

LUNCH IN THE COURTYARD

2002 Michael L. Cohen

Bogged down in a swale of strange and arcane legal words during the law school day, I have the same dream over and over at night. I am sitting at a long planked table in one of Georgetown Law 's dim nineteenth century lecture halls, surrounded by a mass of suits, sport jackets and ties. The bald head of Finckel, the Torts Professor, orders me to my feet to brief a case:

“Mr. Oberman,” he says, “give me Baker vs. U.S. Can Company.” The room is quiet and anxious.

My chair creaks as I rise and attempt open my mouth but I am unable to speak. My lips are stuck together. I try to pry them apart with my fingers and by blowing air out, but my upper lip breaks off in my hand like a chip of pottery. Noises like a bleating sheep come out of me in wet bubbles. With no upper lip, I have no consonants. There is laughter from the mass of students as blood spews from my gashed mouth onto my notes and my Black's Law Dictionary.

I awake and feel my face with damp hands. All the pieces have miraculously re-assembled. And there's no blood. My smokes sit on top of my Black's Law Dictionary on the floor next to my bed. I light a cigarette, and sit back against my pillow. I hear the first of the morning's jet airplanes bolt out of National Airport, heading out of the District of Columbia, the dwindling yowl of its engines leaving me behind.

I would rather book a ticket out. I would rather rocket out on any of those jets tearing out to anywhere but I have no idea where I would go.

I grew up working in my Father's dry cleaning plant, studying the customers' fine clothes: suits, coats, and slacks of lustered woolen and cashmere, tawny plaids, thickened flannel and twill, sharp creased tweeds and worsteds, shirts cut from pure white and regal blue pinpoint oxford cloth, ties of creamy silk in designs of swirling paisleys, patterned foulards, and regimental stripes.

The shop had a poster: “Clothes Make the Man.” I believe this to be true. Clothes show a person’s walk in life, forecast character. No one particular garment carries the whole message. It is the ensemble that warms me or warns me. I don’t wait for behavior.

I decided years ago that I had a choice; I could clean the clothes or I could wear the clothes. It was an easy choice. Now I’m at Georgetown Law.

It is springtime in the District. Finals are coming and the new body counts from Vietnam are reported in the Washington Post. We, the Americans, are winning the body count war and my draft board has requested my grades from school. If I fail finals, I will be wearing an olive green uniform in Southeast Asia. It is much safer at Georgetown Law. Suits, sport jackets, and ties are safer than jungle khaki.

At noon, after contracts class, I weave my way through the mobbed Law Building hallway, past the six-foot high painting of Thomas More in the foyer near the door. I can feel Thomas More’s painted eyes follow me out of the granite and terra cotta entrance as if he disapproves of my departure from class and study. But I want a smoke and some lunch before the afternoon’s class on criminal law.

I walk around the derelicts sleeping on a hot air grate in the sidewalk by the school’s front door. The exhaust from the law building is discharged there heating the bodies stretched over the metal bars. The sleepers give off the aroma of dirt and offal blended with urine, the stench of foreign gutters. Everybody calls the hot air grate ‘The Georgetown Hilton’. Bodies lay across it all day and all night.

I carry my Black’s Law Dictionary next to my brief case as I walk around the grate and the bodies. Black’s is too bulky to fit inside the briefcase, but someone might steal it if I leave it in the law building.

Black’s Law Dictionary is dense, stout, and smells like authority. The in-page claims that Black’s contains 100,000 words and phrases, accompanied by common law interpretations, as well as Latin roots, and Anglo-Saxon pronunciations. The Black’s pages are thin as strudel dough; they stick together, making it hard to read.

“Oberman, you can’t go wrong,” Sam Lerner, the bookstore owner had said, “The Law is words. And they’re all in there, all of them.”

I don't know the law and I don't know the words. So I bought the Black's Dictionary from Sam. It is concrete heavy, the Black's; I carried the book out of Lerner's in both arms. I bring it to class every day where it sits on the wooden planked lecture hall table. I confess; I never open it.

I eat lunch with two of my Torts classmates, John and Larry. We sit on the grass lawn of the Court of Military Appeals across the street from the law building. The lawn is separated from E Street by a thick boxwood hedge and a row of cherry trees. The scent of cherry tree blossoms seem to cover up the reek of car exhaust from E street traffic. I see two Marines in dress blues posted at the doors of the courthouse. Guarding the Courthouse is better duty than Vietnam.

