

The Metamorphosis

By Brice Austin

I'm a lawyer, but I'm hoping you won't hold that against me. To be more specific, I'm a copyright lawyer, which is worse, because that means people tend to think I'm boring instead of slimy. Most folks will take unscrupulous to dull any day!

Wait, please, don't stand up and walk away—there's this story I have to tell you and it really is pretty interesting. You see, I represented plaintiff in the case of Imago Books vs. Thomas Henning, or at least I would have represented if it had ever gone to trial. Haven't heard of it? I guess I'm not surprised. Gag orders were part of the out-of-court settlement. I'm not supposed to be talking about it either, but I just don't give a damn anymore.

Here are the facts, bear with me. Imago, Inc made a product which they called the "Image Book," an electronic device you could hook up directly to your brain with wireless electrodes. Then, when you read one of the million e-books in the Imago library on their device, and your mind created images based on the text, you could actually see those images as fully-realized objects. What you saw depended a bit on how your brain worked, on what kind of visual abilities you had. For some those images were incomplete, fleeting, maybe the heroine's beautiful blue eyes (eyes like yours, say), but others could see entire characters, acting out the plot on the landscape of the Image Book 3-D panel in front of them. And then there was Thomas Henning. He was an outlier, a teenage boy with mental and visual abilities from the far side of the bell curve. What *he* saw when he read an Image Book actually came to life.

I know what you're thinking: *Bullshit!* That was my first reaction, too. It still is until I've had a little too much to drink, until I've reached that point at which I can willingly suspend disbelief long enough to glimpse the truth.

What? Yeah, I do realize I'm headed in that direction now, fast. That's the intent. Can I get you something else, too, while I'm at it?

The Henning case wasn't the first one I'd worked for Imago. There were other customers with superior mental and visual abilities who had come to our attention, though none quite like Thomas. Some of those had managed to capture the images they created while reading Imago's books and were posting them to the Internet. My client sued, claiming the characters were protected by Copyright Law.

Ridiculous? No, not at all. Someone else's representation of Mickey Mouse is still Mickey Mouse, right? That was one of the arguments I used in my cease-and-desist letters, and in the few cases that went beyond that, though none ever actually made it to trial. In the Copyright World, I've found that a little intimidation goes a long way. The only thing you have to be careful about, really, is not to invoke what I call the GSF, the "Girl Scout Factor." A few years ago (you might remember this), some of my colleagues, at the behest of their clients, tried to strong-arm the Girl Scouts into paying royalties for singing "Happy Birthday" around the campfire at their infringing little sleepovers. They had a pretty good case, too, I thought, until public opinion reared its ugly head.

Those were the Scouts, though, cute and cuddly. American as apple pie. There was nothing cute about Henning and his bug, believe me, and certainly nothing much American. The public, if they had ever gotten to know him, wouldn't have given a damn what happened to him. If anything, they would have joined me in crucifying him as a freak. Thomas Henning, you see, all of fifteen years old, was reading Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* on

an Image Book, which was probably enough all by itself to set public opinion against him, but then he brought the bug that had been Gregor Samsa to life.

What? Yeah, sure, this is America; you can read anything you want. Just so long as you aren't on trial for setting Frankenstein's insect loose in the world. If you ever find yourself in that position, then you'd best not admit to reading anything but the Bible. No, there's nothing wrong with being an intellectual, but if you're really smart, you'll keep that to yourself. It's the original "Don't ask, don't tell!"

Yeah sure, I've read Kafka myself, but I wouldn't have brought that up in the courtroom. I'd have squelched Henning for being a snot-nosed little son-of-a-bitch who thought he was so much smarter than the rest of us that he arrogantly set a monster loose on the world. Defense would have no doubt fired back saying that the bug could not have been created without my client's Image Book, that clearly it was a defective product, but then I could have countered that if you believe *that*, match companies ought to be held responsible for forest fires . . .

I'm sorry. I see those pretty blue eyes of yours are glazing over. Too much Lawyerese. Let me start over again and tell this story the way it ought to be told, the way I meant to tell it when I sat down here across from you.

