

Learning to Live with Your Worst Fear

By Ronald A. Lustig

Webster Mitchell hated vacations because they took him away from his greatest love, his law practice. Unlike most divorce lawyers in Detroit, he loved Monday mornings. Thirty years of practice and he still couldn't wait to get to his office. He was addicted to the action.

One week with his daughter and four grandchildren in California had taken its toll. Like always, he slept on the flight home while his wife kept up a steady stream of patter, oblivious to the fact he was already in dreamland when the plane lifted off the tarmac.

Surveying his desk, he spotted stacks of mail neatly piled up by this secretary, Michelle. He made a mental note to take his pistol from the closet before his first interview and put it in the lower desk drawer. His concentration was interrupted by different noises. First, he heard multiple sirens. Probably another senior from the nearby nursing home being taken by ambulance to the hospital.

The second noise was Michelle buzzing his intercom.

"Just a reminder. A new client's coming in at 9:00, a Mrs. Joyce Lovell, and Mr. Pennington's on line 1."

Clive Pennington was Web's best friend. They talked to each other many times a day. He picked up the line.

"Hey, Clive, what's shakin'?"

"My opponents, of course. Like you, Web!"

"Great, but my brain's still fried from L.A. We still on for squash at 6:30?"

"You must be joking," Clive laughed. "You know tonight is payback time. Nothing could make me miss thrashing you and picking up the clinching win for the first time in five years."

They had a standing 6:30 squash game every Monday night for the last 10 years. The winner

of their annual series popped for a cruise every winter.

“Only five years? Seems more like seven or eight to me.”

“Wait,” Clive jumped in. “I’m getting a premonition. I’m on a cruise and I see my beautiful wife, Mimi. It’s Sunday and we’re dancing to Jamaican music. And there’s a guy sitting at our table and he turns around and he has this glum look as the waiter is handing him not one, but two bills for the cruise. Wait a minute, I’m starting to make out his features. Well, I’ll be damned, it’s you. I have a word of advice for you, kiddo.”

“And what might that be?” Web asked.

“You have to learn to live with your worst fear!”

The sirens got louder.

“Hey, Webster. A ton of cop cars are heading your way and turning into your lot.” Clive was in a high rise across the street from Web’s ground floor office. He often peered into his friend’s window.

“Great, just what I need. Gotta run. I have a 9 a.m. appointment. Michelle just buzzed me. My client’s already in the waiting room. See you at 6:30.”

Just as Web was finishing his thought and hanging up, he heard Clive say, “Don’t hang up. Did you hear about Story and Cash....”

Web started chuckling. Clive could fill him in later. Hearing Michelle knocking on his door, he instinctively got up and walked around his desk. Before Michelle could say anything, a sultry, long-haired blond in her forties with painted-on clothes sashayed by Michelle. Disregarding Web’s outstretched hand, she pulled one of his guest chairs up to his desk and plopped down.

Web pivoted around and his new client motioned him to sit down with her right arm while her back was still to him. While moving to sit down, he spoke first.

“Mrs. Lovell, I’m Web Mitchell. Pleased to meet you.”

“Of course you’re Web Mitchell, or else I wouldn’t be here.”

As he sat down, she leaned over his desk. It took all his concentration to avoid looking at her ample cleavage because her blouse was nearly unbuttoned.

“There are three things I don’t like about lawyers. First, you charge too much. Second, all you ever want to do is look down my blouse. And third, you don’t tell the truth. What kind of a lawyer are you?”

Web wouldn’t take the bait and, although his right foot started to twitch, he said with his best poker face, “Mrs. Lovell, you can take it to the bank. I’ll never lie to you.”

He said it in mock seriousness and, as a lifelong poker player, he looked for “the tell.” His clever retort got zero response. She just stared back. He then used his stock-and-trade intro.

“So, Mrs. Lovell, what brings you here?”

“Mr. Lovell, of course.”

“Of course, Mr. Lovell, I understand. If you don’t mind me asking, how long have you been married?”

“We were married for 10 long years.”

“Did you say ‘were’? Are you separated?”

“It might be more accurate to say permanently separated. Mr. Lovell met an early demise about a week ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry for your loss. Must be painful meeting a lawyer so soon after his death.”

“Not really,” Mrs. Lovell interrupted while reaching her right hand into the large purse slung over her shoulder. “I shot him last Wednesday.”

Webster Mitchell should have been alarmed, but he wasn’t. He felt more alive than he had in 30 years when, while parasailing around St. Martin, he realized that his bathing suit had slipped down over his ankles as the wind swooshed him higher.

“You know, I used to practice criminal law when I first got out of law school. I was a damn good D.A., so I’ll be glad to give you any helpful advice I can. But the attorney-client privilege only goes so far.”

