The Book of Air and Shadows

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Extract

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Tap-tapping the keys and out come the words on this little screen, and who will read them I hardly know. I could be dead by the time anyone actually sees this, as dead as, say, Tolstoy. Or Shakespeare. Does it matter, when you read, if the person who wrote still lives? It sort of does, I think. If you read something by a living writer, you could, at least in theory, dash off a letter, establish a relationship maybe. I think a lot of readers feel this way. Some readers write to fictional characters as well, which is a little spookier.

But clearly I am not dead yet, although this could change at any moment, one reason why I'm writing this down. It's a fact of writing that the writer never knows the fate of the text he's grinding out, paper being good for so many uses other than displaying words in ordered array, nor are the tiny electromagnetic charges I am creating on this laptop machine immune to the insults of time. Bracegirdle is definitely dead, having succumbed to wounds received at the Battle of Edgehill in the English Civil War, sometime in late October of 1642. We think. But dead nevertheless, although before dying he composed the fifty-two-page manuscript that

has more or less screwed up my life, or killed me, I don't know which yet. Or maybe the little professor was more to blame, Andrew Bulstrode, because he dropped the thing in my lap and then got himself murdered, or I could blame Mickey Haas, my old college roomie, who turned Bulstrode on to me. Mickey's still alive as far as I know, or the girl, the woman I should say, she has to carry some freight for this, because I seriously doubt I would have plunged as I did if I had not spied her long white neck rising from her collar there in the Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room of the New York Public Library, and wanted to kiss it so much it made my jaw hurt.

And Albert Crosetti and his unusual mom and his even more remarkable girlfriend, Carolyn, if girlfriend she is, all discoverers, and explicators, and decipherers, of Bracegirdle, my nemesis, without whom . . .

I don't forget the actual villains, but I can't really *blame* them. Villains are just there, like rust, dull and almost chemical in the stupid simplicity of their greed or pride. Remarkable how easy it is to avoid these, how often we fail to do so. Not to mention Mary, Queen of Scots (speaking of stupid), one more conspiracy added to her score, even if all she did in this case was to exist. Naturally, I blame my dad, the old crook. And why not? I blame him for everything else.

I see I am not doing this right. Okay, regain focus, at least array the facts, and begin by identifying the writer, me, Jake Mishkin, by profession an intellectual property lawyer. I believe that some gangsters may in the near future attempt to kill me. Although there is a kind of lawyer who can reasonably expect a certain level of physical danger as part of the employment picture, I am not that kind of lawyer – by design, actually. In my youth, I was familiar enough with such lawyers; a few of them, I have reason to believe, actually did

get whacked, and so when I chose my field of law I made sure it was one in which the ordinary participants did not routinely pack heat. IP law has its share of violent lunatics (perhaps more than its share), but when they scream obscenities and threaten to kill you and your client, they are, almost all the time, speaking figuratively.

Even then, much of this venom is directed at litigators, and I am not a litigator. I don't have the personality for it, being a large peaceful person who believes that nearly all lawsuits, especially those involving intellectual property, are stupid, often grotesquely so, and that the underlying issues in virtually all of them could be solved by reasonable people in twenty minutes of conversation. This is not the mindset of a successful litigator. Ed Geller, our senior partner, is a litigator: he is a pugnacious, aggressive, flamboyant, obnoxious little man, a being who might have served as the template for any nasty lawyer joke, yet to my certain knowledge, Ed (an individual for whom I have, by the way, the utmost professional respect) has never heard the snap of a bullet fired at him with bad intent, or tussled with thugs bent on robbery, both of which are now part of my life experience.

I should say that IP law is divided broadly into industrial, which covers trademarks and patents, and probably software fits in this class too, and copyright, which covers all the arts of humanity – music, writing, films, images of all kinds, Mickey Mouse, etc., and I will record here the instinctive punch of the special key on my machine that adds the sacred (c) to the little rodent's name, and which I have just gone back and removed, because this is a new me writing this whatever it is. My firm, Geller Linz Grossbart & Mishkin, is a copyright house, and although each of the partners handles the full spectrum of copyright work, you could make

