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eBooks



**ZOOT-SUIT MURDERS**

**THOMAS SANCHEZ**

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THOMAS SANCHEZ

**Thomas Sanchez's**  
**ZOOT-SUIT MURDERS**

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**7** LOOT-SUIT  
MURDERS

**Vintage Contemporaries**  
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*To the Bright Angel  
Stephanie Dante and  
Thomas Louis Sanchez  
age 21  
“missing in action  
somewhere in the Pacific”*

1943.

# 1

The Zona Roja was blacked out. The hysterical pitch of an airraid siren wailed down the crowded street. Neon signs above stores and clubs went dead. Nathan Younger tried to keep his team of teenage boys together on the sidewalk, screaming commands in the hot night air as he pushed them against the wall of Club Bongo, trying to keep them from being knocked to the pavement by running sailors. Younger knew he had made a mistake, but he couldn't disappoint the boys. He had promised them Cokes if they won the ball game against Pico Rivera. He didn't plan on the game going till dark, having to herd his victorious team through a blackout just to get to the soda fountain at Ortega's White Owl Drugstore. In the street, cars with headlights blinded by black tape honked furiously at people trying to dodge between them. Only the forms of thick-waisted women did not move, their shadows lounging against open doorways. Younger looked anxiously to the cloudless sky. In the sudden darkness distant stars glittered in his strained gaze like a million bomber planes invading Los Angeles from infinity. "Cruz!" Younger lunged for one of his boys slammed to the pavement by a sailor. The boy was scrambling to his feet, trying to grab the fleeing sailor's pants leg. Younger pulled Cruz up, pinning his struggling body to a wall, yelling into his face above the sound of the siren, "Don't bitch it up! No fights with sailors! You promised!" The hundred-pound weight of Cruz's body strained like one uncontrollable manic muscle beneath Younger's grip. "Don't bitch it up!" As suddenly as the siren's song of fear had begun, it stopped. The sound of another siren huffed in staccato bursts from the cement needle crown of City Hall blocks away. Younger anxiously counted his boys along the wall, tapping the baseball cap of each as he ran down the line. All nine were there; his team was intact. The blackout drill was over.

The Zona Roja lit up. Neon lights down the distance of the chaotic street flashed irregularly to life. Electric current flowed in garish colors through letters on pretentious marquees that jutted over cluttered sidewalks, blinking urgent messages:

CLUB COOCH-COOCH  
CLUB COOCH-COOCH CLUB COOCH-COOCH!  
GALS! POOL! POKER! PINBALL!  
GALS! GALS! GALS!!  
AWOL CLUB AWOL CLUB AWOL CLUB  
AWOL CLUB AWOL CLUB!

From inside clubs and bars Frank Sinatra's crooning voice, gay strumming of Mexican guitars, and the fierce lament of Benny Goodman's clarinet blared from jukeboxes, competing with the clanging bells of pinball machines. Younger tried to move his team of boys through the maze of sailors choking all pathways to Ortega's White Owl Drugstore on the distant corner. He didn't want the boys to get caught in the net of drunken sailors jostling them. The thick-waisted women with tight side-buttoned skirts made loud kissing sounds with their bright puckered lips. "Chico, chico, chico!" Younger pushed the boys away from the laughing women to the edge of the sidewalk, elbowing a path between dark blue forms of several vomiting sailors. Flashing red lights of a Shore Patrol jeep whipped across the faces of Younger's boys as he herded them to the intersection blocked by two sailors locked in drunken combat, each clutching the brown neck of a beer bottle in one hand and the neck of his partner in the other. The sailors grunted and shoved each other back and forth, banging against honking cars, oblivious to helmeted Shore Patrolmen jumping from the jeep. From both sides of the street, gangs of teenagers screamed encouragement, booing and hissing as the Shore Patrolmen tried to break up the drunken dance, wedging long clubs between the furious-faced brawlers. The shouts and taunts from the two gangs clashed over the heads of the fighting men, just as the Zoot suits they wore clashed in color and cut, broad-shouldered baggy coats of yellow and chartreuse draping below their knees, flared green and purple pants cuffed skin tight around ankles above oversized waxed shoes. Younger tried to get his boys past one shouting gang that was blocking the entrance to Ortega's Drugstore. A great whoop arose across the street from another gang, standing like an impenetrable forest of outrageously clothed trees around the short fat pumps of the Signal Gasoline Station. The whooping converged from both sides of the street as Shore Patrolmen clubbed the two sailors until they staggered away from one another, stunned and bleeding. Younger broke his way through the cheering gang before the drugstore, their eyes excited beneath the slouch of wildly colored hats, as Shore Patrolmen pulled the sailors into the glare of red light, handcuffing them together like an improbable pair of doomed lovers. Younger was astonished at how the young sailors looked exactly like his brother the day he went into the Navy, totally bewildered. He turned back to his team of boys, pushing them through swinging doors into the safety of the drugstore. The Shore Patrolmen were no longer concerned with the subdued sailors. They confronted the two wildly dressed gangs challenging them with angry stabs of Spanish taunts. The patrolmen's clubs swung nervously at their sides as they stalked along the edge of the crowded sidewalks like lion tamers backing off a dangerous beast.

