

Portrait of a Clown

28 January, 1955

Doug Burdick was having a hell of a morning and it was just beginning.

In his first moment of awareness, he judged that death was preferable to the agony of his pounding hangover.

Bright sunlight streaming through the tiny window added to his misery as did the sounds of Madrid awakening. Metallic shutters being thrown back against ancient buildings echoed through his head like clashing cymbals. Shouted conversations between delivery drivers and motorcycles without mufflers roaring down *Calle de la Cruz* created a cacophony that was almost unbearable.

Even the tiny movement of licking his dry lips with his swollen, sleepy tongue brought forth another spasm of pain.

Suddenly he realized his surroundings.

Where the hell am I? Where're my clothes...my wallet? He bolted upright only to fall back again as every molecule in his head vibrated with a drumbeat of agony in response.

A few seconds passed before he summoned enough courage to open one eye. Cautiously he turned it around the room to see what he could.

Since that effort was rewarded somewhat painlessly, he slowly opened the other. He saw his clothing neatly folded on a chair beside the bed.

He relaxed somewhat—albeit with minimal movement.

But still the question lingered.

Where the hell am I?

A shadow flitted across the room and a form filled the doorway. Burdick swiveled his head to look and his confusion overcame the monumental onrush of pain. In the doorway was a young, dark-haired female of about twenty-two years of age, dressed in a red-and-white-striped shirt and an old pair of black slacks.

Under her arm, she carried a paint-stained, whitish-gray smock.

What the hell?

She flashed a warm smile at him but Burdick was too stunned to smile back—even if his physical condition would have permitted such civility.

“So it is that you live after all, *yanqui*. I was beginning to have doubt,” she said. “Get dressed and we take breakfast.” She softly closed the door.

His memory began returning in bits and pieces as he swung his bare feet onto the threadbare rug in the room. He cursed when he saw blood on his new sport coat.

He remembered that he had lost his balance while exiting *Club Melodias*. Then the lights went out.

As he bent to tie his shoes, he touched his forehead to ease the sharp pain there and discovered a long gash—the source of blood on his coat. He also remembered the girl—a lady of the evening who plied her trade in *Melodias*—but he couldn’t remember if they had done anything or not.

Smells of toasting bread and coffee perfumed the small apartment as he stepped unsteadily from the bedroom. His slowly focusing eyes picked out a couch with a blanket and pillow—obviously where she had spent the night. A worn, overstuffed chair next to the couch and a small stove, refrigerator and table with two unmatched chairs made up the remainder of the apartment.

The girl—he remembered now that her name was Elena—was bent over taking the bread from the oven.

Burdick still felt too sick to admire the view.

She set a chipped plate with a large slice of tasted French bread smeared with orange marmalade in front of one of the chairs and indicated that he should sit. As he took the chair, she handed him a large cup of very strong espresso.

Burdick accepted it gratefully, inhaling the aroma.

Elena sat opposite him. Her bread was on a napkin and her small portion of coffee was in a thick glass.

Sipping the coffee made Burdick feel as if life were almost worth resuming. He studied the young girl seated across from him and had no trouble understanding why he had chosen her from all the others that worked the bar that was popular with American servicemen. Her flawless olive complexion was punctuated by the dark eyes that sparkled when they caught the light. Her shoulder-length dark hair was now held in place by a cheap red barrette.

He still had no clue as to how he ended up here and what happened after he had knocked himself out. He put a hand to his head and winced again as he touched the wound.

“Do you still have pain?” she asked.

“Yeah. Some of it is from the rum and some from... what happened? How did I get this?”

She took a sip of her espresso and smiled. “You insisted on being a gentleman and taking my arm when we leave.” She seemed to struggle with her English in trying to explain. “You slip on piece of ice and hit the head on the door.”

Burdick again touched his forehead and grimaced. “Then... then, did we... I mean... what the hell happened after that?”

“I bring you here... undress you and put you in bed. You never wake up.”

“Then... we didn’t...?”

“No.”

“Most prostitutes wouldn’t do something like that,” he said as much as to himself as to her.

