van parked to the left flashed its lights, and an outstretched hand gestured for her to approach from the driver's window. She walked toward it and stopped and peered in under the shade of her hand. Two figures in the front with more behind. Ed was driving. Inside were Martin, Sam, Will, and Julian.

She pulled at her blouse and let it fall back to her chest and they all fanned themselves and Jasper stood on the curb. Julian asked what perfume she was wearing, the man outside the van watched with his hand on the roof. Bonny sat forward, told Ed to turn on the air. The man outside the van looked down the concourse each way then asked, "Where is he?"

She told him, "He said he's not coming."

He looked at the youngest in the van, said to Will, "You didn't say anything about him not coming."

"Also didn't say he would," Ed told him. "And now security's annoyed. It's three hours to the city and I need the numbers. I promise you'll like it."

Jasper hit the roof with his fist then stood up straight and turned in place looking around him and said, "It's been nice seeing you all. Be good." He put his hand up, closed the door and stepped back to watch them leave.

On Atlantic Avenue at the beach they rolled the windows down and let sea air blow through the van, then left and parked in a structure in the city's downtown. Bonny and the others walked in the shade of the buildings on the south side of Main to a nearby plaza at Main and Central Park Avenue, passed the larger fountain and chose a table away from the main entrance and under the shade of a young tree near the smaller fountain. Its low hiss brought a wave of somnolence, and she sat upright and reached her arm out of the shade and into the sunlight.

Ed still standing, he told them coffee was on at the house. The gray at his temples had advanced, and he had not shaved for days and rubbed his jaw and talked about a ball game he caught on television last night. A pair of young businessmen at a nearby table talked loudly about their work and when they left were replaced by a group of teenage girls who had brought ice cream from a shop up Central Park. Ed told the team about a hockey playoff game that had gone into double overtime. A breeze blew through the plaza, shaking the leaves overhead, the fountain shifted in pitch and Bonny thought she felt a drop of cool water on her arm. Martin reached up and brushed his cheek. Sam lifted his head, smelled something carried on the breeze, and Martin pointed out the source in a pizza shop across the street, on the corner. She thought each of them had noticed the grey van parked south of the plaza that started and drove away. The girls left, and Ed asked what the others thought about what they had seen.

He told them it was a rush job that Will had found on a board recently, then told them about how the city had only been incorporated in 1952, and of the growth experienced since the recession. The downtown they were in had been a stand of trees just twenty years before, he told them about the buildings to go up in the empty lots they had passed, and how the company Paragon acted as developer, builder, and eventual property manager, and how the Petersen Company—the second target later in the summer—had a similar role in large developments at

the city's oceanfront. He told them of the businesses vying for locations in the coming buildings, and the letters of intent and the large deposits sometimes required to secure those locations. He couldn't know the final take, but every deposit secured would be at least a month's rent. Each of them at the table declined when offered to take the van back to the capitol.

She stepped down from the van and crossed her arms behind her head and leaned back into a stretch, before her a blue two story clapboard house with a three-car garage addition on the Lynnhaven River. A tall arch over a recessed entryway and a matching transom window above the door, and above a gable whose bold white barge boards matched the white casings of the windows throughout. Over it all a slate roof and tall chimney at each corner at the back. There was an unused boat trailer in the grass to the side, between the house and a low stone wall that ran back to near the edge of the water. In the foyer she asked, "Do you think it's big enough?" and thought she heard an echo.

A butcher block island-cum-table in the kitchen, properly oiled, but perhaps never sanded. It wore stains and scars from years of use by renters. An old black range with heavy cast iron grates, enamel nicked and chipped in places over the years. The door to the pantry could be heard opening and closing from most rooms, under its paint it bore irregular notches never filled in that ran to shoulder height, and in the dining room a child's impression in the table. The iron bars at the center of the living room fireplace grate had been cooked away to wisps, and years of fires started with a closed damper had left the brickwork darkened with soot. She could follow the movements of people above with the squeaks of floorboards, and when she climbed the stairs to choose her room, the banister felt solid but moaned softly and stairs creaked. The doors were heavy and the walls thin, and in places it had a rich, musty smell that recalled old houses in other

places, all laden with forgotten triumphs and loss—pets at rest out under trees they once patrolled, a playground now the domain of longing until those who hold the memories themselves move on. In the bathroom she saw a great uncle and an unfinished basement with tall stacks of books and board games. A tin of letters to the aunt she had never met, entombed in it a monochrome photo in a white cardigan, leaning against a post on a porch, somewhere and some time.