“Who said anything about attorney-client privilege? You’re the third lawyer I’ve seen in the last week, and the last two didn’t give me the right answers.”

“Well, if you don’t mind me asking, who were the other lawyers?”

“Theodore Story and Frank Cash. Maybe you read about them.”

“No need. I’ve known them for 25 years. Both are great divorce lawyers.”

“I’ll bet they were,” Mrs. Lovell responded. “They sure gave great closing arguments during our interviews.”

“Teddy Story is a fraternity brother. And what do you mean ‘were?’”

“Have you ever heard the expression, ‘end of Story?’”

As she said this, Mrs. Lovell pushed her chair back from the table and began reaching deeper into her purse with her right hand. Web Mitchell gulped and was about to reach into his lower right-hand drawer when he realized he had violated his cardinal rule—he forgot to put his loaded pistol back into its place of honor before meeting with his first client. While thinking of option number 2, Michelle buzzed his intercom and he automatically picked up the receiver.

“Mr. Mitchell, it’s Clive, and he said it’s an emergency ... ”

Web picked up the phone before she finished her sentence.

“Web, thank God I reached you. I did some sleuthing. Story and Cash were shot last week by a lunatic client named Joyce Lovell. They think she’s trying to set up an appointment with you. I see a SWAT team is already in your parking lot. Have you heard from her?”

As he was speaking, Mrs. Lovell signaled him to hang up and he saw the butt end of a pearl-handled revolver being lifted out of her purse.

“Yeah, she’s sitting across from me in my office. Think I better hang up now.”

He hung up the receiver and decided to take a different tack.

“Sorry for the intrusion. Let me guess. Mr. Cash also had an early demise.”

Mrs. Lovell jumped in. “Have you ever heard the euphemism ... ”

Web cut her off. “Yeah, yeah, very clever. He ‘Cashed out.’ Am I right?”

Mrs. Lovell stopped in mid-sentence and gave a half smile while sliding her right hand back into her purse.

There it was—the tell. Web continued before she could open her mouth. There was still hope, or so he thought.

“This isn’t a game. Those were two of the finest people I know and you still haven’t given me a reason.”

“OK, maybe you’re entitled. But no funny stuff!” Without taking her eyes off Web, Mrs. Lovell reached into her purse with her left hand, withdrew a piece of paper, and slid it across to Web, who studied it.

At the top of a things-to-do list were three names.

“I don’t get it,” Web said. “This paper lists three people: Theodore Story, Frank Cash, and Webster Mitchell. Who wrote it?”

“My husband.”

“You mean, your late husband,” Web said. “By the way,” he asked on a lark, “do you have a picture of him?” He studied her closely, thinking about his next move.

“Why, I think I might have one. You want to see it?”

“Well, that’s generally the reason people ask if you have a picture, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Lovell seemed generally amused by his bravado. Once again, she slowly stuck her left hand into her purse without taking her eyes off Web, extracted a small wallet and, without having to

look down, pulled a small picture out of one of its pockets. She slid the picture across to Web, who picked it up.

“Never saw him before in my life,” Web said, “but who’s the beautiful broad on his arm with the short hair?”

“That’s me, before I let my hair grow out.” Mrs. Lovell responded.

“Really!” Web shot back. “You know, it’s really not my place, but you might want to consider keeping it short. Makes you look more sophisticated.”

Web slid the picture back across the table. Before putting it in her purse, Web saw her lick her upper lip—another tell.

“Look, Mrs. Lovell, you probably had a very good reason for Story and Cash, but I’ve seen this happen a hundred times. A man like your husband doesn’t realize he’s got a good thing going and strays a little bit, never thinking his wife will catch him. Then it’s straight down the chute to Divorce Land or, in this case, Casket City. Am I right?”

“Not even close,” Mrs. Lovell grunted.

“My husband treated me like the Queen of Sheba and followed me around like a puppy dog. It was me! I was cheating on him for five years. He had an investigator tail me and even you can figure out the rest. Last Monday, I found this list with three names on it and called the numbers. When it turned out you were all lawyers, I knew the drill. I started drinking last Tuesday and haven’t stopped. Everything’s been a blur since then. I’ll be the last on the list.” She exhaled heavily.

“That’s it!” Web shouted while standing up. “You have a defense—diminished capacity! And I’m your best witness. I can hook you up with the best criminal lawyer I know. But we’ve got to stop the SWAT team before they fill us both full of lead.” Web was starting to feel more in control. He was at his most persuasive, or so he thought.

“No, it’s too late for talk. Anyway, they’d just put me in a mental ward. Do I look like the

kind of woman who would last five minutes in a straightjacket?”

Web started talking again while inching his way around his desk. He figured option number 2 might be his only chance. This time he tried to talk soothingly. He could see her starting to cock the pistol.

