

Cobwebs

By A. Randolph Judd

“Just what part of ‘come back this afternoon’ don’t you understand, counsel?”

Each clipped word from Judge John Francis O’Flaugherty landed like a body blow as Jack Collier weathered that mirthless smile, realizing that he was powerless to stay his tormentor from his daily assignation at the Silver Bullet Lounge. Exiting the courtroom, he watched as the last of the attorneys from the morning call departed, leaving him to contemplate the gulls picking at the rubbish in the now emptying lot. Resigned, he repaired to the basement cafeteria to serve his internal exile. Having observed the young man at the deli counter catching a series of sneezes in his sanitary-gloved hand, Jack opted instead for a cup of varnish-flavored coffee and settled into a molded chair against a wall to survey the wretched and the damned. Nearby, a man rhythmically beat the end of a cigarette pack against his opposing palm for a solid minute while glaring about him. At another table a woman declared that she had “... what the Swedes call a bleeding tumor in my brain.” Wondering what everyone else called it, he turned back only to meet the stare of a small woman standing at his table clutching a shoebox. Trapped, Jack forced a smile.

“Hello, Babs,” he said simply.

She and her husband were part of the cadre of retired court attendees who followed trials while enjoying heat and air conditioning provided by the county. He called her Babs since her husband always did and they had developed a first-name acquaintance after sharing his cafeteria table while attending a grisly murder trial replete with blood-splatter testimony. She’d always reminded him of Ruth Gordon and he’d nicknamed them “Harold and Maude,” which they both had thought funny. This was the first time he’d ever seen her alone.

“Hello, Jack.”

Without asking, she took the chair across from him, carefully placing the box down between them. “I don’t know if you’d heard ... Bob died last month. It was esophageal cancer. He went very quickly. They say it’s a death sentence and they were right.” Her tone was matter of fact and she managed a brave smile. Jack hated death notices of comparative strangers since his condolences sounded even more empty than usual.

“I’m very sorry, Babs. How are you handling it?” He was going to give her hand a squeeze, but her grip on the box made that difficult.

“I’m doing really well, Jack. Thank you for asking.” She gave him a sad sweet smile. “Except I wish that I could have helped Bob out of this life.” She stopped for his reaction, but decades of listening to clients had taught him inscrutability. “Does that shock you, Jack?”

He reached out and took her hand. “No, that doesn’t shock me. It’s never easy to watch someone you love suffer. Bob knows that you did your best for him.” Her tears started, but she kept her grief under control. Pursing her lips, she smiled and squeezed his hand before withdrawing hers. There had always been something coquettish about her, and Jack assumed that she hadn’t been refused much in her time on this earth.

“Yes, I did do my best, but that wasn’t the hardest part. The hardest part was knowing that I would be alone after that. Isn’t that terrible? Bob is gone and all I can think about is me.” She wiped her eyes with a napkin and then looked as if nothing had happened. Jack kept his eyes off the box, which he was certain was not there by chance, hoping that he could politely excuse himself before it became an issue.

“Please, Jack, don’t neglect your coffee,” she urged before expressing her thoughts on life after Bob. He demurred, resigning himself to another 90 minutes of community service. “Jack, I know you’re wondering why an old lady is sitting here pestering you!” He laughed politely and tried to prepare himself for whatever was coming. As his smile receded, she made her opening. “I need your help with something. It’s a family matter.” He spread his hands to indicate his openness.

“My late aunt was married to a very odd man from New York City. He was this bohemian she met just before the second war while she was at Smith and he was attending Yale.”

“Sounds like a pretty good pedigree so far,” Jack offered and earned one of her critical glances for his interruption.