“No.” Her voice was quiet and somehow sad.

“I’m sorry, Elena... I didn’t mean...”

“To speak truth? I am a *puta*.” She looked past him and out the apartment’s one window focusing on something unseen. “It is something of which I have no pride.”

“Why did you become a... a...?”

“A whore, as you Americans say? *Es necesario*.”

Not knowing how to respond to that, Burdick looked desperately for some way to redeem himself in her eyes. He spotted an easel holding a painting in one corner and got up to walk over.

“Hey! Isn’t that the church that’s next to the palace?”

“*Sí*. It is *La Almudena*,” she explained. “It will be Cathedral of Madrid when it is finished.”

“You painted this?”

“It is my *pasatiempo*... how you say? A hobby,” she said shyly. “I am happy that my painting pleases to you.”

He scanned the room. Other paintings were also city scenes. “Did you do these, also?”

“Yes. such a beautiful city is Madrid. I have many things of which to paint.”

“You should try selling them instead of... of...” he stammered.

She let it pass and took a seat on the arm of the overstuffed chair.

Burdick turned to face her. “You never answered my question. Why did you do this for me?”

“Most G. I. would not try to treat someone like me as a lady.” Her eyes never left his face and she then smiled. “Besides. When the blood started and mixed with the snow, you look like a clown.

“I like clowns.” Her smile was fixed but a dark shadow crept across her features.

Burdick waited without comment.

Elena turned her gaze to the bare floor and her tiny fists clenched until the knuckles showed white. “I do what I do because I must have money to live,” she said in a very soft voice. “Not long ago, when my parents still live, I was student of art in university.

“Now I must support myself any way I can. Selling paintings does not bring much moneys.”

Burdick put his hand over her fists. She stiffened for a second. “What happened to your parents” he asked quietly.

“They were arrested by *Guardia Civil*. My father was professor of history at *Universidad Complutense*. He opposed Franco. Those who oppose *El Caudillo* are not allowed to be free. I was staying at the house of a friend when the *Guardia* came in the middle of the night or I would have been arrested, too.

“They were tortured and died in prison.” A solitary tear started down her left cheek.

“Why were they arrested?”

“They say my father was *comunista*.”

“Was he a communist?”

“Does it matter?” Bitterness dripped from her voice. She turned away so he couldn’t see the tears start.

Burdick stood and embraced her, conscious of the swelling of her breasts against his chest but it was Elena who broke the moment when she stepped back.

“Now you know my secrets,” she said with a brave little smile. “You must now tell me of yours.”

“There aren’t any secrets. I’m in the Air Force—you knew that. I work in communications and hate it.”

“Does your father still live?”

Now it was his face that darkened. “Oh, yeah. He still lives. He’s a high-and-mighty congressman and a real asshole.”

Elena laughed. “I know what is asshole but is important a congaress-man?”

“A congaress-man,” he mocked, “is an important asshole—or at least thinks he is. Mine is worse than most. He really believes that he is the messenger from God sent down to engrave laws on stone tablets.”

“I do not understand. You dislike your father?”

“Dislike is not the word.” He sat silently for a moment. “All my life our entire world has revolved around what he’s wanted to do. My mother, my sister and I never had a normal life because he was always running for some office or the other.

“And we had to support his way of life. Everything we do has to reflect favorably on him.” He got up and stood closer to the painting as if admiring it.

“In some ways, I envy you, Elena. At least your parents loved you. My father has loved only power and himself ever since I can remember.

“That’s why I joined the Air Force—just to get away from him.”

Wordlessly, Elena moved toward him, her face turned upward as she waited expectantly.

He took her in his arms and the kiss was tender but surprisingly chaste. The mood was broken when Burdick caught sight of the clock on the table.

“Holy Christ!” He looked at his watch to confirm the time. “I have to get back to the base—I go on duty in two hours.”

She looked down at the floor. “Will I see you again?”

“Yeah. You bet. But not at *Melodias*. I don’t want to think of you in that place again.”

“Are you offering something else, Douglas?” Her question was soft.