a case that each of us has a different specialty. Marty Linz does TV and movies, Shelly Grossbart does music, Ed Geller is, as I said, our litigation chief. And I handle the literary business, which means I spend a good deal of time with writers, enough to realize that I am not and will never be one of their number. Quite a few of my clients have told me, often with a patronizing tone, that within every lawyer is a strangled poet, attributing the quotation to a variety of different authors. I don't really mind this sort of thing, since all these people are as helpless as kittens in the real, as opposed to the imaginary, universe. I can do cutting irony too, when I choose, which is not that often because, in all honesty, I admire the hell out of them. I mean, just making up a story out of your head and writing it so that someone else, a complete stranger, can read it and understand it and have real feelings about fictitious persons! Were you ever so unfortunate as to have a seat on a packed-tight plane or train where you were stuck in front of a couple of jerks exchanging anecdotes? You want to cut your throat out of sheer boredom, right? Or kill them. My point is, at the risk of repeating myself, it's damn hard to tell a coherent story. One client of mine told me that in order to write a story you start with everything that ever happened to anyone and carve away the parts that don't fit. This was a joke, however. Although I seem to be doing something like it now.

Perhaps, though, I am being too diffident. The legal profession is not without its creative side. We do a lot of writing, nearly all of it of interest only to other lawyers, but still there is the business of telling a story, setting a scene, laying out the facts and assumptions behind one's case. Young Charles Dickens started out as a court reporter, and scholars believe that this experience formed the sense of the human drama evident in his novels. Besides which, those novels are

nearly all about crimes, mainly of the white-collar type. Mickey Haas is my source for that factoid, and he should know, as he is a professor of English literature at Columbia. And he is also the beginning of this story.

How much do you need to know about Mickey? Well, first of all you know something, because only a certain type of mature man allows himself to be called by a schoolboy diminutive nickname. I don't believe that 'Jake' is a nickname of the same type at all. He is certainly my oldest friend, but he is not entirely a serious person. Perhaps if he were a more serious person he would have shined the little professor on, and this business would not have occurred. Fittingly, therefore, I have ended up at Mickey's house, a cabin on Lake Henry deep in Adirondack State Park, where I am currently in . . . I suppose I am hiding out, but I can hardly bring myself to use such a dramatic term. In seclusion, let us say. Armed seclusion, let us say.

I have known Mickey (or Melville C. Haas, as it appears on the spines of his many books) since my youth, starting from our sophomore year at Columbia, when I answered an ad asking for a roommate to share a fourth-floor walk-up on 113th Street off Amsterdam Avenue. It is typical of Mickey that the ad was posted in the window of a Chinese laundry on Amsterdam rather than at the student union or with the university housing office. When I asked him later why he'd done that, he replied that he wished to solicit roommates from the subpopulation that wore professionally cleaned and ironed shirts. Oddly enough I was not really of that population; I owned a single dress shirt, a white-on-white De Pinna discarded by my father, and had gone into the little shop to have it pressed for a job interview.

At the time I was living in a greasy single-room-occupancy building, having recently run away from home. I

was eighteen and grindingly poor, and the SRO was charging me fifteen bucks a day, kitchen and bath down the hall. Both of these rooms stank, in different but equally unpleasant ways, nor was the stench contained within either. So I was a little desperate, and it was a nice apartment, a two-bedroom with a partial view of the cathedral, and while dark in the manner of such long-hall uptown apartments, it was reasonably clean, and Mickey seemed a decent enough guy. I had seen him on campus before this, for he was a noticeable fellow: big, nearly as big as me, red-haired, with the pendulous lip and the protuberant, hooded blue eyes of one of the lesser Habsburgs. He wore tweed jackets and flannel pants and, in cold weather, an enveloping genuine Royal Navy duffel coat in camel, and he spoke in the precise, charmingly hesitant, anglophiliac accents we heard from those of Columbia's famous English lit professors who were unfortunate enough to have been born in the USA.

Despite these affectations, Mickey was, like most of New York's sophisticates and unlike me, a hick. He came from – I can't for the life of me recall the name of the place. Not Peoria, but like that. Kenosha. Ashtabula. Moline, maybe. One of those midsize midwestern industrial cities. Anyway, as he told me at that first interview, he was 'the scion of a small business empire' that made industrial fasteners. I recall asking him what those might be and he laughed and said he had no idea, but he always imagined an immense zipper the size of a freight train. It was the great-grandfather who'd made the money, and Mickey's dad and uncles just sat on the board and played golf a lot and were pillars of the community. Apparently there are thousands of such families across this nation, descendants of people who made their pile before taxes and globalization and hung on to it through safe investments and a horror of extravagance.