Younger had pushed the last one of his boys into the drugstore when he heard a new sound that made him shove his way back into the crowd. The scream of a woman was almost lost in the overwhelming blast of car horns. Suddenly the woman appeared, running, dodging between cars. Younger thought he recognized her, her blond hair twisted and bent in a bizarre ring

of curls around her exhausted face, her screams turning to a distinct, terrifying plea. "God's sake! Someone!" Two men zigzagged through the cars behind her, the leather of their shoes slapping against pavement, breath bursting from their lungs in short angry grunts, their bodies heavy and sweating beneath their suitcoats as they closed on her. She ran into the intersection, the horror in her face caught in the whipping red lights of the jeep. The patrolmen turned from the shouting gangs on the sidewalk, trapping the woman in the cleared intersection. She stopped, caught between patrolmen with menacing clubs and the two men about to grab her. "Someone! I'm being kidnapped!" Younger recognized the theatrical twist of fear in her face. He knew who she was: the movie star Barbara Carr. He tried breaking through the crowd to save her. The intensity of her screams stunned the crowd to immobility. Younger could not break through. The anguish in her face even stopped the patrolmen, their clubs dropping harmlessly to their sides, their mouths gaping as she ran between them into the gang of Zoot-suiters clustered around the pumps of the gasoline station. From the forest of the bizarrely dressed gang gunshots rang out, the loud metallic claps reverberating in the intersection. The two men chasing Barbara Carr reeled backward, the impact of bone-smashing bullets knocking them onto hard pavement.

The crowd Younger was pushing against suddenly gave way. Screaming people struggled in wild knots of panic as they tried to run from the scene. Younger got to Barbara Carr, her hands tearing into her blond curls as she tried to protect herself from the gunshots still thundering in her head. Younger grabbed her, trying to shelter her from the stampeding crowd. At both ends of the street, paddy wagons of Shotgun Squad cops were unloading. Barbara Carr's terrified eyes stared directly into Younger's eyes, her fingers flying up, the nails digging into Younger's cheeks as he screamed at her, "Barbara! You're safe now!" The pain in Younger's torn face broke his hold on her and she twisted free. A redheaded woman appeared from behind the pumps of the gasoline station and grabbed Barbara Carr, slapping her face until the sobbing turned to whimpering and she collapsed into the safety of the redhead's arms.

Shotgun Squad cops blocked all possible escape from the street, handcuffing Zoot-suiters trapped in the crush of the crowd. Younger could see his boys inside Ortega's, their shocked faces pressed to the plate-glass window. Between the abandoned gasoline pumps, a lone man knelt, chalking a white circle around a .45 caliber gun lying on the pavement where only minutes before the Zoot-suiters had stood.

