

1-1-2005

The fool

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Recommended Citation

Cook, Jonathan M., "The fool" (2005). *Masters Theses*. 960.
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THE FOOL

(TITLE)

BY

JONATHAN M. COOK

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2005
YEAR

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John Kilgore
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Abstract

The Fool is a detective story written in the vein of the crime fiction of the thirties, forties, and fifties. It is a work that simultaneously pays homage to its influences while giving a postmodern update to the genre conventions in an attempt to bring validity to an all-too-often disregarded form of fiction. The story has been written in a minimalist style so that the reader might engage the story on a much more primal level than traditional genre fiction.

This thesis includes the first two chapters of *The Fool*, along with an outline for the final chapter. A critical Afterword explaining my thoughts regarding the creative process and a short list of works for further reading follow the story.

For Mom, Dad, and Michael, for putting up with my constant
genius:

Acta est fabula, plaudite!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable assistance:

Dr. John Kilgore, for insisting that I worry about the story first;

Dr. Randall Beebe, for asking the right questions at the right times; and

Dr. Robin Murray, for proving that film noir is worthy of academic study.

I would also like to thank the Eastern Illinois University English Department faculty, as well as the Fall 2004 / Spring 2005 English Department Graduate Assistants.

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The Fool

I. Vespers (The Silent City)

It was early, much earlier than I would have liked, when I arrived at 1600 Carbonek Avenue, a massive mansion-and-garden set belonging to a reclusive millionaire who had supposedly made his fortune producing independent films. He had his eccentricity down pat: in the middle of the foyer where I waited on the butler stood that famous Belgian statue of the little boy peeing into a pond. But he did have money: marble pillars holding up the stairs, paintings of various fruits, even two crossed swords mounted high on the northern-most wall. The more money, the better: I was there for work.

The butler, a tall man with hair graying at the edges and tiny wire-framed glasses, led me up the stairs and out onto a terrace, where a wrought-iron table and two matching chairs waited. To the right of the table, leaning against a stone pillar and framed by the early morning sun, was the silhouette of a man staring out over the city. The figure raised a hand to its lips, drew strongly enough on the cigarette to make the sound of burning tobacco audible across the terrace, then tossed the cigarette out into the air.

"Michael Minos, sir," the butler said.

The man turned and stepped out from under the sun, giving me my first real look at Peter Quints. He was younger than I had expected, probably in his early forties. His jet-black hair was neatly combed back, his face smooth and pale, his eyes green and clear. He held himself with a combination of regality and indifference, his broad shoulders set square and his head raised and cocked slightly to the left. But his clothing! Quints wore a dark green suede sport coat, under which was a form-fitting black shirt that reminded me of a spandex undershirt I had once owned as a teenager. Dark green cargo pants that were an inch too long and a pair of off-white tennis shoes completed the ensemble.

"Mr. Minos," he said in a voice that was too forcibly low and gravelly to be natural. "Thank you for coming."

"How do you do, Mr. Quints?" I said.

I waited for Quints to offer his hand, but he merely took a seat and motioned for me to do the same.

"I know it's a bit early in the day, but may I offer you something to drink?" Quints asked with something between a grin and a sneer touching his lips. "A brandy, perhaps?"

I shook my head. "Thank you, no. I try not to drink while working. At least, not in the morning."

Quints leaned forward in his chair, looking at me with uncomfortable severity.

"That is most prudent of you, Mr. Minos. A man who confuses work and play is never to be trusted. Too likely he'll be looking down when he should be looking up." He

raised his left hand and extended his index finger towards the sky. "The tea, Norris."

I looked over my shoulder to see the butler disappear back into the main house in complete silence. When I turned back, Quints was rummaging inside his jacket and mumbling to himself. After a few moments, he finally withdrew a folded white envelope, which he laid carefully on the table.

"Now then, Mr. Minos," he said. "Tell me about yourself."

"What would you like to know?"

"I like to know something of the people who work for me. The only thing I hate more than having to hire men of your profession"—he seemed to smile, but leaned far enough back that the sun was in my eyes—"is surprises."

I wasn't sure how to take that, so I shook my head and crossed my legs. "There really isn't much to tell. I'm twenty-seven, have a master's degree in English literature. When I found out there isn't a whole hell of a lot you can do with that, I took a correspondence course, and here I am."

"Ah, very good, very good," Quints said. "But tell me: how did you go from a literature scholar to a private investigator?"

I had to laugh. "Honestly, the movies. They made it seem like a glamorous job. Women, booze, guns, fedoras."

"The best career Hollywood has to offer," Quints urged.

"Something like that," I nodded. "It's much quieter than I expected, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. More paperwork. But similar in a lot of ways to what I trained for in college. We have to look at a given situation, put the details together, and come up with some kind of understanding. I enjoy it, though, I really do."

"Good. A man should always enjoy his employment. Only way he's any good at it."

Norris returned, as quietly as he had left, bearing a silver tea service, which he placed in front of Quints. I was immediately drawn to the exquisite designs. Thin lines and almost invisible flowers cascaded up the length of the teapot's handle. A series of interlinked circles wrapped horizontally around the center of teapot. The lid was topped with what appeared to be a bunch of grapes. The cups were shaped like freshly opened blossoms with a slightly thickened edge. I knew nothing of antiques, but I could tell the service was valuable.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Quints said.

"It certainly is," I said. "Must be worth a small fortune."

"To some, probably." He poured two cups and handed one to me. He took a long sip, leaned back, and sighed. "It was made by a silversmith during the American Revolution. The story goes that the family it was made for was not pleased, so the silversmith, not knowing what else to do, presented it as a gift to a young man in his service named Jonathan

Tremain. After Tremain was killed at Camden, it found its way into the hands of a woman named Mary Elizabeth Prescott. The service was then passed on to the first-born daughter of each generation of Prescott's descendants. My mother was, unfortunately, the last daughter, so she gave it to me to give to my daughter."

"That's quite a story." I shifted in my chair, trying not to laugh. He was being ornery, and I wasn't sure why. Changing the subject, I said, "I have to admit, I never knew there was this kind of money in independent film."

Quints smiled. "*Industrial* film, Mr. Minos." He pronounced the word with the slight trace of a German accent. "Training videos, mostly. Overseas companies discovered early on that it was cheaper for them in the long run to have their training materials professionally made." He looked down at his teacup, his smile drooping. "Who knew asymmetry theory would make me a millionaire?"

"Womack, maybe, but macroeconomics was never my strong suit."

"A man should understand the world in which he operates," he said dryly.

"I prefer working man-to-man. The lies are easier to spot."

Quints smiled. "You must have many enemies, then."

He was good. He never missed a beat, never blinked unnecessarily, never even narrowed his eyes. "At least with them, I know where I stand," I said.

"Of course. Maybe it's time we discussed more pertinent matters," Quints said.

I finished my tea and leaned forward, resting my interlaced hands on the table. "All right. How can I help you?"

"My daughter has run away. She snuck out of the house somehow two weeks ago and walked to the bus station. I already sent one man out after her, and he was able to follow her as far as a town called Vespers six or seven hours south of here. But then he lost her."

"What do you mean? How did he lose her?"

"He is—to put it bluntly, he is a buffoon." Quints looked out at the city. "That's why I called you. I want a skilled professional to ascertain her whereabouts."

I removed a small black notebook from my coat pocket.

"Any particular reason why—I'm sorry, what was her name again?" I asked.

"Angelica."

"Any reason why Angelica would have gone to Vespers?"

"I never heard of the place before my man returned yesterday, so I don't know where she heard about it."

"Does she spend a lot of time online? Maybe she met someone from there?"

"No, her computer is strictly for school work. No modem, no Internet."

I raised a brow, then shook my head and continued. "Okay, at least we have somewhere to start. Any idea why she would have run away?"

Quints stood and walked away from the table. "Do you have any children, Mr. Minos?" When I didn't answer, he turned to face me. "I've never been a good father. I've tried, but parenting is not easy. Life continually interferes. I've found that, while trying to provide for my family, I've never really been a part of that family. And since my wife's death, things between Angelica and I have been even more strained. Her condition..." He stopped abruptly and rubbed absently at the tabletop.

"Go on. Any detail might be useful."

"You understand why I'm not going to the police with this. Their methods have a tendency to be—rather loud. That's why I wanted to keep matters in house. Do you understand?"

"Mr. Quints, I do what I'm paid to do. I don't go around talking about what I'm paid to do."

Quints closed his eyes and nodded. He turned away from me once more and faced the city. "Angelica suffers from some kind of—I don't know what the medical name for it is—some kind of personality disorder. She has terrible mood swings, gets violent. Without her medication, she's dangerous to be around."

"How long has she been like this?"

"Years," Quints said. "As far back as I can remember. It's gotten much worse since her mother died. I guess part of her blames me. I don't know. But with her medication, she's fine. Maybe not as normal as I'd like sometimes, but she can function. But with her on her own like this—you can imagine my concern."

"She didn't take her medicine with her?"

"She didn't take anything. She just left."

"What's the name of her medication?"

"Norris can get it for you when we're done."

"Okay. And the prescribing doctor, too. Does she have a cell phone, credit cards, anything like that?"

"No, nothing."

"Any idea what she'd be doing about money?"

"She had a weekly allowance, but it wasn't much, certainly wouldn't have added up to anything unless she'd been saving for years."

I looked at my notebook and sighed.

"So basically, all we know is that she's in Vespers, maybe, has no medication, and little to no money," I said.

"That's not a lot to go on. Do you have a recent picture of her?"

Quints turned and motioned to the envelope on the table. "There's a photo of her in there. It couldn't have been taken more than six months ago. There's also my business card, directions to Vespers, and what I hope you'll find to be an acceptable deposit."

I took the envelope and tucked it away in an inside pocket. "I'm sure it's plenty. While we're on the subject, I charge eleven-hundred a day plus expenses."

"That's fine."

"Okay, so if I find her, what do you want me to do?"

"I just want to know my daughter is all right, Mr. Minos," Quints said. "Her eighteenth birthday is this Sunday, so if she wants to be on her own, there really isn't much I can do about it. If she's able to get along without her medication, then she deserves to live her life however she wants." He sat down. "Give me a call whenever you find her. Let me know what she does during the day, if she's working, what she eats, how she's keeping her finances, everything. Find her, follow her around for a few days, and then we'll take it from there."

I stood and extended my hand. To my surprise, Quints took it in both of his and shook it warmly.

"I can tell you're the perfect man for this job," Quints said. "Please. Find her, Mr. Minos." He let go and called inside, "Norris, please call a cab for Mr. Minos, and while he's waiting, find him the name of Angelica's prescription and her doctor."

I'll admit, I left the meeting liking the man. Sure, he may have been full of it at times, but he did care about his daughter. All he wanted was to know she was okay, and since he was paying, that's what I wanted to know, too.

After a minute, Norris stepped out onto the terrace and motioned for me to follow him. At the door, he gave me a slip of paper, on which was written: Buspirone (20mg 3x daily), Ernesto Mengowitz. Downstairs, a taxi was waiting.

* * * *

The cab ride gave me an opportunity to browse through the contents of the envelope. The first thing that caught my eye, even before the substantial amount of money, was the picture of Angelica, a beautiful girl with a delicate, almost anemic complexion and dark brown hair that fell below her shoulders. But there was something odd about the way she held her eyes. It seemed as if she was deliberately avoiding the camera, yet at the same time not really looking at anything else. Her expression was completely blank, her eyes unfocused, like those of a bored model. She had no piercings in her ears and, as far as I could tell, she wore no make-up.