Larry, and I carry sack lunches. John purchased a chicken salad sandwich from the lunchroom automat. I use my Black's Dictionary as a place mat.

Larry has an open New York Times in front of his face:

"General Westmoreland announced that the Viet Cong body count of the past week exceeds the number for the previous month," Larry reads. "Hooray for us. Where did I put my Pepsi?"

Larry wants to be an actor, but needs to stay in law school to avoid the draft. Sometimes in the afternoon, Larry reads the Times antiwar editorials and the military obituaries with a loud New Yorky honk in the anteroom of the library. Larry graduated from Dartmouth. He is in blue today: blue shirt, a blue blazer threadbare on the arms, and a striped tie, which is soiled at the knot from too much handling.

"As long we're out of 'Nam' in two years," John says, "odds are my Board won't take me." John's button down shirt, his initials on the cuff, is frayed at the neck. He sits on his sports coat; his club tie has brown gravy spilled on it. John went to Brown; he wears the blotched tie with pride.

Larry, and John, wear worn out Bass Weejun loafers but no socks. My socks are black ones, a nylon and cotton blend. I graduated from Colorado State University.

A jet airplane rips through the sunny sky. It is a 727 banking and rolling over the Potomac River away from National Airport. I could be out of here on one of those jets,

out of D.C., away from Torts, Finckel, and finals. But I don't know what I would tell my draft board.

John takes my sack lunch, peers into the bag, and wrinkles his nose.

"Another stale fish special from Oberman."

I pull the bag back. "Hands off, John. None for you."

John unwraps his flattened sandwich, removes the gum from his mouth, and bites off a wad of chicken salad and bread. He talks with his mouth full;

"I wouldn't touch your crap, Oberman" John says, "Tuna makes me upchuck."

Larry looks at John, "No napkins, John? Talking while eating? I think we've given up on manners."

"Shove it up your ass, Larry," John's words pass through a spray of chicken salad.

Bantering with Larry, and John, these two elegant, sockless ruffians with their frayed cuffs embroidered with initials, silk ties with food stains, and weary worn down wine colored loafers, makes my muscles unbunch, makes my breathing slow down. Now I can take a bite of my sandwich.

A sleeper lies nearby on his side, back to us underneath the courtyard's boxwood hedge. He is also sockless and his cotton pants have a mahogany stain spreading across the seat like a Rorschach test. I can hear his snoring as we eat.

Larry waves his sandwich at the sleeper:

"Another guy who couldn't stay awake in Torts."

"Doesn't need to be awake," John says, talking and eating at the same time, "He's got last years finals."

We laugh. Rumor has it that someone garnered copies of the final exams from last spring. John takes out a Marlboro, holding it between his teeth as he lights up. He lays his silver Brown lighter on my Black's Dictionary. The lighter is engraved with crossed swords on a shield of polished metal.

The sleeper wakes up, maybe from our laughing or from the smell of tobacco. I watch him hoist himself to his feet and shuffle toward us.

"Hey, what about a smoke?" he says.

"Get lost creep," John says.

“Not so fast, John,” Larry says. His eyes gleam with opportunity. “This could be interesting.” Sitting cross-legged on the grass, Larry waves at the sleeper; “You. Come here.”

The sleeper is slow to hear that the voice addressing him has changed from John to Larry. He walks around to Larry and stands over him.

“What’s up?” he asks.

“I’ll make you a deal, friend,” Larry says. “I’ll give you a smoke if you’ll tell me a little about yourself.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“You know, where you’re from, what you’re doing here. Nothing terribly personal.”

The man has skin like a brown grocery bag and his teeth are yellow. He smells like a foreign gutter, like the Georgetown Hilton.

“Like, what’s your name?” Larry smiles now sticking out his hand, “My name’s Larry.” The man looks long at Larry, then takes his hand, slow and deliberate.

“The names Elbow,” he says.

“Elbow? Elbow?” Larry asks, “What kind of a name is Elbow? I mean, how do you spell it?” John starts to laugh. I have stopped eating; the smell of foreign gutters is too strong.

“You spell it just way it sounds.” Elbow’s words crackle as if he were chewing Rice Krispies and talking at the same time.

“So,” Larry says, “are you from around here?”

The man’s head nods slow as if he has pain when he moves.

