

Josh and the Elder

by David Hamilton

Justin cleared the irritation of the security scan, with me just behind him. The escalator conveyed us to the second floor of the courthouse where the elevators could be accessed. As Justin exited the escalator, followed by me, I turned to look behind us toward the escalator. An older man gradually emerged into full view, head first, then his torso, legs and feet.

To my eye--I couldn't speak for Justin--the Elder was obviously a lawyer, but the small soft sided brief case and wing tip shoes for me confirmed the Elder's status beyond all doubt.

The Elder wore a good quality but older suit. The suit was not worn or even outdated. The suit was—as was the Elder—classically conservative, probably Brooks Brothers, but the suit was clearly a suit he had owned and worn for many years. The Elder had about him the air of a competent, no nonsense man of action as he waited for the elevator. The Elder looked to the elevator bank, clearly thinking about the task that brought him here and ordering his thoughts.

The Elder noticed neither the car that had arrived behind him nor the clutch of people who entered the car. Justin and I were talking and didn't notice either. But then, we weren't old.

Just as the doors closed on the car, the Elder turned around, realized what had happened and began to grumble; not cussing—or maybe not cussing—but clearly irritated at what he obviously perceived as lack of courtesy. The Elder pushed the call button to summon another car. He was clearly still irritated and muttered quietly, but forcefully, to himself emphasizing unintelligible words. Another car arrived, this one in front of the Elder. He, Justin and I got on.

The only other passenger was a young woman who judging by her lanyard was a court employee. She too had seen the incident that had so irritated the Elder because she approached the area just as the other car left. Her reaction was one of mild humor, or pity, that

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the Elder was so inattentive. She sees all types come and go and she has no compassion.

As the elevator rose to the fourth floor, the Elder who, as I observed him more closely, was well groomed but beginning to look a little worn, frayed and even droopy, continued to mutter to himself and shift his weight from foot to foot, but only slightly. When the doors opened, the Elder quickly exited first and moved toward the hallway. The young lady also moved out of the car and began to pass the elevator group as Justin and I followed them.

As we all moved into the hallway, two things happened simultaneously. The Elder's cell phone began to ring. As the Elder irritably answered the call a young man, twenty-something, began to approach the Elder. The young man said "John, it's me." I didn't at first see the young man's cell phone, now held at his side, and neither did the Elder, who was focused on answering his phone. "Hello?" His tone conveyed frustration and irritation, bordering on anger. Again, the young man said, "John, it's me." And again, the older man exclaimed into his phone, "Hello!" and at the same time said to the young man, "I know it's you; I know who you are. I'm on the phone, just a minute." A look of discomfort crossed the young man's face, but also supercilious ridicule, which was shared with the young lady, who was just passing him, via a glancing look they exchanged. For the third time the young man said "John, it's me. . .on the phone; I was calling you."

As a somewhat older lawyer, but still young enough to see the clear distinction between myself and the Elder, a distinction that was not at all clear to the two young people, I thought that a young lawyer should not address an older lawyer by his first name unless they know each other very well and have a good relationship, neither of which was the case with these two. My next reaction was chagrin for the Elder, but really for my future self, reflected all too clearly in him.

The combination of unwanted familiarity and embarrassment at misunderstanding the young man led the Elder to seek to recover a measure of his self-esteem by barking, "It's only 1:25, why are you

calling me? We don't have to be in court for another five minutes." The young man said "Yes, I know, but. . .I've been in the courtroom and the clerk said the judge has been called away. . .so I was calling to see if I could catch you and save you the hassle of clearing security; I'm sorry."

A shadow of confusion and pain washed over the Elder's face. It was excruciating to watch. That momentary reminder of his increasing lack of vitality, that he was not in control of this situation and didn't even immediately perceive the dynamics, shook the Elder in a way that seemed cruel. It was a reminder of his irrelevance to the world of law, a world he had clearly ruled for over 40 years.

The reminder of my own approaching kinship with the Elder made me hope I would have the sense to stop practicing before I let myself "get to that point." I won't though. I moved away from the awkward scene to finish the errand that had brought me to this building I knew so well, but which, like me, was beginning to show wear, fraying and droopiness.

