

Two Weeks in August

Ivan West

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“...things tend to get weird when the weather gets hot like this.” “A wife or a kid might get hit instead of yelled at a barroom argument turns into a stabbing you cut somebody off on the freeway and instead of getting the finger you get shot.”

Ike Eisenhower wasn't kidding when he used his farewell address to warn of the dangers of the military-industrial complex. Ivan West's slow-bubbling thriller set at a Los Angeles area defense contractor successfully combines a detective story with workplace drama. When a new radar system fails in production Joe Woods discovers evidence of a cover-up which may reach into upper management the Pentagon the Mafia and the halls of government. A laboratory engineer pinpoints the failure's intentional cause but is shot on the freeway before he can share his knowledge. This is southern California—the authorities lean toward divining the event as random although one veteran detective isn't so sure.

Joe's smart with corporate politics but is paradoxically passive-aggressive about maintaining a few markers of independence: always late for work he takes afternoon drives on the clock drinks when he wants a drink. Separated from his wife they both express a wish for reconciliation. Mostly. This thread is shepherded along then essentially dropped without resolution well into the story. The product failure debuts as the story's center but is handed off between managers as the action gains speed. When questioned by police in connection with the shooting Joe opens up providing leads which must be pursued with delicacy.

Sergeant Ed Jones a sucker for pet cause cases lives in an afterlife world since his family is long gone. He's past his prime but single-minded enough to be effective. Think Al Pacino from the movie *Insomnia* without the machismo and requisite shouting. Pervasive missed connections fuel plot complications and drive the atmosphere; a summer heat wave sleeplessness and its inverse the inability to wake. “Ed made three attempts to hit the snooze button on his phone before realizing it wasn't his alarm.”

Two Weeks in August judiciously incorporates some conventions of mysteries but doesn't fall prey to a full formula. The narrative varies more organically. At times a setup telegraphs its resulting payoff too clearly. For example Joe is highly suspicious of coworkers but he leaves a briefcase and a file of life-or-death importance in his desk when knocking off for the evening and the computer stays on.

This one has a few imperfections but the story will hold reader's attention easily. It benefits from instinctively correct decisions. Differences in approach to fiction between this work and West's book of interwoven short stories *Ethereal Madness* suggest a thoughtful writer with versatility of voice. Keep him on your radar.

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