

[FREEBSD IS] OUT LIKE A SCOUT ON A NEW ROUTE

(from THE MANUSCRIPT)

by Michael Stephen Fuchs

"Yo, boss, you don't wanna see this, but you best take a look. The webcams going down."

Ace was shouting, something of a cautious shout, out of the server room. He had gone in there to pack backup tapes, carrying them out in treacherous stacks. On the floor by the pool table in the rear sat three identical, huge, black sports bags. The two zipped ones contained cash and coke, respectively. The third was for data and was only yet half full.

FreeBSD sat on the divan with his back to the packing scene, flailing away Mozart-like at a laptop on the coffee table. He was trying to crack somebody's shit.

"Yo, *chief*. I say the *webcams* are going *down*." Ace stood in the doorway of the machine room, backlit by the fluorescent lights within.

One part curiosity . . . two parts vanity . . . and three parts thinking ahead to future possibilities (albeit remote ones) drove FreeBSD now. Drunk on this witch's brew of motivations, he endeavored to learn more about his trying correspondents.

So far, he knew this Miles Darken character had turned up in town with his package; that the red-headed chick had come with him; that they both had adopted a curious desire to *give the bag back*; and that their proximity seemed to increase, by a large factor, one's likelihood of being repeatedly shot. What possibly could have gone wrong in Hookeville to result in all this, FreeBSD couldn't for the life of him. And, moreover, he didn't know enough about the people to whom he'd been trying to sell that bag to even guess what in hell they might do now.

But, with a little savvy hacking, he figured he could at least gather some data about the pawns in this game – the crackers from Hookeville, the babes in the big city. Data such as their identities, backgrounds – and current physical location.

FreeBSD knew they were in the city – but the Darken character still wrote him from out of Thomas Jefferson College. He had already probed the mail host, Boatanchor, a few hours earlier – but had found it locked down tight. He could have gotten in, given time – but he and time were not buddies at the moment. So he did it the easy way: he broke into a nearby router.

A few choice traceroutes told him that everything that went in or out of this machine hopped through the same two routers at TJC. So, a few hours earlier, he had

dropped a piece of code into one of them – code which would sniff any mail packets on the way to, or from, Boatanchor.

Now, squirming on the divan, he saw it had worked: a couple-three messages had landed in his crabtrap. Oddly, one of them was *his own* message to Darken from the night before – but forwarded to one <celeste@gloac.com>. FreeBSD would bet the ranch (though, admittedly, his general attitude was "What the fuck, it's only a ranch") that <celeste@gloac.com> had a Manhattan street address.

"Yo, boss." Ace whispered solemnly in his ear now from a range of one inch. FreeBSD spun like a top from the shock of warm breath on his ear hairs, started to speak, then stopped. "*The webcams . . . are going . . . down.*"

"*Huh?*"

"Some *motherfucker*, is fucking *outside*. The cameras are going *down*."

FreeBSD rose and followed Ace into the server room, where the two hunched tensely over a twenty-inch monitor. Seen from behind, the two consisted of a big knot of sandy dreadlocks, on the left; an Ace of Spades carved into the surface of a short afro, on the right; and a whole bunch of tense back and neck muscles, all around.

The monitor displayed a dozen grainy video feeds, in 200x200 pixel windows, laid out in an orderly matrix. Six of the windows displayed various urban scenes: A trash-strewn alley. An empty corridor with a door at the end. A service entrance on a rooftop, with steam vents jutting up in the foreground and papers blowing by. The other six windows were blacked out.

Now seven were black.

"Whup, there goes the rooftop."

"*Ohh, this sucks*," FreeBSD whined. He was watching his eyes poked out in front of his face. "Is it the guys in the sedan? Across the street? Why didn't you tell me about them before?"

"It's not the guys in the sedan," Ace said. "And I did tell you about them before; I put it in e-mail. Don't you read your mail?"

"How do you *know* it's not the guys in the sedan?" FreeBSD looked back and forth between the display and the side of Ace's head.

"Because those guys're still there, man," Ace said. "I checked two minutes ago."

Another window went black.

FreeBSD stole a glance at some of the other workstations in the room, not looking for anything in particular. "So then they've got to be doing this remotely somehow . . ."