Along with the photograph, there was Quints' business card, on the back of which was scribbled the number to his private line, handwritten directions to Vespers, and twenty-five hundred dollars, cash. I stuck the photo, directions, and business card in my breast pocket, folded a few of the bills into my money clip, and left the rest in the envelope. Petty cash.

Back at my apartment, I packed lightly: two shirts, four undershirts, two pairs of trousers, four pairs of socks, four pairs of briefs, an additional sport coat, and

my shaving kit. I didn't expect to need much else. I called Mrs. Grosse, my landlady, told her I'd be gone for a week or so, and asked her to water my plants. As I started out the front door, though, I had the feeling I was forgetting something important. I stopped for a moment, couldn't decide what the problem was, then left.

Traffic was heavy, and for the first hour that was all I thought about: traffic. I followed a dark green Mustang with a dented fender through most of town, breaking off to merge onto the interstate and follow a southbound Guinness truck. I continued to follow the truck until I left the interstate some seventy miles outside of the city and took a smaller state highway.

After I had passed a dozen cities and towns with wholly unremarkable names, traffic began to thin. The urgency of the previous miles gave way to a much more languid pace. I turned on the radio and found a station playing the golden oldies, and for a while, I sang along with Dean Martin, the Beach Boys, and Neil Sedaka. There were plenty of passing sights to keep my mind from leaking out the side of my head: a green sign indicating such-and-such a town was home to the second runner-up in the state track meet's long jump category, a privately-owned gas station located almost fifteen miles away from the nearest town, even a pay phone located, quite literally, in the middle of nowhere. Part of me wanted to laugh, the part of me that had spent the past three years in the big city.

Around two, I pulled into a rest stop in a heavily forested area. I was hungry, stiff, and had to take a leak. The facilities were located on the western side of the building, facing away from the parking lot. Inside was about what I expected: cracked and discolored tiling on the walls, cement flooring littered with cigarette butts and chewing gum, rusted piping, and urinals that hadn't been flushed for what looked like a very long time. The fluorescent lights flickered every so often. I briefly considered using the trees instead, but there was a family eating at a nearby picnic table. As soon as I unzipped at the urinal, I heard a sound and looked around to see a shoe just visible beneath the stall. Its owner would tap the floor a few times, rest, and then tap some more. I called out in a loud voice, "I'm not interested, but there's a married guy outside, so, you know." The tapping stopped, and I washed my hands in silence.

The highway was empty except for the occasional semi. The radio pulled in nothing but country stations, and all of them were playing the same three songs. Eventually, even the landscape became a flat, unbroken stretch of prairie, nothing but tall, pale brown grass swaying in the breeze.

The sun had just set by the time I came to exit 112. It was going to be dark by the time I got to the hotel, but at least the restaurants wouldn't be closed. I took the exit, turned east, and traveled another six miles, at the end of which I came to a large wooden sign, which had *Welcome to*

Vespers! written in square blue letters. Some young punk had taken a can of red spray paint and written *Simon was here!* in the lower right corner. Beyond the sign I could see the town lights.

* * * *

La Ciudad Silenciosa was written in thick blue-green neon bulbs and could be seen from almost a mile away. There were only two other cars, an older Chevrolet convertible with a fender that had rusted through in places and a faded blue Taurus that was missing three hubcaps. I pulled in under the cement canopy and shut off the engine. A neon sign in the window flashed *Vacancies*. No kidding.

The lobby was small but didn't feel cramped. To the right of the front doors was an archway leading to a dimly lit room. A sign above the archway said *El Restaurante*. On the opposite side of the room was the registration desk, complete with a little silver bell and a gold-plated placard with the words *Registration Desk* neatly inscribed in large, looping letters. There was another door at the back of the lobby, presumably leading to the guestrooms. I rang the little silver bell.

"*Un momento, por favor,*" came a thick voice from somewhere beyond the door marked *Employees Only*. A short, heavysset Hispanic with no hair came out. His nametag said Jorge. "*Sí*, what can I do you for?"

"I'd like a room please," I said.

"*Sí*. Do you have reservation?"

"No."

"Oh. *Lo siento*. I will see if I have anything available." He leaned down and I could hear pages turning.

"You do know there are no cars in your parking lot, right?"

Jorge looked up, said "Sí," and went back to his book. After a minute, he sighed. "No room for you."

"There are no cars in your parking lot. How can you possibly be filled?"

Jorge shook his head. "I am not filled. There is reservation, and reservation must be honored."

I poked the desktop with my index finger. "I understand that, George, but don't you have more rooms available than reservations? Can't you just rent me a room that is not reserved?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. It would be improper."

I stared at him and his sweaty, swollen bulk. He wasn't joking. I could have given him an intimate introduction with the desktop and then hoped that their newfound romance might get me a room, but one look at him told me he wasn't changing his answer. He wasn't that bright. "You're a man of conviction and principle, George. I can respect that." I laid a twenty down on the desk, but kept a hand over it.

"Are you sure you don't have a room for me?"

Jorge's eyes followed the bill. "Maybe reservation for you after all." He lifted a book from beneath the desk and set it in front of me. He indicated two lines with a pen. "Print. Sign." While I did so, Jorge pocketed the bill. He took back the book and wrote something himself, then frowned. He flipped through the pages again. "Reservation was for you."

"I know. It cost me twenty bucks. There'd better be enough towels in there."

"No, reservation really was for you. See?" He showed me the reservation log. The only thing written on the page was M. Minos (*Llegará tarde*). "You had reservation."

Quints must have called ahead. Wish he would have told me. "Yeah. Can I have my key?"

Jorge handed me the key to room 1101. "First floor, on the right," he said.

"Okay, well, thank you for the room and, you know, overcharging me."

"*De nada.*"

Room 1101 was fairly standard. The walls were painted an unvarying shade of taupe, the wire-framed bed was covered in thin sheets that felt like worn-out sandpaper, and the bathroom only had one towel: a hand towel. There was no room for a table, but there was a high-backed wooden chair sitting conspicuously by the door. The television, which received eight channels and a great deal of snow, rested

atop a short, unstained dresser. I hung my sport coat in the closet, then sat down in the table-less chair.

The clock read a quarter after six: too late to survey the town. It was dark outside, and wandering around town aimlessly was likely to get me arrested and thrown in the drunk tank. What I needed at that moment, as my stomach reminded me, was dinner. The restaurant in the lobby was still open, though I wasn't sure when I first walked through the archway. Most of the lights that hung over the tables had been turned off. Only the bar, which ran the length of the far wall, was fully lit. A woman seated on a stool was speaking in a hushed voice with the bartender, an older man wearing a white shirt and a bow tie. He was just another part of the hotel, but she was far too well dressed. She wore a dark brown cocktail dress, with a low-cut neckline and a flared skirt that hung lower on one side than the other. Her dark hair was piled high on her head, leaving only a few stray hairs against her long neck. She turned as I came up behind her. A light floral scent rose off her skin.

"This seat taken?" I motioned to the stool beside her.

She leaned back against the counter and crossed her legs. "I don't know. Paul, is this seat taken?" she said, never taking her eyes off me.

Paul, the bartender, looked at me, crossed his arms and laughed. "I don't know. Kind of depends on what he wants."

"Are you still serving?"

"I'll be serving most of the night," Paul said.

"In that case, I'll have this seat, one of whatever the lady's drinking, and a dinner menu, please."

"Ooh, he said please," Paul said. "We got a live one here."

The woman finally broke off and looked at the bartender. "Paul."

He laughed. "What? Just having some fun with the guy. It's a long night."

She motioned with her head for him to go. He looked at her, then at me, sighed, laid a menu on the countertop, and disappeared after grumbling something about ice. She turned back and looked at me hard with deep brown eyes.

"You a cop?" she asked.

"Should I be?"

"I don't like cops."

"Neither do I."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"I know."

Her eyes narrowed. Then she smiled. "You're not a cop."

"I know that, too."

"I know all the local boys, and you're not one of them. And you certainly don't act like a big city cop."

"So why did you ask?"

"To see what you'd say." She motioned to the stool beside her. "Sit down."

I did. "Thank you."

"Paul!" she called out. "Where's the man's drink?"

Paul reappeared, a large bag of ice in his arms. "Just a minute," he said as he dumped the bag into a freezer. He filled a glass with ice and then proceeded to add several types of alcohol so quickly I had difficulty keeping track of everything. Paul topped it off with a splash of cola and a dollop of whipped cream and set it in front of me. "There you go. One Blue Velvet."

"What's in it?"

"A little bit of everything," the lady said as she took a sip from her own.

I took a tentative sip and set the glass down. The drink was bad all the way through: it smelled acidic, tasted like thin turpentine, and clawed its way down the throat.

"Maybe I'll stick with water." Paul rolled his eyes. I glanced through the menu and ordered a turkey club sandwich, with no mayonnaise or tomato. Paul took the menu and disappeared. I tried the Blue Velvet again, had the same reaction, and decided not to finish it. "Don't know how you can drink that," I said.

"You'd be surprised what'll go down smoothly once you've had enough practice," she said.

"What's your name?"

"What do you want it to be?"

"Whatever it is."

She smiled. "Virginia. My name is Virginia."

"Nice name. I'm Michael, Michael Minos."

"What a name. Didn't your parents like you?" I just looked at her. "It doesn't sound right. It sounds made up, like a porn star's name."

"Is that what you think I am? A porn star?"

"No. You're not that cocky."

"Known a lot of porn stars, have you?"

"I used to be one."

"Really?"

"No."

Now it was my turn to smile. I wasn't sure what her game was, but flirting with a beautiful woman certainly beat eating alone, which was what I expected to be doing. When my dinner came, though, Virginia stood up and paid her bill.

"I've got an appointment, but it was nice meeting you."

"You too. See you around sometime?"

"Maybe. How long are you in town?"

"A week, maybe more. I'll buy you one of those crappy drinks you like."

"What are you really doing here?"

"I'm a prizefighter."

"Really?"

"No."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Do you want me to?"

She kissed me lightly on the cheek, winked, and walked away. "See you around, Mis-ter Minos." She exaggerated my name with that whole Marilyn Monroe Presidential birthday

party thing. I watched her go, her tight ass swishing from side to side as her heels clicked against the polished wood flooring.

I ate my sandwich in silence. I tried striking up conversation with Paul, but the bartender gave a noncommittal reply and went about cleaning the countertop. Finally, I just asked for the day's newspaper and ignored him.

There wasn't much of use in the paper. Either most businesses in town had enough help or they chose other ways of advertising for help. Angelica didn't have the education or the experience to be a senior newspaper editor, a food critic, or "the assistant manager of an up-and-coming video rental store." There was a nanny position, but that was too high profile, which left only a part-time position as a delivery person or a fry clerk at a local fast food joint. Fast food generally had a high turnover rate, so that sounded worth looking into.

"Actually, what's the oldest paper you still have?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Paul asked.

"Do you have any issues of the local paper from earlier in the week, maybe even last week?"

"Why would we keep those around?"

"So that's a no?"

He shook his head. I paid my bill and went back to my room.

* * * *

The restaurant was busy the next morning, almost impossibly so. I had to turn sideways, squeeze between chairs, and dodge waitresses carrying overfilled trays just to get to the only empty table. I sat down and started running over my itinerary for the day when an older woman with gray hair and a dirty apron asked what I wanted.

"Are there any specials?" I asked.

