

Welcome to My World

By

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This reading material is of a mature nature. Reader discretion is advised.

Excuse the pun. But. No matter how hard you try to make them otherwise. Sexualized stories always suck.

Foreword

Doc Holiday is based on Donald Hamilton's [*Matt Helm*](#), Richard Boone's [*Hec Ramsey*](#), Frank Sinatra's [*Tony Rome*](#), and Mickey Spillane's [*Mike Hammer*](#).

Episode 1

Bambi Meets Godzilla

“If there is intelligent life in the universe, other than ourselves, then we must be prepared to greet it, appropriately; whether peacefully or not. To do otherwise is to court certain disaster—our own history of what happens militarily when a more technologically advanced civilization deals with a less technologically advanced civilization has shown us that, repeatedly. We have a responsibility not only to our fellow Americans, but to our fellow human beings worldwide as well, to do whatever is required of us to insure the continuation of our species at any cost.”—**President Barack Obama, an excerpt from his redacted “extraterrestrial event” speech in December 2016 before the Joint Chiefs of Staff.**

Episode 2

To a Hammer, Everything's a Nail

“A starship utilizing active camouflage: The Holy Grail of Stealth, finally. Hiding in plain sight, it subverts your gaze. Likewise, in outer space, it is indistinguishable from the starscape at all sublight velocities. Additionally, no warp bubble's telling wake, whatsoever, as its velocity approaches c , the speed of light. Neither radar nor lidar can detect it. And, it is as quiet as the Abyss, when it moves through atmosphere. Shock and Awe: When you touch it, you can hear it scream in your mind, as if it were the Eater of Worlds.”—**General Warren Keffer (USSF), describing the 1st-generation universal starship proposal**

Episode 3

Alice in Wonderland

“Oh, my goodness. For as far out as far out goes. For as far back as far back goes. They’re gone. Devoured. The Professor was right. The stars are a lie. There’s only us and an all-consuming darkness. It is our Wonderland, and we are its Alice.”—**Captain Percy Shelley, the discovery communication from the United States Merchant Marine starship *Ozymandias*.**

Episode 4

Q&A

A corporate black site five miles below the surface of Perth Australia, P0.

The perfunctory interview, likely chock full of rhetorical questions and blatant feints. Interviewing me for a job they've already decided to hire me for. In other words, it's up to me to accept or refuse the job.

Not my usual interviewers, though. A warmonger and a law-enforcement groupie. As my notorious kind-of namesake might say, "What a pair to draw to. Boy, I can really pick them."

The Q&A begins with the expected declaration.

"This interview is being recorded. And. You've agreed to noninvasive examinations, before, after, and during this interview."

"I confirm your declaration."

This is followed by the expected disclaimers. All of which I agree to.

This is followed by the usual NDAs. All of which I sign.

Then the questions begin.

Rhetorical question, number one: "Tommie Ellis Holiday. What do you prefer to be called?"

"Just call me Doc."

Rhetorical question, number two: "Are you related to the infamous Wild West gunslinger John Henry Holliday, better known as Doc Holliday?"

No need to worry, I'll stop counting. But. I will still keep score.

"Different surname—i.e., same pronunciation; different spelling."

A pawn's gambit, that I favor. Let's see what his response is.

"Doc... You were an MP for how many years?"

Simply moved on to the next question. Nice.

"Five years. Three as a PO and two as a detective."

"You attained the rank of warrant officer?"

"Correct."

"You also Army Scout Sniper qualified?"

"Correct."

“Would-be Army Snipers must be classified as Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) 11B (Infantry soldier), 19D (Calvary Scout), or 18 series (Special Forces) in the rank of E3 through E6. Additional Skill Identifier (ASI) B4 (Sniper) can only be given to those soldiers who have attained MOS 11B.”

“Correct.”

Hopefully, he goes no further down this rabbit hole. Else he’ll get bupkis.

“And. You were stationed at a FOB for that entire five-year tour-of-duty? Correct?”

“Correct.”

“Different FOBs or the same FOB?”

My response is a knowing smile, that tells them absolutely nothing. His partner, Mr. Jones, shows annoyance. I’m being played. The annoyance is fake because these suits are pros.

“Your second tour-of-duty was with Army Intelligence?”

“Correct. I did special policing for them. I was not a spy.”

Of course if I had done spying for Army Intelligence I would also deny it. Therefore my answer would be the same either way. Need-to-know literally means “need to know.” If you need to know something, you get briefed per the discretion of those “above your pay grade”; you don’t need to ask, therefore, if you have to ask, you don’t need to know.

“How long was that second tour-of-duty?”

Again, a knowing smile, from me. Again, no tell, whatsoever. Again, feigned annoyance from Mr. Jones.

Anonymous observation of moi by person or persons unknown? Besides the one-way mirror in the interview room, I’m also being deep scanned—physically and metaphysically—to see if I’ve been arcanelly enhanced. I wonder if it’s being done by The Professor, Heiða Rún Sigurðardóttir, who they would know as her alias Heida Reed. It “feels” like her handiwork.

Additionally. Their pre-employment drug testing will have already told them that I’m not, nor have I ever been, a SARMS user.