And then, inevitably, the talk got around to me, and inspired by his frankness, and sensing that he wished for some urban exoticism in his roommate, I told him that I was the scion of Isaac Mishkin, known to federal investigators and organized criminals from here to Vegas as Izzy the Book, or sometimes Izzy Numbers, a certified public accountant and a bookkeeper to the mob. To which his response was the familiar 'I didn't know there were Jewish gangsters,' and I explained about Murder Inc., Louie Lepke, Kid Reles, and Meyer Lansky, this last person being Dad's instructor and patron. That was, I believe, the first time I used my family history as a conversational gambit, and marked the end of the kind of shame I had writhed under all through high school. Why could I reveal all to Mickey? Because it was obvious that he had no idea what any of it meant, and regarded it as mere color, as if I'd been born in the circus or in a gypsy caravan. And there was, of course, yet more.

So you're Jewish? The natural query from Mickey here; I could tell he was surprised when I said no, actually, I'm not.

Now I hear the sound of a boat's motor out on the lake, a distant humming. It's the middle of the night. No one fishes at night. Or do they? I am not a fisherman myself. Perhaps there are fish that bite in the dark, like mosquitoes, perhaps night fishing is like ice fishing, an unlikely sport but widely practiced by self-torturing fanatics. Or perhaps it's them.

Back again. I went out on the deck clutching my weapon and listened, but I heard nothing. It must have been some automatic motor switching on in one of the other cabins. There are several dozen here, widely spaced, apparently deserted now, in the interval between the summer and the skiing season, and sound, I know, can travel amazing distances across the water,

especially on so calm a night. I had a flashlight too, and I was so moronic as to turn it on, making myself a perfect target for anyone who might be lurking out there. Although they would not want to just shoot me, oh no, it would not be anything so easy. The sky was heavily overcast, and before I realized the foolishness of the action, I was startled to observe how the blackness over the lake utterly consumed the thin beam. I found this oppressive, depressing: the feeble beam lost in vast darkness. Oh, a little memento mori here? Or merely a reminder of the extremity of my current isolation.

Reading this over, I see I am still entangled in the distant past; this account will be another *Tristram Shandy* if I'm not careful, never getting to the fucking point.

To resume, however: on that particular afternoon, I fed Mickey Haas's exoticism jones with a little more of my personal history. No, as a matter of fact, I wasn't Jewish (here a sidebar on the matrilineal-descent rule) because my mother was a Catholic, and in those days, if a Catholic married a non, they were excommunicated unless they made their peace with the Church, the main part of which was swearing to raise the kids in the faith and we all were, me and my older brother, Paul, and my sister, the youngest, Miriam, the whole nine yards: baptism, catechism class, First Communion, altar service for us boys. And, naturally, lapsing, except for Paul, although Paul lapsed like a bastard, until he unlapsed and got his Vocation.

And the cherry on top? Okay, another flashback, and I believe I have time, because I suddenly realized that they would not be so foolish as to try to cross Lake Henry in this darkness, and why should they? So I have all night, I suppose. Anyway, here's my dad, eighteen years old, a Brooklyn

wiseguy in training, a budding bookmaker of sports bets. Unfortunately for Dad's career, it was 1944 and he got drafted. Of course, he went to the dons on it, but they said he'd have to go unless he wanted a guy to run an ice pick into his ears, pop his drums, they'd be glad to help out there. He declined.

So a year or so later, Dad finds himself attached to Third Army headquarters as a cipher clerk, a good job for a nice Jewish boy, clean indoor work, never heard a shot fired in anger; besides it's March 1945 by now, and for the American forces in Europe, the fun part of World War II is just beginning. The Wehrmacht had essentially stopped fighting in the west and its legions were drifting docilely into the POW cages. The American soldiery soon discovered that anything could be had in exchange for American cigarettes – antiques, heirlooms, girls, unlimited amounts of intoxicants – and Dad was not slow in understanding that here was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to accumulate capital.

He was stationed in Ulm, where his official duties – coding messages for transmission – were not onerous. His real job was running a black market operation, moving fuel and food from army stores to the hungry civilian economy. He had no trouble setting up an organization, for Germany at the time was well supplied with underemployed thugs. These fellows had simply shed the handsome Nazi regalia they'd worn for twelve years and were open to opportunities in free-market, rather than state-sponsored, gangsterism. Dad was able to help with de-Nazification certificates, of course, and also used his accountancy genius to cover up the pilferage. He had no compunction about using the former Gestapo in his business. I think it tickled him to see these guys meekly taking orders from a Jew, and from time to time he'd covertly feed one of them to the authorities or, worse, to the Jewish

revenge underground that was active at the time. It kept the others in line.