"Not that either," Ace answered. "Those cameras ain't on the Net, neither is the box driving 'em. Ain't nobody gotten into the box, I checked that, too. Trust me. It's the *physical* cameras, being disconnected. Basically . . . somebody got a pair of wire snippers." He paused, the two of them gazing wide-eyed and transfixed at the monitor, trying to guess which camera would go out next. "I wrote you 'bout the sedan first thing this morning. Did you read the mail?"

"Yeah." FreeBSD twisted his neck to the left. "It must have gone in one eye and out the other."

Ace had bought, months previous, a dozen \$29 webcams and installed them at various points around the perimeter of the Crib. This precaution might have been excessive, but for the low cost. The only real expense had been labor – thinking of a dozen appropriate places to stick the things. Since then, their little gnats-eye-view images had projected into the server room, monitored sporadically by various employees – dealers, enforcers, coders – as they wandered in and out.

And now they were all going black. Not randomly; but in a sequence describing a rough arc around the perimeter of the structure.

Rousing themselves from their stunned vigil, the two young men turned to face each other for a moment, before both pulling handguns from their waistbands. Both were already thinking about breaking out bigger hardware – and considering which cannons they wanted at hand in a crunch.

This was looking increasingly like a crunch.

"Maybe . . . we shouldnt'uv sent the Crew home, after all," Ace offered quietly. "You want I should finish packing?"

"You bet," FreeBSD answered with a grin, as he cracked and checked the chamber of his black SIG Sauer semiautomatic. "But grab some more guns first. Oh, and –"

Ace turned back to face him, his bulk half out of the doorway.

" – *pick up the pace, Ace!*"

He'd wanted to say that forever.

"Did you ever meet yourself coming around a corner?" someone had once asked FreeBSD, admiring his caginess. Now, sitting in his besieged Crib, his only company Ace . . . a chopped M4 assault rifle with duct-taped reversed magazines . . . his SIG, with

two spare mags, jammed in a pocket . . . the laptop, with purloined e-mail . . . three burgeoning bags of dope, cash, and data . . . and some deadly motherfuckers outside with wire snippers (and God knows what else) . . . FreeBSD calmly reflected on all of his good planning.

He was in really good shape. He really was. All he had to do was get out of the building alive. While he reflected on that exigency, he also did some quick online searching.

He copied the address <celeste@gloac.com> out of the mail snagged from Darken's router.

While doing this, he mentally reviewed the contents of the escape bag in his other digs – the studio four blocks away, where he sometimes went to sleep away from the 24/7 activity in the Crib. The escape bag contained a passport, a couple of changes of boxers, a toiletry kit, and \$75,000 in cash. He'd intended this, in his contingency planning, to be merely enough to get him out of the country. But still, it made a significant supplement to the \$400,000-some he had in the Crib – all of which Ace had piled into one of the black bags. All told, it added up to just about enough for a comfy third-world retirement. Or at least a shamefully long vacation.

Next, he grepped the newsfeed for <celeste@gloac.com>. A hit came up right away, in alt.quotations. There was a signature file tacked onto the post. There was a name in the .sig.

FreeBSD also thought, while doing this, about logging into his servers, and running the shell script which would wipe virtually everything, trashing the file systems of every UNIX box in the Crib, (and a couple elsewhere). Then it would trigger a piece of custom hardware inside the power supply which would blast the entire array of machines with enough juice to send motherboards shooting out through the roof like burnt toast.

He copied the name from the .sig – "Celeste Browning" – into a web-based white pages. He typed "New York, NY." He clicked on the search button, and waited one second. A street address came up – just one. It was in the 60s on the West Side. *Bitch is in the Book*, he thought. He took a big bite of his one last quad espresso.

He watched Ace dance heavily around the main area with a Benelli auto-loading shotgun in one hand and a red and silver gas can in the other. He splashed gasoline across the pool table and over the bar, sending fumes everywhere. Ace was bringing down the office. Soon the Crib would be a charred but pleasant memory. Just a matter of a few minutes and a heat source.

Only one of the webcams was still up. And the phone service had gone out. But the T3 line was humming right along. Must be some real old school guys working this job – killing the *telephone service* for chrissakes. Not the briar patch. FreeBSD carried on typing.