Younger gazed down at one of the bullet-riddled men sprawled at his feet. The man's dark suitcoat flared open at his sides like the spread wings of a dying bird of prey, a coursing red glow of blood soaking around the exposed gold badge pinned to the rayon lining of the coat. Three letters on the badge's elaborate engraving could barely be made out in the swirl of the neon-bright night: FBI.

## 2

The Hollywood stars were cold as ice. The afternoon sun was blistering. The field grass was withered yellow. Younger steamed beneath his shirt and tie. The San Francisco Seals were hot. Younger was going to lose his bet with Wino Boy. Angel Parra was burnt out. Across the dusty diamond, in the bleachers high above the Seals' dugout behind third base, Younger saw the man he was waiting for. Younger did not signal the man; he turned in his hard seat and shouted at the pitcher, "Come on, Angel, throw the Seal a spit! He can't hit! Throw him a spitter!" Angel's pitch went wild and was called ball four. Younger kept shouting more encouragement at the young pitcher, even though he knew it was hopeless. The Stars were cold as ice and the sun was getting hotter.

The man Younger was waiting for worked his way around the stadium through half-empty wooden bleachers; no one paid him any attention. The twelve-year-old peanut vendor spotted the man and ran toward him, but the man brushed the boy aside, walking on, adjusting his dark glasses, pulling the bill of a Hollywood Stars' baseball cap further down over his face, walking blindly to Younger's box seat.

"What took you so long, Senator?" Younger asked the question without looking at the man slipping across the paint-peeled bench and sitting so close to him their shirt sleeves almost touched.

From behind thick lenses of dark sunglasses Senator Kinney's eyes were fixed out on the pitcher's mound as Angel threw down his mitt and walked disgustedly off the field toward the dugout. "What's wrong with Angel, Younger? Something sure is eating him. This just isn't the kind of squared-away team it was last month. No way they can go for the pennant now. The Beavers are sure to murder them next week in Portland."

"His brother was killed, Senator."

Kinney lowered his glasses a crack below his gray eyes; Younger could see wrinkled lines of disbelief running up from the top of his blunt nose into the sweating forehead.

"Guadalcanal, Senator. His brother was one of the boys killed there. They didn't find his body for four days. Buried in a bomb crater under twelve other marines. Four days to find his body and six months to notify his family."

Kinney shoved the glasses tight against his eyes. "Fucking Nips."

"Fucking war."

Kinney watched Angel walk slowly from the dugout and take up a bat, swinging it viciously at something invisible and menacing in the air. “How can the guy even play?”

“Why did you summon me to testify before a session of the committee next week?”

“Information. We want information.”

“Everything I can possibly say about the situation is public record. I already told everything I knew at the Zoot-suit preliminary hearing weeks ago, Senator. If you bring me out into daylight like this, it won’t be safe for me in the Barrio.” Younger looked over his shoulder to see if anyone had slipped into the empty seat behind him. He lowered his anxious voice. “What new information could I possibly give you in public that would be worth risking the setup we have going? It’s crazy, an undercover agent testifying to his own bosses.”

“Not you.” Kinney watched Angel chop air at a ball high and outside for strike three, throwing the bat against the wire mesh of the backstop to the boos of the crowd. “We want information on the redhead, Kathleen La Rue, the one who was there the night of the FBI killings.”

“What could La Rue know?”

“We want her to be there when you testify. With you being called to testify before us, she will never suspect who you work for. We’ve got an angle on her and want you to investigate.”

Younger slipped a stick of Juicy Fruit gum from his pocket, scraping tinfoil off the wrapper and rolling it into a bright silver ball. He flicked the silver ball angrily onto the playing field as the third Star struck out, the sound of the umpire’s voice rising above the hissing crowd, “Steeeeeeriiaaaiike!”

The muscles in Younger’s cheeks coiled nervously from his jaw, working at the stick of gum. “Why didn’t you tip me to the situation instead of hitting me cold with a subpoena?”