“After you were honorably discharged from the Service, you bounced around quite a bit: PMC, CA with the USSF, police officer with the SLMPD including a brief stint on the special security detail for the Mayor of the City of St. Louis, freelance CPO, Missouri State Highway Patrol Trooper, investigator with the Missouri State Highway Patrol, Sheriff’s Deputy for St. Charles County, etc. Always law enforcement related: sometimes on-book, sometimes off-book. Then, out of the blue, that all changed. Now you hobo on fox-bodies, paying for your passage by doing ad hoc security?”

“Yes.”

Needless to say, to safely hobo on fox-bodies I must be a Guild member of some stripe. So they know they don't need to ask me about my Guild status. But they do anyways. More games.

“Do you belong to the Spacing Guild?”

“Yes.”

“Membership category?”

“A member in good standing.”

Then, completely out of left field.

“Are you a ‘tool,’ Doc?”

“Are you or your partner, Mr. Smith?”

This time, Mr. Jones feigns anger. Mr. Smith pretends to calm him down. It's all theater. All part of the game being played, nothing else. Just business; nothing personal.

“A crew member on the *Spindrift Diorama*, one of the space marine fox-bodies that we subcontract, has been found dead. We want you to discreetly handle this ‘situation,’ and report your finding to us before you report it to the authorities.” He pauses, then comes the lawyer speak. “I can't emphasize enough that we are NOT asking you to cover up anything.”

That last part is about gauging my honesty—i.e., am I a corrupt cop or not.

“That's good, because I wouldn't, if you did.”

“Payment for your services?”

“Passage on the Kessel Run from Pandora to P337. That's the next trip on my To-Go list.”

“Done.”

“Where is the fox-body in question?”

“Orbiting Pandora. Waiting for the required second opinion on the mishap.”

So, they're privy to my list. They have really done their homework.

“A Kessel Run to P337?” I ask, rhetorically.

“Of course, Doc. Besides your impressive qualifications, that's why we picked you.”

Now comes my lawyer speak.

“The crew in question will formally know me as a ‘fixer’ doing policework for y'all not just some random guy or a rent-a-cop? Everything ‘above board?’”

“Of course.”

More lawyer speak from me follows.

“To be clear, I’ll tell the fox-body’s captain of my finding, but, I won’t volunteer it. The captain MUST explicitly ask me. After which, if the captain feels incumbent to tell you, that’s up to the captain.” I pause for effect, a trick a savvy lawyer taught me years ago. “If the captain happens to ask me before I tell the authorities, so be it.”

“Agreed.”

Again, completely out of left field.

“Are you ‘special,’ Doc?”

“You tell me.”

Episode 5

Postmortem

We're in my assigned quarters on the *Spindrift Diorama*. Myself and Mimi Rogers the fox-body's security officer. Twenty-something Ms. Rogers is a real looker.

"Readiness reports on the deceased?"

The girl hands them over to me, casually. I just as casually leaf through them.

"Oh my goodness. What a grade-A screwup, he was. I'm surprised he lasted as long as he did. Was he connected?"

"He was the godson of a U.S. Senator."

"That explains a lot."

"As in?"

A rhetorical question if I've ever heard one.

"People like him are a menace not only to themselves but also to their fellow crew members. Won't be the first time that a member of a crew who was a liability was prophylactically erased."

"Forensics is inconclusive."

Sweet and smooth. She deftly sidesteps my implied accusation of murder. By pointing out the obvious: there's no evidence of murder. The lack of an admission of guilt makes it a deal breaker.

This is not one of those Perry Mason whodunits or its ilk. Where the guilty party ALWAYS breaks down and confesses.

"So I noticed."

I undress her with my eyes. If she's unnerved by this lewdness, I can't tell. She's no prude. Neither is she a whore. Otherwise a cold fish who's difficult to read. Icelandic frigid. Very Nordic. A hoss. My favorite type of girl.

The captain, Juliet Ward, pokes her head in. Another looker, and a redhead at that. Irish by the accent and look. Very dishy, indeed, albeit forty-something and therefore well past her prime. But. I wouldn't kick her out of my bed. Ergo. I'd love to tap that for a spirited romp. And. I can tell that I'm an itch she'd love to scratch too.

"Conclusion, Doc?"

Short and to-the point. What is the official result of my postmortem?

"Death by misadventure, Captain. Same preliminary as yours. We're in concurrence."

My concurrence will allow the *Spindrift Diorama* to be released from orbit, by the spaceport authorities. The deceased's body will be handed over to the local police. And the fox-body can be about its way.

“Good. Done and done. See you in the mess, in ten.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

All of the crew, except for the deceased, are space marines. All of the crew, except for the deceased, are former military. All of the crew, except for the deceased, are members in good standing of the Spacing Guild; the deceased wasn't scab labor, because he had a special exemption from the Guild, which, in effect, made him a Spacing Guild member in temporary standing.

So, the deceased sticks out like a sore thumb? Yes. Suspicious? Yes. Incriminating? No.

Episode 6

Cat & Mouse

Space-folding drive engaged. Traversing folded space. Ghosting, of course. On route to P337. Furthest astronomical object from the Solar System within the Milky Way Galaxy. Beyond P337 is the Galactic Rim. And beyond that is oblivion. Absolutely nothing. The Void.

In the mess. Eating some mighty-fine chow. Seated across from the boat's cook, Amber "Cookie" Smith. Food aside. Cookie is a very delectable brunette in her own right.

Five-star restaurants don't have the best cooks, starships and submarines do hands down. But. Usually, a Cookie is not smoking hot, especially on a long-hauler like this one. This is clearly one of those glaring exceptions.