He copied the street address for Celeste Browning into a text file and transferred it to his smartphone via Bluetooth. That way he'd have it even after he blew up the server with his mail on it. Maybe later he'd feel like sending a dead fish to these guys, or something. More likely, he'd be busy drinking margaritas and drawing rainbows in the white sand with his sunburnt big toe. He drained his espresso, toasting that thought. He stood up, letting the laptop fall straight out of his lap. It bounced once on the coffee table and hit the floor with an ugly thunk. He gave Ace a big smile and a thumbs up, signaling that he should start the inferno – and that the two of them should make their run for it.

FreeBSD swallowed a huge lump of adrenaline and pinged what felt like every nerve on every surface on his body. The air glowed in front of his face. The deadly hardware, in his hand and in his waistband, felt like Instruments of the Holy Sacrament. The espresso in his belly rolled like the ocean. The metaphors fell like rain in his head, and his eyes rolled back for an electric second. He'd never felt so alive as now – faced with the challenge of getting out alive.

Ace flicked his Zippo, arm extended. They both cocked their heads – they could hear engine noise outside, seeping into the eerily silent Crib. Traffic was approaching their normally deserted stretch of block. A strange thing to hear just then. Surely their senses were jacked beyond normal.

Ace lifted his eyebrows at his boss, asking if he should proceed. He fell down. Pitching forward, he showed a wet, red divot in the back of his head where the ace of spades used to be.

FreeBSD watched him fall, trying to register what he saw. He ducked his head reflexively, and his mouth formed an *O*, and his rifle came up and he emptied a fifty-round magazine into the back of the Crib. In two and three quarters seconds he fired it completely dry.

FreeBSD never heard the zipping sounds of collapsing air pockets cutting the air over his head, plunking into the stereo behind him, shattering glass and circuitry. It all got erased, retroactively drowned out, by the roar of the full-auto assault gun in his hands, filling and shaking the room.

He never saw anything distinct, either – but he wasn't really aiming. He merely kept the trigger depressed as he lunged forward to grab the bag of cash with his left hand, then reversed course in a sprint toward the front door, while swinging the gun around to fire behind him.

Pushing his flailing and wild-eyed way out the front door, he was all but dumbfounded not to feel any bullets plunk into his back – a sensation for which every cell in his body had grown prepared. His surprise at seeing a half dozen police cars screeching to a stop outside was extremely minor by comparison.

He dropped the rifle, which clattered noisily on the sidewalk, and executed a hasty u-turn into the adjacent alley. He shifted the weight of the bag around behind him – to

help his balance as he ran, and also in case anyone started shooting at his back. He thought he smelled smoke as he hit the next block – the coast there was clear, a miracle – and thought Ace must have dropped the Zippo when he fell. If he made it through the next minute alive and free, he promised himself, he'd try to log in and see if anything remained up in the Crib. Still chugging full-out, lungs pumping, limbs flailing, a huge black bag bouncing on his back, he crossed himself in silent memorial to his deceased loyal henchman. Then he focused on those three remaining interminable blocks between him and that toiletry kit.

Unlike the driver, Theron waited until the squad car reached a complete stop before hopping out. He'd bummed a ride in the black-and-white the twenty-four blocks from the bathroom crime scene to the Garment District – and what was clearly about to become another crime scene. The first part of the ride hadn't been exactly leisurely, as half of the NYPD officers and detectives on the scene, and Theron, rolled south on Eighth Avenue toward the address from the incoming message on the answering machine. It didn't seem likely that the perpetrator – who'd escaped from an impossible trap, and killed a baker's half-dozen of SWAT team members doing it – it didn't seem likely that he'd go from the scene of his hair-raising escape straight to a hit. But it was the lead they had.

They passed 42nd Street moving fast and began to circle around a drab, vaguely industrial couple of blocks, triangulating in on the address. As the caravan turned at last onto the correct block, an unmistakable peal of rolling automatic weapons fire rang out – causing the entire group of police cars to accelerate wildly for forty yards, and brake madly for an equivalent distance.

As Theron slid out of the back seat, his Colt in his good hand, a blithe dispatch came across the police radio: shots fired – at what was starting to seem like a very familiar address – and all units respond. *Man*, thought Theron, looking warily up and down the street, *these mugs must have 911 programmed on speed dial.*

As the crowd of officers scrambled out of their cars and across the street, pistols drawn, Theron thought he could see a figure blurred with speed rounding the corner into the alley. He must have seen it right, as several of the uniformed officers angled toward the alley at a dead run. He also saw smoke spilling out over the top edge of the doorway.

