

Once

The police had already been there. They said they'd left it, pretty much, as they'd found it. One of the nurses had left her a cup of coffee with one sugar before closing the flat gray door.

It was her first job. "Go over and have a look around. Make damn sure we can rule out accidental death."

Depositions, yes, they'd taught taking depositions in law school, case analysis, legal writing, correct citation forms, legal ethics; they'd taught all that. Practice was very different. This was her first assignment. They expected her to use her instinct, horse sense, intuition, logic. She didn't need to pass the bar to do this. All the qualities she'd had since she'd left high school, qualities that had been honed throughout college, these were all she needed. And a sense of humor.

His keys, some change, a guitar pick, his wallet. These are what he'd left behind. His coat too; he'd hung it up on the wooden tree that looked anachronistically out of place with the rest of his office; personal computer, a screen saver of planets and deep sky nebulae still running. An X-ray reading light over the center of the desk, which itself stood cold and lifeless in its complete lack of character. Gray and lifeless desk that could have belonged to anybody for any computer screen. No pens on his desk. No calendar. No life. No signs of life.

He'd taken off his coat as he'd entered the room, she suspected. Tossed it on the tree, and then had taken out his wallet and laid it on his desk. Then he emptied his front pockets. He carried a lucky guitar pick, she thought. I wonder whose. Paul McCartney? Elvis? One of the Everly Brothers?

How old was he? She checks her notes. Born October 26, 1925. He's two years older than my father.

He'd walked into the bathroom. Didn't close the door.

He'd washed his hands.

She'd touched the soap dispenser. It was wet. There was still a puddle of water just below the soap dispenser. The cleaning lady had been there that morning and was next door when he'd returned.

Jackie's grandfather had invented the liquid soap dispenser. She'd seen one in a Laurel & Hardy movie. She'd had one at home, as a child, in her bathroom. Her father had installed it. His father-in-law had been a famous attorney, did some work for one of the presidents, and invented the liquid soap dispenser. She touched it. It wasn't anything like the original dispenser her grandfather had invented: the glass bulb on top holding the soap, the plunger below off of which the soap would drip. This one squirted, with some pressure, she found as she pressed it inward.

He'd washed his hands.

It had been just another day. No one had suspected a thing. The nurse who chaperoned him with that last patient hadn't notice anything out of the ordinary. The receptionist hadn't noticed anything. Nobody notices anything unusual, she notes. He enters the examination room, his patient is on the table, legs in the stirrups, covered with a sheet. He greets her, sits at the desk, scans the notes he'd grabbed off the holder on his way through the door and presses the call button. What he'd said to the patient is not known. The patient recalls only explaining her symptoms, but cannot recall much more than that.

When the nurse entered answering his call, he was washing his hands. The patient remembered that, and that he'd said something to her about the nurse assisting him.

The doctor wheels out the examination stool positioning himself between the patient's legs, tugs on his latex gloves with a sharp snap, and lifts the sheet.

The patient didn't recall how long he'd been examining her when he suddenly stopped. The nurse estimated 20 seconds or so.

He stands and re-covers the patient, excuses himself saying he'd be right back, opens the door and steps out.

He removes his latex gloves walking down the hallway.

Nobody noticed anything unusual.

He dumps them in the medical waste container as he makes a right turn.

Alicia had been cleaning the office next to his. Alicia smiled at him as she stepped up to the supply cart he slipped by. She says he smiled back and nodded his head.

He opens his door, removes his coat, hangs it on the tree, and he then empties his pockets. He goes into the bathroom and washes his hands. He steps up on the toilet seat, pulls himself up to the window, and jumps to his death, 16 floors below.

There was no way he tripped and fell out that window. It was a chore to get to it, let alone through it. No sign of a struggle. No accidental death. No double indemnity benefits under the policy. Suicide. Had to be. Due diligence completed.

"But why," she asked herself.

His wife had already been contacted. She said it was just another normal day. Until this, that is. Had they had trouble at home? *Nothing unusual*. Had he been depressed? *Nothing unusual*. Did it look as if he was away, pensive, not always present last evening? *Well, we've been married for 26 years now, the kids are grown, our evenings are quiet. I knit and watch the television. He reads his journals and the newspaper. Nothing unusual.*

Jackie stands by the dull gray door to his office. Ready to leave. It's all there, except the why of it. Unless.

She wonders to herself.

How many times he had to say it until

How many times? 10? 20? 100? Was this the 500th time?

What did he call it? Something medical. Vulva? Pudendum?

Turning to leave, she grasps the doorknob, twists and it hits her: twat. That's probably what he called it. But how many times did he say it before it took effect? Do I put that in the memo? I'm an attorney, doing my first assignment. It's all here before me. She swings the door wide and peers down the hallway, both ways. Empty.

His life insurance provided for a double indemnity on accidental death. I have to be sure. We represent our clients properly, cross all tees and dot all eyes.

So do I tell them my feelings, put this in the memo, or just keep it to myself? Maybe disguise my personal feelings in enough legal terminology that only another attorney could understand it? How many times?

How many times had he said it?

How many times did he say, "If I see one more sick twat, I'm going out that bathroom window."

She stopped by Glenna's office on her way to hers. She too had been a graduate of Yale. Glenna offered her some advice, what they liked and what they liked to avoid. Advice and a bit of encouragement. It was Jackie's first assignment.