Seated nearby at the captain's table is the captain, Claire the XO, Frost the security chief, and Samuels the COB. Claire is nothing to write home about, but, in a pinch, she'll do. Frost is Mimi's sister; they're twins—double nice. Samuels is that generic balding thirty-something "dude."

Needless to say, the mood at the captain's table is nothing short of joyous, because of my finding in the case of the stiff.

Talking with Cookie is more like talking to an old salt instead of conversing with the airhead high fashion model she resembles. Of course, there are limits to that analogy. Because, she's not, nor has she ever been, a cop.

Nonetheless, she's pretty sharp about what the real deal is about. As such, this could be a very interesting game of cat & mouse.

The question is, who's gonna enjoy the shadow of whom? Then again, maybe neither of us might end up caring what the answer to that question is, if we both end up having so much fun.

"Before we left Earth, my boyfriend Phil and I broke up. We had this heated argument. He has a Ph.D. in criminology. Politically, we agree on absolutely nothing. But..."

"He's a real looker?" I ask, rhetorically.

Cookie is pretty much an open book. So you can see her tells a mile away. Zero chance that Phil is anything other than prime USDA-choice beefcake.

"Yep."

This expected affirmation of hers is accompanied by that telling twinkle in her eyes. So. Me loving gossip so much, I probe further. Only queers love gossip more than a straight man.

"And?"

“He’s AWESOME in bed. First time I’ve dated a man who I didn’t have to fake an orgasm with.”

Let’s see if I’ve read between the lines, correctly, on this one.

“A pretty boy who’s hung, can lay pipe, and munch rug? Wow. That’s a rarity.”

“That’s why I put up with his bullshit politics for so long, almost six months. Then that last argument was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“Now, who is bullshitting whom?”

Cookie smiles coyly. Then, after a long pause, she confesses.

“Guilty as charged.”

“He gaslit you, one time too many about something much nearer and dearer to your heart than balling, didn’t he?”

“Yep. To tell the truth. It wasn’t the umpteenth disagreement too many on politics. The stupid ass fucker shit all over my cooking, that one time too many.”

“Good girl.”

She coos. I can feel the rub of one of her boots against a pant leg of my flight suit. So far, I’ve played my cards right and I’m in the stretch heading for home plate.

“So let’s see how our notes compare on the nature of crime.”

“And then?”

“Depends.”

“I’m game. Shoot.”

“Phil always argued that the police are corrupt, incompetent, or both, depending on the police force in question, because crime exists.”

I’ve heard this assertion before. Always from people of a certain neo political ilk.

“How so?”

“He maintained that the purpose of the police was to eliminate crime, therefore, for crime to exist, the police MUST be corrupt, incompetent, or both. I maintained that he was full of shit.”

“You’re right on point. The police don’t exist to eliminate crime. They exist to control it, so that it doesn’t disrupt society too much. Each society defines what that ‘too much’ is. Thus its definition varies from society to society. As does each society’s enforcement of it.”

“So, bottomline, cops just maintain order?”

“Correct.”

“Go on.”

I dare to be great and take the plunge. I rub of one of my boots against a pant leg of her flight suit.

“Cops know who the criminals are. If cops just existed to eliminate crime, they would just line up the existing baddies and execute them. Poof. Crime gone.”

“And when new criminals appear, a repeat of the same wash, rinse, spin cycle?”

“Correct.”

This dovetails into the expected.

“As a rule of thumb, and there are always exceptions...”

“...Usually...”

“I stand corrected. There are usually, not always, exceptions.” She pauses. Very nice touch. “As a rule of thumb, with exceptions, criminals are professionals. That is, the profession of criminals is crime; they make a living by committing crime.”

“Correct.”

“Crime ultimately involves some vice that benefits...entertains...is consumed by...a certain percentage of normies in a given society.”

“Correct.”

“So. If you eliminate crime, you’re also hurting...depriving..., so to speak, a portion of your otherwise law-abiding citizenry, people who are usually productive and usually taxpayers.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“One of those moments, where you pull back the curtains to reveal the Wizard of Oz pulling the strings?”

“Exactly.”

I can tell that I’ve passed muster.

“Your quarters or mine?”

“You pick.”

Episode 7

Feast or Famine

Question: How long can a nuclear-powered submarine stay submerged?

Answer: The length of its resupply.

Old equation: It can produce its own breathable air and drinkable water, but it can't recrew itself and it can't produce its own food or fuel. Add AI to supplement or replace human crew as need be. Plus the advent of 3D printers and printable food. And. The equation changes forever.

New equation: Now a nuclear-powered sub can stay submerged on deployments forever.

Starships had the same equation as nuclear-powered subs. An equation that changed for the same reasons, in the same ways. Now, non-fox-bodies and fox-bodies can stay out there among the stars forever.

There's a saying, "Money talks and bullshit walks."

On Earth. The argument goes that the wholesale adoption of 3D printers for everything, from manufacturing to food production, would cause global economic collapse begetting "tsunamis of apocalyptic crises." So their widespread use is being phased in very, very, very slowly. A multidecade transition strictly overseen by the United Nations. The same old same old: Feast for the monied; Feast or famine, for the rest of us.

A similar "The Sky is Falling!!!" argument is made for the adoption of FTL for orbital spaceflight and suborbital airflight.

And the list goes on and on. Similar argument. Similar solution for mitigating the adverse impact of the "epoch" technology in question.

