

The Secret Rise of Skunk Works is an additional tale of The Imaginary 20th Century. It is a staging of the espionage activities of Harry Brown, and one of his agents, Barney G., who works in a hidden part of Burbank. The setting is 1938 into the fifties.

You know that you are living in history when every day feels like a month. And yet, Barney's story is a little different than that. He had to literally breathe the Second World War from a small room in Burbank. Every day, he had to listen to overwhelming radio transmissions, but never saw battle, or even flew on a bomber. He was like stomach bacteria—or a vacuole on a cell membrane—in the midst of war. His office was too irrelevant to be noticed. It was a converted garage that was built by Lockheed Corporation but proved too skinny for anything from 1938. One might call it a happy mistake.

Beyond the garage was a huge, scattered garden space. One orange tree left over from its decades as an orchard eventually grew as large as the small house beside it. But in 1938, the street went unnoticed, until the war overtook it.

Inside this tiny office, Barney was hired to listen, to never send a message. On the day he was hired, his employer, Harry Brown showered him with faint praise. At their one and only meeting, Harry stared him down, and said: "I prefer agents who have a proven history of criminality. Nothing lethal but showing disrespect for the law. I want flexible morality, the ability to lie when needed. But to me, and let me repeat—to me-- they can never lie. To me, they are as loyal as a smart hunting dog."

"I don't want you to think you know the big picture. You cannot. You send no messages on your own. No typewriter in the room. Your job is to be the ears of a mission larger than history."

Lockheed was beginning to become a player in world aviation. After outrunning bankruptcy in 1934, it specialized in cargo planes. Then its Model 10 Electra (partly funded through Japan, ironically enough) was used for reconnaissance by the Dutch and by the Polish. But most of all, the British got wind of Lockheed. France and Great Britain saw in advance, as one writer put it, "the shadow of tomorrow." The war in Spain was ending miserably. Who could stop the Nazis, who would never be satisfied with just the Sudetenland? Only the prime minister Chamberlain believed in peace in our time.

Lockheed was a small company three thousand miles from the Atlantic. And yet, the British government invited them to London in 1938. Under great secrecy, the Lockheed engineers were shown stolen blueprints of bombers planned by Germany. A contract for warplanes was arranged while Chamberlain signed the peace accord in Munich.

Thus, espionage grew by leaps and bounds; layer upon layer added day by day. Much of that was because the Roosevelt Administration grew ever more convinced that a world war was inevitable, and that the US would have to enter. But the isolationist American public—even as

the news darkened-- were still afraid of European entanglements; while the threat of Japan seemed incomprehensible. So in the meantime, the wrong news had to be covered up.

There were millions of secret dollars already floating at once. Dozens of airplane manufacturers competed for those dollars, especially Douglas and Boeing on the west coast. The Roosevelt Administration worried that airplanes must be built in the heartland, away from oceans vulnerable to air power and submarines. But unfortunately, the heartland was not where airplanes were being built. Still, every fact had to be doctored carefully before it was released.

In a matter of three months, industrial espionage quadrupled (then grew by a factor of ten). This resembled the free-for-all situation in Europe during the naval buildup of 1900; spies of every variety for hire. It was once described as an omelet in search of an egg, private greedy agents everywhere. In the US, federal agencies put in charge of spying remained slender until the Second World War took off. War secrets had to be filtered as if they were stolen patents. Everything was still a blueprint, or a formula, passed along through back channels. There was no radar quite yet; yet so many intruders to watch out for. There were secrets crisscrossing from Britain, Germany, Japan, Russia, Washington itself. There were secret government cells within the navy yards in New York City—and worry about fifth columnists, especially at the airplane factories in Burbank, Glendale, and down along the ports; certainly at Lockheed. Barney had to be friendly to Lockheed people in order to guess who might be a spy for a foreign power, for a rival company, for undercover news, and more. I can't imagine he was any good at it. He even left special shirts and ties hanging behind a curtain in his room, to change for various occasions.

Most of all, there was the pians while staying mum. Nothing he received on the radio could find its way to any fellow workers. Daydreams about what might actually be happening filled his waking moments. He would imagine war spies as pirates, privateers and buccaneers. He even visited the sound stage filled with water when Warners shot *The Sea Hawk*, with Errol Flynn as a pirate spy; and Claude Rains as an Elizabethan Nazi. The business espionage though, between manufacturers, was probably as important as court intrigue. Harry was right. There was so much dishonor to spread around.

In Los Angeles, back channels were hastily set up in the spring of 1938. They were paid for mostly by the oligarchs who ran the city, and some by the mayor's office (easily the most corrupt mayor in the US), some by the governor of California who hated Los Angeles. And these back channels were extensive: everywhere and throughout the west-- and Mexico, where agent provocateurs had been hired by Harry since the Mexican Revolution and civil war. This was multi-dimensional freebooting contract espionage. One had to keep many lids closed at once, and others open at the same time; while allowing tons of vital scientific and military data to pass safely across a distribution network ten thousand miles long.

