

Surviving an FBI Investigation (Thirty Stages of Paranoia)

By James W. Fried

Stage 1. Your Life: Taking Stock

You have a great life. You have a loving wife, a comfortable house, a good job, and a loyal dog. You go to church every Sunday, pay your bills on time, and try to be an admirable citizen. You have no real enemies and, although you've never had an overabundance of friends, you have a buddy that you can always count on. A *best* friend. Someone who cares about you. Someone you can tell your troubles to. All in all, life is good.

Stage 2. The Movie

Your wife Oleanna is having drinks with a friend, so you surf through 700 TV channels before settling on a crime movie. *Good Fellas*. It's a feel-good flick. The FBI and police kick ass. The bad guys go to jail. You're riding high after watching it.

Stage 3. Reflections on the Movie

You can't get *Good Fellas* out of your head. You dream of being an FBI agent. You stream the 1960's TV series—*The FBI*—on Netflix. Efram Zimbalist Jr. becomes your personal hero.

Stage 4. Your Best Friend

You talk to your best friend, Bill, about *Good Fellas* and *The FBI* TV series. He curses the FBI. Says they're a bunch of Communists. Calls Efram Zimbalist Jr.—he's the star of the TV

series—a disgrace to all people of the Jewish faith. You didn't realize Efren Zimbalist Jr. was a Jew. Bill often fills you in on things you need to know.

Stage 5. Your Life: Reassessing

You consider what Bill said about the FBI and think about your own current situation. You give yourself a pep talk. Do nothing wrong. Break no laws. That includes driving over the speed limit. Don't act suspiciously. Take notice of everything and everyone. For God's sake, dot your I's and cross your T's!

Stage 6. The Tax Return

Reviewing your monthly expenses makes you think about your tax returns. You think about how you fudged on your expenses in 2014. Did you really use those numbers on that year's tax form? You're not sure. You rack your brain, trying to remember where the tax return might be stored. How long does the IRS keep tax returns? You agonize all day long and can't sleep. You make a discovery: Oleanna snores.

Stage 7. Your Best Friend (Part II)

You ask Bill to join you for a bite to eat after you get off work at Lou's Handy Appliances. You need to talk to someone. Bill is your advisor. Oleanna has always told you to pay attention to what Bill says. "Bill's been around," she says. "He's seen things. He knows what's what." You tell him about your concern over your 2014 tax return. He laughs and calls you a pussy. He tells you not to worry about it. Says, "Forget the IRS, they're nothing but a bunch of incompetent Nazi scumbags." He tells you that he hasn't filed a tax return in fifteen years. Your codfish is cold. You pick up Bill's tab.

Stage 8. Your Wife's Big News

Oleanna tells you that she's pregnant, but she doesn't seem overjoyed about it. It's like she's preoccupied. You're excited and immediately think of names for the baby. Girl's names. Boy's names. Oleanna doesn't want to play the baby-naming game. She just shrugs and says, "Oh well, at least we'll have our own little tax deduction." Her comment about taxes puts you in a funk. You lose interest in the baby-naming game.

Stage 9. Your Best Friend (Part III)

You find your 2014 tax return inside a plastic bag in the attic. You burn the return in the fireplace. Oleanna walks in while you're burning it. You say you're just using the paper as kindling to start the fire. You tell Bill what you did with the tax returns. "That's destroying evidence, you idiot!" he screams.

Stage 10. Things to Worry About

Your phone. "Hey, dude," Bill says, "your phone's a computer." Bill says your phone is more powerful than the computer that was used onboard the capsule that took Neil Armstrong to the moon. You're confused. He once told you that the moon landing was all staged. "Filmed in New Mexico," Bill had said. Whatever, he's made his point. Big brother can track everything you do right through your own phone.

Stage 11. More Things to Worry About

Your laptop. Oleanna's iPad. Oleanna's phone. Those damned Alexa boxes in four of the rooms of your house. Alexa was Bill's suggestion. Now he says that Alexa records everything you say. Your personal devices have you surrounded.

Stage 12. Crickets

You hear clicking sounds on your phone. They sound like crickets. You suspect a wiretap, although it could be static. You start talking in code when you're on the phone. You use

fake names when referring to acquaintances or family members. No one understands a thing you're saying.

Stage 13. Conversations with the Wife

You and Oleanna move your conversations to a far corner of your backyard. You're not going to let Alexa catch you saying something that could send you to the pen. Hercules, your obese bulldog, is confused but wags his tail to show that he likes having you out there with him. The grass won't grow in your backyard. Bill says it's the weed killer you've applied. Says it's made from lamb shit and poor-quality stuff like that.