"We have the Chandler Plate for \$6.95 and the Cain Plate for \$7.95," she said. "The Chandler Plate includes three George Washingtons, a James Madison, a side of Montgomery or a side of Concord, and coffee and juice. The Cain Plate comes with the same, as well as a James Monroe. You can get your James Madison vegetarian, if you prefer." I must have been staring, because she put her hands on her hips and glared. "Do you know what you want, or should I come back later in the day?"

"What's a George Washington?"

"A buttermilk pancake," she said as she looked around the room and waved at various people.

"And a James Madison is some kind of an omelette?"

"You catch on quick."

"Wouldn't it be easier to simply call it a pancake or an omelette?"

"When you're running your own restaurant, you can call the dishes anything you want, hon."

I bit my tongue, hard. "I'll have three George Washingtons, some coffee, and what do you call grits?"

"Grits."

"Yeah, I'll have those, too."

She scribbled down the order and walked off.

I took a look around at the other patrons. A forty-ish woman with frizzy hair pushed scrambled eggs around on her plate while holding her head above her coffee cup with the other hand. A bald man in a black suit, wearing an earring, spent most of his time pouring sugar and creamer into his coffee. A group of schoolchildren leaned across their table, whispering and then laughing, all the while watching the rest of us to make sure we weren't paying any attention. Everyone was smoking. Even my waitress had a cigarette waiting for her at an empty table. Every time she'd walk past it, she'd sneak a quick drag. She hadn't developed smoker's cough yet, so I wasn't too worried about my breakfast.

When the food came out of the kitchen, I ate with relish, drizzling large amounts of homemade maple syrup over the fluffy, golden brown discs. The grits were thick and buttery, with a dash of tomato and paprika. The coffee was hot and strong, and the waitress made sure to keep the cup full.

Vespers, as it turned out, was a decent-sized town. There were two main roads, each running east-west for the length of the town. The northern road, Miami Street, was by

far the busier of the two. At the western edge, just outside the town limits, was a Methodist elementary school. Across the street was a strip mall that included a hair salon, a children's clothing store, and a discount shoe store. The eastern edge was occupied by a cardboard factory, an enormous, sprawling structure that seemed grotesquely out of place among so many smaller buildings. In between was everything from law offices and computer repair shops to grocery stores and gas stations. Mom-and-Pop stores stood alongside larger retail chains, and all of them seemed to do a fair amount of business. The southern road, Fifth Street, ran through a mainly residential area, though there were two more private elementary schools and a Catholic church. Connecting the two main roads on the western side of town was Clay Street, which ran along an undeveloped field, the county fairgrounds, and an assisted living community. The downtown area was dominated by the county courthouse, a sleekly modern building with large glass windows and a black steel frame. Most of the businesses in the courthouse square appeared far less successful than their main street counterparts. A number of stores stood empty. Filling out the rest of the town were more residential districts, churches located in the strangest and most arbitrary places, a few large parks, and a mental hospital. The town overall bore a thick coat of polish.

I only found a single abandoned building, an office supply store just south of Fifth Street. A sign by the road

said the building was scheduled for demolition within the next few days. The eastern edge of town was the only area that showed clear signs of neglect, probably due to the factory workers all living in the area. The homes there were cheaper and less cared for. The front porches of several had collapsed, and at least a dozen windows were boarded up. Much of the fencing in the area was terribly rusted.

I stopped at every fast food restaurant as I drove around. The routine was the same: I'd walk in, order a small soft drink, take a quick look around, and then leave. I timed myself so that I wasn't in any one place longer than an ordinary customer. I was able to see the kitchen workers, and I followed each one's activities as best I could. Aside from a few especially fair and slender boys, I didn't see anyone who reminded me of Angelica.

Shortly after noon, having been through each restaurant, I stopped for lunch at a coffee house downtown. I ate my salad slowly, not wanting to return to the restaurants until after the afternoon shift change. I picked up a flashlight before heading over to the library.

Back issues of the local paper were a waste of time, though. I went back three weeks, just to be sure, but few of the *Help Wanted* listings changed. Only one caught my eye: "Looking to make quick money? Call Angelo. No experience necessary!" The listing appeared sporadically throughout the weeks, including twice the week Angelica would have arrived in town. I copied down the number at the bottom.

By the time I left the library, it was mid afternoon, so I began making my way back through the restaurants. I planned to follow the same routine, but it was a zit-riddled manager at Burgers-n-Bliss who ended up answering my questions.

"Excuse me. What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm buying a drink."

"Yeah, I noticed," the manager said. "I meant, weren't you in here this morning?"

"Yes, yes I was."

"Okay, well, I don't mean to be rude, but what are you doing here again?"

I told the clerk to cancel my order, grabbed Zit Face's arm and pulled him away from the counter. I flashed my driver's license at him and then put it back in my pocket before he could get a good look.

"My name's Doyle. Agent Doyle. I'm with the CDC. You know what that is, right? The Center for Disease Control. The reason I'm here is because we have reason to believe a young woman may be employed here. It is imperative that we find this woman as soon as possible." I showed him Angelica's picture. "Have you seen this woman?"

"You just showed me your driver's license," he said.

That was unexpected. "Yes. Yes, I did. And I'll tell you why." I thought for a moment. "I really don't have a good reason. I thought if I was fast enough, you wouldn't notice."

"Um, you're gonna have to leave now, and don't, um, don't come back." He was a good kid, and part of me almost felt sorry for trying to screw with him.

"Look, it's very important that I find this woman. Her life may be in danger. If I don't find her soon, something could happen to her." I showed him Angelica's picture again. "Have you seen her?"

He looked at the photograph, then at me. "Why are you looking for her?"

I sighed. "I can't tell you that. Have you seen her?"

He looked around, making up his mind to trust me, then leaned in close and said, "Yeah. Yeah, I hired her a couple weeks ago, but she's not here anymore."

"What do you mean anymore?"

"I mean, she was fired. I fired her."

"Why?"

"Well, she was a real bitch, you know. Always copping an attitude about everything, always picking fights. Everything was always about her. She was way too much trouble, especially when there's always someone else who wants the job."

"Do you know where she's living?"

He looked around and shifted from foot to foot. "She only worked a few days. I didn't bother filling out the paperwork."

I thanked him for his time and left. I hit the rest of the restaurants out of obligation. I didn't expect to find anything more, and I wasn't disappointed.

I got back to the hotel just after sunset and stopped for some dinner. Part of me hoped Virginia would be having her dinner, too, but the restaurant was empty except for Paul and myself. I sat down at the bar and ordered a club sandwich, then called the number for Angelo I'd gotten out of the paper, but an answering machine picked up: "Yeah, it's me. Leave a message." No point in leaving a message, so I hung up at the beep.

"Anyone important?" a voice behind me asked. I didn't need to turn around to know it was Virginia. She smelled like water lilies.

"No, no, just business."

She was wearing a black silk chiffon cocktail dress, with a thinly beaded trim and a deep V-neck. The hem of the skirt licked against her knees. Once again, her hair was up, held in place with a pair of black chopsticks. She pressed up against me, pushing her breasts against my side, and snatched the piece of paper out of my hand.

"What kind of business do you have with this guy?" she asked.

"He's my dealer."

"No he isn't."

"I know."

We took our seats and she asked Paul for a Blue Velvet.

"How was it?" Paul asked.

"He started crying half-way through." She took a sip.

"Had to finish everything by myself."

"Ouch. He still pay?"

"If by paid you mean I took the money out of his wallet and left, then yes, he paid."

"What do you do?" I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew.

"What do you do?" Virginia asked, without missing a beat.

"I'm a porn star."

"And I'm a prize fighter."

"No you're not."

"I know."

"What's your business with Angelo?" she asked again.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"I'm a prostitute."

"Okay."

"I fuck men for money," she said. But she said it with such a straight face and a composed expression that I knew she was serious. She leaned an elbow on the counter and moved in closer. "Does that bother you?" she asked in a lower voice. "Does it make you uncomfortable, sharing a counter with a woman of such low moral fiber?" The last words were barely above a whisper, and her face was less than an inch from mine.

I sat there, trying to avoid picturing her in bed with another man.

"You look like you're going to pass out," she said, and then she pulled away from me. "Relax. I didn't mean to bother you."

"I don't mind. I like it when you bother me."

"I'm sure you do. I just wish there was some way I could make it up to you."

My first thought was wildly inappropriate, my second a little less so. "You sound like you know this Angelo guy."

"Yes." She said the word slowly, like a child who knows she's about to be accused of something by her parents.

I pulled Angelica's photograph out from inside my sport coat and handed it to her. "I need to know if he has seen this girl in the past couple weeks."

Virginia studied the picture for a while, running over it lightly with the pad of her index finger. When she finally raised her head back up to me, she looked very uneasy. "I'm going to need to know what you're really doing here."

I waited until Paul was out of earshot. "I'm a private investigator. That girl is the daughter of a client. She ran away two weeks ago. I think she's somewhere in this town, but I don't have any idea where. Angelo's number was listed in the paper as a quick source of cash the week she would have gotten into town. So far he's my best lead. My only

lead. I called him, but his machine answered, and leaving a message isn't going to get me anywhere."

Virginia looked away and rubbed absently at her upper arm. "She would have needed money when she came here?"

"Yeah. And a place to stay."

She sighed and looked at me with her head tilted slightly. "Okay. I'll see what I can find out. You doing anything else tonight?"

"I've got a few things I want to check out."

"Okay. Don't call Angelo again. Don't mention his name, don't do anything. Leave him to me. You don't want to get involved with him if you can avoid it. I'll find you tomorrow and let you know what I find out. Okay?"

"If he's that dangerous, just tell me where I can find him. I'm being paid to risk injury."

"That's sweet, but I know how to work him. We-fit together, and you and him wouldn't."

"Just be careful."

"Don't worry about it." She stood up and turned to leave. "See you tomorrow, Shamus Minos."

And then, against my better judgment, I asked, "Just out of curiosity, how much would you charge me?"

"I don't know that I would," she said over her shoulder with a wink, her ass jiggling ever-so-slightly as she moved away.

I ordered some food and gave Quints a call while I waited.

"How goes the search, Mr. Minos?" Quints asked.

"I found where your daughter was working last week. A local burger joint. But the manager said he fired her after a couple of days, said she was—problematic." Quints was silent, so I continued. "I've got a couple other leads I'm going to follow up on, but I'm not—what makes you so sure she's still in this town?"

"Hope, Mr. Minos," he said. "Hope and prayers."

"Like I said, I've got a few other leads, so hopefully I'll have more for you next time."

"Good. I look forward to your call."

With a click, the line went dead.

* * * *

I got to the abandoned office store around ten. I parked the car on the side of the street in a residential area, then circled around to the back of the store. The backdoor had been covered with boards, but several at the bottom were missing, as was a part of one at the level of the lock. The lock's cylinder had been removed, and when I pushed against the door, it swung open with a loud, long squeak. I shined the flashlight between the boards and peered inside, but a stack of something was blocking most of my view. I got down on my stomach, hoped my health insurance covered accidents occurring in condemned buildings, and crawled through the opening at the bottom.

There was surprisingly little dust on the floor. A stack of photocopier paper boxes was covered with a thick

layer of dust, as was a table in the far corner of the room, but the floor was clean. There were also no cobwebs, except those few clinging to the very top of the ceiling. Someone had gone over the place, not well enough to arouse suspicion, but well enough to make it livable. The front windows had been soaped over, but a few small lines were scratched out so that a person could see the road from within the store if he or she was close enough to the windows. In the very back, through a door that still bore slight discoloration from its placard, was a cramped room with three shelves on each wall. On one of those shelves against the back wall was a group of candles. I shined the light at them and saw faint smoke rising from the charred wicks. On the floor was a thin blanket and a handful of candy bar wrappers. I knelt down and touched the blanket: still warm. I searched for another exit, but couldn't find one. The blocked door I had come in appeared the only way in or out.

