The Burning Fuse

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I

THEY WERE both thinking of the bomb threat, so for twenty minutes there had been no conversation between them. Driving from Barnstable to Orleans on Cape Cod, they travelled on U.S. 6. Behind the wheel of black Cruiser 9 was Detective-Lieutenant Mike Barney, stocky of build, with thick, wiry hair and a brooding, massive face.

Detective-Inspector Wade Paris, sitting beside him, felt the warmth of the late September sun on his back. He leaned against the seat and watched the scrub pines as they slipped by. Along the shore the sand dunes were crested with bunch grass. To his left he could see the sparkling blue waters of Cape Cod Bay, a smudgy haze on the horizon. To his right, whenever the car came over a rise in the road, he caught occasional glimpses of the calm waters of Nantucket Sound. It was nice country, he thought. At any time of the year it was pleasant, peaceful and quaint. Only now one thing had spoiled it. Somewhere along the seventy-mile stretch of the peninsula, from the Canal to Provincetown, a dangerous maniac was loose.

They were nearing Orleans when Mike Barney broke the silence, saying, " We'd better check with Troop D."

" I'll call," Paris said. He picked up the radiophone and pressed the button. " Cruiser 9 to W."

There was a rasp of static from the car speaker, then, " W. Go ahead, 9."

Paris said, " Advise if you've heard from Technical Sergeant Eygis. Go ahead, W."

"W to 9. Sergeant Eygis has reported he's at the scene, Inspector."

"Nine off," Paris said. He hung up slowly, thinking of the date and the time. It was now Monday, 22nd September. Looking at his wrist-watch he saw it was one p.m. By all rights he should now be on his vacation, winging his way north by Eastern Air Lines to the fishing lodge in New Brunswick, Canada.

But at nine a.m., State Police General Headquarters had called his bachelor apartment, asking him to report in. In the Commissioner's office the Chief of Detectives was waiting. And behind the big desk, the Commissioner sat erect in his chair, his military bearing stiff and austere.

"I'm sorry about the vacation, Wade," the Commissioner said.

"Yes, sir," Paris said mechanically, thinking, so the vacation is off. There was no bitterness in him—only a feeling of resignation. It had happened to him before, of course. It had happened to the Chief standing there. It had happened to all of them. The job was like that. Nothing was taken for granted, not even a vacation. Listen, he wanted to say suddenly, I don't want to complain but I've been working hard and I'm tired and my migraine headaches have come back. I have my plane reservations and I have a guide hired. If I could get away now——

But the Chief of Detectives was talking, saying, "It might be a serious matter, Wade. Otherwise, we wouldn't have called you. On Friday, the nineteenth, *The Yarmouth Gazette* got an anonymous telephone call. Some man spoke to the editor and raved about the 'desecration' of Cape Cod. Said he was sick

of it and was going to place a bomb and blow things up."

Paris nodded automatically, waiting. This was a routine matter and no reason for him to cancel his vacation. Although bomb threats, obscene telephone calls, poison-pen letters were fairly uncommon, they required no special detective assistance. Detective-Lieutenant Mike Barney, stationed at Barnstable, solid and efficient, could handle a thing like that alone. It meant contacting all local police departments and getting a rundown of all the demented ones in the area who were not confined to institutions; the schizophrenics, the paranoiacs, the manic-depressives. It was tedious work, but by process of elimination, and with guile, flattery and a conspiratorial air, you usually found out who had committed the deed. If the condition or threat was serious the arrest was made. In these cases, the judge, before sentencing, ordered the person to a mental institution for a period of observation. If the condition or offence was not serious, guardians and family were warned and stricter supervision was ordered. No, he thought, they wouldn't cancel his vacation for that. There was something more to it.

"This morning," the Chief of Detectives was saying, "twenty-five sticks of dynamite and six blasting caps were reported stolen from a highway construction job in Orleans. And Orleans isn't too far from Yarmouth."