Stage 14. Your Work Environment at Lou's Handy Appliances

Your boss, Lou, is acting weird. He starts monitoring your lunch breaks. You find him looking around and writing notes in a little pad. It freaks you out. Lou only wishes the appliances he sells are handy, like the store's name promises. He should be embarrassed to peddle such cheap stuff. You wonder about Lou's tax returns.

Stage 15. The Attorney

You decide to see your attorney. You're in need of some reassuring. You tell him about your 2014 tax return. "I can't help you," he says, "I'm just a five-and-dime divorce attorney. What you need is a good criminal lawyer." You leave in a bigger funk than when you arrived. You receive a bill from your attorney for two-hundred dollars. You hate attorneys. You search the Internet for the name of a criminal attorney in your area. You wonder how much that will cost. Your salary from Lou's Handy Appliances won't cover much.

Stage 16. Your Best Friend (Part IV)

Bill calls and suggests a drink after you get off work at Lou's Handy Appliances. You meet him at your favorite dive, *Willie's Wayward Wind*. You order a beer. Bill goes straight to

the hard stuff. Jack Daniel's. He doesn't stop with just one. You admire the way he sucks down one whiskey after another. He says he has something important to tell you but passes out before he can reveal what it is. You ask the bartender, Razor James, to call Bill a cab. You don't know why the bartender is called Razor James. He has a long beard. Could that be his real name? You pay the tab.

Stage 17. Oleanna's Depression

Oleanna is in a deep depression. She cries all the time. Your dog, Hercules, has a cold or something. He wheezes while Oleanna cries. You're concerned about Hercules's health, too, but you're not going to ball your head off over it. You wonder if Hercules will still be alive when the new baby arrives. You remember Grumpy, your first dog. He was run over by your brother, Stu. Remembering it makes *you* cry. It also makes you think about your 2014 tax return.

Stage 18. Your Criminal Attorney

You meet with Eddie Edson. He's the criminal attorney you found on the Internet. Eddie makes you think of Eddie Haskell, the smart-ass on *Leave it to Beaver*. You binge-watched seventy-three episodes of the show one weekend while Oleanna was off somewhere with friends. You don't know why the attorney makes you think of Eddie Haskell. The attorney is a short, black, fat guy. Maybe it's the name. Anyway, you tell *Eddie the Lawyer* about your concerns over your 2014 tax return. He scratches the side of his neck and says, "Hmm." You don't know what that means, but then he says that you could have a significant problem. "The feds are real cowboys these days," he says. "No man is safe." He ends the session after fifty minutes and hands you an invoice for one-thousand dollars. Eddie's office is a dump.

Stage 19. Your Wife Drops a Bombshell

You try to break the news of the one-thousand-dollar invoice to Oleanna, but she is distracted. She finally breaks down and sobs. You try to calm her and tell her that you'll find the money to pay the bill somehow. She throws her hands up. "You imbecile," she yells, "I don't give a rat's ass about the invoice. I'm trying to tell you something." You're completely lost until she says the baby isn't yours. "What?" you manage to say. "The baby is Bill's," she says. "He was supposed to tell you that the other night." "You and Bill?" you say. "We're in love," she says. "I'm leaving you." She storms into the bathroom and locks the door. You stare into space and try to understand. Oleanna and Bill? The baby? Then you think again about the attorney's invoice. How could he charge that much? And he only gave you fifty minutes of his time. You try to calculate how much his hourly fee must be.

Stage 20. The Man in the Raincoat and Fedora

You notice a man on the other side of your street. You watch him through the cracked blinds in your dining room window. He's carrying a clipboard and going from door-to-door, talking with your neighbors. He's wearing a raincoat and has a fedora cocked to one side of his head. It's not raining. You find it very suspicious behavior. When he finishes the houses on the other side of the street, he gets into a banged up gray Hyundai and drives away. You pour a glass of wine, sit in the living room, and think about your first car. It was gray too. Stu was driving it when he ran over Grumpy.

Stage 21. Some Anonymous Phone Calls

You receive a series of strange phone calls. There is no sound on the other end of the line. Just the crickets. You think about recording the calls. But what would you get other than a lot of

static? It makes you think about the nights when you were a child and would sleep in your backyard. You remember looking up at the stars. You loved those nights, but in the morning, when you'd wake up, you'd be covered with dew. It makes you think about all the wild animals in the world. Do they ever get used to waking up each day drenched in dew?