“We couldn’t take a chance on not going through regular channels to subpoena you. We want you normal, above suspicion.”

“You don’t believe this Mankind Incorporated outfit she’s head of in the Barrio is a Sinarquista front? The Sinarquistas are heavy-handed Fascists; they aren’t interested in having a white girl who speaks barely passable high school Spanish front for them. They want the Zoot gangs, that’s who they’re after. The Fascists always develop from the bottom, from the street gangs up.”

“We think she’s something. FBI ran a report. She’s clean. Too clean. Born in San Francisco, a bright girl, only child, went to college at Berkeley, graduated summa cum laude. You tell me why an educated girl from a rich family would join Mankind Incorporated.”

“She’s probably sexually frustrated. Frustrated females are impossible to figure. La Rue believes this Mankind Incorporated business about a

superhuman race of metallic-headed men who will liberate mankind. Let her have her fantasy. Why waste our time?”

“Hey! He struck him out! See that, Angel struck the Seal out!”

Younger stared blankly at the cursing batter. He tried to control the anger in his voice, irritated he couldn't shout his opinions at Kinney. “The cops shook La Rue down after the FBI shootings. They couldn't pin a thing on her with those murders. Just some dumb woman out to save the world from itself. So what's new?”

“The LA police didn't find any fingerprints on the gun that murdered the two FBI agents in the Zona Roja.”

“No fingerprints doesn't prevent the court from trying to pin the murders on twelve Zoots not much older than eighteen. They'll get the electric chair if convicted.” Younger stopped chewing and rammed the wedge of gum up under his top lip. He looked like he had just been slugged in the mouth. “You don't believe La Rue killed those two agents. La Rue couldn't even lift a .45 magnum. I doubt she could punch her way out of a paper bag. If she fired the .45 that night, it would have knocked her off her feet. I saw her at the Zoot-suit hearing; she can't weigh more than a hundred pounds when she's soaking wet.”

“Anything's possible in wartime, Younger. These could be Fascists in Mankind Incorporated we're dealing with.”

“Then I'll investigate her, but I don't believe she's a...”

“It's not your job to *believe* anything.” Kinney's voice rose as he clamped his fist around the rusted iron-bar railing in back of the empty seat before him. He looked nervously over his shoulder to see if anyone had heard his loud words. He lowered his voice to almost a whisper. “I can't sit around and argue the point, Younger. I've got to get back up to Sacramento for a hearing in the morning on whether or not to lock up Italians living along the coast, same way we did with Jap sympathizers. Any of these foreigners could be a spy. It's okay for America to be a melting pot during peacetime, but right now you can't trust your own mother.”

“I just don't believe La Rue's a killer.”

“And Chamberlain didn't believe Hitler would invade Poland.” Kinney turned the glare of his sunglasses on Younger, his mouth puckered into an ironic smile. He stood up to the organ music blaring over the loudspeakers for the seventh-inning stretch, his last words barely discernible as he walked quickly away. “There are political enemies in the Barrio, Younger, and if you don't find them, they'll find you.”

### 3

Younger couldn't tell if the distant, high-pitched wail outside the closed and locked window was an air-raid siren or a police siren. He turned back from the window, squirming around in his chair to meet the intent gaze of Senator Kinney standing before him in a heavy tweed suit. "My name, Senator? You want my full name?"

Kinney thumbed the lapels of his tweed coat, as if trying to flick off some bugs invisible to everyone but him. "Yes, would you please state to this committee your full name, age, and nationality?"

"Younger, Nathan. Thirty-three. American."

"Occupation?"

Younger glanced down at the worn soles of his beat-up wing-tipped shoes. "Social worker in east Los Angeles."

Kinney walked to the window and turned his back to it, blocking the square of blue sky outside the small room. "If you will be so patriotic as to answer the questions we four gentlemen put to you about the recent murders in east Los Angeles," he nodded to the men seated at the long table before Younger, "I'm certain you will render your country service beyond simply working with unfortunate Mexican-Americans. You must keep in mind, however, this is a closed-door hearing on un-American activities constituted by the California State Legislature. As long as you answer truthfully about the terrible night in question, you personally have nothing to fear."