"That's the kicker," the Commissioner said. "That's what has us worried. Maybe the bomb threat, by itself, is relatively unimportant. But coupled with this theft——"

The Chief looked at Paris with the wise, hard eyes

of thirty years of police experience. "We're not prejudging the case, Wade. Even if these two incidents are unconnected, the theft of that much dynamite and six blasting caps is a serious matter. If they *are* connected it's really bad. That's why you're here. And that's why Mike Barney is waiting for you in Barnstable. We'll be standing by if you want more help."

"Yes, sir," Paris said, putting on his hat. "I'll phone the airline and cancel the reservation."

So now he was driving along U.S. 6 with Mike Barney. The vacation was out of the window for the time being. But he was thinking perhaps he could get to New Brunswick before the ice set in. In the cold northern air, away from people, his migraine would abate and he would sleep better. The guide would wait for him, and with the new rod and the special reel——

"Here," Barney said suddenly. And Paris, looking up, saw a large sign that read *Lamas Construction Company*. There was a dirt road to the right and Barney swung the detective sedan on to it in a mist of grey dust. They drove ahead about a half-mile, passing yellow diesel graders, diggers, rollers, bulldozers, and clusters of tanned construction workers.

Barney pulled up in front of a large unpainted shed. Beside it was a black State Police cruiser with a long buggywhip antenna. Sergeant Eygis's car.

Barney said, "I'll call in and tell them we're going off the air." He reached for the handphone. "Cruiser 9 calling W. A Signal 4 at Lamas Construction in Orleans."

He released the button and the car speaker answered, "Received okay, 9."

The door of the shed opened, but the man who came out and shaded his eyes from the sun wasn't Sergeant Eygis. He was a young man, bronzed with the sun, wearing corduroy pants, a plaid lumber shirt, and a grey felt hat. Barney introduced himself and Paris.

"I'm George Craig," the young man said. "Engineer-in-charge. I'm very sorry about all this, gentlemen."

Paris nodded, looking at the young, anxious face, feeling a sadness in him. It's probably the kid's first big job, he thought, and he's had a tough break. Stolen dynamite and blasting caps were bad business—especially the caps. Because without blasting caps the bomb could not be made.

"If you're looking for your sergeant," Craig said, "he's in the magazine." He pointed to a small, windowless hut fifty yards away. "Been puttering around in there about fifteen minutes."

"Thanks," Paris said. "Mr. Craig, what time was the break discovered?"

"This morning when we opened, Inspector. Seven a.m."

"Who discovered it?"

"I did."

"You were the first one here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any work over the week-end?"

"No, sir. We close up Friday evening at five."

"Were your explosives checked then?"

"Yes, sir," Craig said. "We check them every morning and every night."

"Do you have them checked Saturday and Sunday?"

"No, sir," Craig said. "I suppose we could check them then, too. But the place is closed and there's

nobody here except the two watchmen. They don't have a key for the magazine. I guess I could come down myself every Saturday and Sunday——"

"It's all right," Paris said. "I'm not criticising, Mr. Craig. I only wanted to get an idea of your operation. How do these two watchmen work?"

"Twelve-hour shifts. One for the day and one for the night."

"Is there anything else missing?"

"No, sir. Just the dynamite and the blasting caps."

"We'd like to talk to the two watchmen, please."

"Yes, I thought you would," Craig said. "They're waiting around somewhere. I'll go find them."

"I'll go with you," Barney said. "I want to look around."

Paris watched them walk down the road. Barney would miss nothing, he thought. Not that Mike Barney was a brilliant, flashy worker, by any means. He was a slow, plodding, stubborn, taciturn man. Barney was of the old school, a workhouse with a devoted sense of duty. He was an expert at questioning suspects. In his relentless, patient way he could interrogate a man for hours, asking the same questions over and over again. In his voice there was often an import of physical violence, which the suspect nervously awaited and which, somehow, never came. His rate of confessions was one of the highest in the Division. As one noted hoodlum had said when he came out of the GHQ interrogation room, wiping sweat from his face.