Although officially lodged in the Third Army headquarters – company barracks, Dad spent most of his time in a suite he maintained in the Kaiserhof Hotel in Ulm. Now, it is one of my father's eccentricities that he never enters a place of public accommodation through the main, or normal, entrance, but only through the service areas. I think he got this tic from the mobsters of the '40s, whose habit this also was, when visiting, say, the Copa or El Morocco. It may have had something to do with security, or maybe they did it just because they could; who was going to stop them? In any case, one night in the winter of 1946, returning from a nightclub and approaching the Kaiserhof via its kitchen entrance, he found my mother among the urchins and old ladies rooting through the garbage cans set out there. He ignored them, as he usually did, and they ignored him, except for one who, lifting her head from the filth, said, 'Give me cigarette, Joe.'

He looked, and there – only partially disguised by dirt and the soiled rag she wore around her head – was that face. I've seen photographs taken around then and it's quite amazing – she looks just like a younger Carole Lombard, blond and ridiculously exquisite. She was just a week past her seventeenth birthday. Of course he gave her cigarettes, of course he invited her up to his suite, for a bath, some nylons, a change of clothes. He was gaping. How had this creature survived unclaimed in 1945 Germany? Somewhat later, when she was clean and shiny, and draped in a pink silk robe, and he attempted the usual quid pro, he found out why. She had a pistol and she pointed it at him in a determined manner, and told him that war or no war, she was a good girl, the daughter of an officer, that she had shot three men before this and would shoot him too if he attempted

to force her virtue. Dad was astounded, he was charmed, he was fascinated. This was, after all, an era when you could fuck a countess for a pound of sugar; that she could have successfully defended her body against a mass of wandering DPs and escaped prisoners, plus the dregs of one defeated army, plus the forces of three victorious ones, indicated a more than ordinary supply of moxie. One of Dad's words, *moxie*. According to him, my sister has all of it in our generation, me and my brother are moxie-deficient.

So, faced by the pistol, he relaxed, they had a drink and a smoke, and they exchanged life stories like the teenagers they were. Her name was Ermentrude Stieff. Her parents were dead, her father, the officer, had died in the summer of '44, and her mother had been killed by a stray bomb in the war's final weeks. This was in Regensburg. After that she'd wandered through the chaos of the Reich's final days, dragging the little suitcase she had stashed in her locker at the hospital. People did such prudent things in those days, so if what happened to her ever happened one would not be an utterly destitute refugee. Sometimes she traveled with groups of fleeing civilians, and here she had two means of establishing friendly relations, depending on the nature of the group. One of these items was a yellow star of the kind the Nazis made the Jews wear. The other was a narrow strip of black cloth with the words DAS REICH embroidered on it, which was designed to go around the lower left sleeve of the uniform worn by the soldiers of the Second SS-Panzer Division. She never told Dad where she got the yellow star, but she got the SS unit marker from Hauptsturmführer-SS Helmut Stieff, her father, fallen for the Fatherland in Normandy and, as a matter of fact, eventually buried in that Bitburg cemetery that got President Reagan briefly into trouble some years ago.

This tale says something about the deviousness of both my parents, and about my own character as well, I think, in that I chose to, in a manner of speaking, dine out on it to amuse or impress Mickey Haas that afternoon on 113th Street. It's the sort of thing many people would want to keep quiet about. My mother, by the way, denied the cute meeting entirely. She claimed she met Dad at a dance and thought that he was a gentleman. She never scrabbled through garbage cans, or shot anyone. She acknowledged that her father was indeed an SS officer, but she was careful to point out to us children the difference between the Waffen and the Allgemein, or general, SS, the people responsible for the camps. The Waffen-SS were brave soldiers fighting the horrible commie Russians.

Rambling. Basically who gives a shit at this juncture? I suppose the only lasting point is that truth was ever flexible in the hands of my parents. Not only was the far past in play, but they also often disagreed violently about events of the previous evening. This bred in me an early cynicism about historical fact, which makes my present situation, as a martyr, in a way, to different versions of four-hundred-year-old events, not a little ironic.