“Don’t be alarmed. Would you put that thing back in your purse? I was just going to the closet to get my calendar. I wanted to see if your husband ever called me or made an appointment.”

“Fine,” Mrs. Lovell responded. “But nice and slow.”

Web sized up his chances. He could open the door, quickly jump in, shut it, and hope her bullets wouldn’t pierce it. But he wouldn’t be able to grab his gun from its case and hold the doorknob at the same time. Even worse, she might grab Michelle and shoot her or use her as a shield. Instead, he quickly opened the closet door and fished his calendar from the breast pocket of his hanging suit jacket. He started looking in it while walking towards her chair.

“Far enough!” she cautioned.

Web flipped the pages of his calendar. When he got to Wednesday, he started nodding his head.

“Yeah. Just like I thought. Your husband made an appointment to see me a week ago last Wednesday. Right before my vacation. I never talked to him, but my secretary wrote it on my schedule. He apparently called and cancelled the appointment because she crossed it out and wrote cancelled. See! Take a look.”

Web started walking toward Mrs. Lovell while looking at the calendar and then stretched out his right arm to hand her the calendar. Once she reached to grab it with her left hand, he lunged toward her. Option number 3. In a fraction of a second, he pulled her left wrist across her body with his left hand and jumped on top of her chair. The chair flipped over backwards. She never got her gun completely out, but he heard a muffled shot as they tumbled over one another.

Even though neither of them was hit, Mrs. Lovell ended up on top of him with her legs straddling his body. The barrel of the pistol was pointed right at his head, but he grabbed her right forearm with his left hand and tried twisting it so she couldn't shoot him. With his right hand, he grabbed the back of her long hair and started pulling it back.

Then, everything went black.

Next thing he knew, Web heard a familiar voice.

“Webster, damn it! Will you let go of my hair? You're hurting me! You're pulling it right out by the roots!”

Web opened his eyes. It was his wife's voice.

“We just got back from California and you're having another one of those God-awful nightmares. You're going to pay for this one. Now I know why couples sleep in separate beds.”

“Oh my God, Carol, it was so real! Are you alright? I can't believe it!”

“Believe this, no cruise this winter. You and Clive are taking Mimi and me to the south of France. And if you don't make an appointment with a psychiatrist tomorrow, you better get down on your knees and pray I don't call Ted Story.”

Flipping on the nightstand light, she got out of bed, grabbed her bathrobe out of the closet, and started walking out of the bedroom.

“Where you going? I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. I'll call Dr. Fox first thing tomorrow. I promise.”

“I'm sleeping in the guest bedroom. This is the third time this month you've had a nightmare. It's a good thing you don't own a gun.”

As his wife slammed the bedroom door behind her, Web touched his pajamas, which were stuck to his body with sweat. He got up and quickly went to the bathroom and hopped in the shower. After a long shower, he got fresh linens out of the closet and remade the bed. Within 30

seconds, he was out cold.

When he awoke Monday morning, he was jolted back to reality when he realized his wife wasn't next to him. He was afraid to face her, so he took his time getting ready for work.

After he had cleaned up and dressed, he went downstairs expecting to find his wife in her usual spot in the kitchen, but she was gone. Instead, a note was sticking up from the napkin holder on the kitchen table. He grabbed it, and was relieved after reading it.

“Don't forget to call Dr. Fox!!!! Luv, your balding wife.”

Web looked at his watch and realized he would be a few minutes late for his 9 a.m. appointment, so he called Michelle and gave her a heads up. They talked shop for a minute or two. It was totally out of character for Webster Mitchell to be late for an introductory Monday morning interview, so he gave Michelle instructions.

“I'll probably be two or three minutes late tops, so offer her something to drink. I'll call you when I'm pulling into the parking lot so you can take her into my office and make her comfortable and I'll walk in right behind you.”

During the 10 minutes it took to get from his house to the parking lot, Web's mood picked up. He was thankful he had such an understanding wife, and in spite of his guilt, he couldn't stop smiling when he visualized how ridiculous it was that he had been pulling his wife's hair in his sleep. To be sure, this would be a standing joke between them for the rest of their lives.

As he turned into his parking lot and was pulling his car close to the front entrance, he called his secretary. Trotting from his vehicle up the steps into the building, he checked his watch. It was only 9:01. Within a few seconds, he was down the main hallway and pushed open the door to his suite. He saw Michelle just walking out of his office and, to her surprise, he smiled at her and gave her a high five.

His client was already sitting in one of his guest chairs. Before she could turn around as he

approached the side of his desk, he introduced himself.

“Hello. I’m Web Mitchell, pleased to meet you.”

No sooner had the words escaped his mouth, he saw her profile and started to feel queasy.

“Of course you’re Web Mitchell or else I wouldn’t be here. There are three things I don’t like about lawyers ... ”