I was on the phone a few weeks ago when my secretary, Jill, dropped a note on my desk. She's a leggy blonde, though not nearly as leggy or blonde as you. The note said *Call Mr. Edwards. He's got a new case for you. This one sounds interesting!*

What? No, she and I don't have a thing going. She's a sweet kid, engaged to be married this summer, if the world hasn't ended by then. Where was I? Right, Mr. E. He's the VP at Imago who, as Jill likes to say, holds my leash. I think Jill kind of likes that image of me: a snarling bulldog at the end of a chain. Oh, so you like it too, huh? Well, hold onto that thought until I finish my story! Anyway, I called Mr. E back straightaway, like I always do. He's my best client.

"This one's got a twist, Jensen," he said in his gravelly voice. There was some weird clicking going on in the background, like maybe he had another call coming in, but he didn't take it. "According to reports we're getting, the kid's used our device to create a bug that's actually alive."

I was on it. "And you're worried about liability?"

"Yes. There are concerns that this bug, if it really is real, might get out into the general population, or that Henning might even create more of them . . . either way, we're afraid Imago might be held responsible for the infestation, especially if the bug does something litigateable."

"Litigateable?"

"Yes, or whatever the term is that you and your ilk use."

I wasn't sure I liked being referred to as "ilk," but I suppose it beats his bad jokes. Stop me if you've heard this one before:

Question: What's the difference between a catfish and a lawyer?

Answer: One's a scum-sucking bottom feeder . . . and the other's a fish!

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Henning didn't live too far from our offices, just down the road in Antioch. So I made an appointment to see him, through his mom. She didn't seem surprised to hear from me. She sounded a little scared. She probably thought I was coming to help and maybe I was, though my loyalties, of course, lay with my client.

Mrs. Henning was a nervous bird. She met me at the door of her little two-bedroom brick house alongside the Rappahannock. She was brunette, petite, took good care of her

herself. Maybe a little too much so. She was one of those women who've had so much surgery that they start to look like they're made out of wax. She offered me some tea, which I accepted, even though I was on a bit of a tight schedule. I wanted her to feel comfortable. I wanted her to think I was on her side. We sat down together in the family room, where I learned (against my will) that her husband had left her. I wondered if that was because of the bug or her somewhat distorted wax cheekbones.

"I'm so glad you could come, Mr. Jensen," she said when we finally got around to the point of my visit. "I haven't known what to do! I can't tell you how much better I feel, knowing that Imago is so concerned."

"They're concerned, believe me," I said, which was true. It's just that they weren't concerned about the same things she was! I asked her if I could meet her son. She took me back to his room, though she wouldn't go into that room herself. Was she scared, or ashamed? Maybe a little of both.

Here's the skinny on Thomas Henning: he's skinny. He's fifteen. He's got long black hair that doesn't look like he combs it much. I have this game I play whenever I meet somebody who might wind up on the other side of the courtroom aisle from me: I make mental tick marks in two mental columns, one FOR and one AGAINST. Henning's age and unkempt hair meant two tick marks in the FOR column right off the bat: he looked like a punk. As I've already said, I figured the fact that he'd been reading Kafka gave me at least one more tick mark with any normal *People Magazine*-toting jury. The bug? Well, I didn't know if there really was one at that point, so I withheld judgment.

Henning was lying in bed, just like Gregor Samsa at the start of *The Metamorphosis*. Apparently, he had some sort of physical illness that kept him confined there (a tick mark AGAINST, damn it!). I sat down in the chair at the side of his bed.

"Hello there, Thomas," I said, hoping I sounded like a jovial uncle. "It's great to meet you. I'm Wes Jensen, an attorney for Imago Books. I'm not here in any legal capacity, though. They just asked me to find out from the horse's mouth what was going on here. And you're the horse, my friend!" I said, laughing.

Tell me you can't speak to me unless your own lawyer is present, I was thinking. Not because I liked him or his mother, particularly, but because I don't like seeing smart people do stupid things, even if they aren't my clients. And it was obvious right away that Thomas was smart. Like most folks, though, smart or stupid, he didn't know enough to keep his mouth shut.

"Horse's ass is more like it, Mr. Jensen," he said sadly, and that's when I got my first shock. His voice was metallic, like it was coming out of some box in his throat. The words sounded like they'd been through a meat grinder. And there was this strange clicking noise that came out along with them.

"I seriously doubt that, Thomas!" I said, as heartily as I could. Meanwhile, I was mentally chalking up tick marks, one on either side of the ledger. FOR: the metallic, inhuman sound of his voice. AGAINST: "Mr. Jensen." Unfortunately for me, the punk had good manners.

"It's true, sir," he said. "I didn't mean to bring Samsa to life, though! I was just reading the book. And now he says he's here to transform our world!"