I crawled back out of the store, only to find myself staring up the barrel of a police-issue pistol.

"Move and I'll blow your head off, you piece of shit. Don't think I won't," the officer holding the pistol said.

Before I was entirely certain how it had happened, I was seated at a small folding table in a square interrogation room. I studied myself in the requisite two-way mirror and would have waved to my captors, had my hands not been in cuffs. A door in the wall adjacent to the mirror

opened, and in came a tall man with a bushy mustache and a sheriff's badge. He sat down, laid a manila file on the table, and folded his hands together.

His voice was thick and heavy, the kind of guttural voice that comes from smoking cigarettes and drinking whiskey every day for twenty years. "Michael Minos, private investigator. I'm Francis Chevalier, the sheriff, in case you hadn't figured that out by the badge. I want you to remember that. I'd also like you to remember this: I don't like guys who dick with me. If I find out you're fucking with me, I'm going to rip you a new asshole. Do you understand? Now, let's start with the obvious: what were you doing in the building where we found you tonight?"

"Looking for a bathroom."

"Minos..."

"I thought I saw Elvis."

"What were you doing?"

"Investigating."

"Investigating. Good. Investigating what?"

"That's a good question, and I could answer it for you, but I think you'd learn more if you figure it out for yourself."

The sheriff pushed the table to one side and stood up. "Minos, you're about to be charged with breaking-and-entering, trespassing, and if I wanted to, I could add interfering with a police investigation."

"I guess maybe I was just bored."

The blow caught me in the jaw and whipped my head to the right. I could taste the first coppery splatter of blood on the inside of my cheek.

"Shit," the sheriff said as he turned around and walked towards the mirror. He shook his head, gestured at the mirror, then turned back to me. "Look, we're both men. All I want to know is what you were investigating this evening. If you were there for legit reasons, we can work something out."

"Oh, come on. Hit me again. I like it when you're rough."

"Cooperate and I'll drop all the charges. Deal?"

I spat blood and saliva at his feet. "I was investigating a runaway. That building seemed like the kind of place someone who didn't want to be found would hide in."

The sheriff's whole posture changed. "Really. Someone hired you to do this?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"I can't remember."

"Did you find anything?"

"Just a lot of dust. If someone was living there, they aren't now."

Chevalier turned back to the mirror and threw up his hands. "Shit." He paced back and forth for a while, his beefy arms and clenched fists swinging. "If we missed him..."

Chevalier exited, and in came two officers, nightsticks in hand. I closed my eyes and waited for the beating, but it never came. Instead, they took me by the arms and pulled me out of the interrogation room, through the station, and out into the parking lot, where they removed my handcuffs and said they stuck together and I'd better not try anything. I made my way back to the car. I found it just as the clock above the courthouse signaled two.

When I opened the door, though, the light revealed a cigarette butt lying on the ground. I picked it up, looked it over, and sniffed it. It was fairly fresh, probably not more than a couple of hours old. The words *American Spirit* were written in tiny gold letters around the rim of the filter. There were a few cars, but no more than when I had parked. I dropped the butt, ground it underfoot, and headed back to the office store. I kept to the shadows, circling around the building several times in case the friendly local sheriff had decided to have some more fun with me. The area seemed empty, so I tried going back into the store via the boarded up doorway. This time, though, I found myself staring at a long, polished knife blade. Attached to the handle was a thin hand and arm. The rest of the body was hidden in darkness.

"The hell do you want?" a man's voice asked.

"You must be the guy the pigs are looking for."

The blade didn't move. "What do you know about it?"

"I know they arrested me thinking I was you, and now they think you're no longer living here."

"Why do they think that?"

"Because I told them I didn't find anything."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because my ass is hanging outside the door and I've got a knife in my face. Now is probably not the best time for me to bullshit anyone."

The blade hovered for a moment more, then disappeared. "Come on in. Try anything and I'll gut you like a fish."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said and I squirmed the rest of the way through the door-hole.

Inside, the knife-wielder was seated on a short stack of crates, his head slumped forward and his knife across one knee. Even sitting down, he was tall. He had a slim build, which explained the entrance. His eyes were wide and he never took them off me. Behind him were several shelves of lit candles.

"So you're not with the cops," he said. "What are you doing here, then?"

"I came here looking for someone, and that's how I got arrested earlier."

"No one here but me, yo."

"I see that. What's your name?"

"Bob."

"Bob. Okay, Bob. Mind telling me how you disappeared earlier?"

"I didn't disappear."

"Where were you hiding, then?"

He grinned. "I was under my blanket."

I thought for a moment. "There's a trapdoor?"

Bob nodded, his grin getting larger.

"So how did you get the blanket to cover it after you were inside?" I asked.

"Man, I ain't telling you everything."

"Fair enough." I reached into my coat and pulled out Angelica's picture. "Have you seen this woman?"

Bob looked at the photograph for a while, grinned, and asked, "What's it worth to you?"

"I already saved your ass once tonight. Tell me what you know and we'll call it even."

He stood up and crossed his arms. "A'ight. Yeah, I've seen her."

"What can you tell me about her?"

"Not much. I stopped by the Seven-Eleven earlier to pick up some cigarettes, and I noticed her buying some milk."

"You sure it's the same woman?"

"Oh yeah. You don't see many chicks looking like her alone."

"What time was this?"

"Earlier today, probably around five, maybe six."

"Did you talk to her at all?"

"I may have said *what's up* but that's about it. I didn't get freaky with her, if that's what you're asking."

"No, I'm sure you didn't. No idea where I might find her?"

"Guess that sort of depends on why you're looking for her."

"She's a runaway. I'm just trying to make sure she's okay."

"Chick like that, probably shacked up with some rich dude."

"I don't think so. She's not looking to be a kept woman."

"Well"—he laid the knife down on a crate—"there is a guy who might be able to help you. He sort of—collects women."

"What do you mean, collects women?"

"He owns a club downtown. Hires chicks to work there. He—if she's a runaway, chances are she'll meet up with him."

"What's his name?"

"He goes by Angelo. I don't know how to get a hold of him, but ask around and you'll likely get his attention."

"What is he, some kind of gangster?"

"Not really. He's just—not the kind of guy you mess with."

"I see. By the way, what kind of cigarettes do you smoke?"

"Luckies, baby. Lucky Strikes or nothing."

"Okay, thanks for you time."

"Take it easy, yo."

I crawled back out the door, tearing my coat in the process.

Back at the hotel, I wanted nothing more than to peel off my clothing, take a long, hot shower, and go to bed, but Jorge was waiting for me as I entered the lobby. "*¡Señor! ¡Señor!* I have message for you," he called as he came running from behind the registration desk, waving a white envelope in the air like he was delivering orders to General Sherman. He stopped short when he finally saw how disheveled I was. "*¡Dios mio! ¿Qué sucedió?*"

"What's the message?" I said, reaching for it.

Jorge's brow furrowed, as if he was trying to decide whether or not I was dangerous. He looked down at the envelope, nodded, and then handed it over, saying, "*Su novia* said it was very important you saw it right away."

"Thanks." In the envelope was a white slip of paper. *Room 1102 ASAP*, it said. "My girlfriend gave you this?"

"*Sí.*" Then, with a mischievous grin, he added, "*Ella es la novia de todo el mundo.*"

I shrugged and walked back to the guest-rooms. Room 1102 was the last room on the right. I knocked, softly. After a minute, the door opened to reveal Virginia wearing a white cotton bathrobe. Her neck was still damp.

"The hell happened to you?" she asked, motioning for me to enter.

"I met the local sheriff. He thought I was dicking him." I sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, Frank can be a little rough." With a little more concern, she asked, "You okay?"

"I'll be fine. Just spent most the night crawling around on the floor. I just need a shower." I ran a hand through my hair. "What did you need?"

"What do you mean?"

"George gave me your message, said it was important."

"Oh, yeah." She sat in a chair in the corner and crossed her legs. "I talked to Angelo while you were having fun with the sheriff. He said he recently hired a new girl to work at his club downtown. From what he told me, she might be the girl you're looking for."

"Yeah?"

"Well, he said she's pretty and pretty pale. I thought you'd want to know right away."

"I heard about this Angelo. Sounds like a real stand-up guy. What kind of club is it?"

"It changes. Some nights, there's live music. Other nights, it's just a regular bar. I don't know what he hired her for. Does it matter?"

"Her father wants to know what she's doing."

"I guess we'll find out tomorrow night."

"We?"

"Yeah." She stood up. "So you'd better go clean yourself up and get some rest."

"How much for a sponge bath?"

"You sure you're going to be okay?" she asked in the doorway.

"Sure, I'm strong like bull."

"You're a strong light bulb?"

"No, I said—it doesn't matter. I'll see you tomorrow night."

She kissed me on the cheek and then closed the door. I hobbled down to my room and took a very long shower.

* * * *

I was hungry the next morning, and the hotel restaurant, once again, was like walking into a circus. I dodged the same waiters carrying the same plates away from the same patrons. These people liked their routine. I took a seat, and within a heartbeat, the same old woman was staring down at me, pad and pen in hand, waiting.

There was a drug store on the corner of Miami and Division. I drove up and down the street for almost forty minutes, waiting until there were no cars in the parking lot, before finally pulling in. Inside, it was quiet. The walls were painted white, except for a thick red stripe that ran parallel to the floor all around the room. There were the usual items scattered throughout the front of the store: condoms, cold medicines, thermometers, health journals, protein bars, humidifiers, stethoscopes. The back of the store was devoted to the pharmacy proper, with a large

counter and a thin man in a white coat behind it. Behind him were shelves containing a variety of colored bottles.

"I'll be right with you, sir," the man in the coat said as I approached the counter. He pulled a bottle off the shelf, looked at it through the glasses that sat low on his nose, and placed it back on the shelf. "Now then," he said, turning towards me, "what can I do for you today?"

I decided to be direct and stupid. I handed him the scrap of paper. "My sister's doc wants to put her on this and she wanted me to find out just what it is, what it does, you know."

The pharmacist looked at the paper and raised an eyebrow. "Say, do you mind if I ask what the doctor said was wrong with your sister?"

"Oh, she's got moods."

"Moods?" he asked.

"Yeah. You know, like, *moods*."

"Okay, well, Buspirone is a kind of anti-anxiety medicine. It calms people down by working with the dopamine system and serotonin receptors in the brain." He opened his mouth, shook his head, and closed his mouth. A moment later, he said, "But are you sure about this dosage? This is what your sister's doctor prescribed?"

"Yep."

The pharmacist took off his glasses and leaned over the counter. In a lowered voice, he said, "Has she taken this yet?"

"No, not yet. She's--well, she doesn't trust doctors all that much. I told her I'd check it out."

"Okay. Well, this is a pretty potent prescription for someone who has mood swings. Now I realize I don't know anything about your sister or her condition, but you probably want to see about getting a second opinion. I really can't--it would be very odd to see this prescribed like this, that's all I'm saying."

I took the paper back, thanked him for his candor, and left.

The most recent PDA threw around words like *psychotropic*, *anxiolytic*, and *azaspirodecanedione*, but the gist of it was simple enough: the prescribed dosage was way too high. Twenty milligrams was considered relatively safe, incurring minimal psychomotor interruption, but Mengowitz had prescribed 20mg three times per day. That kind of dosage would have kept a girl Angelica's age nice and calm, so calm she wouldn't have minded all the drool running out of her mouth.