For Los Angeles, there was one person usually put in charge of such back channels, when they were this massive. He was known by his assumed, false name, Harry Brown. He was a lawyer by trade, who kept a perversely low profile-- almost an agoraphobic. Since 1898, as a very young man, he had been erasing crimes embarrassing to the oligarchs of Los Angeles.

Harry Brown stayed mostly on an estate toward the eastern edge of the LA basin. He also had agents in Mexico, even Latin America, because he had worked secretly with the Marines on special missions since 1905. Harry famously (at least to the FBI) had something to do with the American entry into the First World War. He worked at being a face you could easily forget. And he knew had to build imaginary events, in the newspaper especially. To summarize his ethics, he often liked to say. “lucky for me, fictions are more believable than facts.”

Harry knew about a Guttierrez or Gomez clan in Mexico. They were known as thieves who (a bit like Harry) lived by a warped but understandable code. In other words, the Guttierrez Gomez clan were trustworthy monsters. They even had extended family, in Burbank, a thirty-four-year-old man named Bernardo Guttierrez (sometimes Gomez) Gantenbein. Being Mexican on his mother’s side—and having an unpronounceable German last name-- Bernardo’s parents (and then Bernardo himself) deodorized his legal records a bit. Bernardo became an Americanized Bernard. Gomez became Gomes (from who knows where). And Gantenbein couldn’t be helped, was almost impossible for anyone to remember. It was a German name meaning wild goose (for a man who loved hunting for geese).

There was no way to say all or much of Bernardo’s name at once. So from Bernard, he became Barney (the more American the better, to cover up the Mexican criminal side, and even the German side). But unfortunately, just about every third man was called Barney. So, at last, Bernard -- with all those suspicious G’s-- became simply Barney G.

“Barney G” was no go-getter. After puberty, he quickly joined the floating class even before the start of the Great Depression. He had a get-along/go-along quality about him, a very open face. He liked to nest anywhere. His wife made sure there were no comfortable couches for him to drop off planet earth. Barney would have kept floating that way, drive a truck, go to war, if not for Harry Brown, his savior. Harry taught him everything he needed to know—how to be slightly less, yet passably complete. We can only guess what Barney’s moral journey was like inside that room, certainly not straight and narrow, knowing what he did. Harry undoubtedly helped to destroy parts of Barney’s personality that were too jittery or useless. Perhaps that made Barney more essential. I have my doubts. Harry liked to say, people are like wagons. Four wheels are plenty.

Strange that Barney’s life, or whatever that was, had finally come to light; as part of the growing fascination with the recent discovery of Harry Brown’s files. Barney is on the ledger, in low profile. Articles recently about Barney have compared him to Kafka’s Joseph K, if Joseph had better furniture.

Barney stayed almost buried in his little office throughout the war. One historian called him “a vacuole to history.” He remained in that 9x15 foot office for at least six hours a day, sometimes twelve. He stayed at his job for seven years at least, in that single room (with skylight added, to keep him from getting suicidal). That means at least two years after activities were wrapped into Skunk Works in 1943. One theory is that he stayed working there into the fifties.

Barney was undoubtedly a prologue to the postwar FBI and CIA, like an Eric Ambler version of a John Le Carré novel. Most certainly, he was a prelude to how Lockheed kept secrets

during the war and afterward. Starting in 1943, Skunk Works became “the secret wing” of Lockheed, where reconnaissance and spyware were developed, like the infamous U2 aircraft during the Cold War.

One might well theorize Barney as cybernetic, even poststructural-- lost in an internet anti-zone long before the Internet existed. Like so many of us today, he survived along a highly physical trail of bytes and information. And his workload stretched as time went on. He was soon also the courier for engineer’s drawings from Disney, while the film *Victory Through Air Power* was made. His back-channel room was only blocks from the Disney Studios as well, and less than a mile to Warners. He was sometimes a courier for Hollywood, even during the wartime strikes.

Victory Through Air Power was expensively made to justify the vastly expanded Air Force. To Barney, it seemed an extension of Skunk Works, or even those Snafu cartoons from Warner’s animators. Still, he had a Disney file that kept moving around. One drawing has survived.

It took months, but at last, we have reassembled Barney’s room, pretty much as it was. Visitors can even sit down on the chair Harry gave him and absorb something of Barney. His desk, with its own office swivel chair, was on his right. But inside that lounge chair provided by the boss was Barney’s sanctum.