In outer space. In sharp contrast. And. Interestingly enough. Society is based upon 3D printers, FTL, and other such epoch technology. The new thing: It's feast not famine, for everybody.

Nonetheless. Earth is far from being regulated to legacy status. It's not rapidly, or even slowly, disappearing in the rearview mirror, so to speak. Much too powerful and pervasive are the nations of Earth to allow such a thing to happen. They remain as relevant as ever in outer space where their self-sufficient colonies are extensions of their imperialistic ambitions. That's politics for you, and politics is always a bitch.

I avoid that bitch's wraith by taking heed of the obvious: (1) The Golden Rule: Those who have the gold, make the rules. (2) Know your place: Behave suitably for one's position, rank, or status, in society. And. (3) Know when it's in your best interest to look the other way: It's okay

to be a hypocrite, albeit a pragmatic one. Maxims which apply to cops, civilians, and whatnot alike. Everything else is a chicken wing—i.e., it doesn't matter.

Bottomline, Raymond Chandler's fictional detective Philip Marlowe I am not. Nor. Have I ever met his ilk in real-life.

Episode 8

A Fire-breathing Dragon

“You can’t outrun death forever. It’s a relentless predator. And. Its lackey is time. But. You can sure make those two bastards work for it.”—**an anonymous soldier from some long-forgotten war.**

High in the skies above a terraformed Europa. Deep behind enemy lines. On an interservice CSAR. During the waning days of The 3rd Great War.

I’m manning the “backseat” of a cloaked US Army APC. Monitoring crew telemetry. Trying my damndest to not be the last person killed in this the first interstellar conflict fought between the Great Nations.

The pilot and myself are the only ones on board who aren’t special. Except for the pilot, all of us are clad in one of those new-fangled prototype EXOs.

Additionally, the pilot is a DSC. Which explains why she’s wearing a flight suit instead of an experimental AI-powered exoskeleton like the rest of us.

Within the suborbital APC’s vicinity. Too close for comfort. An extinction-level event. The energy output of a controlled thermonuclear reaction is triggered.

In spite of the armored hull’s radiation shielding. In spite of the best efforts of the polarizing glass of the cockpit windows and the windows of the passenger cabin. In spite of the deflector screens.

From the pilot’s perspective. At the moment of detonation there’s a flash. At that instant, the pilot of the APC is able to see straight through her hands. She can see the veins. She can see the blood and all the skin tissue. She can see the bones and, worst of all, she can see the flash itself. It’s like looking into a white-hot diamond, a second sun. This tremendous burst of light is followed shortly thereafter by the deep, growling roar of an explosion.

From the passengers’ perspectives. There’s a scream. Shrieks follow. It’s the pilot.

A bright light penetrates the cabin. X-raying everything and everybody. Eye-melting luminescence. Then, the heat comes. Heat from the nuclear explosion bathes the cabin. A slow, intense, searing heat which eats its way into your very bones—it feels as if someone is passing an electric fire through you. A large portion of the heat in a nuclear explosion is from the absorption of gamma rays emitted in the nuclear reaction.

Even to the most jaded world traveler, the whole scene is unbelievable. A source of wonderment. And awe-inspiring dread. No matter how many times that you see it. A gigantic, dirty-looking mushroom cloud forming in the now ravaged sky, visible for miles, dominating the

horizon. An enormous ball of fire inhabits the base of the cloud and deadly-looking waves begin to emanate from its rippling base in all directions.

The quiet. That pause which ends when violent, gale-force winds hurl the craft much higher into the air and then slam it into the ground.

Everything that's been vaporized into ash by the initial blast gets sucked up by the vacuum of the subsequent vortex. An ash which falls to the ground as fallout.

The signature effects of a thermonuclear overblast. Someone has used forbidden atomics. Ballistic trajectory and blast forensics are that of a fire-breathing dragon. Godzilla would be positively green with envy.

What's telling is that the crashed APC, its pilot, and its passengers are intact. Someone was watching their Ps and Qs. In spite of the revelry and seemingly total abandon. Safeguards were in place.

The male scout-sniper uses his tessimacher to melt an opening in the jammed door of the cockpit and in the floor of the passenger cabin. Laying on its side, the APC is intact but it is still a complete and utter wreck, nonetheless, therefore normal egress is impossible.

After having retrieved what's left of the pilot. The female scout-sniper emerges from the APC first. She too is armed with a tessimacher. Shouldering her proscribed raygun in the ready. Both hands gripping the high-compression assault rifle, conventionally. Sweeping the LZ with its muzzle.

The rest of us follow suit and egress. The pilot is placed in one of the mobile reston tanks. By all rights she should have died of shock, killed outright by what she was dealt by the atomic blast. But, she's one of those tough-titty broads.

The pilot might as well be ash, gone. She's burnt toast. Fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-degree burns cover ninety-nine percent of her body. Her eyes are melted in their sockets. Charred skin and flight suit are indistinguishable—fused. The reston is busy, already healing her!

As an aside. Bean-counter logic, that oxymoron: the pilot is “cheap and disposable,” so she doesn't rate an EXO, but she's too expensive to be merely scrapped if she can be recycled.

Bottomline. The pilot gets fixed for damage that she never would have suffered if she had been wearing an EXO in the first place. Penny wise; pound foolish.

We secure the LZ. The wrecked APC is self-repairing. We wait until the APC is healthy enough to recloak and reestablish its Holtzmann shield, before we head out to the crash site that we had been heading for when we ourselves were crashed.