Younger smiled at the silent, stern-faced men rowed before him, unmoving and uncomfortable in hard-backed chairs. "I have a question, gentlemen."

"Yes?" Kinney folded his arms and leaned forward.

"Since this is not a court of law, do you mind if I have a piece of gum? You see, my mouth gets dry when I'm in a nervous situation like this and I..."

"Yes, go on, have some." Kinney unconsciously thumbed his lapels again.

"One other thing." Younger slipped a stick of Juicy Fruit into his mouth and chewed noisily. "What is an un-American activity?"

"An un-American activity, Mr. Younger," Kinney held the palms of his hands up like he was reading from a book, "is any attack on the constitution of California or the United States."

"Good." Younger balled the gum wrapper between his fingers. "In that case I will tell you everything you want to know."

“That’s patriotic. We are at war both abroad and at home. As you know, murder is not a pretty issue; political murder is the most ugly.” Kinney let the smile on his face play itself out into an expression of disgust, then sat down at the long table with the other three men. “Assemblyman Burns, would you like to proceed with the witness?”

Burns’s fingers adjusted his bowtie like it was a microphone. His voice boomed in the small room. “Mr. Younger, do you have a younger brother, Marvin Younger, a boatswain’s mate first class on the U.S. aircraft carrier *Lipscomb Bay*?”

“Yes, sir. Marvin’s somewhere near the Philippines now, I think. The government censor always cuts out any direct reference Marvin makes to where he is in his letters.”

“Does Marvin know the nature of your occupation?”

“He knows I’m a social worker in the Barrio. He thinks it’s a waste of time.”

“Do you know the twelve Mexican Zoot-suiter youths who murdered the two FBI agents?”

“Every one, but they aren’t Mexican; most were born in Los Angeles. I’ve worked with their families. They accept me. So far as I know they aren’t guilty of murder, only *accused*. I don’t know why the press keeps talking about the ‘Zoot-Suit’ murders.”

“We did not call you here to editorialize on the press, Mr. Younger, just answer the questions. Do you know Kathleen La Rue?”

Younger turned uneasily in the chair, his shoulders slumping beneath the padded shoulders of his faded sport coat. His embarrassed gaze went to the woman sitting with her lawyer by the door. “Yes, sir, I believe that’s Miss La Rue right there.”

“And what does Miss La Rue do for a living?”

“She came into the Barrio several months ago. From what I understand she is an apostle of Mankind Incorporated.”

“Excellent. Do you know the movie star Barbara Carr?”

“No. Until that night in the Barrio, I knew her only from her films, and from articles I read about her in Hedda Hopper’s gossip columns.”

“Can you tell us what happened that hot August night in the Barrio? Why you were there, exactly what you witnessed?”

Younger couldn’t take his eyes off Kathleen La Rue. She was such a thin, odd woman, not nervous, but seeming to burn with a strange energy, energy not only fueling her existence but consuming her at the same time. Her face was pale, so ghostly white it made the wild curls of her red hair appear even redder, like the sudden dazzling crimson of ignited road flares in the night. The top three buttons of her flowery cotton dress were left carelessly open, exposing a quick, tapping pulse in the center of her white throat. The heat of the stuffy room brought only the slightest trace of sweat along the soft white

down above the lipstick of her upper lip. She looked like she was about to faint.

“Mr. Younger, are you going to answer this committee’s questions?”

“Oh, yes, Assemblyman Burns.” Younger forced his eyes away from Kathleen La Rue. He turned and tried to focus his attention on the Assemblyman. “Yes, sir, I remember that night well. I had just finished over at Lincoln Park with my CYO boys; we were in the summer baseball playoffs against Pico Rivera. We won.”

“CYO would be the Catholic Youth Organization?”

“Yes, teenage kids mostly.”