Harry admitted that a worker sitting and just listening, like a piece of plumbing, was unfair. “I have to apologize for how boring and dehumanizing your life will become. To remind you that I understand, however, I have bought for you the most comfortable chair imaginable. You are entitled to an inner sanctum. On that chair, you will listen to the radio beyond what humans can bear. There will be special briefings, searching for chinks in everyone’s armor. So, I want you have as much freedom as possible. You are allowed to take an occasional snort, but never get drunk. You can smoke until the room is in fog, brush away ashes from your shirt when you nod off, but never start a fire, at the risk of your future. You can regularly take a few breaths out in the yard, but never engage in conversation there. You can even bend the rules, especially with your wife and two children over the weekends. I say bend the rules because I know your true nature. You live mentally on your pirate ship. However, when you bend the law, it must be faint. If you slip into a real crime, never bring it to my door. Never. When I speak, usually on the phone, you answer only with the truth, however strange or illegal that may be. So whatever daydreams you need, no matter how much your mind takes flight, you must stay put, as if you worked inside a flowerpot. I want you to be comfortable, to be nice to yourself. I will protect you at all costs. However, if you break any of my simple rules and damage the mission, I can only guess what might become of you. Because I won’t be the only one upset. There are governments and armies. The quicker you forget a message, the better.”

Barney’s room was a lair in miniature. It was speck of dust that in no way resembled Harry’s estate. Barney room is intact again, about the same as in 1938 onward. Visitors are invited to enter and sit where he sat; live a few minutes as Barney. A few minutes deliver more than enough. Of course, we’re all Barneys, like Bartlebys in 2022. Barney had a Philco radio on

his left; it also carried on-the-air police communications. To his right, on his desk, there was an international short-wave radio that could reach New York, even London sometimes; as well as ships, even submarines, at sea, especially off the ports of Los Angeles.

We are not quite sure how his reports were passed along, every two days or so. There was no typewriter, no envelopes to mail; nothing to inspire him to communicate to anyone, only to answer when called. He had some kind of document to fill in, with some room at the back for comments.

His library was minimal: a few pop science (“scientifiction”) magazines, western novels, an occasional crime novel, and of course, Alexander Seversky’s *Victory Through Air Power*, inspiration for the Disney propaganda masterpiece.

So Barney spent much of the time lost in thought, half listening. He daydreams as we all must, when history tears the ordinary fabric of our life; lets us keep going, but not much else. Like all Americans after September 1939, he kept maps of how badly the war was going. This was Harry’s idea, to help Barney remember how dangerous his job was, despite the liminal cushioned day and nights. The detached back channels were actually life and death. Barney eventually knew too much. What he knew that the average lay public did not, we can only surmise. Nor how it felt to keep so quiet. It must have felt like a deaf mute watching newsreels. Remaining silent with outsiders was his byword, though he was chatty enough with the mailman, especially with his wife (who found him exhausting-- always wound up like a top). He invented parlor games about not being able to escape. On the walls, he occasionally sketched evil flight patterns, as part of imaginary firefights in Africa, or Polynesia.

Two stuffed birds were perched in the room. They both looked as dumb as a lox, but gorgeous. He arranged one as if it were flying into a little movie set. The other just stared back at him, as if to say: I know why I’m here. To generate his wildlife movie set into mental pictures, he bought two cheap chromos of genre landscape paintings. By following the diagonals of light across the paintings, his mind could float into the woods. You might ask why such cheap chromos. He could have persuaded Harry to pay for something better. Barney never trusted originals as much as copies anyway. He used to sign off as “your carbon copy.”

On weekends, Barney would drive down to Mulholland preserve, and go hunting, especially for birds. He always took his two children along for company (his wife had the stamina to refuse). But again, like gears up a steep hill, even his family bonding slipped into reverse (not that Barney quite noticed, smiling while his bird dogs smiled beside him). The rest is predictable. Both of his children went through intensive therapy years later; the psychiatric death and nervous flight of birds were reenacted in session after session.

For the past year, two anthropologists from UCLA have been looking for any trace of Barney’s existence beyond Lockheed, Skunkworks and his sanctum. A scrap of paper from Barney was found in Harry’s famous Third Act file. As Harry liked to say, “Whenever I have a second act, it is always followed by another second act.”

As always with Harry, this was an inversion of how he operated. In fact, when his estate was finally torn down, a few metal boxes of legal documents were found, each stamped the Third Act. Attempts to decode Barney's little note await a fuller understanding of Harry's sense of humor. He used to say: "My surgery does not need anesthesia. But a week later, you look down, and discover that your right kidney is gone." Barney was a gear in the Third Act, filled with espionage codes, as the Army centralized its spying missions. By the time of the Cold War, old Harry settled down to long breakfasts, and new ventures. We like to imagine, at least that Barney was invited to one of these breakfasts. But whether they had much to say to each other is difficult to assess. I suppose Harry would gratefully thank Barney, because thanking doesn't cost any money. We know that Barney outlived Harry, but not in his mind's eye. Who else among Harry's back channel he met is gradually being discovered.