

Rry

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I thought I was *playing it smart*, keeping up with the *trend*, surfing the internet.

I've always been a bit wary of the 'World Wide Web'. Ok, so I can send an e-mail half way around the world in the blink of an eye, but whose reading it? What if I dare to send a message with the word 'bomb' or 'terrorist' in it? Will it be chased up by the FBI or MI5 who will track my e-mail, intercept snail-mail and tail me until they're sure I'm not plotting to blow up the Whitehouse.

Do I sound a little paranoid?

Maybe you should pay a visit to Spynet.com that should make you wake up and smell the coffee.

I once e-mailed a cyber-pal in Dallas, Texas telling him how I'd made a 'killing' at the dogs. I thought MI5 had put a tail on me after that, but it turned out to be some guy who happened to be taking the same route as me. I laugh about it now, but he looked terrified when I pulled him from his car at the lights. He thought it was road rage and kept saying 'I didn't see you, I didn't see you!' I should have known, undercover agents always drive a white or red coloured car, usually a Ford, this was a Blue Nissan Primera, not their style at all.

I was really getting to grips with this new technology; I was surfing the net, downloading images and sounds and subscribing to e-mail lists that told me everything from which celebrities have just died to Intelligence: the spy bulletin. I visited the FBI site, NASA, the Whitehouse. Although I was always careful to use an alias when joining a mailing list; T Barlow: 23: single, C Cake: 35: married. Nobody was going to build up a profile on me.

I remember well the night we first made contact. The rain splashed on my window. I was downloading the latest Hubble images from the NASA site, when an instant message popped up.

'Good to have you back, was the information received?'

'What information?'

'That is you Orange, isn't it?'

'Who?'

There was a long pause, and I thought who ever I had been talking to was gone. I was just about to go back to my images, which had been downloading in the background when a new message appeared on the screen.

Listen to me carefully, you have received an e-mail from a person called Red, go to your mailbox and delete it. Do not read it; it contains a virus which will wipe your hard drive if activated.

This didn't sound right. Viruses can be transmitted via e-mail but they are usually well exposed, and I'd never heard of anyone going around personally warning victims about infected files. A massive mail, but this?

'Are you Red?'

'Another long pause.'

'Yes. Now please do as I say.'

'OK.'

I opened my mailbox and found among the newsletters and junk mail a message from Red, 'Subject: Orange'. I did not intend to delete it just yet. I opened my virus checker and scanned my e-mail for known viruses; negative. Just to be safe I started some firewall software running in the background; this would tell me if any attempt was being made to access my hard drive while I opened and printed out the contents of the message from Red before deleting it as requested. The printer was soon squeaking as it with ease put ink to paper. I deleted the file. My hard drive remained undamaged.

I read the pages one by one as they came out of the printer. The first was a map of the Paris metro, then instructions to be at a specific station at a specific time. Then a couple of images that the colour ink jet printer had done its best to replicate. The first was entitled 'target' and showed a passport type photo of a smartly dressed middle-aged man. The second was entitled 'for you' and was of a woman in her late twenties posed revealingly on a bed. Was this Red? I was still online.

'Did you do as I asked?'

'Yes.'

'I don't think so. Do you know how easy it is to track an e-mail with the right software? You did a very stupid thing.'

'I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up.'

'I suppose I'm in grave danger now.'

'No. I'm sending you a short program. Install it and then get back on line.'

'I'll tell you what, why don't I just contact Interpol (American Internet Police) instead.'

'I don't think you'll do that, au revoir.'

Red was right, I didn't contact anybody. I impatiently installed the encryption software she'd sent me and got back on-line. Red was waiting.

First, let me tell you a few things about you; your name is James Ronald McGee, you are 32 years old and single. You work in the credit recovery unit of a well known bank. You participate in solo competitive sports, hunt occasionally and have a keen interest in espionage and the space program.

'Congratulations, you hacked my e-mail.'

'Oh I did more than that, how else would I know that your bank balance is £343.17, or that you tried and failed to join the police force.'

'That was just rude.'