“Some of these boys are related to the Zoot-suiters?”

“All of them; no one in the Barrio isn’t.” Younger couldn’t keep his attention on the Assemblyman. His gaze was pulled back to Kathleen La Rue, as if he had to answer the questions to her satisfaction. “I was walking some of the boys home on Flores Street; it was late, hot. That used to be a good street before the war, a nice neighborhood before it became the Zona Roja. Now it’s become dangerous, bars and clubs, young sailors prowling the streets for a good time. Not safe.”

“Why would you expose teenage boys to such a scene if it’s so dangerous?”

“Because the Barrio was crowded, one of those nights when everybody is out. People sitting on their front porches, men with their shirts off, women fanning themselves with newspapers, kids running everywhere, lots of noise, loud radios. There is always lots of noise in the Barrio, but for some reason that night seemed worse. I had promised the boys some cherry Cokes if we won the game with Pico Rivera. All the soda fountains were closed except the one at Ortega’s White Owl on Flores. I couldn’t disappoint the boys.”

“So you risked their lives in the Zona Roja?”

“I just thought we could get down Flores very fast. How was I to know we’d get caught in an air-raid drill? Maybe I wasn’t thinking straight. There was a Santa Ana blowing, you know, the hot wind we get from the Mojave Desert. Everything seemed dusty, hazy sort of. After the blackout we continued to the intersection at Orange Street, where two sailors were fighting. The Zoots were hanging around on their usual street corners enjoying the fight, the two gangs, the Mateo Bombers in front of the Signal Gas Station and the Square Johns in front of Ortega’s White Owl Drugstore. They had their Black Widows with them. All of them were shouting encouragement over the tops of cars to the fighting sailors.”

“The Black Widows are the, ah, Zoots’ women?”

“Yes, their girlfriends. They wear very tight black skirts. They can’t walk fast in those skirts; their legs are in black net stockings. They wear all black, blouses, sweaters, everything. Only different color on them is the silver crucifixes hanging from long chains around their necks.”

Burns cleared his throat, trying to dispel an image of crucifixes swinging between young breasts. He adjusted his bowtie like it was a knob turning up the volume of authority in his impatient voice. “Did you see Miss La Rue at the time?”

“Not then. Not till after.”

“What happened next, as you approached the two Zoot gangs?”

“It was confusing, Assemblyman.”

“But not so confusing you couldn’t witness everything?”

“Everything.” Younger noticed Kathleen La Rue watching him, her eyes wide and brilliant, like she was taking flash pictures of his every expression, recording his every answer.

“Continue, Mr. Younger. We haven’t much time allowed here this afternoon. You are at the corner of Flores and Orange and the sailors are fighting.”

“The Shore Patrol broke up the fight. Then I heard a woman screaming.”

“You heard screaming before you saw the woman running?”

“I couldn’t tell which direction the screams were coming from. There was lots of confusion because horns were honking. Then I saw the horns were honking because she had run into the street between cars trying to get through the intersection.”

“Did you recognize the person running as the movie star Barbara Carr?”

“I didn’t know who the person was at first, a blond woman running, screaming, two men chasing her. How could I tell who it was? Barbara Carr was the last person I expected to see in the Barrio on a Friday night.”

“Could you make out anything she was screaming?”

“She was screaming she was being kidnapped.”

Burns leaned quickly forward, as if he could hear screaming in the room. “What did she *exactly* scream?”

“What do you scream when you’re being kidnapped?” Younger felt the heat from Kathleen La Rue’s flashing eyes upon him. She was making him feel like he was in a circus spotlight. “Barbara Carr was hysterically shouting for someone to save her.”

“Did anyone try to help?”

“It was then I recognized just who she was. I was shocked. I tried to get to her. There wasn’t time. It happened too fast. Cars skidding all over the place, people screaming and frightened. The two men were right behind Barbara Carr. She ran straight to the corner where the Mateo Bombers were hanging around the Signal Gas Station. She ran past the pumps for safety. She was only five feet from the Zoots when I heard the shots.”

