

Scene at the Courthouse

by David Hamilton

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I had cleared the irritation of the security scan. The escalator conveyed me to the second floor of the courthouse where the elevators could be accessed. As I ascended an older man gradually came into full view, head first, then his torso, legs and feet. He was obviously a lawyer. The small soft sided brief case and wing tip shoes confirmed it beyond all doubt. He was wearing a good quality but older suit. The suit was not worn or even outdated, it was actually classically conservative, probably Brooks Brothers, but it was clearly a suit he had owned and worn for many years. He had about him the air of a competent, no nonsense man of action as he waited for the elevator. He was looking toward the bank in front of him, clearly thinking about the task that brought him here and ordering his thoughts. He did not notice a car had arrived behind him. A young man got in that car and didn't alert the lawyer the car had arrived. Just as the doors closed on the other car, the lawyer turned around, realized what had happened and began to grumble; not cussing—or maybe not cussing—but clearly irritated at the lack of courtesy. By this time I was exiting the escalator and walking toward the elevators. The man pushed the call button to summon another car. He was clearly still irritated and muttered quietly, but forcefully, to himself emphasizing some of the unintelligible words. Another car arrived, this one in front of the man, and he 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 older lawyer, but her reaction was one of mild humor, or pity, that the old man was so inattentive. She sees all types come and go and she has little, or no, compassion.

As the elevator rose to the fourth floor, the older lawyer, who 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, he quickly exited

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first and moved toward the hallway. The young lady also disembarked and I followed both of them.

As we all moved into the hallway, two things happened simultaneously. The older lawyer's cell phone began to ring and as he irritably answered it a young man, twenty-something, began to approach the older man. 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 older lawyer, who was focused on answering his phone. "Hello?" His tone of voice 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 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 older lawyer, 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 older lawyer, 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 older lawyer 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 momentary confusion, even pain, crossed over the older lawyer's face that was excruciating to watch. That momentary reminder of his increasing lack of vitality,

and that he was not in control of this situation and didn't even immediately perceive the dynamics, shook him in a way that seemed cruel; a reminder of his irrelevance to the world of law, a world he had probably ruled for over 40 years. The reminder of my own approaching kinship with him 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.