“Well, I guess you might think it a positive beginning, but I can assure you that it was a recipe for disaster. My mother used to talk about how her lovely brilliant sister met this ... prodigal from New York and together they became a couple of shiftless ne’er-do-wells who hung out with a very fast crowd.” Jack smiled at the use of the term “fast crowd,” picturing trust-fund socialists drinking absinthe at the Algonquin. “Dick...his name was Richard Halprin ... and he was ... a wastrel. You see, my aunt had a rich father, so they just drifted around the Caribbean during the war years,” she offered with emphasis. “He never served in the war. I mean, his draft board never knew where to find him, for goodness sake. He was the only son of a Jewish doctor in New York City and supposedly he kept them together by investing her money. After the war, nothing changed except they both became Scientologists. Scientology, Jack! Can you imagine? My family absolutely detested the man!”

She paused to open the box and Jack was relieved to see nothing but old photos. Looking perplexed, she started to rifle through the collection and then gave an exaggerated look of cognition as she pulled a large manila envelope from her oversized bag. In it was a professional black-and-

white print of a tanned, thin couple dancing barefoot in the sand beneath a sign declaring “WORLD FAMOUS BEACH BAR.” Turning it over, Jack read “CAT CAY 1941.” The couple looked oblivious to everything beyond their own pleasure and Jack found himself envying such hedonistic abandon. “This must have been taken just before Pearl Harbor. The last big party before the world went crazy,” he offered.

“Maybe for some, but not them. The war was just a slight inconvenience to their appetites!” Babs’ harshness brought him back to the present.

Jack returned it and then randomly pulled a sepia photo out of the box and stared at the faces of a man with a boy and a girl posed next to a large town car. They wore the uncomfortably hot clothing required of the upwardly mobile 80 years ago, and the photograph was barely larger than a high-school graduation picture. There were no names or dates written on the back to give any indication as to who they were. He put it back in the box, replaced the lid, and pushed it back towards Babs. Taking an envelope from her purse and laying it on the lid, she returned it to him. Jack frowned and Babs gave him another ingratiating smile that surrounded her pale eyes with endearing wrinkles. She was not about to let him go without a full-court press. The envelope contained three \$100 bills. They were crisp as only newly printed bills could be and reminded Jack of the cash his grandmother used to place in his birthday and Christmas cards. The scent of the money brought his Granny’s dour visage into his thoughts and after banishing her, he attempted to return the envelope and box only to find the way blocked by a frail wall formed by Babs’ extended palms.

“What’s this? Are you trying to retain me for some legal work?” His attempt at humor failed.

“Jack ... how should I put this? I want you to dispose of Dick Halprin and his family for me. Please hear me out on this.” Her words together with a hand on his wrist quelled his protest.

“When Dick Halprin died, oh, it was 15 years ago, his new lady friend—my aunt’s replacement—boxed up all of his photos, including the ones belonging to Dick, and just sent them on to my mother. Mother was appalled. Can you imagine? We all suspected that he may have staged Jan’s suicide and here was his paramour sending on his family photos as if we would naturally be willing to accept them.” She paused for Jack’s reaction.

“Why didn’t your mother cull through the photos and return the ones that were related to Dick Halprin?” Jack waited for an answer, but Babs just looked exasperated. “Was your mother concerned that she might look insensitive by refusing to dispose of somebody else’s trash?”

“I don’t know, Jack. She didn’t and here I am trying to clean up a mess that wasn’t my doing.” He could see that he was picking at a scab that hadn’t healed in decades.

“Why don’t you just send the box back to the sender without a return address? Wouldn’t that serve her right? Balance the scale ... retribution?” His question earned him nothing but a flinty silence.

“How did your aunt kill herself?” he asked.

“With a gun, Jack ... why does that matter?” Jack knew that it was odd for a woman to use a firearm to end things, but again he spread his hands, accepting the dismissal. “My mother was horrified and put the photos to one side. I suppose she hoped that someone would just toss them in the trash, but then we started looking through them, trying to figure out who was who. I mean, it was almost archeological—an extinct Jewish family from New York City and this was all that was left of them. My mother recalled that Dr. Halprin had been a prominent physician and he’d had two children, a son and a daughter. When Jan and Dick finally did marry, Dr. Halprin remarked how his son had disappeared and become an entirely new and different person since meeting my Aunt Jan,

which was funny because our family felt exactly the same way. The two of them had merged into some new person without their pasts. His sister died without marrying and we learned that Dick's father died in the late 60's. That was it until the box arrived. My mother died and I inherited the photos."

