

1.

At half past ten, they called Hieronymus Dent out of the classroom.

Hieronimus Dent was a professor. An unassuming one. If he couldn't exactly be described as mild-mannered, he was at least soft-spoken. In his twelfth year of teaching undergraduates the intricacies of cinema—all kinds of it: Golden Age films, silent era pictures, the latest blockbuster releases, the least accessible foreign films—he had an enthusiasm for the subject as huge as his knowledge of it. He once staged the waterfall scene from “Our Hospitality” on the roof of the Administration Building: braving one thousand gallons of water and swinging from a ship's rope, he shone and dangled high above his laughing students and two frowning department heads.

He wondered why they—meaning the administration—wanted to see him now. *Harold usually doesn't talk to me at all*, he thought, *except to dispute my budget every year*.

He had to wait while Marva, Harold's Administrative Junior Coordinating Facilitator, spoke to her staff. Then, to his astonishment, she wanted to check his ID. He obligingly slid his dog-eared school card across the counter. She took some time examining it and then said, “He's in there,” nodding to the door of Harold's office. Hieronymus proceeded to the door, trying to guess if Marva's usual chilliness was chillier today and, if so, by how many degrees Fahrenheit.

“Close the door, Hi.”

Hieronimus closed the door behind him and sat down in the chair in front of Harold's desk.

“Sit down anytime, make yourself comfortable,” Harold said. “You want me to get you something to drink?”

The sarcasm in Harold's voice was plain; so was his anger. Hieronymus didn't answer.

“We have to let you go,” said Harold.

“What happened?”

“You know what happened.”

“No, I don't. That's why I asked.”

“Don't you try a fresh mouth with me. I'm your superior, and you show me the proper respect.”

“Okay,” said Hieronymus. “What happened?”

“We can't continue to employ someone who doesn't turn in requested work.”

“What work?”

Harold's gray mustache tightened. “Your time management report for the week ending,” he sat down and very slowly looked through some screens on his computer, “February Nineteenth.”

“I turned that in.”

“No, you didn't.”

“Yes, I did. Ask Marva. I gave it—”

“Don't blame others for your incompetence.”

“Incompetence is a strong word for a misunderstanding,” Hieronymus said. “Suppose you look for it again? If you still can't find it, I have a copy at my desk.”

“You didn't turn it in. And I had Security search your desk.”

Hieronimus was silent.

Harold shrugged. “Marva will give you a good reference.”

“But—”

“*Marva*,” Harold repeated, “will give you a good reference.”

“But I don't understand. I did turn in the report—”

“No, you didn't,” Harold said in a way that brooked no argument.

Hieronymus tried again. “Is one...infraction, let's call it...really grounds for termination?”

“*Marva* will give you a good reference.”

That sounded final. In this “right to work” state, there was no tenure. There were no teachers unions, and even had they existed, there were few full-time professors to belong to them. Hieronymus reflected again, as he sometimes did, that most of his colleagues were adjuncts. In fact, he was the only full professor at the school. *Used to be at the school*, he corrected himself, feeling suddenly chilled all over. He had to make an effort to keep his teeth from chattering as he stood up and offered his hand for Harold to shake farewell.

Harold didn't shake his hand.

*Marva* was busy with something else and didn't acknowledge his exit.

Walking out into the empty sunshine of the courtyard, he felt a little warmer. His mind moved slowly.... He knew that he had turned in the report. He couldn't understand what just happened; it seemed crazy. His body's core temperature dropped again when a stocky security guard approached him.

“Let's go,” the guard said with careful expressionlessness.

Hieronymus objected, suddenly angry. “I have to go back to my class, say goodbye to my students.”

“Let's go!” The guard was shouting now.

“I need to take my belongings and—”

“They'll be sent to your address of record,” the guard replied calmly, slipping into the routine of a well-rehearsed script. “Come with me, please.”

Before they took two steps toward the parking lot, a woman came out of the Administration Building and ran over to Hieronymus. He recognized her. It was Molly Haley, a graduate student of his from last year's class. The guard didn't seem to mind the interruption and he let them speak.

Molly, clutching a folder, explained. “I found this in his wastebasket yesterday. I wanted to tell you about it.”

“Whose wastebasket?” Hieronymus asked.

Molly eyed the guard cautiously. “The one in my office.”