“How many shots?”

“Just the two. Carr stood there before the gang of Zoots, pressing her hands to her head in terror. The two men behind her were both on the ground, shot in their chests.”

“Who shot them?”

“From where I was standing, I couldn’t tell exactly *who*.” “You saw the murder weapon?”

“After I ran over. I grabbed Carr. She was frantic, uncontrollable. I had to hold her down. She tore at my face, trying to get away, as if someone was after her. The gun was lying on the pavement by the gas pumps.” Younger stopped talking and stared down at the floor. Sprawled before his feet a man in a dark suitcoat lay dying; blood from a bullet hole in his chest seemed to float his body in a peaceful lake of red.

“At this time you also saw Miss La Rue?”

Younger jerked up from the nightmare vision on the floor. “Yes, yes, she was right there. She was very courageous, slapping Carr’s sobbing face, bringing her out of shock. Miss La Rue put her arms around Carr, stroked her head, comforting her.”

“Where had Miss La Rue come from?”

“From behind the gasoline pumps. She’s always in the Barrio hanging around the Zoots, trying to get them to come to her Mankind Incorporated meetings.”

“Did the Zoots attempt to run away from the scene of the crime?”

“Most of them were as confused as the rest of us, running in circles. I remember seeing the leaders of the Mateo Bombers, Marco Delgado and his cousin Gus Melendez Delgado, trying to get away up Flores Street.”

“And did these two Delgados escape?”

“No one got out of there. Within an instant, police cars had both ends of Flores blocked. There was a carload of Shotgun Squad cops. They got everything under control in minutes, holding shotguns on everybody until the homicide detectives arrived. Then I found out, when one of the detectives flipped open the coats of the two dead men. I saw the gold badges.”

“What did you find out?”

“The two dead men were FBI agents.”

Senator Kinney tipped his chair forward and nervously clicked his ballpoint pen closed. “Thank you, Mr. Younger, you’ve been a most cooperative witness.”

“One more moment of the witness’s time, Senator, if you don’t mind?” Burns stopped writing in his notebook and brought his eyes up to Kinney, the irritation in his voice unmistakable. “The purpose of this hearing is to ascertain facts. I have a final important matter.”

Kinney leaned back in his chair and looked nervously at Younger. “Your

witness, Assemblyman.”

“Mr. Younger.” Burns continued writing in his notebook. “Do you know who the Sinarquistas are?”

Younger tried to avoid the nervous gaze of Kinney as he answered. “They are a political organization active in the Barrio.”

“And what does this word mean, Sinarquistas?”

“Roughly translated, Assemblyman, it means *those without opposition.*”

“And what are the Sinarquistas opposed to?”

Younger turned away from Kinney’s nervous gaze and felt trapped as his eyes met those of La Rue. The blue brilliance of La Rue’s open stare seemed to burn a circle around Younger as he blurted his answer, “I guess the Sinarquistas are opposed to our American way of life.”

Burns stopped writing, looked directly at Younger, and straightened his bowtie. “Excellent.”

## 4

The sun rising was no bigger than a baby's fist in the distance across the concrete Los Angeles horizon. From his window Younger saw smokestacks of a sprawling tire plant far to the east, where washed-out gray stuccoed tenements on the flatlands blurred into more factories, one after the other, black columns of smoke pricking the blue-bellied morning from a forest of chimneys. He peeled a stick of Juicy Fruit and chewed it slowly, savoring the taste sweetly like it was the last meal of a condemned man. The palm trees swelling up from small squares cut into the cracked concrete sidewalk below always made him laugh. Tall and skinny, bent and bouncing in the wind, higher than the sun-blasted paint of the three-story walkup apartments lining his street. The brief green skirts of palm fronds at the very tops of high smooth trunks made the skinny trees look like swaying one-legged hula girls. The palms stood out almost self-consciously, as if aware they were destined to line some broad boulevard, not a run-down street crowded by ragged children and people unable to conceal desperation in their faces over where the next meal was coming from. Every day Younger watched the desperation in the faces grow, until he couldn't look in a mirror without seeing the same expression curl down his lips, couldn't hide the glint of fear in his eyes—and he was in the Barrio by choice, not a proud man trapped by fate, like an elegant palm tree growing from a cracked sidewalk. The sound of wind playing through Younger's dusty Venetian blinds was startling, like a monkey rattling his cage for freedom. Younger carefully unfolded the thin envelope of a red-white-and-blue V-mail letter. For the fourth time, he read the lines that hadn't been blacked out by the censor:

