

THE QT

I quickly turned my head to the side and placed my hand over my mouth to suppress a fake cough, hoping that the diversion would prevent my client from observing the look of utter incredulity that had come across my face. It didn't. Although we were physically twelve miles apart, me in my law office, and he in the Martin County Jail, the holographic image made it appear as if he was seated in one of my client chairs and I could reach across my desk and shake hands with him.

"You don't believe me, do you Mr. Harper?" Lucas "Luke" Trent asked me.

Realizing my diversion was unsuccessful, I attempted to sidestep the issue. "Well, Luke, it really doesn't matter what I think, does it?"

Luke deferred, "Oh, yes it does, Mr. Harper..."

"I've asked you, call me Jim, please," I interrupted.

"Okay, Jim," he continued. "I need to know my own lawyer believes in my innocence. How can you fight for me if you believe I'm guilty?"

"90% of my clients are guilty," I explained. "Most often it's not a question of guilt or innocence, it's a question of an appropriate sentence, of reaching a fair plea bargain."

"No plea bargains," he stated adamantly.

I'm sure the frustration was evident on my face. How do you reason with a zealot? "Luke, look, ever since Quest Truth replaced juries... what, twenty some years ago?... the

conviction rate is 100%. The computer doesn't make mistakes. It's not affected by emotions. The evidence is presented to it and it spits out a finding. If it comes back 90% likely that you're guilty, you're convicted. 90% is defined as beyond a reasonable doubt. Prosecutors don't even present cases anymore unless they've made a dry run of the evidence and it comes back at least 95%. Remember when you testified to my office version of Quest Truth? It came back 100%. The State's Attorney tells me they ran the evidence through their Quest Truth five times and, every time, 100%. You will be found guilty. There's simply no question about it."

"But, I'm not guilty," he said. "I place my trust in God."

"God won't be deciding your fate. Quest Truth will. We're talking first degree murder here. When you're convicted you'll get fifty years minimum. That's real time, no parole. You're forty-eight, Luke. That's a life sentence. The State's offering twenty on voluntary manslaughter. Look, we know your wife was having an affair. We know you found out about it the day you killed... excuse me... the day she died. You made threats to her boyfriend. Sudden passion's not a defense but it's a significant mitigating factor. On a voluntary manslaughter conviction, you'll get good time credit. You could be out in twelve years. Twelve versus fifty. Be reasonable."

"I loved my wife. Why would I kill her?" he asked.

"My God, Luke, when the cops arrived, you were standing in the kitchen holding a bloody knife. Her body was at your feet with her throat cut. There was no forced entry. Your DNA was all over the place. No one else's. No wonder Quest Truth came back at

100%. The only thing the State's missing is a holovideo of the crime."

"I loved my wife," he repeated. "No plea. Let's go to trial."

Like I said, how do you reason with a zealot? This was probably the tenth time we'd had this discussion. Clearly, I was wasting my time and his.

"Fine," I finally replied. "The trial's set for next Monday. See you then." I reached across the desk and turned off the Holovision set.

"Great," I muttered to myself, "a trial when he's Q.T.'d at 100%." It had been eighteen years since my last trial. Having been in practice over thirty-five years, I was now one of the more senior members of the local bar. I had started back in the old days... when we still had judges and juries deciding cases instead of computers. I used to try at least two or three cases a month. For the first couple of years after the passage of the thirty fifth amendment which required computers to decide cases, I still tried a few. But after a while, it was apparent to anyone with half a brain that it was pointless. All us criminal defense lawyers got the office version of Quest Truth. You inputted the evidence, had your client testify to the computer, and if it came back ninety percent or more, you were a dead duck. The official court version of Quest Truth sure wasn't going to come back with any different result. And Quest Truth had been tested and tested and retested and had been proven to be 100% accurate. It could tell, absolutely, whether a person was telling the truth or lying. It could even tell if a witness was basically telling the truth, but just embellishing it a little. I had played with my office version enough to know Quest Truth always got it right. I would close the blinds on my office window on a nice sunny day. I'd look at my Quest Truth's "eye", relax, sip my coffee,

smile and nonchalantly remark, "Boy, it's raining cats and dogs out there today."