At the back of the house she found a large balcony overlooking the water with the river beyond mostly obscured by the trees. A small dinghy was left upturned at the water's edge, and a narrow wooden dock stretched out over the water with a white boat floating at its end. To the right a small tool shed with a padlock on the door between two trees. A fire pit just beyond the patio.

She blew on her mug, rubbed her finger over a faint burn mark where a hot or still lit match had been dropped on the counter. Martin's shoulder brushed against hers and he put three spoons in the freezer. He got a beer, and the others came into the kitchen and drank and they talked sports and movies and jobs in the news. A party in Dallas. Fifty thousand dollars of hobbyist telescopes gone when someone stole a truck and, posing as the driver, drove up to the factory gate, hooked up to a loaded trailer inside and left. A thing with an online campaign to crowdfund heat engine research, with promises of an eventual JTEC competitor. It had been written about in tech journals, and after twenty thousand had been raised the developer disappeared. The example in the online video and shown to journalists now suspected to have been powered via induction. Columbia had never heard of him. Martin said he would find something to lubricate the hinge. He no longer rubbed his ring finger with the thumb on that hand. Some fifteen pounds heavier and his skin taught, like her he'd put on weight for the job, and grew out his hair. Something

missing in Julian's walk, he favored his right leg. Will was more mature, still rarely looked her in the eye. Ed quiet, pinched his lip with his thumb and index finger, and was the first to leave, telling the others to come into the living room when they were ready.

When he finished it had gotten late. The sliding door at the back of the house stood open, and out in the coming night the sounds of crickets and birds, and the lights from houses far across the water already reflecting off its surface in ragged lines. A flurry of scratching noises out in the yard that Martin said was squirrels chasing each other.

Bonny asked, "Biggest spaces first?"

"I wish it were that cut and dried. There's a choice to be made. Some low value sure shots and some high value nuts—those companies that weren't as far along in the process and might be a harder sell."

"Make the decision."

"We'll start small."

"Good."

"You'd have said that no matter what I chose."

"Just glad I don't have to make the call."

"And if someone has an old business card in their desk, an old email chain they reply to?"

"A good time to say thanks to Will."

"Good man."

Will said, "I made it into Paragon as an intern from the local Journal—"

"Before you knew we'd show up?"

"Knew you'd come. Got access to both their email servers and their phone lines. Targets will get new contact information, but I'm gonna set up my own server with Paragon's old server's

address, tell mine to sit on any email for an hour before sending it along to the old server, which now has a new address. While you guys are out pretending to be from Paragon, I'll be back here to intercept anything from the targets. Phone calls from certain area codes will no longer make it to Paragon for a while starting that Wednesday. The caller'll be told the number's no longer in service, so he emails you—me— for the new number. After wave one we monitor communications to see if anything's up, and wait for the transfers. After a week everything looks good, we do it all over again. They'll get some mail while they're on their retreat that weekend, but if anyone support or back office stays behind I'll make sure they vacate the building.”

“With your toys?”

“And whatever happens, there's little chance wave two targets will know what's up. It'll take too long for Paragon to figure out what's happening.”

Ed continued, “A map of the city. Backup house out on the beach, here. We're here, on the Lynnhaven River, a tidal estuary off the Chesapeake Bay. Boat's fueled up and some supplies for a quick egress if needed. Head north and once you're past the Lesner bridge you're in the bay. That goes a couple hundred miles north all the way to Baltimore. Pass the Lesner bridge and turn east, you're in the Atlantic Ocean in ten minutes and can head up or down the coast. Or we head out into the bay, west to Norfolk, and take the ICW anywhere down the coast. If you're in a car and need to lay low for a bit, there are a few good spots marked in blue. As with the boat, we don't anticipate needing these, but they're there. Maps on your walls, know this place like it's home, and these people like you've been in break rooms and living next to them for years. In and out. Then you have to do it again a few hours later in a different office, maybe a different city. Then again. And again. You're gonna be exhausted and hate it, so it's got to be effortless. And remember rule three.”

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