"I see," I said, though I didn't. I don't drink on the job, at least not usually, so my sense of disbelief hadn't been suspended. I was wondering to myself if the kid might be mentally ill, if maybe what we needed here was not a lawyer but a psychologist and some anti-psychotics. If that turned out to be true, then Mr. E didn't have much to worry about. Just to be sure, though, I said: "Thomas, is there any way I could meet Samsa? Is he here?"

"Yes, sir," Henning said in his echo-chamber voice, clicking. "He lives under my bed."

Don't most imaginary monsters? I thought, and relaxed a little. This was going to turn out to be a fairy tale, after all. Still, I wasn't about to get down on my hands and knees and take a look. I was a kid once, too, after all! "Can you ask him to come out?"

Henning nodded. "I can ask." A stream of clicks came out of Henning's voice box. Those clicks were like little insects themselves, scurrying all over the room. And then I saw some movement along the edge of the navy-blue skirt that hung down from the bed. There was a ripple behind the cloth.

Instinctively, I recoiled. I heard more clicking, but this wasn't coming from Henning. Then something crawled out from under the end of the bed. Something like a silverfish, half my size. Only it had more legs than I was used to seeing on a bug, and it was as yellow as a stick of butter.

What? No, this is no joke. Why the hell would I make up something like this? Certainly not to try and impress you! I understand what you're saying, though. I didn't believe it either and I was sitting there looking at it. I told myself that it was just an image, that it was just Thomas Henning's vision of what Gregor Samsa had metamorphosed into, in the Kafka novella.

It certainly seemed like more than an image, though, more than just some hologram. The damned thing seemed awfully real! It raised up on its hind legs then and made a stream of clicking sounds at me. "What's it saying, Thomas?" I asked, trying to stay calm. I tried to pretend it was opposing counsel and that helped. It wasn't much more verminous, I decided, than some of the characters I'd encountered in the courtroom!

"He's saying hello," said Henning. "He's saying that he's honored to meet the creator of the Imago Book, which along with my mind has opened a gateway between his universe and ours, a cause for great celebration."

That was *Image* Book, I thought, and I wasn't its creator. I wasn't even a part of the Imago Company. I was just on a leash, a retainer. But I didn't see much point in trying to split hairs with an oversized insect, especially one that couldn't possibly be real. "Tell him I'm charmed," I managed to say.

Henning did some more clicking and then the bug phased out on me. One second it was there and in the next it was gone, which made me think that maybe it was just a hologram after all, a character constructed out of photons by the interaction of the Image Book with Thomas Henning's unusual mind.

"What happened to it?" I asked him.

Henning shrugged, then said in his metallic voice: "He comes and goes, Mr. Jensen. He's always making trips back and forth between his universe and ours. Making preparations, he says."

"Preparations for what?"

"I'm not sure."

I felt like I was being drawn into the world of a nut case. Maybe that was the key? Maybe Henning really was crazy, I thought again, maybe the Image Book was giving tangible form to his hallucinations, which were inspired by reading *The Metamorphosis*? After I left him, promising to come back the next week, I found myself wondering if maybe the Image Book could be used somehow for psychiatric therapy, if maybe that could be an untapped market for Imago? Or if maybe we were going to need to slap warning labels on the product, *Not to be used by those with psychiatric disorders*, just like video game makers are now required to say that their flashing screens may cause seizures?

When I got back to my office, Jill was waiting for me. "Well?" she said, arching a blonde eyebrow.

“Well, what?” I groused.

“Can the kid really bring characters in Image Books to life?”

“The images he’s able to create are more convincing than most.” That was all I was willing to concede at the moment.

“Mr. Edwards wanted to talk to you as soon as you got back.”

I grunted.

“He’s been calling every fifteen minutes.”

“So has the I.R.S.” I picked up the phone, though, as soon as I was alone. “Jensen, returning his call.” Then Mr. E himself was on the line.

“What did you find out about Henning?” he asked.

I told him my impressions. He asked me what I thought we should do. I’d been mulling that over ever since I’d parted company with the kid and his bug and his wax museum mother. “Let’s get an injunction until we have time to sort this one out,” I advised, “Let’s confiscate his Image Book. It may come to nothing in the end, but then again there may be liability issues. I don’t think we should take any chances.”