Hieronymus knew she occasionally temped for the administration. She clearly meant Harold's wastebasket—and when he examined the folder's contents, he saw he was right.

The folder contained his report for the week ending February 19.

The paper was crumpled. “You did turn in that report,” Molly said. “And the other page is your copy, the one from your desk.”

He glanced at the attached page; she was right.

“Thank you, Molly,” he said.

“Will it make a difference?” she asked. Her eyes contained a kind of longing.

He told her it did and left with the guard. When he got home, he threw the folder away.

2.

The next morning, he got up late and looked in the mirror. The face staring back at him

was square and Dutch and tired-looking. A small mole on the side of the chin was the flaw that made the rest look attractive by comparison.

What happened? Harold had got rid of him neatly, and he had no recourse.

After going through the motions of washing up, he moved into the living room. He looked at the black sofa there, and the two chipped teak chairs, and the old bookshelves that lined the walls and threatened to tip over from the weight of the books.

His steps thudded downstairs to the basement.

A large media room, the basement was a kind of wonderland, with more frowzy carpeting, more bookshelves, and a few leather theater seats of different colors. The large blank screen in the shadows seemed to hang in space. He'd taught his students that filmmakers had to fill the movie screen with life, just as they had to fill their lives with life.

He turned on the light and found himself paging through old textbooks about films. They discussed every film ever made. They detailed the films' histories, stars, grosses, fates. From 1890 to now, lost or not, every film was covered...pegged like a butterfly impaled on a pin.

Except one.

The holy grail of cinema's most serious scholars, the most elusive of lost films, was "Unconquered Soul." People had died trying to find this film. More had spent their lives trying to learn how it got lost in the first place.

Filmed in 1932 at the height of the United States' Great Depression, "Unconquered Soul" never played in theaters. The "preview" cut never actually got previewed for anyone to judge. Its director, Emil von Schwartzkind, had turned in a four-hour cut, and studio executives hadn't understood it. Police found Schwartzkind murdered the next day. The film was later either burned or dumped in the Pacific Ocean. But just as nobody had solved the murder, so nobody had ever proved the destruction of the film beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The trail ended somewhere in Mexico. The co-screenwriter, Josué Lopez, moved back to Mexico City sometime in the 1930s and was never heard from again.

No one even knew what the film was about.

It was Hieronymus's dream to find "Unconquered Soul," or find out what happened to it at least.

But right now, he had to get a job.

He dressed, folding his cuffs in half and choosing one of his snazziest ties to wear. It never hurt to *look* one's best when one needed to *be* at one's best, he thought.

He spent the next eleven hours sending out resumes on the internet. The next few days consisted of the same, interrupted only by meals—hot dogs that he boiled in a saucepan—and one call to the office. He wanted to make sure Marva would give him the reference Harold mentioned. She didn't answer: his call went to voicemail. As the days passed and his first fifty applications got rejected, he began to feel that she might not return his call.

That was okay for now, because he had landed a couple of phone interviews. The first interviewer confessed that the job didn't really exist but might be created in April, two months from now, if management approved the budget for it. The second interviewer asked personal questions, as if she wanted a date. "If you were an animal, which animal would you be?"

He networked with other full professors. He had to do this by internet because all lived in different states. Only one was frank. "They gutted my program too. No one gives a shit about film. Give up."

He spoke with the adjuncts at the college. They remained cordial toward him but couldn't spend a lot of time with him. They taught twelve hours a day whenever the opportunity came and

had little time for anything else.

He had savings. Though wifeless and childless, he had made a careful effort to save and had augmented this by forays into the stock market. And he had, or would have, a pension. Thinking of it, he called the school again. They should have sent him an information brochure about it. They had sent his personal belongings, but had missed a few things, so he had to check on that, too.

Again, no one answered. The call went to voicemail. So did his next ten calls.

On a stormy morning, sporting an elegant gray tie, he left the house for a “live” interview. This meant a person-to-person meeting, or P2P in the current lingo. The place was seventy miles away.

An hour later, he pulled his inexpensive sedan, which was as reliable as a sensible shoe, into an empty parking lot. He dodged thickening rain as he sprinted to the entrance of the office building, the corners of which resembled those of a raggedy book. Its broad windows were black, reflecting the sky.