A search for Ernesto Mengowitz's credentials proved even more interesting. The only Mengowitz any licensing board in the country had on record was a New York-licensed family physician who died in 1972. No other records of an Ernesto Mengowitz in any state existed.

I called Quints at his office that afternoon.

"You have good news for me, I hope," he said. "You've found my daughter?"

I took a deep breath and tried to keep my voice as even as possible. "Not yet, no, and it doesn't look like I'm going to. I've got a source who says she got on a bus three or four days ago. He seems fairly reliable, so I'm looking into possible destinations. Nothing concrete yet, though." There was silence on the line for several seconds. "Hello?"

"She—you're sure about this?" Quints asked.

"Pretty sure. I'll keep looking, but I think I may have lost her."

Quints sighed. "Please see if you can track down where she went. I will, of course, pay you however long it takes."

"Don't worry about that. I'm finding the case intriguing, so I don't mind staying on a little bit longer. I just wish I had a little more to go on."

"I'm sure you're doing everything in your power. Let me know what you find out."

As I replaced the receiver, I had the feeling that whatever I was about to find out, Quints already knew.

II. Angelica (Sex and Death)

Virginia called around six and told me she was running a little late. I ignored the muffled sounds in the background as best I could, and waited until after nine before going to her room. Before I could knock, though, the door swung open and I collided with a short, well-dressed man. His hair was sticking up in several places and there were red splotches around his neck. I offered to help him off the ground, but he pushed my hand away and struggled to his feet. "Enjoy your evening?" I asked. He scowled and limped away.

Virginia came to the door in her bathrobe. "Sorry I'm running a little late. He took longer than usual."

"A regular?" I asked.

"Yeah. He likes the domineering schoolgirl shtick."

"You really go all out, don't you?"

"I believe if I'm going to do a job, I should do it right." Virginia winked, turned, and let her robe fall to the floor behind her as she walked into the bathroom.

"You really go all out," I said as she shut the door.

I sat down on the edge of the bed to wait for her, but I couldn't help thinking about what went on in it over the past couple hours. I opened a window and rested on the inner

ledge, breathing in the chilly air. Off in the distance, tiny clouds were lit up with lightning bolts. The storm was still a few hours away, at least, but it was going to be heavy.

"Ready to go?" Virginia asked.

"That was fast," I said. I turned to see her wearing a tight red chiffon cocktail dress with a tapered skirt and thin shoulder straps. For a minute, I forgot I was working. "You look good. Looks like rain, though. Are you sure you want to wear—you know, never mind. You look very—elegant."

"Thanks, but this isn't a date. You don't need to fawn."

"I take it that means I won't be getting lucky at the end of the night."

She smiled. "I never said that."

We drove downtown, where she had me park in front of *Troy's Maggot*, a bar for those who enjoyed the smell of vomit and the crunch of peanut shells underfoot. She took my hand with a half-smile and led me past a group of tattoo-laden men with broad shoulders and thick bodies clad in black leather. Several of them whistled at her, and she gave them a sly flip of her hair. We walked through a small doorway next to a jukebox, down a long, narrow hallway, until we came to a closed door, where she turned to face me, our bodies much closer than I was comfortable with. She touched the side of my face, then turned to the door and gave three sharp raps. An electronic voice coming from a

speaker behind us asked for the password. "Frank Chambers sent me," Virginia said. There was the clap of a large lock being released, and the voice told us to proceed.

I pulled the door open, and before us stretched the longest unbroken staircase I had ever seen. The bottom was just barely visible from where we stood. Running along one side of the passageway were thick, rusting pipes and bundles of cable. The lights overhead pulsed slowly. A constant dripping of water could be heard, as well as the faintest hints of music. Several people, dressed in everything from black leather jackets to sport coats, leaned up against the walls, smoking cigarettes and watching the two of us as we squeezed past them. The further we went, the louder and more defined the music became. It was techno, with plenty of emphasis on the bass and percussion lines. The air gradually became heavier, and a slight haze appeared around our legs. At the bottom, a muscular man with a shaven head and large teeth slumped on a wooden stool, his chin resting on his fist, guarding the door beyond.

"Alan?" Virginia said. He didn't move. "Alan?" She reached out and touched his shoulder.

"I asked you not to call me that," he said, still unmoving. "It's Brutus now."

"Okay, Brutus, can you let us in?"

Alan—or Brutus—slid off his stool and once risen to his full height stood almost half a foot taller than me. He took

a step forward, leaned down so that his face was nearly touching my own, and squinted. "Who the hell are you?"

"He's with me," Virginia said.

"Is he?" He continued looking at me. "He looks like he's going to be a problem."

"Just open the door," I said.

He grinned and, with a grunt, he pulled the door open. A thick cloud of smoke floated into the stairway. Virginia took my hand and led me through the entrance.

The room was large but cramped. A red-carpeted path ran down the center, leading from the door we had just come through to a stage with two thick poles, one near either side. Midway down the path, a second path cut across, running from a deejay booth near the left wall to a bar set against the right wall. In the four quadrants these paths divided the room into were crammed tiny tables, each with a small globe-shaped candleholder in the center and two small chairs facing towards the stage. In the wall on either side of the deejay booth were a series of narrow recesses, each with a padded ledge about a foot deep. Tubes of constantly changing neon lights lined the outside of the deejay booth, the bar overhang, and the edge of the stage. A thick cloud of smoke clung to the ceiling. Speakers pumped techno music at high volumes from each of the darkened corners. The deejay, his head just visible in his booth, shook his head to the beat. Most of the tables were occupied by men sweating around their cigarette stubs. Women in thongs and

novelty bras walked along the carpeted paths in high heels, carrying trays filled with drinks. On the stage, a young woman who couldn't have been more than eighteen was busy wrapping her thin legs around the leftmost pole and climbing it upside down. On the bar overhang, written in Day-Glo pink paint, were the words *Club Elsinore*.

We found an empty table near the bar, sat down, and ordered drinks from a brunette with small breasts: a dry martini with two olives for Virginia and a bourbon on the rocks for me. We sat in silence. Virginia appeared to be enjoying the show, and I kept to my drink.

A short, thin man in a dark suit walked up the table. In an unusually high voice, he introduced himself as Nicolas, a buyer of souls. At first, I laughed, thinking it was a joke, but when he asked what I was laughing at, I realized he was serious. Judging from his mannerisms, the way he pursed his thin lips and held his hands together like an undertaker, he was very serious. I asked him what a buyer of souls was, and he removed a slim notebook from inside his sport jacket. He opened to a bookmarked page and handed it to me: *I, the undersigned, do hereby relinquish all claims, explicit and implied, to my eternal soul and do transfer said claims to the care of Nicolas Chikovsky. I understand that in relinquishing my soul I also relinquish all rights, explicit or implied, physical or metaphysical, to my eternal soul and transfer said rights to the care of Nicolas Chikovsky. I furthermore agree that I enter this contract of*

my own free will. Beneath this were four lines, two for the buyer's name, printed and signed, and two for the seller's. When I asked what he was offering in exchange, he said the next round of drinks would be on him. I laughed and handed the notebook back. He returned it to his coat pocket, nodded his head, and walked off to another table.

"Don't mind him," Virginia said. "He came to town a couple of months ago, and he's been buying souls ever since. I think he sells them online."

The woman on stage finished her dance, gathered up the clothing she had removed and the dollar bills that had been flung at her, and walked off stage. Another woman, this one almost painfully thin, took the stage and began her routine as a new song began. She started off slow, gyrating her hips and running her hands all over her body, but as the music intensified, so did her gyrations, her hips working against her legs and forcing her body into positions that were more masochistic than erotic. She collapsed to the floor, her legs bent beneath her, and then lifted her pelvis, arching her back and slowly raising her torso, her head hanging back. Her hands caressed her thighs, her hips, and then her flat stomach, and finally she seized her breasts and snapped her head forward, her face twisted into a grimace of pleasure. She tore off her bra and thrust her chest forward. The crowd surged, their cheers temporarily overwhelming the music. On her knees, she coyly fondled herself with closed eyes and a smile. Moving lithely to her feet, she hunched

down with her knees together and ran a hand down between her legs. The crowd roared. Her legs spread to reveal her hand on the inside of her thong teasing herself. Her legs closed back together as she feigned embarrassment, then she spread them again and resumed her playing with more intensity, her face a mask of pleasure and agony. She leaned back until she was lying on the floor and pointed her legs toward the ceiling. In one swift motion, she removed her thong and gave the crowd what it wanted. They cheered and tossed crumpled bills at her. She fell forward into a sitting position, her head tilted back, and stretched her legs out to either side, exposing herself further.

Virginia tapped her hands together lightly.

"Marvelous," she said. "Simply marvelous. What beauty. What poise. What grace."

"Not a big fan, I take it?"

She snickered and signaled for another drink. "I don't like liars, and this"—she gestured towards the stage—"is lying of the worst kind."

"Lying?"

"Daddy's little girl as a nymphomaniac. A virgin and a whore. If someone wants to sell sex, then they should sell sex, not the idea of sex." She ate one of the olives, stirring her drink slowly as she chewed.

"Like you," I said.

She stopped stirring, and lifted the other olive to her face. She stared at it, her lips pursed. A bead of gin ran

down the side, down the toothpick, and came to rest at the corner of her thumbnail. "I like sex. I like it, and I am very, very good at it. Now, if these little girls aren't any good at it, fine, but they should stop pretending to be."

"Some people don't come to these places for sex, you know."

She looked at me with a raised brow. "Then what? Intimacy?"

"Point taken."

"Sex is not a bad thing. It's not something I should be made to feel guilty about."

"Do you feel guilty about what you do?"

"I love what I do."

"Then what—"

But I didn't get a chance to finish. The music had stopped and the stage was empty. Suddenly, there was a loud popping coming from the speakers. I looked over at the deejay booth to find him tapping the microphone.

"Testing," he said over the speakers. "Testing. Can you horny bastards hear me? Good. Then sit down and shut the fuck up! We've got a special treat for you tonight, and you greasy shits won't want to miss this. Are you ready?" There was scattered applause. "I said, are you motherfuckers ready for this?" The applause was louder. The crowd wanted fresh meat. "All right, then. Ladies and gentlemen, Club Elsinore is proud to give you the very lovely, very tempting, very dangerous Sherri Baby."

Surprisingly, no one clapped. In fact, there was no sound at all. Those who had been whooping and hollering only moments earlier were now completely still. I looked at Virginia, who nodded, a slight smile touching the corners of her mouth.

And then there she was. Angelica Quints, standing not much more than five-foot-five, stared out at the crowd with a deliberately vacant expression.

When the music started, I thought there was something wrong with the sound system. The first several seconds were nothing but a series of layered drones played with varying frequencies. Then came a soft pop, as though someone had squeezed a plastic sandwich bag full of air, followed by the main notes of the piano section. Beneath the piano was a constant drone, like the sound of electricity grafted onto the sound of a breeze. Every so often, bells could be heard. It was simple, with only slight changes to what little melody there was, but the overall sound was horrible. What I heard sounded less like actual music and more like the mauled remnants of music. The reverberations sat at the forefront of the mix, as if I was listening to noises echoing through a very long steel pipe.