"I'd just as soon face your goddam lie-detector machine. It's more human than Barney." Barney never gave a favour or asked one. Once, Paris remem-

bered, Barney had stood on a stake-out fourteen straight hours without relief because there had been a mix-up in signals. Yet Barney had never said a word about it. He was a middle-aged man with the beginnings of a middle-aged paunch, and the most important thing to him was his dog-eared notebook. In it he recorded, in a laborious hand, every item, no matter how seemingly trivial.

Paris turned and opened the door of the big construction shed. There was an odour of freshly cut wood, of wood shavings, oil and sawdust. Inside were the valuable engineers' tools, transits, blueprints, and racks of shiny, well-kept construction tools.

Paris stepped out again, closed the door and went around the side of the shed. He walked across the sandy soil towards the small hut. It stood by itself, fifty yards away from the nearest underbrush. On the side of the hut, in large letters, was painted: DANGER KEEP OUT.

The door was open. Paris stepped inside. There was a large wooden chest. In it he could see layers of dynamite sticks, eight inches long, an inch or so thick, each wrapped in oiled brown paper. Crouched down before the chest, brushing white powder on the wood with a fine camel's hair duster, was a coatless man wearing a white shirt and grey worsted trousers. The shirtsleeves were rolled above the elbows and the butt of a service revolver protruded from a leather hip holster.

Sergeant Eygis turned his head around, saw Paris and grinned. He stood up and brushed a smear of powder from his pants. He was young, big-shouldered and ruddy-cheeked.

" Wade," he said, " according to the duty roster this morning, you're on vacation."

" Take a good look," Paris said. " I'm here."

" The consequences of rank," Eygis said blithely. " It's not all tea and crumpets. I've already found *that* out."

Paris smiled. This Eygis had come up fast, he thought. Not more than twenty-eight years old and already a tech sergeant. He was not a member of the detective branch. He was of the uniformed branch which consisted mostly, now, of young war veterans. Eygis had a college background, a sharp, agile mind, and a wisecracking brashness. He was also ambitious, eager and well-liked.

" Well, here's the scoop, as I see it," Eygis said, rubbing at a smudge of dirt on his cheek. " Sometime between Friday evening at five and this morning at seven, somebody broke in here and stole a quarter of a case of dynamite—twenty-five sticks. There were also six blasting caps in this chest. They're gone, too. The complete works should make a hell of an explosion."

" Any evidence of entry? " Paris asked.

" Yes. The door of this hut has a big padlock. It was filed through. The same with the padlock on the dynamite chest."

" And outside? "

" Can't find anything. Footprints all over. Dozens of them. Everybody and his Aunt Minnie was trampling around searching for the stuff. If they would have waited at least until——" Eygis shrugged his big shoulders. " Well, that usually happens."

" So they were anxious," Paris said. " Like you'd

have been anxious if you found dynamite and blasting caps missing."

"I'll tell you this," Eygis said. "I'm happy I'm stationed far away in Bridgewater. If this one goes off, it'll be a beaut."

"Nothing's gone off yet," Paris said shortly. Eygis's cocky cheerfulness was suddenly irritating to him. Also, he was getting one of his headaches again and there was a weak nausea in his stomach.

Abruptly he walked outside and inhaled the warm, fragrant air deeply. Eygis, sensing his displeasure and serious now, followed him. Paris looked across the sandy soil to the underbrush fifty yards away. The construction company had apparently covered all security regulations on explosives. The explosives were in a separate shed, far enough away from vegetation. The shed was plainly marked. Also, a guard had been kept.

"Have you looked around in those bushes yet?" Paris asked.

"First thing," Eygis said deferentially. "There's some broken twigs and trampled grass, like somebody was hiding out watching. Then there's an old dirt road twenty yards back. Tyre marks, but not good ones. As soon as I finish inside I'll go over it again."