* * *

Jackie leans back into her swivel chair knowing the clock is going to drag this final hour out over a week. She wants her lunch break. She wants to go outside, into the park with the trees and birds and sun. She wants a sandwich. Just a break. Gimme just a break. Ken bursts through the door. He's got the dioxin reading from the lab in Vermont, but it doesn't match anything the corporate science guys warned him about. Get a second reading, Jackie suggests as the phone rings. Her suits are not ready at the cleaners, apparently. Mara, her assistant is spitting angry over this because she's going to have come back this afternoon and we have that deposition to get ready for. Make sure they take something off the bill, is Jackie's response. And pick me up a Ginseng tea on your way back. She buzzes Bill, the new law clerk. He's not at his desk. She gets up and sticks her head in Glenna's office, spots Bill. He's just leaving. Oh, and Bill I still need anything you can find on vicarious liability in the Second Circuit before the depo. *I'm getting close, Jackie*, he smiles back. What a nice nerd. She sinks into Glenna's couch. Coffee? Glenna offers. No, just A breath. That's what I want, a breath.

It's good you dropped by, Glenna rests back in her chair, a pencil tapping lightly on her tongue. *I'm thinking of bringing you in on the Northern Lights case. In fact, I want you to come on board as lead counsel for Northern Lights. What do you think of that? You'll have time to try your case all summer, but next fall,*

Growman should be ready to settle and I want you to handle it. If the stock market collapses and your 401K dries up, you'd still be set for life.

Say what, Glenna? Are you retiring?

Heaven's no. It's just not what I want to do now. And you're the logical one to take over with all that work you've done over the past 5 years. Glenna leaned forward over her desk saying, Keep this to yourself. I've been offered a job in San Francisco. Big family practice firm. Lots of charity cases. Closer to my roots. I just might not be able to refuse this.

Jackie thought back. How long had it been? since she had wanted to work in family law. In Law School, she'd kept herself going, taken flack from the men, but kept hell-bent toward that goal. She had wanted to stand up for battered and abused women. Wives who slaved at home, sewed up this and duct taped that all to save a penny or two. Wives who wiped bottoms year after year and made enough Kraft macaroni and cheese to fill Lake Erie. Wives who held their kids' hands to cross streets, stayed up with them when they caught the croup, always had something nice to say about the projects they brought home from school, always staying up late to help with homework, only to be told by psychologists that the fifteen minutes a month they spent with dad had more influence in their little lives than their mom ever had.

Some, what? 19 years? She'd passed the bar, gotten this job. Lots of new friends and colleagues who'd graduated from Yale too, the women mostly. And now she was a partner and senior litigator, still billing 60 hours a week, still a stranger at home, still defending corporations that, for the most part, were sorry their policies killed Americans occasionally, but that had to flourish or the entire system would collapse. Corporations must survive or we all die. The end of civilization as we know it. Corporate crime was a necessary evil essential to the free market place. Essential to our way of life. Essential to Jackie's way of life. So much for her dreams of standing up for battered women and cast-off wives. Glenna has a chance to go back to her dreams and Jackie was truly happy for her; she really wanted Glenna to find her passion and live it. It felt good to see her getting out, getting away, living her dream. Besides, she'd get Glenna's office when she left. Much bigger. This sofa is just exquisite. I could sleep here for six or seven days if I had to.

Ken stuck his head around the door. *Telephone, Jackie. It's Parker...he's in a hurry.*

Jackie spun off the sofa and out the door in a single gesture. Parker was in charge of their corporate defense team. She both admired him and ignored him. Some of his methods seemed a bit overblown and dramatic, though she couldn't knock his success.

Yes, Jerry, what can I ...?

No, really? I think....

But . . .

Sure, you can, however, I must . . .

No.

I'm not sure.

Christ, you mean . . .?

Christ.

I'll put Bill on i . . .

No, I . . .

Ok.

Sure.

Ok.

K. Bye.

She sat down and flipped open the Rolodex. She copied two phone numbers on the back of her card and picked up the phone to call Mara.

Where are you now?

Can you drop that, come back and pick me up.

Yes, they're leaving earlier than we'd planned.

Yes, we have to get this done before that.

You're perfect. As is. Just tuck that in, you'll be fine.

Jackie hangs up, leans back, takes a deep breath.

If he'd shot a worthless street person dying of liver cancer, he'd be doing life in prison. He kills 200 people a year and flies around the world like he's the goddam Pope. Now he's leaving early for East India where his plant employs half a town while poisoning the other half.

Yes, and he deserves representation too.

His constitutional right.

Yes, I'm hired to protect my clients' constitutional rights.

Jackie stood, stretched, headed to the ladies room and flipped on the faucet to wash her hands, pumping the soap dispenser.

But if I have to take one more deposition for some rich slimy.....

She stopped pumping. She stopped.

If I have to....

She wiped her face. She reached for a paper towel, ripped it off, ran it under the water, and wiped her brow, her temples.

How many times?

She ran her wrists under the water. Slowed her breathing.

How many times?

She looked at her watch. Ten minutes to the lunch break she was going to miss.

How many times?

Mara was on her way back, the whole morning wasted, and this afternoon had already begun without her.

How many times?

Once.

Just once.

She picked up her purse, walked by Glenna's office and stuck her head inside. *Glenna?* She said, *Take that job in San Francisco. You'll love it. I'm sure.* And then she headed for the front door, thinking how sometimes someone lives an entire life just to be an example.

At the receptionists desk she said, *Molly?* And handed Molly her keys. *Office, my office, my safe, and the bathroom. Please have my personal belongings sent to me, or if that's too much bother, just pass them around.*

You...you...you...you.

I'm not coming back, Molly. I've had enough. Tell Mara I'm sorry. Give this to Jerry when he comes in. Tell him I'm sorry, but I had to leave. I'll send over summaries for my cases and my trial calendars. If more is needed, you know where to find me. But I'm not coming back.

You're, you're not coming back?

Not at all, Molly. I think I want to paint. You know? Landscapes. An old barn. An old red barn.