Burdick hesitated. He knew guys who had their own private whores. They paid the rent and bought the food and the girls remained faithful to them as long as it lasted. But, in 1955, the Air Force frowned on such behavior, considering it ‘conduct unbecoming an airman.’

“I’m sorry. I can’t. My father....”

“I understand. We cannot do something that would embarrass the congaress-man.” A sad smile crossed her face.

“Look! I can get back into town Thursday. Can we have dinner?” She slipped his sport coat on and was tying his tie—in the 1950s, American servicemen had to wear civilian clothing with coat and tie when off base in Spain. “After all, I owe you a lot for what you did for me last night.”

“What I did, I did because I wanted to do,” she said. “You owe me nothing.

“But, yes. I would love to have dinner with you Thursday.” She gave him a small kiss on the cheek as he left the apartment.

2 February, 1955

He had the midnight shift on Wednesday night. When seven o'clock finally arrived, he ate a perfunctory breakfast in the mess hall and ran back to the barracks where he carefully wound his alarm and set it for two-thirty.

As it shattered his dreams, he arose, showered and dressed in a blue suit. Passing through the squadron orderly room, he checked his mail and found a letter from his mother.

Tearing it open, he read as he walked to the bus stop. The letter seemed to be filled with his father's propaganda.

Christ! I wonder if he censors her letters. Then he thought about Elena. *I wonder what the old man would say—or do—if he knew what I was planning tonight.* He grinned at his father's imaginary discomfiture.

As he got off the bus downtown, he saw a *florista* near the *Corte Inglés* department store and bought a small bouquet of violets.

Elena opened the door dressed in a simple black dress with a gold locket hanging around the high neck.

She looked like anything but a prostitute.

Burdick had learned the local tradition of having *tapas* before a leisurely dinner at ten or eleven o'clock. So the couple set off wandering toward the *Puerta del Sol*, which, as usual, was bustling with crowds checking out the various *tapas* bars.

Despite being early February, it was a mild night in Madrid and the night—and Elena—was soft on Burdick's arm as they drifted into the *Plaza Mayor*.

Crossing the historic plaza, they wandered through the *Cuevas*—ancient buildings hosting small bars and cafes. Going from bar to bar, they nibbled sautéed mushrooms, potato omelets, fried squid and various other appetizers. Burdick had a small glass of beer in each one while Elena sipped dry sherry.

They talked of life and each other while the old man at the organ in the *Mesón del Champiñon* serenaded the couple with love songs. As they left, Burdick dropped a fifty-peseta coin in the old man's tip dish.

After dinner at one of Madrid's oldest restaurants, they returned to the *Plaza Mayor*.

“This is one of my favorite places in the city, Douglas.” Soft notes from guitars kept time with their footsteps on the cobblestones. “It is especially beautiful tonight.”

“Maybe it’s the company we’re keeping,” Burdick responded—not entirely in jest. He stopped and carefully selected a rose from a flower woman’s cart.

The moon smiled down on them as she accepted it with a small kiss.

Hand-in-hand they strolled back toward her apartment, oblivious to the crowds around them.

Burdick didn’t make it back to the base that night.

6 March, 1955

His nights at Elena’s apartment increased. He started buying groceries at the Base Commissary to make up for her lost income on the nights he spent with her.

He refused to let his mind focus on the nights that she spent at *Club Melodias*.

“What’s the name of that museum here?” he asked one Sunday morning as they were having coffee. “Prague? Nah! Hell, that’s in Czechoslovakia. *Prado!* That’s it! Why don’t we go there today?”

“Douglas, I would like very much to go with you to the *Prado*. But what if someone sees us—someone who knows you?”

“I don’t give a damn!” he said sweeping her up into his arms. “Let ’em find their own girl.”

They spent the afternoon perusing some of the greatest works of art in the world and Burdick was amazed at Elena’s knowledge of the masters’ techniques and history. Standing in front of a Goya painting of the royal family, she smiled sadly. “If Goya were alive today, he would probably be arrested by the *Guardia*.” Quickly she looked around to make sure that no one had heard the comment.”

He took her hand and squeezed it.