The entrance was locked. He looked around for a security doorbell. As he did so, he noticed a man standing about fifty yards away. This man had no umbrella, no hat, and only a black coat, which wasn't a raincoat. Graying and almost impossibly thin, the man was looking at him without moving at all. Before Hieronymus could wonder who he was, a voice came over a security intercom and asked his name. “Hieronymus Dent” brought the *clack-clack* sound of the door unlocking.

He had to wait almost an hour before meeting his interviewer, named Zachary. As Zach led Hieronymus toward his office his gait was nervous and halting; he made many pauses to say hello to various people, even backtracking to speak to them.

In the office, he explained the job to Hieronymus.

“Yeah, see, oh excuse me, I have to answer this.” He stared at a blinking phone bank for a long moment, his mouth twitching. He didn't answer the phone and turned back to Hieronymus, who noticed that he twitched all over, actually: his mouth, his knees, his restless hands, and his shoulders, the bones of which seemed to want to flee his skin.

“You would be my assistant in building a mainframe, an educational mainframe for new hires, an educational—see? I suppose you saw, noticed, know that, from the description of the job. Did you see the description? Okay, good. Now, what we, see, there is, what we, we want to, I mean the thing I'd like—have you designed educational training for...? They told me you did, I lost that sheet of paper. Anyway, my vision, now you would be responsible, you would personally be, I mean that you would have personal responsibility, it's very important to me, responsibility is my number one thing. Around here the munchkins call me 'Zack, the responsibility lunatic.' Ha ha ha ha. You'd have to do a lot. I like change, constant, constant change. I'm not demanding. They—easy-going, easy-going guy, they like to—they call me. *Yes!* We're getting the picture now! I like, change is what I—see, if I could, I would have *everything* change. Every day. Even the wallpaper. Every day. Look at it. Every day. A different color every, I mean who wants to see the same goddamn color? Right? I would like it changed twice a day, if I could get it. *Change*. You would have personal responsibility and report to me every change, I mean every hour. Now let's start winning! I mean, if they let me. There's a budget approval process, oh excuse me.”

He took a breath. Hieronymus also took a breath—and slipped out of the office while Zachary again twitched beside the blinking phone bank without answering the call. Hieronymus reached his car without being stopped. He pressed on the gas and never returned.

He thought he saw a black pickup truck following him in the rearview mirror. But the truck took a different turn about ten miles before he reached his house and he forgot about it.

Wearily, he checked his messages as soon as he turned off the engine in his driveway.

A news ticker gave him terrible news: the college had closed. *Bankrupt*, the story said.

The loud tapping on his driver's side window startled him. He turned and saw the thin graying man he had seen earlier. He also glimpsed the black pickup truck parked on the other side of the street.

“What do you want?” he said, rolling the window halfway down.

The man's face showed no emotion. “Mister Dent, we must talk.”

3.

The badge in the man's hand—reading “Central Intelligence”—was his pass to Hieronymus's living room.

He declined Hieronymus's offer of coffee. He sat down and his small, feral eyes flashed around his nose-beak as he spoke. “I'm no longer with Central Intelligence. I'm with New American Values, another agency. You're probably wondering what we want with you. Well, Mister Dent—may I call you Hieronymus?... No? Very well. You may call me Ben. Mister Dent, New American Values sent me to you because you're a film teacher. A historian.”

Hieronymus remained standing, the line of his mouth straight and hard. The badge also gave the man's name: Benjamin Weatherly. Hieronymus felt all this might be a trick, like the trick pulled last year by the guy who pretended to be a stranded motorist and then made a pitch for investing in his new church. That one he had to throw out physically.

“I still don't know what you're selling,” said Hieronymus.

Ben snorted. “America! We're selling America.” He leaned forward in his seat and spoke quietly. “We want to win hearts and minds around the world again. We want to showcase American culture. Culture includes film.”

“Why come to me?”

“Because we think you can find 'Unconquered Soul.'”

The next beat of time felt like a delayed heartbeat to Hieronymus.

“We saw your series of articles about it in 'Cinema Forum.' Nobody knows much about that film, but you seem to be a leading authority on it. That's why we're offering you a proposition.”