'I've just about had enough of this, who the hell are you?'

'It's not about who I am; it's about who you are, or more precisely, who you could be.'

'You're beginning to sound just a little crazy.'

Red took my evasiveness as encouragement to go on, and maybe it was.

'The information you mistakenly received and then read, against my advice, was a plan for a hit. Nothing complicated, just pushing a mole in front of a train. Orange was meant to be carrying out this mission, but has gone underground. Your profile suggests that you might be suitable for recruitment; your initiation would be this mission. Have you ever killed a man before?'

'You're making a hell of a lot of assumptions.'

'Look, you have an opportunity here, one that only comes along once in a lifetime. If your not interested say so, you'll never hear from us again unless you talk to the police, which would be very stupid. However, if you want to change your pathetic

little existence into something that really matters, stop playing games. It was my turn for a long pause.'

'OK, I'll do it.'

I phoned work the next morning. My supervisor was a bit surprised to hear I was ill as I hadn't missed a days work in 3 years. Of course, the 'viral infection' would unbelievably clear up and I'd be back at my desk the following day. My colleagues were no doubt cussing me as the workload was divided up amongst them.

I was sitting in Paris metro station watching a smartly dressed middle-aged man from behind a copy of 'Le Nouvel Observateur'. It struck me how ordinary he looked, coolly melting in to the Paris rush hour. What would his fellow commuters say if they knew he was passing industrial secrets to the Russian Mafia. I didn't know who was trying to recruit me yet, but I was sure it was government. The deal was simple, if the mission was successful Red would vouch for me and I was in. If I failed, there would never again be any contact between us. Red made it clear that I could back out at any time and go back to my 'pathetic little existence', no questions asked.

The sound of the wind whistling through the tunnel was joined by a distant mechanical buzz. The stimulated commuters moved closer to the track and I positioned myself behind the target and waited. I was already unavoidably touching him as was the person behind me, eager to get out of this place. A train pulled in going in the opposite direction and the frustrated commuters returned to reading their papers or staring at the ads on the wall. I quickly moved away and resumed my position on the bench. Again the distant sound, this time it was for real. I stood behind the target biding my time as the noise grow louder and louder. A light shone dimly in the depths of the tunnel. I brought my hands in front of me and positioned them lightly on his back. The light was bright now, two all seeing eyes in the darkness. My body tensed.

'Careful there sir, you might fall.' A hand came down in front of me as other firmly gripped my shoulder, 'May we have a word.' The commuters safely boarded the train I was lead back to the bench.

'Who are you. Orange?'

His expression told me all I wanted to know. He opened his wallet to expose an ID card, ' Please come with me.' His colleague tightened his grip on my shoulder, it seemed I had little option.

I banged my fist on the wooden top of the metal framed table,

'We've been through this before, I've told you all I know.'

Detective Dougant sat back and took a long draw on his cigarette. He opened a folder and took out a photograph, placing it in front of me,

'Is this Red?

I squinted at the passport photograph, "Yes, that's her."

Dougan leaned forward, 'No, that is Muriel Mercedes. She works at the Paris branch of your bank. You've been sending her e-mail, arranging to meet, and yesterday she deposited 20,000 francs in your account.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Well she does, she's in interrogation at the moment, telling of how you offered to 'take care' of her husband for 20,000 francs so that she could be with her lover.' He tossed the photograph of another woman onto the desk, 'It appears Muriel doesn't like men after all.'

My head swam with confusion, 'but I've been telling you the truth! Look at me, do I really look like a hired hit man?'

Dougant looked me over in consideration, 'I've seen stranger things.'

He walked to a desk at the side of the room and switched off the tape recorder, 'I'll give you some time to think about it.'

I was left alone with the guard. I started thinking over what had happened and the anger grow within me. Not at Red, Muriel, or whoever she was, but at that damn computer hooked up to the World Wide Web; giving every weirdo and con man access to the exposure of my home.

I made a vow to myself there and then that if I ever got out I would take a sledgehammer to the damn thing and cut myself off forever.