“Burdick? I thought that was you,” a tall man with glasses came up to them.

“Hello, Captain.” He looked at Elena. “Sir, this is my friend Elena González. Elena, this is my boss, Captain Stewart.”

Elena put out her hand and said, “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Stewart said nothing in reply. He took her hand briefly and then looked at Burdick and then back at Elena. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Airman.”

“Yes, sir.”

The captain walked away toward another group of Americans.

“Will that cause you trouble, Douglas?”

“No. I don’t think so. There’s no way that he could know that you’re.... I’m sorry, Elena.”

She said nothing as they walked out of the museum and took a bench on the wide boulevard in front where they were content to let the world pass them by as they held hands.

Walking back along *Carrera de San Jerónimo*, they passed the *Cortés*—the Spanish Parliament. Elena had been urging him to let her paint his portrait.

“O. K. I’ll let you,” he conceded and he laughed. “But you’ve gotta paint me as a clown so you can never forget how we met.”

The lyric sound of her laughter brought suspicious stares from the *Guardia Civiles* who were standing guard. Laughter was always regarded with suspicion by the *Guardia* during Franco’s regime.

As they reached the plaza nearest Elena’s street, Burdick steered her onto another of the five streets that radiated from the square. “There’s a bar down here that I’ve heard a lot about,” he explained. “Supposedly it’s where the movie stars all hang out when they are in town. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

A red sign, *Cuevas del Sésamo*, greeted them on the street. There was only an empty bar.

Finally Elena spotted the sign that directed them to the real bar in the basement. As they found the stairway, the rhythmic notes of a piano playing the theme from *Casablanca* floated up the stairway mingled with murmurs of bubbly conversation and a cloud of cigarette smoke.

A sign painted on the wall at the bottom of the stairs informed them that ‘Entry is forbidden to anyone who understands geometry.’

“I guess that means I’m welcome,” Burdick joked. Elena was looking between the open steps into a private room trying to get a glimpse of any celebrities who might be there. When Burdick looked all he could see was a pair of tuxedo trousers and part of an elegant evening gown.

The owner, Angelo, interrupted their snooping and led them to a small table with bench-type seats. Posters on the walls advertised writers’ conferences, some current and some long past. On the ceilings and the high portions of the walls, quotes from famous writers had been carefully inscribed.

Elena's hair swung as she swiveled her head trying to read all the quotes. As she turned back toward Burdick, he grabbed her face between his hands and started a soul- and tongue-searching kiss.

The kiss was interrupted by a blow to his back. Angrily he turned and saw a big man in an ill-fitting suit with a large grin.

Christ! Just what I needed! Al Davies, the biggest loud-mouthed sonofabitch in the squadron!

“Hey, Dougie, boy! Whatcha doin’ out here? Bein’ the son of a famous congressman, I figured you’d be under the stairs hobnobbing with Sinatra and Gardner.” His laugh boomed raucously around the small room and drowned out the sound of the piano.

Uninvited, Davies wormed his way onto the seat across the table from them. His breath reeked of beer, garlic and bad oral hygiene. Burdick saw Elena flinch slightly when the odiferous vapors reached her nostrils.

“And who is this lovely lady?” Davies continued when Burdick ignored him. “Hey! You look familiar, baby!”

Burdick saw the comprehension dawn in his eyes.

“She’s none of your goddamned business, Davies,” he said as he picked up the pitcher of sangria on their table and angrily splashed some into a glass. “Now get the hell away from us and leave us alone!”

He downed the drink in one gulp. Elena said nothing but sat with downcast eyes. The piano player had just struck up a plaintive tune that neither of them recognized and the smoky cloud in the room seemed to thicken and close in on them.

It was obvious that Davies knew who—and what—Elena was.

And one did not bring hookers to the south side of the *Gran Vía*.

It would be all over the squadron by tomorrow.

11 March, 1955

“Burdick! You need to get your ass over to the Comm Center!” The orderly room clerk had stuck his head in the door of the barracks room. “Sergeant Soto wants to see you NOW!”

Wondering about the message and trying to remember if he had done anything wrong at work, he grabbed his service cap and headed out the door to the Sixteenth Air Force Headquarters building where the communications center was located.

