

City Lawyer

By Bill Wilson

The psychiatrists declared me sane, sane enough if medicated that is, to stand trial. Upon hearing the news, the judge set the date. The next morning at five AM, five AM! the night ward attendant, Jose, unlocks the door to my room and shouts, “Okay Doc, get up and get dressed,” and tosses my personal stuff in a plastic bag. I’m led out in handcuffs -- down the hall, past the empty common room, into the elevator and out to the parking lot. I look back at my home for the past year, a mammoth, dark building, the Southwest Virginia Psychiatric Hospital. I’m manhandled into the back of a hospital van and belted to a bench. Jose sits on the bench opposite and is soon asleep, chin bouncing off his chest. After an hour I am put in a cell at the jail next to the Farmford County courthouse. Jose didn’t say good-bye.

The trial, Commonwealth of Virginia vs. John Lee MD, is scheduled for a week from now. I’m accused of murder two. Bail was denied. My mother bought me a new suit so at trial I could appear as the respectable surgeon I once had been. Also, she hired my lawyer, Manfred Schwartz, known in courthouse circles as Mad Dog. So Mad Dog makes an appointment to meet with me 1 PM Monday.

I’m told his time is very valuable and he is coming all the way from Richmond, 85 miles. I check my appointment schedule. It’s my nap time, but I pencil him in anyway, glad to get out of my cold cell. Monday after lunch I’m led to a seat at the steel topped table in an otherwise barren cement walled conference room where we the incarcerated are questioned or meet with our representatives, lawyers and social workers mainly. One o’clock sharp the locked door is

unlatched and an arm holding a can of air freshener protrudes and blasts a mist of gardenia. A small man follows, five-five I figure, and places his alligator skin briefcase on the table, slips out of his blue blazer and hangs it on the back of his chair. No eye contact, not a word. He sits at the far end of the 4 by 6 table and with an index finger, points, indicating he wants me to move to the seat opposite, six feet away. It's apparent he is repelled by prisoner contact. His preventative measures have been successful so far, no signs of leprosy, nose and fingers intact. From the brief case, he pulls a can of Lysol and wipes down the table top. A file folder is flipped with a slap on the table and the brief case snapped shut. He sits, leans back, loosens his tie, smooths out any creases in his trousers, hooks his thumbs in his paisley braces, and still silent, smiles a smile of satisfaction. He probably had a heavy lunch. I smile back.

His salt and pepper hair is short and neatly barbered. The intense fluorescent light is no friend to his face, inking in the wrinkles and creases, and his rimless glasses make wobbly shadows on his cheeks. I present my pasty face that I'm sure looks freshly exhumed. He lays out a yellow legal pad and a gold Cross pen carefully, he's in no hurry, paid by the hour. Probably has big boat payments.

"I suppose you know who I am," he says. I am startled by his voice that is abnormally deep and loud for a small man.

I can be a jerk too, so I say, "And I suppose you know who I am?" We're off to a pleasant start.

He comes back with, "Manfred Schwartz, I'm hired to get you off. But we need an understanding." He leans forward and puts his arms on the sanitized table. His gold cufflinks flash in the fluorescent light like mini-strobes, and the wristband of his two pound Rolex makes

chalk-board scrapes on the table top. He's a regular light and sound show. "Doctor, these are the rules. I run your defense. Period! I won't tell you how to take out my appendix, so don't tell me what to do. Got that?" He looks directly at me and I see there is something off with his eyes, they don't fuse on their target, me, and I try to figure out this neuro-ophthalmologic defect. His eyes pop off my face down to his sheaf of papers. He must realize that his gaze looks peculiar; his left lateral rectus doesn't work which makes his left eye turn in. Also, I conclude, based on dim memories of my psychiatry notes, his size and eyes have made him into a super compensator. He gives all the signs of a class A+ jerk.

I couldn't care less about what he has just announced and say loudly back into the air lock he has established between us, "I want to change my not guilty plea to a NGRI," and I add to be obnoxious, "That is --- not guilty by reason of insanity."

He shoots out of his chair, "Are you freaking nuts!" Yes sir, there is the bark that Mad Dog must be famous for. The reaction did catch me by surprise. At a near shout I say, "Yes, counselor, I do suffer from schizoaffective psychosis but I'm sane enough to know I would rather be in a mental hospital than a prison."

"My firm hired Russ Biviano here in Farmford to get the details of your story, review the evidence, and do all the pretrial hearings for me. Didn't you plead not guilty?" Schwartz is still standing, waving a folder. "His report is right here! We got the charge reduced from first to second degree and even that won't stick! Berringer hit you on the head, and while unconscious your dog ripped his throat open, killed him. That's corroborated by two pathologists' depositions. And yeah, you did hide the body to save your dog. No problem. I'll put a lot of pet owners on the jury."

I see how effective this guy will be in a court room. I try shutting up, partially reconciled to his point of view. He sits down and gives me another unfused look, and to rub in the point he says, “If you got a NGRI you would sit on the back ward of a mental hospital for 15 years or more, forgotten; versus we go for broke, and I get you off.” Large pause, I sit silent, poker-faced. He fills in the void. “John, I’m being paid big money. Let me work. Otherwise you can rot on a mental ward. Your choice.” I’m looking at Napoleonic “small man syndrome” in spades. He’s short, has a funny eye, and by far not the best looking kid in his high school; yet all the internalized frustration, the anger at the inevitable put-downs, shaped a personality that once freed up and elevated by his status as a lawyer, is at once arrogant, ostentatious, combative: a no hands barred winner.

I’m starting to believe in him especially since he just used my first name. Suddenly, we’ve got a little comradery here. So he gets down to work and spends forty-five minutes telling me what to expect, my necessary comportment, to make short answers to the prosecutor’s questions, no elaboration or he will turn any information I feed him back on me. Smile, don’t get angry. Look at the jury when you make a point in your favor and so on. Nothing I hadn’t learned from the Perry Mason show. Mad Dog is no Perry Mason, he’ll chew the legs off hostile witnesses.

“So you want me to testify, Manfred, I ask?” I use his first name as I assume we are pals now. He didn’t ask me not to.

“John, you’re intelligent, make a good appearance, and you’re well-liked in this town. Your tragic story of how it came to be that a skilled, popular surgeon was driven mad, and now lives in a trailer, and wanders about penniless with his dog, is well known. You already have the jury with you. The pluses to your testifying outweigh the negatives.”

We finish and make plans to meet before the trial. He leans over the table and I stretch out my six-one flabby body over the table edge attempting to reach his hand without risking major groin injury. We shake. Then he pulls out a little square of aluminum foil wrapped alcohol hand wipe and begins to clean his hands. Automatically I say, “Hey, pass one of those things over.” He flips one down the table and we are cleaning our hands together, like brothers, alcohol wipe brothers.

He raps on the steel door, and as an afterthought turns and asks, “What happened to the dog, he was put down, right?”

I trust Manfred with my life, but I don’t trust him with Sunny’s, my yellow lab, and I lie. I tell him I have no idea.