"Someone has expensive tastes in shoes," he dryly observed, reading the logo on the box and drawing another sharp look from Babs.

"Jack, I'm alone now. We never had children and apart from some nieces and nephews on Bob's side, I've no one." She paused for Jack to take this in. He, in turn, waited for the denouement that would attempt to put money in his pocket and make him the new archivist of Clan Halprin. Babs paused and Jack decided to preemptively push through his polite refusal, return the retainer, and make a quick retreat back to the rough justice of Judge O'Flaugherty.

"Babs, I don't do this. Really, I can't take this. I've already got boxes of photos that my parents left me when they died. I just cleaned out the old paint cans my father put in my basement when they moved to California, and that was in 1973. Keep your money and take this to one of those shredder outfits and have them recycle these folks ... I mean the pictures. Just get rid of them and you'll be \$300 ahead, okay?" But it was not okay.

With her stylish hair and scarf arranged over her shoulders, she set a high bar for mourning, and he realized that he was dealing with someone who was not about to go quietly nor accept anything less than a complete victory. The thought of becoming the caretaker of a family's memory conjured images of trapped animals willing to sacrifice a limb for freedom. Unconsciously, he rubbed his hands on his trousers and resisted checking his watch.

“Jack, I don’t want you to keep the photographs. I want you to throw them away. That’s why I’m paying you, and don’t tell me that you don’t take money. I know that you do. Bob and I went to court once to watch you in one of those boring insurance cases and the judge gave you attorney fees ... that’s the term, isn’t it? Anyway, he gave you \$60 an hour for what you had done and Bob and I thought, ‘My, that’s a lot ... he must be a really good attorney.’ So I thought that it would take me about an hour to explain this to you, and then you’d have to get your thoughts together—that would be another two hours—and then you’d have to actually dispose of the box—another hour—and the remaining \$60 would be for your trouble. You know, like a tip. Jack, it’s really such a simple matter, and I am willing to pay for your services. I’m not asking you to do this for nothing.” She smiled and sat back, obviously pleased to have addressed the issue in such an organized fashion.

Being reminded of that judge’s low opinion of his hourly value was still nettlesome to Jack, but he concentrated upon tactfully refusing this assignment. He felt a rising panic as he realized that Babs had controlled this exchange from the outset and he wanted only to disappear into the maze of steam tunnels under the courthouse and leave her to this ancestral disposal.

“Jack...”

Her words brought him back to the present.

“I’m not asking you to hurt these people. They’re already dead. It’s like removing cobwebs. I know that’s a terrible way of putting it, but I need you take this box away and I’m willing to pay you handsomely. You never have to see me again because I’m moving away to be closer to what family I have left. Please, Jack, take my money and the box and, as they say in the movies, we both walk away clean.”

Jack realized that he was sweating. He had once read an account of a man facing torture at the hands of the Gestapo. An officer had explained very simply why the prisoner should tell them what they wanted to know and forgo the pain and disfigurement that was inevitable. Everything that the inquisitor said was impeccably logical and the narrator couldn't think of anything to rebut it. Still, he refused, realizing the only right that remained to him was his right to say no.

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Standing in the parking lot with the shoe box under his arm, he watched his new and former client disappear down a row of cars, having sealed their arrangement with a brief kiss on his cheek. The box had already begun to put his arm to sleep, so he shifted it to his hands as he turned towards the courthouse. Removing the envelope, he deposited the faded images into a container as he began clearing his own cobwebs in preparation for his next descent into the maelstrom of Judge O'Flaugherty's mind.