

thrice great hermes

#54

by stanley lieber

a surplus had been declared, and étienne volunteered to surrender his job, transferring to another position within the company that shared the same job title, but performed entirely different work. the previous holder of his new job, who enjoyed less seniority than himself, was in turn forced to transfer to a less desirable position with a lesser job title. in this way a third person at étienne's original job was spared. such were the convolutions of former-monopoly surveillance.

concentration points, referred to as "surveillance shacks" by his fellow tradesmen, were sprinkled generously throughout the small town. étienne's new responsibilities included installation, maintenance, and disconnection (rare, except in cases of site demolition or upgrades) of circuits at twelve central offices and remote surveillance shacks located within the town and its surrounding area. beyond this immediate charge, his personal sphere of responsibility comprised what amounted to the entire southern half of the state, stretching from his old home in the city to the southern border with kentucky. when duty called he would climb into his company truck and drive to the given location to assess the situation, and possibly to administer aid. priority was anyone's guess.

the central offices were not staffed, as such. his own reporting location was home solely to an administrative assistant, out front, and the sensitive surveillance equipment, concealed behind a false façade that presented itself to the public as a web design firm. the receptionist didn't know anything about the false façade or the equipment. she only knew about websites.

the solitude of étienne's shift encouraged him to reflect on the nature of his new situation. when grandma died, there had been no remaining focal point for his father's family to rally around. he suspected that, barring funerals, he would probably never see most of them again. mother's family had all but disintegrated, many years before. that left violet and himself, working through the current decade. he'd approached the question of why he'd decided he needed to come here, to grandfather's property, but hadn't yet pushed hard enough to penetrate, and as a result he'd failed to enter into the question properly. the empty field that had confronted him when he first arrived, expecting to rekindle fond memories of grandpa's house, still haunted him as he stumbled over furniture, groping his way around his new home in the dark. waking up in the middle of the night he realized that some of the new rooms shared the same shapes as the ones he remembered from childhood. but he was still mostly lost.

the surveillance shacks were spaced at irregular intervals throughout the town. even the local addresses were sometimes hard to find. he spent more time locating the ones that were relatively close by than he did the comparatively distant remote huts. all things being equal, putting gas in the truck was probably the worst part of his job.

for his next shift, the manifest of his daily carry would include:

- briefcase
 - leaf w/ wireless physical keyboard
 - plastic box w/ ink, nibs, brushes, pencils
 - folder w/ blank paper
 - notebooks (various)
 - felt tip pens
 - nabokov novels 1955-1962 (library of america)
 - berlin in the 1920s (taschen)
 - 50 years of the u-2 (schiffer military history)
 - the shadow #1-4 (dc)

- backpack
 - full-size leaf for extended sessions
 - small hand tools (various)
 - adapters, terminators, cords, clips, straps
 - portable speaker (wireless)
 - handheld game system
 - pocket music player
 - whatever books, magazines, etc., wouldn't fit in the briefcase

- rolling carry-on
 - tools for work
 - redacted
 - redacted
 - redacted
 - redacted
 - redacted
 - tool pouch w/ quick release pistol belt

- lunch bag
 - stanley thermos
 - pb & j sandwich
 - container of apple slices
 - power bar
 - sencha green tea
 - bottled water
 - napkins (folded)

étienne lugged all of this around everywhere he went. the upside was that he felt completely prepared for most any situation he was likely to encounter, up to and including the complete shutdown of the local municipal government.

which presently obtained.