As he approached the vestibule it "flashed": smoke, ash, and heat blasted out of the open door with an audible whoosh. That was always, Theron knew, a pretty good time to enter a burning building, if you were going to – right after the flash. He looked around to see if anyone was watching. Unfortunately, a couple of uniforms, as well as Detective Eyebrows, were looking at him intently. Their facial expressions moved in synch from alarmed to indignant as Theron picked up his trot toward the smoking entranceway.

Fuck it, he thought, taking a deep breath and pulling his leather coat around him, *I'm not even supposed to be here.* He put his head down and charged inside.

Twenty seconds later he emerged back onto the street. Flames flickered from behind the second story windows overhead, and Detective Eyebrows did a little flame job of his own on Theron as he teared, blinked, coughed, and held his coat tight around him. Theron nodded humbly at the invective and meekly followed as a young white cop led him away to the end of the block.

Theron stood on the corner, sucking oxygen, and lightly massaging the warm laptop he clutched underneath his duster. Five minutes later, a yellow cab appeared and pulled over as Theron raised his hand, lowering his head. No one noticed when he ducked into the cab and drove neatly away from the shouting, burning, confusing scene. A few seconds later, Theron found the laptop still humming – with an open browser window, showing a search query return. It still displayed a name and street address: Celeste Browning. Upper West.

I am a bad ASS, thought Theron T. Johnson.

"*Biatch!*" FreeBSD ejaculated into the small, and otherwise quiet, space of his studio. To his amazement, he had gained the apartment, winded, terrified, but all in one piece and uncaptured. He had tossed his pistol on the bed, and the satchel on the floor, then hauled on its heavy zipper.

It gave way to an expanse of white powder under plastic: the bag o' blow.

"*Fargin' biatch!*" he shouted again, for emphasis.

Ordinarily, in his trade, he could easily convert high-grade white stuff to the green stuff. Now, however, FreeBSD found himself suddenly out of business – and with *no particularly good fucking way to turn a quarter million dollars worth of coke into a quarter million dollars*.

"*The fucking cash!*" he loudly lamented, all red-faced and forlorn, and kicked the bag of drugs across the room. It knocked over a spindly-legged plant stand, which fell with a crash.

A thump sounded from his floor – which was some other guy's ceiling. "Knock it off, you asshole!" a voice floated up. FreeBSD clenched his jaw and proceeded to jump up and down with his full weight, six times in a row, dreadlocks grazing the ceiling at his apex, shouting, "HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO EAT A BOWL OF BIG FAT DICK!!!" at the top of his lungs. He jumped twice more. "*AHHH!!!*" He snatched the SIG from its resting place on the bed and took aim at the floor. He pivoted left, then right, picturing the layout of the apartment below, finger twitching on the trigger.

But almost lighting up the downstairs neighbor brought him a bit back to his senses. He had some issues to deal with, and needed his full faculties to do so. He stood motionless, shoulders slumping, and considered.

He wasn't the first person in history to grab the wrong bag in the heat of the moment – but he was the latest. *Tarantino would appreciate this*, he thought sullenly. *I wish I did.*

But where did that leave him?

It left him fucking poor – after three years of drudgery in the computer business – and more than eight months risking his precious neck in the drug trade. Suddenly, he didn't even have six figures to his name. His exit strategy had turned into a receding horizon. This was bullshit.

Quickly enough, he realized what he needed now. He needed the Manuscript Deal; he needed it back. *Fuck enlightenment*, he snarled inside of his head. *I want to get paid.* He'd given up on that deal, given it away, really – afraid of the risk that had built up exponentially around it, and reasonably confident in his liquidity position. Well, the risk hadn't gone away – if you were paying attention to current events – and all his cash had. That was bullshit, too.

He'd given the deal away; but he knew who had it. And now he knew where to find them. He yanked his phone from his pocket. While jabbing at it with his thumb, he dragged the escape bag from under the bed and checked the contents. He threw in some more mags for the SIG.

He read this message from himself – correction, from his former self. Out of the trade, he guessed he was Paul Lineberry again. No, that didn't feel right, either.

You can never go home again.

"But, shit," he muttered, "I can go to Celeste Browning's home. Two tears in a bucket – fuck it." With his bag, his SIG, and the address glowing off the small screen, he tromped intently out of the door, and he didn't bother to close it behind him.