Stage 22. Your Best Friend (Part V)

You've not heard from Bill in weeks. You find it very interesting. You've called him several times, but it always goes to his voicemail. His greeting on the recorder makes him sound as if he's on top of the world. You bet he is. He's got Oleanna, and he'll soon have a new baby. You imagine Bill and Oleanna playing the baby-naming game. You wish they'd let you participate.

Stage 23. A Curious Scene at Work

One day at Lou's Handy Appliances you watch two men talk to your fellow employees. They leave without talking to you. You ask around. Your friends say it was no big deal. They were just checking on whether Lou followed all work-safety requirements. Sure, that's what they were asking about, you say under your breath. And my name is Santa Clause. That makes you think about the bicycle Santa brought you one Christmas. You loved that bike. Someone slashed both of its tires. It's hard to steer a bike with two flat tires.

Stage 24. Oleanna's Disturbing Call

You receive a phone call from your estranged wife. She tells you that Bill has been arrested. He's being charged with income tax evasion. That's disturbing enough, but what she says next sends chills down your spine. Bill is being pressured to give the feds information on anyone he knows that might be guilty of any type of crime. "They're squeezing him hard," Oleanna says. She tells you that anyone would break under the pressure. "They told him, 'Give

us something, and we'll go easy on you.'" She says that he might have mentioned your 2014 tax return problem. "Just threw it out as something they might want to look into." She says Bill feels bad that he threw you under the bus. "But he knows you'll understand," she says.

Stage 25. The Man in the Raincoat and Fedora (Part II)

You receive a knock on your front door. It's the man in the raincoat and fedora. He's carrying his clipboard. You open your storm door enough so you can hear what he's saying. He says he's with the Census Bureau. Sure, you are, you think to yourself. He says he has a few questions. You hesitate. What to do? You quickly develop a plan and let him come inside. He sits in your favorite easy chair. You tell him that you need a glass of water. He says, "Hey, that's sounds great! Could you bring me one as well?"

Stage 26. Executing Your Plan

You go into the kitchen and turn on the water in the sink. Then you open a drawer by the back door and remove a claw hammer that you once used to pull nails out of some rotting wood on the side of your house. You turn the water off and return to the living room. The man in the raincoat and fedora has his back is to you. He has removed the fedora. You take note of the bald spot on the crown of his head. That will serve as ground zero. You raise the claw hammer over your head and bring it down, as if you're chopping wood. The hammer makes contact and sinks deep into the man's head. You're surprised by how gooey it feels when it sinks in. When you pull it out, there's a sucking sound, and gray matter hangs from the head of the hammer. You drag the man's body to the garage and, with considerable effort, hoist it up and into the freezer you use to store steaks and hamburger meat. You slam the door five or six times before getting it closed. Your freezer has always been a godsend.

Stage 27. Nothing but Silence

Three months pass and there is no word. Not from Oleanna. Not from Bill. Not from the police. Not from the FBI. Not from the IRS. It makes you think that something's up. You try to imagine what it could be. You don't know what the FBI is doing, but one thing is for certain: the bastards are up to something.

Stage 28. Your Best Friend (Part VI)

Oleanna gives you a call. She's down in the dumps. She has just returned from the federal courthouse. Bill has pled guilty to tax evasion. "You should have seen him," she says. "He was crying like a little baby." He asked the judge to show mercy. Said he had received bad advice. "I'll bet you did," the judge told him, then sentenced him to five years of hard time. "Life's not fair," Oleanna tells you. "All he did was forget to file his returns. It's not like he killed someone."

Stage 29. The New Baby

Oleanna calls with some good news. She's had her baby. She's named it William, Jr. "I'm going to call him Billy," she says. You think that's nice. You had a cousin named Billy. He was a hoot. A real practical joker. Your cousin was killed in Iraq. You wonder about the people in Iraq. What do they name their babies?

Stage 30. The Heat is Off

You settle into your work routine at Lou's Handy Appliances. You do your job but there is no satisfaction in it. Things have calmed down and you're bored. You hardly even think about Oleanna anymore. Or Bill, for that matter. And you *never* want to think again about your 2014 tax return. You decide to cook hamburgers on the grill tonight. You'll have to squeeze an arm around the body to get the meat out of the freezer. Freezers are great, but you realize that this one is too small. You surf the Internet and find a larger one that looks like it'll work. You wonder if

they'll offer free delivery. You like to order home delivery of pizza. Pepperoni is your favorite topping.