"It is 99.7% likely that your statement is false, Mr. Harper," the computer would respond with that sultry female voice that was programmed into it.

"Well, okay, maybe not cats and dogs, but it is drizzling," I'd respond to my electronic adversary.

"I don't think so, Mr. Harper. It is 97.5% certain that your statement is false."

"Take a hike, Quest Truth!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harper, but I don't think I can assist in evaluating the veracity of that statement."

I suppose I'm like every other old guy that's been doing the same thing for thirty-five years. I miss the old days. I'm nostalgic for them. I loved getting up in front of a jury, arguing, emoting, crying if I had to. And I was darn good at it if I do say so myself. I got clients off that didn't have a snowball's chance in hell. Prosecutors feared going to the mat against me and rightfully so. But those days are long gone now.

We don't plead and beg to juries anymore. The question of guilt or innocence is a moot point. Quest Truth made it so. It's changed the whole world. Your wife says she was working late and you don't believe her? Make her say it to Quest Truth. You'll find out if she was fooling around with that new, good looking guy in her office in a minute. Your son says the other kid started the fight at school. Q.T. him. The President gets on Holovision and says he did not have you know what with you know who. Q.T. his speech and you'll know if he's lying through his teeth.

I guess it's hard to argue that a world where people are unable to get away with lying isn't a better place. But, there have been so many unintended consequences. Q.T. is omnipresent now. It's built into our sat phones, our watches, our entertainment systems. Flip the switch, turn on the Q.T. program, and it's the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God.

I know guilty people got off and innocent people got convicted under the old system. But, still, I miss it. Maybe it wasn't perfect, but neither are people. Do imperfect people deserve a perfect system of justice? I guess that's for philosophers to decide, not lawyers. Anyway, it's the system we've had for the last twenty some years and no one's ever going back to the old days. Us dinosaurs have just had to get used to it.

I used to spend days and days preparing for a trial. Up all hours, burning the midnight oil. Reviewing the reports, interviewing witnesses, preparing cross examinations. But there's no point to it now. Q.T. immediately knows when a witness is lying. What's the point of a cross examination? I did my last cross eighteen years ago. I'm not sure I'd even remember how to do it anymore.

So I had a relaxing weekend with my wife not really worrying about my first trial in eighteen years coming up on Monday morning. The reports would be submitted, the witnesses and Luke would testify. And within seconds of the judge saying the evidence was closed Q.T. would render its verdict. Luke would then be sentenced to fifty years... real time. No good behavior. He'd die in Statesville.

I got up at seven on Monday morning, showered, shaved and tried to put my "trial" suit

on which had been hanging in my closet for eighteen years. It reeked of mothballs. It hadn't occurred to me that my forty-four year old physique did not match my sixty-two year old one. I couldn't get the trousers zipped. I could barely get the suitcoat on. Talk about an ego. Had it not occurred to me that I had gained a good twenty-five pounds in those years? I settled for business casual; khaki's and a sport jacket and didn't think the judge would be offended.

In a concession to tradition, we still had trials with everyone personally present in the courtroom. Since Holo vision was perfected, personal meetings were pretty much a thing of the past. I could sit in my office and have a meeting with a client in the Greater Arabian Islamic Republic and it was the same as if he was sitting across the desk from me. Why fly five thousand miles to accomplish the same thing? Business travel was, for all intents and purposes, dead. Another victim of technology.

I hovered the thirty kilometers from my office in Selma to the old courthouse in Butler. In my first years in practice, I practically lived here, but I rarely had the need to come to court anymore. Two or three times a year at most.

I shook hands with old Judge Garner and we exchanged war stories about the good old days over a cup of coffee. Later, the prosecutor, a young lady named Ann Simmons knocked on the door to the judge's chambers and entered. She was younger than my daughter and a real looker. I had to scold myself to stop gawking at her shapely legs, minimally concealed by her short skirt. After an absence of at least thirty years, skirts, the shorter the better, had recently made a reappearance in women's fashion. There was not a person on the planet any happier about that development than me.

“So,” the judge began with undisguised excitement, “a real trial. Can’t remember my last one.”

“Me neither,” I added.