Angelica's performance was a beautiful contrast to the noise. A ballet, not a striptease, her body acting and reacting to each motion. She let her slip fall, and the material seemed to billow outwards in slow motion, each individual curve holding, however briefly, the lights that

shone down. Her thin legs, so smooth and finely sculpted, flowed from one position to the next without stopping or slowing, as if constant change was her most natural state. Her face, though, maintained the same blank expression throughout her routine, as though her mind had separated from her body, as though she knew what was coming. Near the end, she reached her arms toward the ceiling, tilted her head back, and let herself fall to the stage, but even this seemed fluid, as though she was a wave on the ocean, raised only to fall. The music faded into echoing echoes and she lay there, her chest rising and falling slowly.

All through her performance, the crowd remained silent, but at the end, they erupted with incredible ferocity. They stood in the aisles, shouted her name, pounded on tabletops, and pelted her with crumpled bills. A few even tried to climb onto the stage and touch her. She collected her clothing and tips, then exited through a side door guarded by a large black man. The crowd continued to rave, even as the deejay tried to calm them by offering an hour of discounted lap dances. Tables were overturned as the crowd became more frenzied. I motioned to Virginia that it was time to leave. As we made our way to the exit, I could hear glass shattering.

Outside in the cool night air, Virginia began laughing almost hysterically. "Holy shit! That was unbelievable! I need to figure out how to do that."

"I guess. Where's the other exit?"

"What other exit?" she asked.

"When Angelica left, she left through a side door near the stage. How would she exit the building from there?"

Virginia pointed towards an alley that ran alongside the bar. "Probably somewhere in there."

I gave her the keys to my car and told her to leave them at the front desk of the hotel. When I told her I was going to follow Angelica, she looked at me with narrowed eyes and asked, "Why?"

"Because this is what I was hired to do," I said.

There was a single door in the alley leading into the *Troy's Maggot/Club Elsinore* building. I hid in a darkened doorway in the opposite building, at one end of the alley, and waited. An hour passed, then another. Several women did come out the door, so I expected this would be the exit Angelica would use. Another hour passed. The temperature dropped and all I had was my sport jacket, which I wrapped tightly around me. Soon I was shivering and sniffing. I considered leaving and coming back another night, but I stayed, cold as I was, in that doorway, and waited.

Around one, it began to rain. Shortly after that, Angelica walked out the door and into the alley. Anyone who had seen her strip would have been hard-pressed to recognize her in the denim skirt and jacket she wore. Her hair was pinned up and a small purse hung from her left shoulder, but as she passed beneath the lamp that hung just over the doorway, I could see that same empty expression on her face.

She walked towards the north end of the alley, away from me, and I followed. She turned right onto Ashland Street and went eleven blocks, into the cardboard factory district. The rain was pouring down. Lighting bolts tore across the sky and illuminated the almost deserted streets. I followed a block or two behind her, just far enough to keep her in view, but as I trudged through the rain-slicked streets, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being followed. Every so often, a dark-hued car would roll past me, continue for a block or two, then turn and disappear. I couldn't be sure, but it seemed to be the same car each time. But by the time Angelica turned left at Mills Street, the car had vanished. I followed her another six blocks, to the very edge of town, where she went into a church. There was no sign outside indicating the denomination. My jacket was soaked through, and I was shivering all over, so I welcomed getting out of the rain, but I circled the building first to make sure she wasn't trying to give me the slip. There were only two exits, one in the very back, which was locked, and the main entrance. After waiting a few minutes, I stepped inside.

It was a church just like any other, with vaulted ceilings, pews, hymnals, stained glass windows, an altar covered with white cloth, a baptismal font, confessionals, and a tabernacle. A monstrance, turned sideways and surrounded by unlit white candles, stood on the altar. The thick, smoky scent of incense hung in the air. A flash of lighting, filtered through the colored glass of the windows,

cast long shadows from the numerous pillars, crosses, and statues.

I couldn't see Angelica from the back, so I moved closer to the altar, my wet shoes squeaking against the smooth tile floor. If she didn't know she was being followed, she at least knew she was not alone. Another flash of lighting came, and I could make out her profile seated near the front, her head bowed in prayer. I walked to the pew behind her and sat down. We sat there for a long time in silence. She never moved or gave any indication that she knew I was there. Finally, I leaned forward. "Angelica," I whispered. Nothing. "Angelica." Still nothing. "Angelica, your father sent me." Something was wrong, and even as I reached out to touch her shoulder, I knew what it was.

I turned her head towards me and saw a smoking hole in her forehead. A small amount of blood had trickled down into her right eye. But her expression was still blank, her eyes empty. Her mouth was not twisted with shock or fear.

There was a sharp hiss, and the back of the pew exploded into splinters. I threw myself to the floor. Another shot caught the cushion of the kneeler less than a foot from my face. Rapid footsteps retreated. I crawled to the opposite end of the pew and down the side aisle, moving as quickly and quietly as I could. One of the doors at the main entrance opened. I leapt to my feet and ran outside, realizing too late my error.

It felt like someone punched me hard in the shoulder. My entire arm burned, my vision blurred, and I collapsed to the wet cement. Somewhere far away, I heard a voice say, "Thank you."

* * * *

"What the hell were you doing bleeding all over the church steps?" The sheriff leaned over and stuck his face in mine.

Every muscle in my upper body felt like it was in a knot. I tried to sit up, but a wave of nausea forced me back down. A strong light shone in my eyes. "Where am I?" I asked.

"Cain Memorial. We picked you up off the front steps of Holy Trinity Church, which brings me back to my—"

"What about the girl?"

"What girl? You were alone when we found you."

"No, the girl in the church. There was a girl in the church."

"How are you feeling, Mr. Minos?" asked a doctor as he walked into the room.

"He's claiming he saw a girl in the church when he was shot," the sheriff said.

"That's not all that surprising," the doctor said. Then, to me: "You were in shock, Mr. Minos. Your mind is trying to cope with what happened."

"No," I said. "I was shot after I found her. She was shot, I found her, and then I was shot when I chased after the killer."

"You sure about that?" the doctor asked as he scribbled something down on my chart. "It's possible you're just confused. Trauma will do that."

"I'm not confused. There was a girl and she was dead and she was in the church!"

"There was no one else in or around the church," the sheriff said. "We checked. Don't think that just because you're in a hospital I won't rearrange your orifices if you don't stop dicking with me."

"Go back to the church. She's inside."

"My boys spent all night going over over every inch of that place. If there was another body, somebody would have tripped over it."

"I followed her into the church where someone killed her and then tried to kill me."

The sheriff put his arm around the doctor's shoulders and they walked off together. A moment later, the sheriff reentered the room and closed the door. He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Minos, I get that being shot is a terribly traumatic experience, one that probably will render you impotent for the remainder of your miserable life. I also realize that this is probably the most exciting thing that has ever happened to you, and you want there to be mystery and intrigue. But see, the problem with that is that I am trying to figure out what happened out there, and if you cannot—if you will not focus on the facts, then I cannot do

my job. And when I cannot do my job, I get cranky." He leaned in close. "Now, do you want me to get cranky?"

"I don't care if you believe me or not, but there was a girl in there."

"Okay, so where did she go? Why haven't we found any traces of her? No body, no blood, no fibers?"

"What about fingerprints?"

"In a church? No, we didn't find any fingerprints, none at all."

"Were there any places that looked like they had been wiped down?"

"Listen to me, Minos. Don't tell me how to do my job. You don't want to cooperate, fine. I could care less whether or not we find who shot you. I just thought you might like to know, but if not, I'll send my boys home. If you change your mind, stop by the station. Otherwise, I want your sorry ass out my town by this time tomorrow. I'm not wasting anymore of my time on you."

He left, and after a short consult with the doctor regarding the care of my now useless left arm, I left.

I must have been out of it for several hours, because when I left the hospital, the sun was shining and the streets were dry. The grass was still damp and water drops would fall from the trees whenever a strong breeze came, but there was little other evidence of the previous night's storm.

I called Quints from the hotel room, but all I got was his secretary saying he was in a meeting. I left a message for him to call me back ASAP.

The case was over. That much was certain. With Angelica dead, there were no more clues, no more leads. Whatever questions remained would never be answered. It was time to go home. Leave town, type up a full report, collect my check, and enjoy a good stiff drink. I went to the front desk and told Jorge I was checking out.

I needed to get out of town, fast. There was blood on my hands and the law was just looking for an excuse to kick my ass, and like an idiot, I'd given it to them. If I stayed, sooner or later, Angelica's body would turn up, and then they'd be all over me. Peter Quints would be pictured in the local paper as a grieving father who made the mistake of hiring a psychopath. I'd be pictured as a monster. Nothing I could say would be heard. Some young attorney would claim that the disappearance and reappearance of Angelica's body was an elaborate attempt to distance me from the crime. He'd point out that I admitted there was a body. He'd have a line of witnesses to confirm that I was looking for her: Bob, the Burgers-n-Bliss manager, maybe even Virginia. Everything would be circumstantial, and maybe a decent defense lawyer would be able to get me off, but I wasn't going to put myself through all that. It simply wasn't worth it. In the end, Quints would get away with it and I would be the only person who knew the truth.

I needed to leave. I could stop by my apartment, pack another bag, and then head out west. All I needed were some forged documents, and Quints' advance would cover those. A few calls and a brief stop in Chicago, and then I'd disappear. No more crazy cops, no more misguided whores, and no more rich bastards out to make me a sucker. I could get a job as a bartender in some sizeable city, rent an apartment in the projects, and forget about Vespers. And if Virginia hadn't knocked on my window at that very moment, that's where I would have been headed.

"Where are you going?" she asked, leaning down to speak through the car window. Her hair was down and she wasn't wearing any makeup.

"The case is over. Angelica's dead."

She brushed a lock of hair out of her face. "Really. What happened?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm leaving town."

"What are you going to tell her father?"

"I think her father's the one who had her killed."

She was silent for a minute. "What happened to your arm?"

"I got shot."

"You okay?"

"No. I'm getting out of here." I looked at her for a while before adding, "Come with me."

Her eyes were hard and her lips stiff. "What if I said I had something you might be interested in?"

She was serious, more serious than I'd ever seen her.

"What is it?" I asked.

"An address."

"Whose address?"

"Angelica's. Before I took the car back to the hotel, I went and found Angelo. After a little bit of pumping, he told me where she was staying. I thought you might want to know."

She drove, not because I wanted to make up for my latent misogyny but because I'd forgotten to take my Vicodin and my arm hurt like hell. We went over towards the cardboard factory district, stopping only a few blocks away, across the street from a public elementary school. The apartment complex was one of those clean-but-cheap places favored by college students and shut-ins, with plenty of foliage to offset the monotony of the concrete. Angelica lived in 3B, which faced away from the street. An oak tree stood outside her window, the vast majority of its leaves on the ground, brown and stiff. The door opened easily enough. The lock was old enough that a credit card was all I needed.

It was a typical three-room apartment: a main room with an attached kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. The bed was unmade and pieces of clothing were scattered on the floor, but there was no sign the place had been searched. Virginia stood in the doorway, hands on her hips, keeping an eye out for potential trouble, while I started going through everything, emptying drawers and overturning what little

furniture there was. I pulled off the bedding, pushed aside the mattress, and tore open the pillows. I emptied every bottle in her medicine cabinet. I rifled through every pocket in every piece of clothing. Nothing. I searched the stitching of the shower curtain and loose carpet corners. I knocked on every inch of every wall. But it wasn't until I opened the toilet tank that I found what I was looking for: a roll of 8mm film.