As he walked up the circular drive to the red brick building, images of Elena kept surfacing in his mind—her paint-smudged nose as she stood in front of her easel; her enchanting smile when they awoke in the mornings; and her incredible beauty that transfixed him when they went to bed.

He pushed his way through the glass doors and noticed that the duty officer, a lieutenant colonel, was wearing a Class A blue uniform.

That’s odd. It’s after four and they usually wear fatigues then.

A wave of noise from the bank of teletype machines washed over him as he entered the center. Soto, a large man with master sergeant’s stripes, looked up and waved him back to the captain’s office.

Remembering the scene in the *Prado* with the captain, Burdick’s stomach tightened as he walked to the back of the center. He suddenly felt as if he had to move his bowels and stopped. He farted, easing the pressure somewhat and summoned his courage to continue on.

As he opened the door to Stewart’s office, a well-dressed, older version of himself stood up and held out his arms.

“Doug! Boy, it’s great to see you again!” said Denton T. Burdick, Representative to Congress from the Eleventh Vermont District and ranking member of the Armed Forces Appropriations Committee.

“Hello, father,” Burdick said dully. He guessed that the congressman had justified his trip to voters by calling it a fact-finding mission.

I think I know what facts he’s ‘seeking to find.’ His stomach began churning again but he tried his best to keep his face neutral.

“Jim, could we borrow your office for a few minutes?” the elder Burdick asked Stewart. “My son and I have to catch up on a few things.”

“Take all the time you need, Congressman,” Stewart said rising from his high-backed leather chair. “It’s time for Happy Hour at the Officer’s Club anyway.” He put on his service cap. “If you’re going to be in that neighborhood later, sir, I would be happy to buy you a drink.”

“A tempting offer, Jim. But I have only a short time here. Our mission is really at the base in Zaragoza and we just stopped here at Torrejón for a couple of hours to refuel and so that I could see my son.”

“The offer still stands if you find the time, sir.” He did not invite Burdick—an enlisted man.

Father and son made the requisite small talk. His mother and sister were fine. How was he doing?

The re-election went well in November and he really had no solid opposition. The Republicans had gained control of Congress and that would enable President Eisenhower the chance to institute his agenda.

His father got to the point.

“I hear you’re seeing someone on a pretty regular basis,” he put forth the gambit.

Burdick stared at the duty roster posted on Stewart’s bulletin board and ignored the comment.

“Douglas, you have got to realize that I hold an important position and I’m in the public eye. The work I do is very important to me and to the country as well. I cannot tolerate your doing anything that will interfere with that work.”

“You needn’t worry, Father,” Burdick answered with fire rising inside. “I won’t embarrass your position!” The bitterness dripping from his lips was almost palpable.

“You already have! When I find out that my only son is openly keeping company with a goddamned common street whore, wouldn’t you call that an embarrassment?” He turned for a moment toward the bulletin board.

“Jesus Christ, Doug! It’s O.K. if you want to pick one up occasionally—discretely—but the information that I have is that you are about to move in with this slut!”

Burdick whirled to face his father. “You can’t call her that, goddamn it! You don’t know her! She’s different!”

“I don’t give a damn if she is different. The only thing I am thinking about is how this is going to play out in the press if they get wind of it. I’m in line to be the next Speaker of the House and I’m not going to let you and some goddamned hooker destroy that!”

Before Burdick could answer, he continued. “It’s obvious that you’re doing this just to spite me. I wanted you to go to college—you chose the military. I suggested West Point or Annapolis—you enlisted in the Air Force.

“All your life you’ve been against what I stand for and what I’ve been trying to do.” He paused and took a couple of breaths to control his anger. “This crap with the whore—it’s the same thing. You’re just trying to frustrate me more.

“Well, it’s not going to work, Doug. You continue this relationship and I’ll see to it that you’re transferred to Thule, Greenland, for the rest of your time in the Air Force!

“I always cover my bets!” he shouted as he walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

Burdick sat alone in the empty office. The pounding in his head seemed to be keeping time with the clattering of the teletype keys coming through the wall. Despair hung heavy in his heart.