In any case, now we have to flash forward twenty or so years. As I've said, I became an intellectual prop lawyer, and Mickey has managed to stay within, nearly, a stone's throw of where we first met, for he is a professor of English literature at Columbia College. Mickey apparently draws a great deal of water in lit-crit circles. He was president of the Modern Language Association a few years back, which I gather is a big deal, and he seems to be respected with varying degrees of grudgingness by most of the interpretive fiefs into which the literary critical world seems nowadays to be divided. His field of study is William Shakespeare's plays,

which is how he came to know Bulstrode. Professor B. was a visiting scholar at Columbia, also a Shakespeare expert, from the University of Oxford. One day, it seems, Bulstrode comes up to Mickey and says, 'I say, old bean, you wouldn't happen to know an intellectual property lawyer, would you?' and Mickey comes back with, 'As a matter of fact, I do.' Or something like that.

Let me recall the day. It was October 11, a Wednesday, the weather a little chilly, so that you knew the summer was over for sure, and there was a threat of rain in the air. People were in raincoats, as was I. I can see my raincoat, a tan Aquascutum, hanging on a coat-stand in the corner of my office, which is smallish for a partner's office, but comfortable enough. Our building is on Madison in the low Fifties, and through my window I can see one of the monitory spires of St Patrick's Cathedral, this view being nearly my sole connection to the religion of my youth. My office is furnished in an unpretentious, vaguely modern manner reminiscent of Jean-Luc Picard's ready room on the starship *Enterprise*. I have my diplomas and licenses up on the wall, together with three chrome-framed photographs: one is a professional portrait of my two kids as they looked a few years ago, and another is of me and my son Niko in which I am running alongside him as he learns how to ride a two-wheeler, a quite good shot taken by his mother. The only object in the room that one might consider unusual is the third photograph, which shows a large, crop-haired young man in red-white-and-blue weight-lifting togs holding high a heavy barbell. The barbell is so heavy that it bends slightly at each end, for this athlete is in the 1921/2 lb+ class, the heaviest, and he is lifting over five hundred pounds. Five hundred thirty-two, to be precise. This person is me, and the photo was shot at the Mexico City games in 1968, where I was part

of the U.S. Olympic team. This was more weight than I had ever lifted in the clean-and-jerk and would have got me the bronze medal, but I messed up on the snatch, and Joe Dube took it. I have kept up training since then, at a lower level, of course, but I can still yank somewhat more than a quarter of a ton over my head.

A perfectly useless skill, which is why I like it, why I took it up. I started at ten with a set of homemade weights and lifted all through high school and college. At present I'm a hair over six feet two and I weigh two-fifty, more or less, eighteen-inch neck, fifty-two chest, and the rest to match. Many people take me for a fat person, which I certainly am not. Since the coming of Arnold, people tend to confuse the use of weights to sculpt the body with competitive weight lifting. They are completely different enterprises. Weight lifters almost never have cute or pretty bodies, which are in any case more to do with the absence of subcutaneous fat than with strength. Any serious heavy-class weight lifter could break Mr Universe over his knee. Only potentially, of course: I have found it to be the case that large, strong people are mild of temperament unless they are into steroids, which is more and more common nowadays, I fear. I remain non-steroidally mild, however.

I see I have drifted yet again. I was just trying to set myself in my office on the relevant day, which was quite an ordinary one, the morning spent at a meeting about Chinese T-shirt piracy of a rock album image, an increasing part of the normal practice of IP law. Quiet meetings, billable hours, the marshaling of expertise, and the delicate suggestion that lawsuits in this business are largely a waste of time, for Chinese piracy of rock album cover images is an unavoidable cost of doing business in our fallen world. I returned to my own office after this meeting – it was about twenty minutes

to twelve and I was already looking forward to lunch – but as I passed my secretary's desk she hailed me. My secretary is Ms Olivia Maldonado, a young woman both decorative and competent. Many in the office lust after her, as do I, but it is an iron rule here at Geller Linz Grossbart & Mishkin that we don't screw around with the staff, a rule I entirely support. It was nearly the sole instance of my forbearance in that department, and I was stupidly proud of it.

I recall she was wearing an outfit I particularly liked, a gray skirt, somewhat clingy, and a dusky rose cardigan sweater with the top two buttons open. Pearl buttons. Her shiny dark hair was wound up on her head and clasped with an amber comb, exposing a small brown beauty mark on the base of her neck, and she had the scent of iris faintly about her.