“So, what’s the problem, Jim? Why won’t he take the plea? I hear he QT’d at 100%,” the judge asked. That information was supposed to be privileged until trial but word always had a way of leaking out.

“He says he loved his wife,” I responded.

“Maybe I loved the cow that became my hamburger last night,” Ann replied, “but that didn’t stop me from eating it.”

I like this girl, I thought, helluva sense of humor.

“Judge, it’s a lost cause. I’ve talked to him ‘til I’m blue in the face. He ain’t gonna plead.”

“Well, “ the judge quipped, “I hope he likes blue denim, because he’s going to be wearing alot of it for the next fifty years.”

Ann chuckled and I shrugged my shoulders. I’d done everything I could. If my client was an idiot there was nothing I could do about it.

“Let’s go try a case,” the judge said as he rose, removed his black robe from the coat tree and put it on.

We had been in the old courtroom about five minutes when the deputy brought Luke in. His electronic restraint bracelet, capable of incapacitating him in an instant, was on his left wrist. He was kind of a nervous looking frail little guy. He looked like he was incapable of

killing a fly. He was nicely dressed in slacks and a short sleeved shirt and had obviously washed and shaved. He looked like an okay guy. Like your dorky next door neighbor or the kid that got picked last for every game in school. Those things would have been important to a jury, but, of course, they were meaningless to Quest Truth.

The reports and photos came in by stipulation and were downloaded straight to Q.T. The police officer who responded to the neighbor's calls about screams testified that she entered the kitchen and found Luke, bloody knife in hand, standing over Debra's corpse. The sight of her throat, cut so deeply that she was nearly decapitated, had caused the young officer to lose her lunch all over the crime scene. Debra's paramour, Robert Benjamin, testified that Luke had called him not an hour before the police found Debra dead, and told him that he was aware of their affair and that he would put an end to it one way or another. Robert, crying on the stand, testified he never thought Luke meant he was going to kill Debra. He would have done something, called the cops, he added, if he'd had any inkling.

Finally, the State rested. I swallowed hard and announced, "Defendant calls Lucas Trent." Against my advice, he had absolutely insisted on testifying.

Luke rose and walked to the witness stand. He stood as the judge swore him in. I couldn't help myself. Even though the result was foreordained, the adrenaline was flowing. God, it felt so good to be back in a real courtroom, asking questions, making arguments. Of course, it was all for show. None of it would matter to Q.T. But I still couldn't help myself. For the briefest of moments I almost convinced myself that my client was innocent.

"State your name," I began.

“Lucas Trent.”

“Age?”

“Forty-eight.”

“Where do you reside?”

“Butler, Illinois.”

“Occupation?”

“Currently unemployed.”

“Now, Mr. Trent, your wife was Debra Trent?”

“Yes.”

“How long were you married?”

“Sixteen years.”

“Did you love your wife?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“Did you kill her?”

“No.”

“Do you know who did?”

“No.”

“Do you know why anyone would have wanted to kill your wife?”

“No.”

“Now, Officer Farley testified she found you, holding the murder weapon, the bloody knife, standing over your wife’s body.”

“Yes.”

“That’s true?”

“Yes.”

“Did you use that knife to cut, harm or kill your wife?”

“No.”

“How is it that it happened to end up in your hand?”

“I walked into the kitchen. I saw Debra. I saw the knife on the counter. I picked it up.

The officer came in.”

“Where had you been for the hour before that?”

“Hovering around. Thinking.”

“About what?”

“My marriage, my life, my wife.”

“Did you form an intent to kill her when you were doing this hovering and thinking?”

“No. I wanted to save my marriage.”

“Again, Mr. Trent. Did you in any way harm your wife? Did you kill her?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Your witness.”

Ann lit into him on cross as if she had been doing it for years. Of course, once again, it was all for show. Q.T., no doubt, was already at 100%. But Ann was enjoying herself and she utterly destroyed Luke. She reamed him a new one. A jury would have taken five minutes to convict him.

I asked a few pointless questions on redirect and then announced, “No more questions.”

“May I add one thing, please?” Luke asked. The judge replied in the affirmative. I wondered if maybe he’d finally put an end to this charade and confess.

“These are the times that try mens’ souls.” Lucas said, staring directly into Q.T.’s “eye.”