We found an functioning 8mm projector for sale at a pawn shop on Miami Street. We set up in Virginia's room, locked the door, turned off all the lights, and flipped the switch. The first minute or so of film showed a child's birthday party, presumably Angelica's fourth. Quints was there, along with a woman I assumed to be Angelica's mother. They gave her balloons and a few presents. Angelica tore the brightly colored wrapping paper apart to reveal a Raggedy Ann doll, which she hugged tight, her pigtails swinging from side to side. Then came the cake. Angelica had to try three times to blow out all the candles, but when she finally succeeded, she jumped up and down and clapped her hands together. Virginia laughed the way only women can laugh at children behaving like children.

If only the film had ended there.

The rest of the film, all twenty-nine minutes of it, detailed the exact reason why Angelica had run away and why Quints hadn't wanted to involve the police. I sat and watched the whole thing, the pain in my arm forgotten.

Virginia only watched the first few minutes, all the while muttering to herself, before getting up and locking herself in the bathroom. She was the smart one.

When it was over, I sat watching the wall and listening to the rapid tapping of the end of the film against the projector body. I knocked on the bathroom door and asked Virginia to let me in, and when she did, I found her sitting on the floor, her knees pulled up against her chest. Her eyeliner was running down her cheeks in thin, black lines. She looked at me, her eyes glassy and her nose wet, and said, "I should've stayed in bed." I could have put my arms around her. I could have held her close and kissed her and told her everything would be all right, but that would have been a lie. I sat down next to her and shook my head. She leaned her head on my shoulder and shuddered. She fell asleep like that, and I sat listening to the sounds of our breathing.

III. Quints (The Devil in the Tower) - Outline

The chapter begins the following morning, with Minos eating breakfast—"strong, black coffee, an egg-white omelet with nothing in it, the house grits, and some grapefruit juice"—and reading the newspaper. Two articles in particular catch his eye: the front page story about two boys—one eleven years old, the other twelve—who attacked a mentally disadvantaged boy of fifteen by sticking a lit firecracker down his pants; the second article, in the entertainment section, talks about heiress, socialite, and "It Girl" of the moment London Sears' new book about the "trials and tribulations of looking fabulous and being rich in America." Minos also notices that Angelo's ad looking for people seeking quick money has reappeared. Finally, he reads his horoscope: "A bad moon hangs over your affairs. Take care to resolve disputes quickly."

Minos uses a phone in the lobby—"because it was too damn loud in the restaurant"—to call Peter Quints. Quints doesn't let on that he knows Angelica is dead, and Minos says he is ready to deliver his final report. When asked point blank if he found Angelica, Minos flatly says "No." They agree to meet at the Quints' estate that evening so

that Minos can deliver his report in person and collect his payment.

Back at Virginia's room, Minos notices a broken windowpane and finds Virginia sitting against the bathtub in her robe, a hand clutched to her left shoulder, "her eyes wet and her breathing hard and shallow." She is bleeding from a bullet wound and muttering "It won't stop bleeding, I can't make it stop" over and over. Minos calls 911. The paramedics arrive, along with the police. Sheriff Chevalier immediately assumes Minos is to blame and places him under arrest.

At the police station, Chevalier grills Minos and demands he confess. Minos tries angrily rationalizing with the sheriff, but it's not until a deputy informs Chevalier that A) several people confirm having seen Minos in the restaurant when the shooting took place, and B) several people confirm seeing a man with a gun, who ran off when they shouted at him, in the parking lot, that the sheriff lets Minos go. He is still convinced Minos knows more than he is saying, and Minos finally gives in and explains the case. He doesn't mention specific names or the film, but he does give the sheriff a more or less full account of the case and his conclusions.

Minos and Chevalier return to the hotel and discuss the shooting with the officers working the scene. They find several American Spirit cigarette butts in the parking lot directly outside Virginia's window, along with recent tread

marks leading away from the area. Minos suggests that the shooter was startled and missed his shot when he was spotted, and fled without finishing the job. The deputy says the people who saw him couldn't confirm that he did shoot, only that they saw him aiming a gun. The sheriff gets a call and tells Minos Virginia is out of surgery. Before they leave, the sheriff apologizes to Minos for his rash behavior—"You're not so bad for a dick." Minos tells him not to get sentimental.

At the hospital, Virginia gives her account of the shooting. She opened the curtains to let some light into the room and proceeded to take a shower. When she came back out of the bathroom, she heard someone shouting, turned towards the window, and was shot in the shoulder. She crawled back into the bathroom and stayed there until Minos arrived. He recalls no shots beyond the one that hit her being fired. Chevalier leaves. Virginia asks if her being shot has anything to do with the case. Minos replies that he is going to find out.

Minos stops at a pawnshop on the way out of town. He haggles with the owner over the waiting period and finally agrees to pay two hundred over the price of the weapon in order to skip the waiting period.

Minos arrives in Chicago shortly after dark and heads straight for the Quints Estate. He finds the front unlocked and enters the mansion with his gun drawn. Norris is nowhere to be seen. Minos searches through each room, finally

finding Quints in the study, standing behind a large wooden desk with his back to Minos. When Quints turns around, Minos immediately shoots him in the chest. Quints, who is holding a glass tumbler and a bottle of bourbon, collapses into his desk chair. Minos demands an explanation, which Quints provides.

When Angelica ran away, she took the film of her father raping her as insurance. Quints dispatched a man to locate his daughter and reclaim the film. Angelica was not to be harmed. The man failed in his mission, and shortly after he left, Angelica called Quints to let him know that she had no intention of using the film against him provided that he left her alone. Quints' associates, however, refused to accept this and insisted Quints dispatch someone else to locate her and the film. They saw Angelica as an unchecked threat to the group. At this point, Quints hired Minos. Unbeknownst to Quints at the time, the group dispatched their own man to follow Minos and, should Minos find Angelica, kill her. It was believed that with Angelica dead, the tape would become useless, as there was no way of knowing where it came from or who the man in it was. Minos, however, in finding the tape, became a threat to the group. Killing Minos was out of the question, though, as any investigation into Minos' death would lead back to Quints. The man sent out was therefore supposed to kill Virginia and frame Minos for her death, therefore entangling Minos in the legal system and rendering him powerless to pursue the case

any further. But the assassin's screw-up has left both Minos and Virginia alive and the only remaining threat to the group.

Minos connects the film, Quints' "industrial training films," and the group together. When he asks about the group, Quints laughs and says that it doesn't matter, because there is no evidence beyond the tape. Quints says the case is over and indicates a briefcase containing \$50,000 and an extra "gift" for Minos. The gift is a videocassette that shows a tall, thick, bald man talking with Quints. On the tape, Quints pulls out a gun and shoots the man several times at close range. Quints tells Minos that it was the least he could do and that whatever Minos may think of him, Quints really did want his daughter to be left alone. Minos opens the briefcase and counts out what he is owed. Quints asks Minos to give Angelica a proper burial, if he ever finds her body. Minos agrees and then empties the clip into Quints' chest, killing him.

Minos returns to Vespers. The case is over.

Afterword

In The Beginning Was The Word

The thing that strikes me hardest about the present work is how innocently it began. I won't say I never once giggled over my own genius, but by and large, the creation of *The Fool* was a quiet experience. Unlike most of my earlier writings, *The Fool* was never about making a point. I wanted to tell a story, a fun story, something that could be read on a beach during summer by bikini-clad women. Yes, the story is bleak, and in some ways, despite its quiet beginnings, it became as disturbing to write as, I hope, it is to read. But is *The Big Sleep* a Disneyland ride? Is *The Postman Always Rings Twice* the pulp equivalent of cotton candy? Of course not. They are, beneath their highly stylized presentation, tales of extreme debauchery, corruption, and misanthropy: terrible people doing terrible things to one another. But this makes for a thoroughly entertaining story.

There are two camps when it comes to creative writing. One believes good writing is writing that, in the great booming voice of a god, Says Something, like Bret Easton Ellis' almost unreadable *American Psycho* and Thomas Pynchon's chaotic *Gravity's Rainbow*. The second camp believes that good writing entertains, that it strives,

above all else, to please its readers. Stephen King falls into this camp, as do the pulp crime novelists of the thirties and forties and most current mystery writers. There is nothing inherently wrong with either stance, but there is always the danger of going too far. *American Psycho* succeeds as a satire; indeed, it may be one of the great satires of our time. But as a novel, it is a complete and utter failure. If a reader does not enter Ellis' book already knowing how to read it, then he or she will find little more than a fifteen-dollar clothing catalog. However, one glance at the sheer size of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is evidence enough that the problem goes both ways. Wallace, despite having a few inspired passages, is so in love with making his audience laugh that the story never goes anywhere. For almost a thousand pages—plus a hundred more of footnotes—the narrative meanders from one screwball situation to the next without any sense of unity. It is funny, in parts, but humor is limited in its power to entertain the reader.

The writers I most admire are those nomads who sleep alone somewhere between the two camps. James Joyce could balance entertainment value and intelligence—even if you don't like *Ulysses*, you can still laugh at parts of it. Shirley Jackson could do it, too. Jorge Luis Borges. Ambrose Bierce. Ursula K. Le Guin. Franz Kafka. Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Even J. R. R. Tolkien, regardless of what you may think of the fantasy genre, was able to tell an intelligent,

engaging story. These writers never want their audiences to feel stupid. They want their audiences to enjoy their works, and if the works cause the audiences to ponder bigger questions, so much the better. But these writers never talk down to their audiences. They never sacrifice entertainment value for intelligence or vice versa.

"But how is this miracle to be achieved?" you ask, with a hint of defiance in your voice.

Raymond Carver suggests that to write is to lay down "one line and then the next, and the next" (1527), and I couldn't agree more. Writing is difficult. Writing is taxing. Writing demands much of the writer, and the only way for the writer to succeed is to build his or her story piece by piece. The problem, though, is that those pieces are expected to add up to something. To Carver's advice, then, I add that a writer had better have an idea of what he or she wants the finished product to look like. While doodling will occasionally yield interesting results, giving serious thought to any project before formally beginning almost always saves the writer major hair loss.

Long before I wrote the first line of *The Fool*, vague notions of the story had been percolating, the earliest going back almost a decade to a magazine article written during the mid nineties discussing the availability of child pornography on the Internet. The article stayed with me all these years for its central premise: through the advent and mainstreaming of the Internet, what was once limited to the

extremely black market is now available to anyone anywhere with a computer and a modem. Even as a teenager, I remember wondering what kind of sick individuals would use such a wonderful new tool—yes, I really was that naïve—for such depraved purposes. I found an answer to that question five years later, when I finally read *American Psycho*.

American Psycho's analysis of spiritually void, materialist people living in New York City is frightening, despite the novel's languid pacing and non-existent plot. The very idea that there exist people so disconnected from any sense of identity or purpose that they can torture, rape, and murder with complete insouciance is enough to make even the most callous shiver. Certainly, these people were the kind trafficking child pornography over the Internet. The problem with Ellis' protagonist, though, is that he lacks the drive to actually do anything; he most definitely would think about trafficking child pornography, but he wouldn't do it.

This left me with a rough character sketch and the beginnings of a story. However, I didn't want a story that polarized good and bad. I didn't want to write about a pornographer as a symbol of pure, unadulterated evil. The crime itself was to be heinous enough; no one would argue about its nature. But I wanted a character who couldn't be so easily dismissed. I wanted someone who could be, if not sympathized with, then at least defended. The best way of doing that, I felt, was by removing the story from the

crime, and the best way of doing that was by writing a detective story.