There was a man waiting to see me, I learned; he had no appointment, could I squeeze him in? A Mr Bulstrode. Walk-ins are rare in our business – it's not as if we're upstairs from the bail bondsman – and I was intrigued.

I went into my office and sat behind my desk and shortly Ms M. showed the fellow in, man with a briefcase. Bulstrode had dressed his portly form in a brownish three-piece suit of well-worn tweeds and wore tortoiseshell spectacles on his little marshmallow of a nose. Worn Burberry draped over arm, good oxblood shoes on his feet and a paisley square in the breast pocket; thin snuff-colored hair moderately long and combed across the scalp, a little vanity there. His face was flushed, up from the neck and across the cheeks. He blinked colorless lashes at me as we shook hands (soft, dampish). I thought 'professor' and I was correct: he introduced himself as Andrew Bulstrode, a professor indeed, late of Oxford in the U.K. and visiting at Columbia. Professor Haas good enough to give me your name . . .

I sat him and after the usual chat asked what I could do for him. He said he wanted some IP advice. I said he'd come to the right place. Asked if he could put me a hypothetical. I don't like hypotheticals because when the client talks in hypotheticals it usually means he's not going to be frank about the real. But I gave him the nod. Suppose, he said, that I discovered a manuscript of a literary work, a lost literary work. Who would own the rights to it? I said, that would depend. Author dead? Yes. Before or after 1933? Before. Heirs or assigns? None. I told him that under the U.S. Copyright Revision Act of 1978, unpublished manuscripts created before January 1, 1978, by authors who died before 1933, became part of the public domain on January 1, 2003. His face fell a little at that, from which I gathered that he had wanted a different answer, such as that what he had discovered might be copyrightable. He asked whether by chance I knew the relevant law obtaining in the United Kingdom, and I was happy to answer that I did, for our firm does a good deal of consultation back and forth across the gray Atlantic. I told him that the U.K. was friendlier to creators than the U.S., to wit: that the author had indefinite common law copyright to unpublished work, and if published or performed, the copyright ran fifty years from first publication or performance. The author being dead in our case, I continued, the copyright would run fifty years from the calendar year in which the provision of the Copyright Act of 1988 came into force, i.e., fifty years from January 1, 1990.

Here he nodded and asked about ownership – who held the copyright in an unpublished manuscript of a deceased author? I explained that under British law, unless ownership was established by testamentary evidence, such copyright reverted, under U.K. intestacy law, to the Crown. I love saying that, by the way, *the Crown*; the image of Elizabeth II R

rubbing her hands in glee as the lucre pours in, corgis yapping around the piles of bright guineas.

He didn't like this part either. Surely not, he said. Whatever happened to finders keepers? What about possession being nine-tenths of the law?

To which I answered that these saws were true enough, but also that should he publish or perform such a work he should be prepared to have the Crown come after him, and if he published or performed in the U.S., he might have a hard time defending his copyright from outright piracy; and now would he care to leave the hypothetical and tell me what was going on?

I said this in a manner that suggested I was about to wish him good day were he not prepared to be more forthcoming. He considered the request for some time in silence, and I observed that sweat beads had accumulated on his forehead and upper lip, although it was cool in my office. At the time I thought he might be ill. It did not occur to me that he was badly frightened.

I have been in this business long enough to tell when a client is being frank and when not, and Professor Bulstrode was clearly in the latter class. He said he had come into possession (that's a phrase that always raises my hackles) of documentary evidence, a manuscript from the seventeenth century, a personal letter from a man named Richard Bracegirdle to his wife. He thought this manuscript was genuine, and that it revealed the existence of a certain literary Work, of enormous potential import to scholarship, the existence of which had never been suspected. This manuscript alone was enough to launch a field of study, but to have The Work itself . . .

When he said The Work, I heard the capital letters and so I include them here.

What is The Work? I asked.

Here he demurred, asking instead about the protocols of confidentiality between lawyer and client. I explained that our normal retainer was twenty-five hundred dollars and that once his check was in my hands no power on earth could extract the substance of any conversation the two of us might have, save only an admission that he was about to commit a felony. With that, he drew out a leather-covered checkbook, wrote out the check, and handed it over. Then he asked me if we had a safe on the premises. I said we had locked, armored, fireproof files. Not good enough. I said we had an arrangement with the Citibank downstairs, a large safe-deposit box. He opened his briefcase and handed me a heavily taped manila envelope. Would I secure this for him, temporarily?

There's that engine noise again.