What a total cluster fuck this op is turning out to be. Then again, in my honest humble opinion, that's what real-world combat always devolves into, no matter how well-planned the mission is.

The saving grace, so far is?

Any landing you can walk away from is a good one.

Episode 9

The Talented Mr. Ripley

Per the BAU: Suspect Zero.

The existence of Suspect Zeros was stumbled upon by FBI remote viewers during one of their routine panoramic views.

Suspect Zeros are a category of serial killers crisscrossing our known universe who are able to kill indefinitely because of their ability to remain undetectable by law enforcement agencies.

Bottomline. They are random killers who leave no clues and have no discernable MO.

On that fateful day. Unbeknownst to us, at the time. Our top-secret mission on Europa was the catalyst for the creation of the most prodigious serial killer in human history.

The Talented Mr. Ripley. A serial killer who has proven to be even more elusive than a Suspect Zero.

A non-binary formally known as “The Talented Mr. Ripley.” Because. Although they’re non-binary. They refer to themselves in the third-person singular as The Talented Mr. Ripley.

Mr. Ripley is amoral. Never considering the boundaries of right and wrong that are routinely crossed.

To evade detection. Mr. Ripley remotely “wears” people. And is a virtuoso at doing it.

Mr. Ripley makes use of a wide variety of wearables. Males and females. Adults and children. Of various ages and persuasions. Whoever best suits Mr. Ripley. Worn until the wearable is of no further use, and is subsequently discarded. As such. Mr. Ripley is the quintessential infiltrator.

It’s only when a signature discard of Mr. Ripley is discovered that law enforcement knows Mr. Ripley is afoot.

Fortunately, for me, I’ve only crossed paths with Mr. Ripley, once. And that was tangentially. Which explains why I’m still alive.

One of Mr. Ripley’s infamous predecessors, Jack the Ripper, stalked his victims with impunity because Jack was a Jill. A preeminent example of “hiding in plain sight.” The authorities were searching for a man when in actuality the “bad actor” was a woman.

The stalking horse, so to speak. Likewise, by wearing people, Mr. Ripley hides in plain sight while hunting their victims. Mr. Ripley is quite a student of the game.

So far, Mr. Ripley has eluded the best remote viewers of the FBI's Project Icarus. Those viewers are trained in declassified DIA Project Stargate remote viewing protocols.

The Stargate Project was a secret U.S. Army unit established at Fort Meade, Maryland, by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and SRI International (a California contractor) to investigate the potential for psychic phenomena in military and domestic intelligence applications. The project, and its precursors and sister projects, originally went by various code names—"Gondola Wish," "Stargate," "Grill Flame," "Center Lane," "Project CF," "Sun Streak," "Scanate"—until they were consolidated and rechristened as the "Stargate Project."

The Stargate Project's work primarily involved remote viewing, the purported ability to psychically "see" events, sites, or information from a great distance. The project was overseen by Lt. Frederick Holmes "Skip" Atwater, an aide and "psychic headhunter" to Maj. Gen. Albert Stubblebine, and later president of the Monroe Institute. The unit was small scale, comprising about 15 to 20 individuals, and was run out of "an old, leaky wooden barracks."

The Stargate Project was terminated and declassified after a CIA report concluded that it was never useful in any intelligence operation. Information provided by the program was vague and included irrelevant and erroneous data, and there were suspicions of inter-judge reliability. The program was featured in a book and film, both titled *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, although neither mentions it by name.

Another example of the FBI using disgraced CIA protocols.

Episode 10

“On the Blue Water,” Esquire Magazine, April 1936

“Certainly, there is no hunting like the hunting of man. And those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter. You will meet them doing various things with resolve, but their interest rarely holds, because, after the other thing, ordinary life is as flat as the taste of wine when the taste buds have been burned off your tongue.”—

Ernest (Miller) Hemingway (1899-1961)

Stopped over on P337. Called in for a consultation on a rather nasty piece of work. A discard, with a self-inflicted Columbian necktie, left behind at a crime scene. I’m very familiar with the MO. The telltale disguise artifact and the victim killings are obviously the handiwork of the Talented Mr. Ripley.

As is my practice, I differentiate between the discard and the actual crime victims. There is one disguise artifact, a twenty-something man. And. Two crime victims: a thirty-something married couple—a man and a woman.

The surrogate is fully clothed.

Both crime victims are naked. Tied securely to makeshift dissection tables set up in an automated warehouse on the edge of the spaceport.

The CSI team has attached a neural-scanner to the skull of the surrogate. Allowing the reliving of the crime from the perspective of the killer, albeit in a very redacted form, and colored by my own POV. As usual, Mr. Ripley has covered their tracks well.

I jack into the scanner, wirelessly, and, so to speak, become Mr. Ripley:

The long slender blade feels feather light in Mr. Ripley’s hand. Shiny and deadly. Familiar. Mr. Ripley’s deadly old friend. An oversized scalpel. Well suited for vivisection. Specific for surgical amputation. It’s overkill for Mr. Ripley’s uses.

It slices open the male victim’s left leg lengthwise along the shinbone from just below the knee to just above the ankle. As if it was filleting a tender cutlet. A splay, also known as an old-fashioned, the preferred blade of a Ripperphile. Formally the Liston.