"Were the Orleans cops here?"

"Earlier. They say some townspeople saw four suspicious-looking men in a '54 blue Buick Saturday afternoon. They seemed to be driving around all over town."

"Saturday?"

"Yes. The car had New York plates. Nobody

thought anything about them until this happened this morning."

"Has Orleans done anything about it?"

"Well, they called out Yarmouth Barracks with a description of the men and the car, such as it is. Yarmouth put out an alert for police information. But there isn't much to go on."

"You going to need help from GHQ, Stan?"

"Not so far," Eygis said.

Paris, hearing footsteps crunching in the sand, turned and saw Mike Barney coming towards them. He walked with short, heavy steps, his open notebook in his hand. As he came up, Paris saw the worried look on his face, the trace of paleness around the nostrils.

"Hi, Stan," Barney said. Then to Paris, "Craig's waiting for us with his watchmen."

Eygis grinned. "Mike," he said, "you don't look happy."

"My territory," Barney said heavily. "And my ears are twitching, waiting for an explosion. We're looking for four men in a blue Buick, but nobody knows the registration number of the car. I should think if people see a car and it doesn't look right they would write down the number."

"People aren't as systematic as you, Mike," Eygis said.

Barney grunted. "You find any fingerprints in the hut, Stan?"

"All over the place. A lot of people used this shack, Mike."

"You have any ideas yet who might have done it?"

"No," Eygis said, looking at Paris. "What do you think Wade?"

Paris shook his head. "I don't know. There were a lot of valuable tools around here, but somebody wanted only the dynamite and caps. This person took the time and patience to file through two padlocks."

"A crackpot," Eygis said tentatively. "Those people make careful plans and have lots of patience."

Barney said, "Stan, don't mention crackpots to me. I've had a sour stomach all morning."

"Let's go back and talk to Craig," Paris said.

He and Barney went away. At the construction shed George Craig was waiting.

"The watchmen," Craig said, pointing to two elderly, solemn-faced, weatherbeaten men. "Tezo and Wertz."

Paris acknowledged the introductions and asked which one was the day watchman. Wertz answered. Paris asked him where he stood watch. Wertz said he stayed at the construction shed, where he had a good view of everything. No, he had not seen anybody around on Saturday or Sunday. No passing strangers, nobody stopping to ask directions, no one at all. The only person he had seen was Al Tezo, the night man, who came to relieve him at five p.m. on both evenings.

Paris spoke to Tezo. "Last night you reported at what time?"

"Five o'clock," Tezo said.

"Did you check the locks when you came on?"

"Just the locks on the doors, sir. I can't get into the sheds to check the locks inside."

"All right, the locks on the doors. This one and the one on the magazine. You say you checked them?"

"Yes, sir. Both locks were snapped tight."

"Did you see anybody last night? Any person at all?"

"No, sir. When Wertz left I saw nobody until Mr. Craig came at seven this morning. He was here first."

"Did any cars ride by?"

"Last night there was a car. It didn't exactly ride by. It came down the road over there by the main highway, stopped and turned around. I figured the guy was lost. Got off the highway by mistake."

"Could you recognise who was in the car, or the number of people in it?"

"No, sir."

"Did you notice the make of the car?"

"No."

"The licence plate?"

"No, it was too far away."

"What time did you see the car?"

"Early. About nine."

"How do you handle your job, Mr. Tezo? Do you stay here at this construction shed all night?"

"No, sir. When it gets dark you have to keep moving around. You can't see anything unless you do. It's not like when it's daylight."

"In other words, you weren't watching the magazine the whole time?"

"No, sir," Tezo said, his eyes cast down, a big, dusty, cracked shoe making a meaningless pattern in the gravel. "We got lots of equipment all over the place. They work on the road, and there's filling here and grading there—equipment spread all over. You got to go down every once in a while to see if the things are still there."