*Hi Guy!*

*How goes it, guy? As you know I can't say where we are, but it's not downtown Tokyo. No action yet, guy. Just maneuvers every day. I still have those nightmares. You know? That the carrier takes a hot one off the port quarter from a Jap Zero and there's fire on the water and we have to jump for it. Terrible. Say, guy, can you send me one of those sexy Esquire Petty girl pictures? Rumor on the tub has it the old man's going to ban all pinups pretty soon. Sure would be a sight for sore eyes to have one of them Petty girls, all that black lace and white skin. I could use a real Betty Grable right now, though. I'd know what to do with her. Everything on this tub is rumor. Like the one Henry Fonda is going to visit the tub. Sure, a big movie star, some luck! Another rumor is there's a Shitter on the tub. It would be just my luck if that rumor turned out to be true. Write to me, guy, I get lonely.*

*Your brother, Marvin*

*P.S. Have you started your Victory garden yet? Ha ha!*

The long flat streets of the city were filthy. The streets were never really clean, but since Pearl Harbor there were always piles of trash blocking sidewalks, trash for the war effort: black bald automobile tires, mountains of old newspapers, boxes of metal bottle caps, old keys, locks, nylon stockings, everything imaginable that could be reincarnated as a uniform or a weapon. It took Younger twenty minutes to walk the seventeen blocks downtown from his apartment, past empty padlocked storefronts in what was once Little Tokyo, with NO JAPS WANTED! NIP LOVER! NISEI TRAITORS! painted across boarded windows. The sidewalks were so cluttered by the chaos of collectibles to aid the war it was necessary to walk in the street and risk being hit by honking cars, drivers hurrying from the San Fernando Valley neighborhoods to work in war industry factories crowding the eastern flatlands of the city. On the wall of Paco's Supermercado two Civil Defense workers were scraping off words slashed in red paint the night before: ¡SINARQUISTAS POR LA RAZA!!! At the corner of Orange and Flores streets a black billboard on top of Ortega's White Owl Drugstore spelled out in bold white relief: DIALGOD. Younger turned the corner at Flores. Morning light threw singular shadows of shaky, drunken men standing idly for block after block in the debris of sidewalks. The forms of men leaning against storefronts gave the illusion that buildings along the entire street were supported by nothing more substantial than wobbling shadows.

"¡Compadre!"

Younger shielded his eyes from the sun, trying to pick out which of the long line of drunks had called his name. He kept walking.

"Compadre, ¿qué pasa?"

A short, dark man stumbled out from among the leaning shadows of a building, his worn boot heels catching the edge of the street gutter, pitching him face down on the pavement. No one moved to pick him up. Younger ran into the street, holding a hand up to stop a car speeding around the blind corner. He pulled the man out of the gutter and supported him against the window of Ixatlan Cantina. A young waitress inside the restaurant ignored the two men as she propped a black slate against the inside of the window advertising the special lunch menudo.

"A case of Gallo! You owe me a case of Gallo Tokay, *compadre*."

Younger brushed off the old man's torn jean jacket. "You're right, *amigo*. I owe you."

The old man's wrinkled hands were shaking; the brown eyes in the weary face seemed to be worn down to their final shine. "*Señor* Younger, you owe. Angel was burnt out."

"Damn you, Wino Boy." Younger shook his head and grinned sarcastically. "You knew his brother had been killed, that's why you laid that heavy bet on