The Liston knife is a type of knife used in surgical amputation. The knife was named after Robert Liston a Scottish surgeon noted for his skill and speed in an era prior to anesthetics, when speed made a difference in terms of pain and survival. The knife was made out of high-quality metal and had a typical blade length of 6-8 inches. Surgical amputation knives came in many

styles and changed very much between 1840 and the American Civil War. These changes reflect changes in techniques used by the surgeons and makers of surgical knives during the period.

Amputation blades from the 18th century to the 1840s are generally known for their distinctive “down” curving blades. By 1870, amputation blades had become straighter, and more closely resembled the “Liston” European style. Since the Crimean war ended in 1856, it is likely the American Civil War that had a greater impact on the long slender blade style than the actual Dr. Liston. The dedicated task of amputation may be more responsible for the Liston title than any specific design.

It is noted by collectors that the handles on earlier knives (pre-1850) are of a much bigger and heavier construction.

The majority of the history of amputation blade evolution is referenced from the medical textbook “Handbook of Surgical Operations,” U. S. A. Medical Department, 1863, written during the Civil War by Stephen Smith, M.D., with various drawings from the medical literature credited to Bourgeroy & Jacob.

Mr. Ripley digresses. Back to the here and the now.

Blood. So much blood. His screams fill the room. No one can hear him but Mr. Ripley though. Mr. Ripley gets hard. Mr. Ripley jisms in Mr. Ripley’s pants. Mr. Ripley gets all warm and sticky down there. Tibias. Tibias. Mr. Ripley loves tibias.

Make the Monkey suffer. Make the Monkey scream.

The drugs Mr. Ripley has pumped him full of will prevent him from going into shock and dying on Mr. Ripley prematurely. Other drugs he’s being infused with will keep away infection. Not that he will last that long. They never do. Nifty cocktail he’s been given by Mr. Ripley.

Resection? Mr. Ripley always start with the left leg. Then, the right foot. The skull is last. They never get to die until Mr. Ripley says so.

And, best of all, the fun doesn’t end when they perish.

Nope. It doesn’t. Mr. Ripley fucks ‘em when they’re dead. Over and over again. Until Mr. Ripley tires of doing so. The fun ends when Mr. Ripley says so. That’s when the fat lady sings.

Mr. Ripley unzips Mr. Ripley’s pants and masturbates on him. Rubbing Mr. Ripley’s dick in his wound. Mr. Ripley will fuck him in the ass later after the Monkey bitch has sucked Mr. Ripley off and gotten Mr. Ripley hard again. Mr. Ripley loves fucking a virgin anus. It’s so very tight and unknown.

The Monkey bitch is his wife, of course. Mr. Ripley took them both. Two for the price of one. In the next room. Door shut. Out of sight, but not out of mind. Just like he is, she is naked and trussed up, and drugged up on a “makeshift” that’s been pressed into service as a dissection table. Ergo: Her dire predicament is identical to his.

Mr. Ripley has only had a little time with her. Mr. Ripley might as well rape her too since Mr. Ripley is in the mood for backdoor. She's no backend virgin though. Too bad.

After Mr. Ripley has iced him, she'll get Mr. Ripley's undivided attention. She'll pay in spades for being one of those haughty feminist career bitches, just like he Mr. Mom, the stay-at-home dad, her enabler paid for supporting her. Mr. Ripley is gonna make sure that she gets what's coming to her. She should have stayed at home and had babies just like women are supposed to. Barefoot. Pregnant. And, subservient to her man. To be seen and not heard.

Episode 11

Time

“What is the ultimate weapon of mass destruction? Time. Time is the apex predator. And. In the event of an ‘incident.’ Time is the weapon with which we will defeat all of our enemies. That is how we will win the great game of Capitalism. Not by outfighting anyone. But by outliving them.”—from episode 8 of the *Fallout* series on Prime Video, based upon the video game *Fallout*.

Again, crossing paths with Mr. Ripley. Again, doing so tangentially. Which, again, explains why I’m still alive.

Be that as it may. I notice the “thing” again. The first time. *It* might have been an anomaly. But. The second time. Not a chance in hell.

Again. I dutifully tag *it*.

I’m a one-percenter, therefore, I connect to a neural-scanner unbuffered. I wouldn’t have noticed *it* if I had been connected buffered like a “normal” person.

NDA’s aside. There are many one-percenters in law enforcement, both active-duty and retired, who would have been pulled in as resources for the apprehending of the FBI’s number one on its most wanted list. Which had to translate into multiple tagging.

Deduction?

Luck of the draw. I’m here, as a qualified neutral observer, to final confirm what’s in play, just before the coup de grâce is delivered, i.e., only my due diligence is required.

I don’t envy whoever has been selected as the point of the spear on this one. Which is a no surprise, considering my POV. Namely. I never lived to work, I worked to live. Additionally. I’m retired, and thus, understandably, I don’t want any of that smoke. Then again. Even if I were active-duty, given a choice, I still wouldn’t want any of that smoke.

I don’t want that smoke. But. Win, lose, or draw. When push comes to shove. And. It’s kill or be killed. I will always come out swinging for the fences, come what may.

Episode 12

You can never be too careful in this business.

There's an age-old mantra in boxing, "Speed kills, timing beats speed, power rules."

But. Just in case. Because you can never be too careful in this business. I online my features. Now I have on-demand access to my military-grade power-armor. Concealed wearable permit? Roger that. Open wearable permit? Roger that. Ownership and use permits, including use of deadly force? Roger that. Lacking any of those permits translates into a death sentence, if you're caught.