“Nope, and it doesn’t sound like you’re from around here either!” he says, jabbing a bony index finger at Larry.

“Ah,” says Larry, falling backwards, as if struck by a spear, “My ‘cultcha’ has given me away.” Larry is on a roll.

I light a cigarette with John’s lighter, hoping the smoke will cover up the foreign gutters. I move Black’s Dictionary out from under my lunch bag.

“Mr. Elbow,” Larry says, “If I may I call you that, do you have a family?”

"I do," Elbow says, his hair sticking up on one side as if there is a cyclone blowing in the courtyard.

"Where are they?"

"Down in m' home."

"Where's that?"

"In Ashford; Ashford, North Carolina." Elbow points the wrong way; he points north toward Maryland.

"Have kids?"

"Yup," He grins, "Three of them, two girls, and a boy. Now what about that cigarette?"

"Yes, what about the cigarette, John." Larry is being the ring Impresario.

John tosses over the Marlboro pack. Larry takes one out and extends it to Elbow.

"How about a couple for my buddies?" Elbow says.

Larry feigns surprise and disappointment: "Mr. Elbow we - you and I - had no arrangement for additional smokes. You're renegotiating our deal. What do we do about this? What about a tuna fish sandwich?" I snatch my sack away from Larry's hands.

"No way," Elbow says, "Not good for ya." He puts the Marlboro in his mouth, "Somebody gotta light?"

"Here," Larry throws over John's silver lighter.

"Gimme that back, asshole." John says to Larry.

"Too late, my boy." Larry says. "Need help in the operation, Elbow?"

Elbow pops open the lid and the lighter ignites like a blowtorch.

"This is something," Elbow says, squinting through the smoke as the sun reflects off the silver lighter. The blend of Elbow's breath and smoke swirls around me like a dust devil on a new plowed field.

"O.K. Now lets have the lighter back, buddy," says John.

"Elbow hands it over; "Thanks."

"Thanks for nothing." John says, as he grabs the lighter from Elbow.

" Mr. Elbow," Larry says, "I have a new proposition for your consideration and possibly I can offer some further benefits."

"Money," Elbow says, "you got some change for me?"

“I was thinking about the full pack of cigarettes, Mr. Elbow. No money.”

Elbow now is hunkered down; the rubber is returning to his skin and his balance is improving. He seems to enjoy the banter, too.

“What for?” he says.

“Elbow,” Larry says, dropping the ‘Mr.’; “Elbow, I don’t understand. You have a wife, a family, children of your seed, a wonderful a place you can call home. Why are you here in the District, sleeping in the grass and dew of the Justice system, somewhat unclean and uncomfortable?”

Elbow rises half way up. He stares at Larry’s smile, as if he senses the possibility of a blow from his interrogator.

“Because,” Elbow says with emphasis. He says it again; “Because.”

“Because, why?” Larry asks.

“Because,” Elbow repeats loud and slow, incredulous at the question and the accumulated impertinence of the questioner; then he straightens up and speaks over the noise of cars going by on E Street.

“Because I’m a drunk.” he says, and stands there.

Larry and John are silent. I am silent, unable to answer the question that has saturated the silence: *‘and who are we?’*

“This is bullshit,” Larry says, “I’m outa here.” He rises without acknowledging Elbow who stands next to him.

“Larry, you’ve left your lunch crap,” I say.

“You clean it up Oberman,” Larry says over his shoulder as he walks out of the courtyard.

Elbow says, ”What about my smokes?”

There are grass patches on my pants from sitting on the lawn. Soiled, I think. Maybe stained forever.

I pick up Black’s Dictionary; “Here, take this,” I say, handing Elbow the Black’s. “You can sell it to the book store owner over on the corner.” I point to Sam Lerner’s Book Store across from the law school.

“Come on, Oberman, ” John says, “Don’t kid the guy around.”

“I’m not,” I say. “This book is a waste, dead weight. I’m just lightening up.”

“That book’s a ticket to jail,” Elbow says. “I walk in the store with that - the book guy - he calls the cops.”

“See, Oberman.” says John; “This guy is better equipped to make it around here than you are.”

He is right. Elbow knows that possessing Black’s is a trap; it radiates disguise. I would get off so easily by giving Black’s to Elbow but he won’t take it.

I have to deal with the planes arriving and leaving, I have buy the plane ticket out of here. Or stay disguised. It is my draft board after all.