Ben went on to detail what the government proposed. Hieronymus would help to rehabilitate the currently somewhat soiled name of the United States abroad by finding “Unconquered Soul,” the great lost film, the one everyone said could not be found. That would show that the U.S. was on the cutting edge of art. This information—“some might call it propaganda,” Ben said, offhandedly—was important to the main aim of assuring people all over the world, investors, “our overseas partners,” and especially young people that the U.S. wasn't circling the drain. “We aren't in decline, Mister Dent. We're renascent. You will help us prove that.”

“But that film probably *can't* be found,” Hieronymus said. “Besides, my articles, if you read them, just repeat what people know, or don't know. I'm only an enthusiast, really.”

Ben said in a low tone, “You don't want to find it?... Maybe you don't like to serve your country?”

Hieronimus smiled. "Excuse me for a second."

He left the room and went downstairs. In the half-darkness of the basement, he called the police on his phone. But the phone didn't work—it wouldn't dial. *Dammit*, he thought, *what a time for the battery to die*. He checked on the battery level while looking around for the spare charger that he kept down here.

92% CHARGED. That's what the glowing screen told him. He frowned.

Something made a sound on the stairs. "No need to call the police, Mister Dent."

Hieronimus looked up and saw Ben on the stairs. Ben descended farther and stepped into the light. "Even if I hadn't placed a block on your account, speaking to them wouldn't do any good."

Hieronimus thought about how to defend himself. There was no weapon nearby. Ben had the advantage of standing higher and blocking the only way out. "Who are you," Hieronimus asked, "really?" He was playing for time.

"I told you." Ben came down the rest of the stairs—and moved confidently to one of the theater seats. He sat down. "Nice set-up you have here. Pretty good for a teacher."

Hieronimus came around the seat and faced him.

Ben glanced up at him and shrugged. "Sorry. I meant to say an *out-of-work* teacher.... Why not screen a movie? You must have the time. I know I do. You would find me an apt pupil. The books on your shelf there, I'm sure I've read most of them, and you already know that I follow 'Cinema Forum.' So why not trust me?" He chuckled, "*Sit down*, Mister Dent. We have a lot to discuss."

Hieronimus sat down in the nearest theater seat. "Like what?"

"Anything you like." Ben studied his face.

"Okay, I'll bite. American culture fills the world. Everybody knows all about it already. So how in hell would finding an old film—or promoting cultural things in general—serve my country?"

"That's one question," Ben said gently. "Don't you have two?"

"You mean how your agency can help me find 'Unconquered Soul'? I won't ask that until you answer the first question."

Ben explained the history of intelligence agencies' promotion of the arts. Central Intelligence funded United States modern art in the post-Second World War era. Using front groups, it even funded and controlled fiction-writing programs. "Nipping political fiction in the bud, or a certain type of political fiction." The purpose of all this was to win a good reputation in Europe—to show that, in the contest between the philosophy of the United States on one side of the world and that of "Soviet Russia" on the other side, the U.S. was no slouch. Red-blooded Americans were neither philistines nor propagandists "unlike the Cossacks—I mean, the Russians. The work goes on today," Ben concluded, "and although you undoubtedly think it's a small thing, especially when compared to spying and trading military secrets, we consider it to be important enough to allocate a budget for it. A rather *large* budget, Mister Dent. Now why don't you ask your second question?"

"You mean how the CIA can help me find 'Unconquered Soul,'" Hieronimus said without a question mark. He stared hard at a point in space somewhere above Ben, his forehead growing hot.

"Not CIA. NAV," Ben gently corrected. "New American Values."

Hieronimus said nothing.

"You seem preoccupied. I'll come back later." Ben moved to stand up.

“No.” Hieronymus put his hand out, stopping Ben from standing. “Go on.”

“You already have a few leads. Right there in your 'Cinema Forum' articles.”

“For example?”

“For example, the cinematographer's family lives in Paris. No one person has interviewed all the surviving family members.”

“I know that,” Hieronymus said. “There was an estate fight years ago. They're suspicious of each other. Everyone who interviewed them up to now had connections with some members of the family but not with the others.”

“You would be a neutral outsider.”

“You're saying I could interview them all?”

Ben leaned in. “If you want to make Paris your first stop.”

Hieronymus immediately responded, “But I have to stay here and look for a job—” Then he cleared his throat. “How much is the pay?”

“We have arranged a substantial stipend,” Ben said, rising. “We'll discuss it on the plane.”

He added: “Time to pack, Mister Dent.”