I demand, and am now clad in my EXO.

Also. With my features online. Now I have on-demand access to my series-3s: pistols and high-compression assault rifles. Concealed carry permits? Roger that. Open carry permits? Roger that. Ownership and use permits, including use of deadly force? Roger that. Lacking any of those permits translates into a death sentence, if you're caught.

I demand, and am now shouldering in the ready my series-3 high-compression assault rifle.

I take a deep breath.

Shock and awe. As soon as I breach the motel room, they're on my like white on rice. I might as well be a newbie instead of the experienced operator that I am.

No Country for Old Men is a 2007 American neo-Western crime thriller film written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, based on Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel of the same name.

Where was the hotel scene in *No Country for Old Men* filmed? 230 Plaza Park, Las Vegas, NV.

Was the score/rescore of this famous "The Eagle Pass Hotel Scene" from *No Country For Old Men* (2007) new and original? All of the film's music is new and original. Composed, arranged, produced, and mixed by Wolfgang Wee.

Yes. That's right. This *No Country for Old Men* minutia, not my life, is what flashes across my mind's eye, just before I die. All of my careful planning and preparation prove for naught. And. As far as my mission brief is concerned. They lied. I never stood a chance.

Episode 13

Why?! Because it made me happy.

Whether boxing or in the business: Train as you fight, fight as you train.

No matter how many truisms you adhere to. When it's your time, it's your time. Nobody comes to this life to stay forever. That's why Father Time is undefeated, and you can't outrun Death forever. All you can do is make the bastards work for it.

There are three covered bodies in the motel room where the shootout occurred.

I'm guessing that the two dead bodies I don't get shown are the proxies used by the drivers that constitute The Talented Mr. Ripley.

The State Trooper uncovers the body that used to be Danny Briscoe. Danny was a guy who cycled regularly between subcontracting and being retired. He won't be doing that anymore. He cycled to pay for his high maintenance wife. A wife who had a well-deserved reputation of being able to paint any porn starlet green with envy.

The way Danny got butchered, he might as well have been a newbie instead of the experienced operator that he was.

I scan the motel room as I inspect Danny's body. There's a healthy mix of State Patrol, FBI, and local cops. Outside, instead of the expected FBI Task Force, it's masked US Military who aren't wearing any rank, insignia, or unit patches.

A Hispanic woman, named Claire Lopez, dressed in a smart pantsuit sipping coffee from a sippy cup, is in charge. She's with the FBI.

I'm the only one in sight who isn't packing heat.

Special Agent Lopez waits patiently for me to finish my inspection before she gives me my walking papers.

"Let's walk, Mr. Holiday."

"Yes, ma'am."

We walk outside. And keep walking in a way that makes it difficult if not impossible to eavesdrop on us by "ordinary" means thus remote viewing notwithstanding.

"Tell me a story."

"There were three of them. Two bad actors in the motel room and a spotter outside. The spotter was disposable; hired anonymously, has revealed nothing in interrogation that gives you a better handle on The Talented Mr. Ripley."

"Mr. Briscoe never stood a chance, did he?" Special Agent Lopez asks, rhetorically.

“Why ask a question you already know?”

“Touché.”

“You lied to him, didn’t you?” I ask, rhetorically.

“Why ask a question you already know?”

“Touché.”

Tit for tat. I really like the balls on this chick.

“Would you have done better, Mr. Holiday?”

I shrug my shoulders. Then I answer.

“It’s hard to say.”

“Try harder.”

“If it had been me, I would have ended up just as dead.”

“Fair enough. I appreciate your honesty. Now, continue.”

“All three were military-trained and sniper qualified. Experienced in covert urban ops.”

“Go on.”

“Two drivers mirroring as one, in the case of The Talented Mr. Ripley. Two consciousnesses simultaneously occupying the same surrogate body. A postmortem scan of the discard could easily mistake a non-binary individual as the driver, and a lot of your posts early on in this case did just that.”

“The MO of a discard, with a self-inflicted Columbian necktie: either a non-binary individual as the driver or two binary individuals as co-drivers.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Simply amazing. It’s one thing to read about people like you. It’s another thing entirely to meet one of you savants in the flesh, so to speak.”

She’s feeling me out by stroking my ego with compliments. For her part, her poker face affords no tells, whatsoever. And. I know better than to ask how I’m really doing with my educated guesses. That’s all they are, which is guesses. Although, to a neutral observer, if I’m largely or entirely hitting the mark it would seem like I reading from the case file.

“You found the discard from the scene of the latest Ripley killing. Somehow you traced the location of the drivers back to this motel room. It was a trap, of course, but you and them had to finally have this initial face-to-face contact if to do nothing else than to directly assess each other’s capabilities.”

“Hypothetically, if we’re being remote viewed by an FBI truthsayer, how might you be assessed?”

“I’d flatline. Same as any sociopath, psychopath, or one-percenter.”

“If we captured one or both of the unknown individuals who constitute The Talented Mr. Ripley. And we asked them, ‘Why?’”

“They’d give you the same answer: ‘Because it made me happy.’ Same as any sociopath, psychopath, or one-percenter, would answer.”

Episode 14

Speed is in the Body; Quickness is in the Mind.