There was that same, irritating clicking in the background. I was wondering if it would be possible to get an injunction against the whole bullshit notion of Call Waiting when Mr. E came back at me with a response that was unexpected. “That seems a bit rash, Jensen. We don’t want it to get out in the papers that we’re going after kids, especially if it’s just one kid. Show me there’s a widespread trend and maybe we can label them all pirates. That’s worked before. Besides,” he added, “I have this interesting idea.”

I thought about telling Mr. E that I really didn’t believe there was a GSF here, that Henning was about as far from being a Girl Scout as you could get, but I held my tongue instead.

“Subsidiary rights. Just think of the merchandising possibilities, Jensen! Buy one of our Image Books and you can create your own customized, living toys from the text! There would be a licensing fee involved, of course.”

“Hmm. That *is* an interesting idea, Mr. Edwards.” I’d actually thought of it myself. “But don’t you think we should ascertain the true nature of what’s happening first? I’m not sure yet if what Henning has created is actually alive. And if it is alive, there may be dangers. What if the next book the kid reads is *Dracula*? *War of the Worlds*? What if he reads *Cat’s Cradle* and manufactures some real Ice-9?”

I lost him there. He’d probably never even heard of Vonnegut, even though the Imago Library contains twelve titles by that author. But he seemed to understand the nature of the problem in general. He grunted—and clicked. “All right, Jensen. This is what we pay you for, I suppose. See if you can find out what’s really going on. But don’t take too long. I don’t want one of our competitors beating us to the punch!”

He had a point. Imago’s market share was being cut into already by Microsoft’s new “Dream Book,” and Apple’s “MacMind.” If we were thinking of licensing our customers’ mental creations, you can bet they were, too. They might have even heard about Henning. They might be trying to contact him now. I knew I needed to go out there and see the kid again, soon, but I wasn’t eager to do so.

Christ, what does it take to get a waitress’s attention in this place? She’s been avoiding our table for so long that I’m beginning to think I accidentally filed a restraining order against her!

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I couldn't blame Mr. E, I guess. He hadn't seen what I'd seen. I wasn't even sure what I'd seen myself. Whatever it was, though, I was going to see it again. "If I don't come back to work this afternoon," I told Jill as I left the office, "Call Orkin, would you?"

That joke didn't get me much more than a distracted smile. She was busy, probably thinking about her upcoming wedding.

When I got to Henning's, the door was open. I knocked anyway and asked, softly at first but then finally in an outdoor voice, if anyone was at home. No answer. I have no excuse. I know enough not to enter someone's house, especially someone that my client might one day be suing. But I had a feeling something was wrong. "Hello?"

The family room was empty. Maybe Mrs. Henning had run down to the market, or the Plastic Surgeon's. Maybe she'd run away, like her husband. I wondered if Thomas and his bug were alone. I started to feel sorry for the kid again. He didn't seem to be there either, though. At least there wasn't any sound coming from his bedroom at the end of the hall. Wait. No, now there was. I heard clicking.

No, I'm not really a brave man. I thought about turning around and leaving, believe me. It's just that curiosity got the better of me. Did I tell you, by the way, that I have a license to carry a gun? It dates back to a previous case, Mega Records versus the "Groundhog Rapper," PunkSueTawny Phil. He (or she or it) was making a good living from mash-ups and sampling until the record company hit him up for royalties from all the other artists he was ripping. The details aren't important. It's just that after the injunction he swore he'd kill me. As a lawyer, anytime you can get the opposition to hate you instead of your client, you've done your job. Anyway, ever since then I've packed heat.

I took that gun out and walked down the hall to Henning's room. I tried the door, found it unlocked. I pushed it open . . . and saw bugs. Lots of them. There was no Thomas Henning there, just bugs. I think Thomas himself must have turned into a bug because one of them was lying in bed, in the same position he was the last time I saw him. Or maybe there never was a Thomas Henning at all, maybe there was only the bug, the bugs. They were clicking at me. And then they weren't. Then it was like I could actually understand them. One of them said: "I'm glad you came back, Mr. Jensen."

It wasn't Thomas's voice, exactly, but the words sounded like ones he might say. I was standing there, holding my gun. I could have shot him. I suppose I could have shot them all, assuming bullets would work on them. I wish now that I'd at least tried. Instead, I did something that I can't really explain. I closed the door and turned around and walked out of the house. It's like I didn't want to know anymore. It's like I thought that if I didn't believe in what I'd seen, it wouldn't be real. Or maybe, just maybe it was the bugs themselves that made me do that. Maybe they had some control over me? I don't know.