The center—if there is such a thing—of many detective stories is a past crime that is only understood by interpreting the present as a result of the past. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, for example, uses as its "crime" the premise that Aristotle wrote a second book of his *Poetics* about comedy. While many would consider such a work to be an important historical and philosophical find, Brother Jorge of Burgos believes the idea that laughter is permissible, even healthy, to be heretical, as nowhere in the Bible does it say Jesus ever laughed. Brother Jorge therefore begins poisoning certain monks who display what he considers inappropriate inclinations: fanciful imaginings, a sense of humor, a loose tongue, and curiosity. While the deaths that comprise the mystery of the story are set entirely in the novel's present, the original crime, the origin of all that occurs, was the writing of a book one thousand years earlier. This, however, leads to a trait common in detective fiction: the crime tends to get lost in the action of the story. In a novel of five hundred pages, only about twenty of those pages deal with the actual crime; the rest are divided among religious debates, prayer services, and an investigation of the monks' deaths. These crimes, however, are intimately connected to the original crime, in that they are the horrible consequences of Aristotle's lost book.

But what was my story's original crime? What horrible thing happened to set events in motion? I considered a murder, but murders are loud and messy. I wanted something quiet, something subtle, something not immediately recognizable as a transgression: I needed someone to disappear, a daughter perhaps. Having her run away from home was a natural decision, as it neatly provided me with both a victim and a distant crime. But this was merely a catalyst for the events of the story, not a source. What would cause a teenager girl to run away from home? It had to be something dark, something sinister: a long-held family secret that the daughter could no longer abide. And then I had it: the father raped the daughter. It was perfect in every way, a crime sufficiently removed from the present of the story that when finally revealed it would shock everyone involved.

All that remained was to figure out who the principle players were.

Portraits Of Interesting And Dangerous People

Peter Quints, the villain of the story, was the first character to be completely fleshed out in my head. I always knew that the villain had to be an active participant in the original crime, that there could be no confusion regarding his culpability. As I have mentioned, though, I also wanted him to be an enigmatic character. By the end of the story, I wanted my readers to be conflicted over who he was: a

monster or just a failure as a father? This was important to me because much detective and crime fiction focuses on decidedly bad people. The novels of James Ellroy and Elmore Leonard are filled with evil characters wholly lacking any substance. They exist simply as evil; their only definition is the fact that they are bad people who do bad things. They are little more than cardboard cutouts. That is not to say I wanted Quints to achieve a kind of apotheosis, but I did want him to be more defined than his namesake, the child-molesting adulterer in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*.

Much of the inspiration for Quints' character came from Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. Like Quints, Kurtz is a character who has committed some deplorable acts and must be punished for them, and both Quints and Kurtz welcome their deaths. The difference between the two is that Kurtz wants to die because he has lost his faith. He is a soldier who has pledged his loyalty to a cause and he believes his superiors have betrayed that cause and, in the process, betrayed him. His horrific acts are not the products of madness, but a kind of sick indifference. He is a soldier, and if his superiors take that away from him, he will be left with nothing. Therefore, death is seen as the only way out. Quints, on the other hand, welcomes death as a punishment. He deeply regrets his actions and wants his daughter to escape from the nightmare he has created. He has subjected his daughter to terrible things. Worse, he himself is unable or unwilling to do anything against those who

would perpetuate his actions. Quints' associates, through the worldwide distribution of child pornography, encourage others to act like Quints. They also would have kept Angelica trapped in a never-ending cycle of abuse, had she not run away. In the end, though, Quints recognizes that he is as responsible for Angelica's death as the man who actually shot her. His idea of redemption is to impart some of what he knows to a third party and then die. His death, then, is a symbolic gesture, but I leave the reader to decide how powerful a gesture.

Michael Minos was the hardest character to create. Throughout the drafts, I was constantly retooling his personality and trying to give him a strong sense of identity beyond the standard genre conventions that say a detective must be an avenging angel in a world of opportunistic devils. I knew that he had to play the role of the fool. All detectives are fools. They always know less than everyone else, they are always getting beaten up without putting up a fight, they are always at odds with the police, and they always seem to get stiffed on the bill. However, I wanted to take things further. Rather than have Minos be a cynical, jaded detective, I wanted him to be somewhat naïve. He is a smart character, at times even clever, but he is also somewhat uneasy throughout the story. Certain situations make him uncomfortable, and he resorts to humor as a way of compensating. In this way, I wanted Minos to act as a stand-in for the reader. His reactions are what

I believe would be the reactions of most people were they in his shoes. When the reader is tense, Minos makes a joke. When the reader is disturbed, Minos sulks. He is less the idealized detective of Chandler and Hammett and more an average person.

Virginia was created in part out of loyalty to genre conventions: in every good detective story, there is a femme fatale. The Sternwood sisters in *The Big Sleep*. Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*. Virginia is not a traditional femme fatale, though, as she does not lead anyone to his downfall. She is not overtly dangerous. Virginia is the kind of woman who knows what she is good at and uses it to her advantage. She is not out to harm anyone, but she does wield her sexuality in a disarming way. If she can get under a person's skin, she will, not to be malicious, but to make it clear that she can. She will lead a man to the edge of a cliff, kiss him as he starts to fall, then pull him back up and lead him elsewhere. For Virginia, seduction is a game, and part of her charm is that she causes Minos to lust after her in an almost adolescent way.

More important, though, is that Virginia provides a foil for Angelica. Whereas Angelica was forced into a terrible situation, Virginia chose her lifestyle. Both are viewed as sexual objects, but Virginia refuses to be just an object. Her sexuality is something she enjoys. It is a source of empowerment for her, whereas it is a source of misery for Angelica. Through Virginia, I wanted to look at

the line between pain and pleasure and ask the reader to decide how valid the difference between the two characters is.

What Is Needed

According to some, this is how a creative work should begin:

"*The sun had not yet risen*" (Woolf 7).

"The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation" (Tartt 3).

"Tyler gets me a job as a waiter, after that Tyler's pushing a gun in my mouth and saying, the first step to eternal life is you have to die" (Palahniuk 11).

"People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (Ellis 9).

Of course, there have always been those authors who choose a different approach:

"The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest" (Conrad 7).

"Christmas Eve, 1955, Benny Profane, wearing black levis, suede jacket, sneakers and big cowboy hat, happened to pass through Norfolk, Virginia" (Pynchon 1).

"Sam Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth" (Hammett 3).

For what it is worth, *The Fool* begins with the words "It was early, much earlier than I would have liked, when I

arrived at 1600 Carbonek Avenue, a massive mansion-and-garden set belonging to a reclusive millionaire who had supposedly made his fortune producing independent films." It is a functional beginning, a beginning designed to set the stage and drop the reader immediately into the situation. It is not a beginning designed to grab hold of the reader. That is for the rest of the story to do. I have always distrusted those writers who claim the first line must be brilliant, a powerful and moving anecdote encapsulating theme, motif, and situation, lest the reader stop reading. Placing so much stock in the magical properties of a single line seems excessive. After all, the first line is simply where and how the author chose to drop the reader into the story.

Writing is a complicated act, though, and deciding how to write something is almost as difficult as the actual writing. There was a time when all I could read was incredibly large, complicated novels. Short stories, all of them, were not deep or intricate enough for me, not because they were actually lacking in depth, but because I came to believe that size matters. The heavier a work, the better. I would spend every free moment reading these behemoths, going through one usually in the span of a week, maybe two if my life was particularly busy at the time. Because of this fetish, I wanted to write huge, sprawling epics. Nowadays, though, I shudder at the thought of committing the necessary time to reading a thick novel. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* took me almost three months to finish, and though I

enjoyed it immensely, I have no desire to go back through it. Even John Fowles' *The Magus*, perhaps my second favorite novel, gives me pause: at over six hundred pages, do I really want to invest the time in it? Part of the problem may be that I'm reading more slowly today than I was six years ago. That happens in graduate school; a person learns to become a more careful reader. But the major problem, as I see it, is that life has gotten busier, faster. I'm reminded of James Gleick's description of "[t]he DOOR CLOSE button in elevators, so often a placebo, with no function but to distract for a moment those riders to whom ten seconds seems an eternity" (9). It seems absurd, but as a member of the so-called MTV Generation, I have come to accept that I have an obsession with time. I prefer things quick and to the point. I prefer *USA Today* to *The New York Times*, Pinter to Shakespeare, and Borges to Trollope. I still enjoy thinking about art and musing over its meaning, and I certainly do not like things to be oversimplified, but I'd rather not spend precious days, weeks, or months fighting through a story.

During my senior year of high school, my English instructor told me that in a good writer's works, nothing is insignificant. *The Fool* was written and revised so that what was needed was included and whatever wasn't needed was excluded. The first complete draft was significantly longer than the present volume, including a rough-very rough-draft of the final chapter and almost twenty pages of material

that needed to be cut. Those twenty pages were interesting to me and parts were well written, but they dealt with details and additional information that were simply unnecessary. Not only does having the protagonist think about the case on every other page violate detective fiction conventions, it also slows down the story. And paragraphs like the following add nothing to the plot:

Vespers at night was an entirely different town, the polish having worn off to reveal something decrepit. The streets, formerly so clean and solid, seemed saturated with water and reflected the exaggerated images of street-lamps. Trees that had been attractive background elements suddenly sprang forward, much larger, with thick, bare, twisting branches. Doors and windows were covered in darkness. The moon, waned down to a scarcely noticeable sliver, cast only the most negligible amount of light. A thick, gray mist, fattened by the headlight beams, clung to the ground. The occasional breeze would blow the autumn's dried leaves across the pavement. A few people shuffled listlessly down the sidewalks, their heads bowed and shoulders slumped forward. There were no sounds, not even the cicadas' constant drones.

It's not a bad paragraph, but it has no function in the story. It is, as my thesis director pointed out, "Halloweenesque scary stuff." I fought him on this paragraph, and it wasn't until the final draft that it became the last major cut to the story. My initial thinking was that it

established a surreal mood and gave the town a certain menace. Subsequent thinking centered around "It's my paragraph, I like it, and I won't let you take it away!" And that is only natural. Writing is a deeply personal and egotistical act. I invested time and energy in that paragraph, and cutting it was painful. But the facts spoke for themselves: as I read through the final draft, I realized that paragraph was one of two that stuck out like a sore thumb. It had to go.

As for the other conspicuous paragraph, it still exists in the present volume, but unlike "Vespers at night..." it addresses a situation in the best possible way. It stands out because it needs to stand out in order to impact the reader. Besides, it's my paragraph, I like it, and I won't let you take it away!

A Brief Note On Things Yet To Come

Two things need to be said regarding the outline for Chapter 3 which concludes the present work. First, I was facing a deadline. Drafting a story of any length is a long, exhausting endeavor, revision even more so, and it was almost the end of October before I was finished with the draft now in your hands. Taking into consideration the fact that I still needed to write this afterword, formally defend my thesis, and file the manuscript, I felt there simply was not the time to write and polish another chapter. When I write, I want to write to the best of my abilities, and

under such time constraints, I worried that my writing would suffer, which wouldn't have been fair to either my readers or my story. Therefore, I chose to outline the events of Chapter 3, so that the reader who wishes to can find the answers he or she seeks.

That said, I must remind my readers that nothing in this world is certain. The outline represents, to the best of my knowledge, the course of events for the rest of the story. But things don't always work out the way we plan them, and when it is finally written, the third chapter may be radically different from the outline I've included here. Writing is a process, an exploration of ideas, and sometimes when we round a corner, we find something we weren't expecting.

A writer should never apologize for his or her work. It is what it is, and nothing more.

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