I looked at Ann and the judge. They were as befuddled as me. “Excuse me,” I said.

Lucas repeated the quote, then added, “It’s from Thomas Paine.”

“Oh,” I responded, still shaking my head. I wondered now if I should have called for a psychiatric exam. Maybe he’s bonkers, I wondered. Then again, maybe he just wants all of us to think that. Maybe he’s crazy like a fox. “Well, okay, I believe the evidence is closed... then,” the judge said. “I’ll procure the verdict.” He punched a button on his computer terminal and a sheet of paper printed out within seconds. The judge grabbed the paper, read it silently and turned ashen. He looked at Ann, Luke and me. “I... I...,” he stammered “... will procure the verdict again. There’s obviously been a mistake.”

I was too shocked to even think to object. A mistake? What did he mean? Q.T. didn’t make mistakes. Never. A second later another piece of paper was disgorged from Q.T. The judge, still ashen, read it silently and looked at us all again.

“I will read the finding,” he finally said. “People vs. Lucas Trent: ‘Probability of Guilt of First Degree Murder: 0%; Probability of Guilt of Voluntary Manslaughter: 0%; Probability of Guilt of Aggravated Battery: 0%’. Based on the findings of probability of guilt being less than 90%, I am required by law to enter a finding of not guilty to all charges and dismiss the defendant from custody.”

“Judge,” Ann screamed while jumping to her feet. “Something’s wrong! You can’t let him go! He cut her head off, for God’s sake.”

“I don’t have a choice,” the judge responded, visibly shaken, “what can I do?”

I sat silently, unable to believe any of it. I looked at Luke. He had a broad, knowing smirk. The deputy walked over and undid his restraint bracelet. Luke rubbed his wrist.

“Come with me,” I said to Luke. We rose and left the courtroom. I led Luke to the old unused jury room on the fourth floor. I wanted some privacy. We sat down. He was still smiling. “What happened in there?” I asked.

“The truth won out,” he responded. “I told you it would.”

“Don’t give me that b.s.,” I snapped. “You know as well as I do that you killed her. “What happened? I want an answer.”

“Attorney-client privilege?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And double jeopardy precludes more charges?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you. Do you remember my former occupation?”

“No.”

“Programmer.”

“So?”

“Do you remember where I used to live? Where I used to work?”

“No.”

“Urbana. I was a chief programmer at Solara Corporation. At 23. A real computer prodigy.”

“So?”

“We patented the Q.T. software, what... twenty-five years ago. I was chief programmer.”

“Yeah?”

“I worked on the programming of Q.T. ...”

The first bits of comprehension began to penetrate my thick skull. “That quote; a code?” I asked.

“Yeah, Jim, that quote. There’s a particular line of code in every Q.T. that’s ever been produced and that ever will be produced with a little secret embedded in it. Embedded by me.”

“That quote?” I asked again.

“Yeah. I always liked that quote. Any time any one ever says ‘These are the times that try mens’ souls’ the Q.T. will believe everything that person says... 100%. Every time. Doesn’t matter what the rest of the evidence is.” He began to laugh. “I’ve been the only person in the whole world who could beat the Q.T. All I had to do was say that little quote. I thought it might come in handy some day. Never knew it would come in this handy though. Worked like a charm, didn’t it? You know, I may decide to use it again. I wouldn’t be selling Robert Benjamin any life insurance.” He began laughing again, longer and louder. Like a maniac. I hated him. I looked at my file, sitting on the table. A photo of Debra, nearly decapitated, had spilled out of the file. He just kept laughing. I looked down at the picture

of Debra again. I'm a non-violent man. But they say every man has his breaking point. I guess I discovered mine. I looked at Luke, still laughing like a hyena. I looked at the photo of Debra once more. I smiled at him as my hands closed around his throat. " "These are the times that try mens' souls'" I said calmly. "I'll have to remember that." He stopped laughing. After a while he stopped struggling. Then he stopped breathing. Finally, I let go.

I collected my things and casually strolled out of the courthouse. Days later the janitor noticed a nasty smell coming from the old jury room. The next day the cops knocked on my door and brought me in for questioning. I Q.T.'d at zero percent. They let me go.