Anyway, I went back to the office like nothing had happened. What else was there to do? When I walked in, Jill gave me a strange look. She said: "Where the hell have you been?"

I laughed. I thought she was joking. She *knew* where the hell I'd been! When I sat down at my desk, though, I found a stack of papers there. How had so much work piled up on one afternoon? It looked like I'd been gone for days. I looked at the file on top. Another Imago Book incident I was supposed to look into. Some nun had apparently created an image of the Virgin using Imago's software and had gone to the papers saying it was a vision. Out of habit (no pun intended) I began evaluating the facts. Maybe this was good. Maybe it would give us some traction with the fundamentalists, who had been giving us grief about the kids out there who had been creating images of goblins and witches and spawn-of-the-Devil, after reading horror stories.

I couldn't concentrate, though, not with the Henning case unresolved. I dialed Mr. E. He told me to relax.

"The Hennings contacted us and we've agreed to a settlement," he said. "The only stipulation is that we can't talk about it."

"A gag order?"

"Precisely."

"Why wasn't I notified?" I asked indignantly, a tone one should probably never use with a client. "Why the hell wasn't I involved?" Suddenly, I was as worried about my status with Imago as I was about the bugs, and Henning.

"We asked one of our other attorneys to handle it," said Mr. E. "No reflection on you, Jensen, it's just that this all came up rather suddenly and you weren't available."

Not available? What the hell did he mean? I wasn't in the office at night or on weekends, but even then I'm accessible through my pager! Then I remembered the strange look on Jill's face, remembered her asking me where the hell I was. Something wasn't right, but I wasn't sure what it was.

It was only after I got off the phone with Mr. E that I realized something else was different. For the first time in weeks I'd had a conversation with him and hadn't heard any clicking coming over the line. For some reason I thought that might be an indication that things were getting better, that maybe this whole Henning business really was over with.

And that's pretty much how things stand now. Another two weeks have gone by. Except . . . except that I keep having nightmares. In these bad dreams, sometimes, I see the Earth whole. Sometimes I see a saddle-shaped soap bubble that I know, instinctively, is our Universe. Sometimes I see my own skull. Whichever one I see, Earth, skull, or Universe, before my eyes it gradually changes into an egg case, or maybe some sort of chrysalis. The egg explodes, the chrysalis is torn apart, and Henning's yellow bugs, his giant silverfish, emerge from it in droves, in a horde. Our world, our reality, is being infested.

Yes, it *is* horrible. But is it real? It can't be, of course. I've been wondering a lot lately if maybe I've lost my mind, or if I'm in the throes of losing it. I have to acknowledge that possibility. There is however, another one. Sometimes I wonder if maybe reality is changing, if maybe it's being changed purposefully and systematically by Henning's bugs.

Listen to this: One day recently it suddenly dawned on me that Imago hadn't always been called Imago, that the name of the company was supposed to be Image Books, Inc, just like the name of their product, the Image Book. Stupid, I know. And contrary to the reality that was right in front of me. But that seed of doubt had been planted. It sprouted. Eventually, I had to look the word "Imago" up in the dictionary, just to see if it even existed. What I found was interesting.

You see, it *is* a real word, and one definition of it sort of fits the product: an Imago is an idealized mental picture. But that's the second definition. The first? Get this: a sexually mature adult insect!

What am I trying to say? I don't know. Ask me tomorrow and I may tell you "nothing." It's quite likely I won't even admit that this conversation took place. But at the moment, with I-forget-how-many bourbons under my belt . . . Look, maybe what I'm saying is this. Maybe Henning and my dreams are what's real here. Maybe somehow these bugs have used Henning and the Image Book and the company that is now known as Imago, and maybe even me, to somehow invade our world. Maybe my dreams aren't dreams at all? Maybe these insects have somehow made our entire Universe into an egg case from which they—the next generation of they—are emerging?

Ridiculous? Yeah, I agree. Yeah, it's some story. No, there isn't any more to it, at least not yet.

Tomorrow? Who knows. I'm not sure, any more, that tomorrow will even come. And if it does come, I don't know what it will be like.

Tonight? Well, to tell you the truth I was hoping you'd had enough to drink by now that I could persuade you to come upstairs to my room. On the theory that there might not be a tomorrow, I rented the honeymoon suite.

One condition? Sure, anything, name it.

Stop making what clicking sound?