He knew that his father meant every word.

I have to get to Elena to warn her.

He didn’t have duty until tomorrow afternoon so he started out to the barracks to change clothes when the klaxon in the hallway went off.

”ALL PERSONNEL. THE STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND HAS IMPLEMENTED AN OPERATIONAL READINESS INSPECTION FOR TORREJON AIR BASE. ALL PASSES AND LEAVES ARE CANCELLED AND ALL PERSONNEL WILL REPORT TO THEIR DUTY STATION FOR ASSIGNMENT.”

The base would be quarantined for the next seventy-two hours—no one in or out.

With a sigh he turned back to the Comm Center to report to Soto for instructions.

15 March, 1955

The alert finally ended.

It seemed to Burdick that it had been forever since he’d last held Elena. He impatiently waited for the bus to ride it to the *Puerta del Sol*. From there he practically ran to *Calle de la Cruz* and thundered up the stairs.

Elena jumped to her feet when he rushed in the door. “Oh, Douglas. I was so worried. I hear nothing from you for three days and I think that maybe you not wish to see me anymore.”

“Fat chance of that. In fact, I am going to do the opposite. I want to see you every day for the rest of my life.” He took her hand. “*Te amo, querida*. Will you marry me?”

“Te amo también, mi corazón/ But what of your father... what of your Air Force? Will they permit this?”

“I’m not going to ask them so they won’t know. But Elena, just so you know what you’re getting into—it will be rough if they find out. As an enlisted man, I can’t marry without permission so I could end up serving time in the stockade.

“And my father knows about you and has threatened me. I don’t think he’ll do anything to you but he may have me transferred far away.’ He took her face in his hands.

“But I’ll be back—no matter how long it takes.”

Elena broke free and a serious expression came over her face.

“Douglas, are you asking to marry me just to hurt your father?”

“No! I really do love you, Elena. I’m just saying that, when they find out, it’s going to be rough. I will likely be punished and you will be shunned by everyone who knows about it.”

“I do not care for myself—only you, Douglas.”

This time the kiss lasted quite a while.

When they finally broke apart, a thought occurred to Burdick. “How are we going to do this? I don’t think any priests in Madrid will marry us and we can’t use the base chaplain.”

She thought for a second. “I have a cousin who is a priest in Andorra. He is very open-minded.”

She called her cousin who agreed to marry them and they began making plans for the six-hour bus trip to the tiny country in the Pyrenees. Burdick was still wondering how he could get her a dependent’s ID card but decided that could wait until after the ceremony.

6 April 1955

The day finally arrived. Instead of the bus he decided to take one of the myriad cabs that waited just outside the base, promising the driver an extra hundred pesetas if he made it a quick trip. The driver complied. He tossed some pesetas at the man and ran around the double-parked green truck. A few drops of rain began falling from the leaden clouds.

He skidded to a stop as he reached Elena’s floor. A *Guardia Civil* in full uniform, his Sten machine gun slung muzzle down across his back, stood smoking in front of the shattered doorway.

“*Qué pasó?* What happened?”

He ground out the foul-smelling cigarette with his highly polished boot. “Is nothing, *yanqui*. We make arrest on a *prostituta* is all.” He laughed. “She was a pretty one and she must have been cheating you *americanos* because it was an American officer who turned her in.”

“What will happen to her?”

“She will be sent to prison, of course. Then she will be released in a few years with a shaven head.” He adjusted his leather tri-corner hat. “That is...if she survives. Our guards are not *simpáticos*.” He laughed as he walked away.

Burdick entered the apartment to find everything in disarray. The *Guardia Civil* were never gentle in their arrests—it was part of their mystique.

He found the picture of him made up as a clown, its frame broken. Neighbors peered from behind cracked doors at the big American as he walked to the stairs.

Outside, the green truck was gone, and with it, Elena. He knew he would never see her again. His father had covered his bet.

He looked again at the painting as the raindrops again started falling. A droplet ran down its cheeks and Burdick could swear he was crying.