“It takes skills to get old. You don’t get old being foolish. It takes skills to get old. Pride doesn’t get you old. Pride gets you killed. There’s a lot of people in the graveyard who if they could come up out of the ground and speak that would tell you if I hadn’t let pride get in the way I’d still be here.”—**Virgil Hunter, boxing coach of Andre Ward**

The Freemasons will remain a single-sex organisation, its leaders have declared in defiance of claims the fraternity is misogynistic.

The United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE) and its female counterpart, the Order of Women Freemasons (OWF), have issued a joint statement stating that each branch will not admit members of the opposite sex.

The move comes after the Garrick Club in London voted to accept women after its former male-only policy was embroiled in claims the organisation was sexist.

Numerous other institutions, including golf clubs, have also been persuaded in recent years to open membership to women.

The two Freemasons women’s Grand Lodges were created in the early 20th century and follow the same rituals, rules and regulations as the men-only lodges – even referring to each other as “brother.”

The public declaration, issued last week, was made to try to counter “recurring themes” by critics who claimed the Freemasons were “non-inclusive, misogynistic” and lacking in transparency.

“What should we do about this lawsuit from Perpugilliam ‘Peri’ Brown?”

“Settle out of court. Let her in along with that other woman Nicola Bryant, and call it a day.”

“She’s that good of a lawyer?”

“Yes.”

Chet Baker, an old Army buddy of mine and the Grand Master of this Freemason lodge, shrugs his shoulders and sighs.

“We were afraid you were going to say that.”

Chet escorts me out of the lodge’s front door. We pause at the top of the stone steps, and shake hands. Things change. Not always for the better.

“Well. Time for me to push off.”

“Back to Earth?”

“Probably.”

That’s when I get that same feeling I got right after I left the company of Special Agent Lopez. I smile inwardly. No tells whatsoever.

Twice in the same day, twenty minutes apart. A feeling I haven’t felt in over twenty years. The feeling of being hunted, by some big bad.

Assumptions? My turn at bat. No half-stepping. It’s full on like Donkey Kong.

Bottomline? Unless someone has seen fit to level the playing field. The outcome will be the same as it was in that motel room, and I will share Danny’s fate.

Chet goes back inside, as I descend the steps and recede slowly and nonchalantly into the distance. Plausible deniability for all of the parties concerned.

Episode 15

My Inner Villain

Tom Hiddleston—“Every villain is a hero in his own mind.”

The **Mystery Box** is a technique where you just show the audience a “box,” and they’ll want to know what’s in it.

In the TV show *Lost*, J.J. Abrams made up some questions with no answers. His goal was to string along the audience for seven years as they waited to find out the answers to all of the mysteries.

After seven years, the audience found out that there were no answers. The whole thing was a fraud, a lie.

It wasn’t a story, because a story has an ending. It was a con game, like a shell game. You’re watching the shells to figure out which one is hiding the pea, but the pea isn’t under any of them. You got played for a fool. For seven years.

In the show *Lost*, the leader of “The Others” says “What if I told you that there is a box on this island, and whatever you want will be in that box when you open it?”

That’s the arrogant writer using the story to rub his manipulation in the face of his victims. “All I have to do is tell them there’s a box, and they believe me. They think I’m going to open the box and show them something.”

There is no box, and there’s nothing in the box. There is no box in the story, because there is no story, because a story has an ending.

Some people learned from *Lost*. After believing a lie for seven years, they were more cautious about believing the next lie.

A **MacGuffin** is a narrative device. An element in a work of fiction that drives the plot and motivates the characters despite being relatively insignificant to the story. A story’s MacGuffin can take the form of an object, event, or character. It can be replaced by virtually any other object, event, or character as the story progresses, because it is not central to the story. The MacGuffin is essentially the trigger that sets the story’s plot in motion; therefore, it is usually introduced within the first act or first half of the story, although it may change throughout the story. Examples of MacGuffins include the stone in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* and the word “rosebud” in the film *Citizen Kane*.

So. I idly wonder. Mystery box or MacGuffin? Which one am I? Maybe I’m a little bit of both? Maybe I’m neither?

“Every villain is a hero in his own mind.”

A disembodied voice. And. From its proximity. Its owner is obviously close by, and cloaked to evade detection.

The voice is also distorted to evade identification. Therefore, I won't even venture a guess at the preferred pronouns in play here.

As for the Tom Hiddleston quote uttered by the big bad. I respectfully beg to differ. I, for example, have never entertained that delusion. I know full well what I am, and I embrace it. I own it. It doesn't own me.

My parry is delivered nonchalantly and inwardly. In other words, I never utter it. Therefore. Tellingly, I say nothing, and, instead, let the big bad carry the conversation. A telltale that the big bad chooses to ignore. Which bespeaks volumes.

“See you sooner than later.”

This time, the big bad's voice is at a slowly-increasing distance. I smile, inwardly. The big bad is playing with me. Overconfident. Dismissive. Not taking me seriously as a threat. Good.

Else you risk your prey turning the tables on you. You should NEVER underestimate your prey. Even if you're so very, very, very good at killing that you get away with it 99.99% of the time, there's always that exception waiting in the wings to cook your goose.

Needless to say, for better or for worse, if this opening gambit was intended to instill fear in me, it's failed miserably.

Feeling froggy. I wonder who will end up being the cat and who will end up being the mouse. Only time will tell if I'm being arrogant or prophetic.

And. Yes. On occasion. Back in the day, of my misspent youth. I too have been known to play with my food. But. I AWLAYS made sure that it was dead first.