



Nobody's Fool

By Randy Judd

Asking an attorney about his or her most memorable client is much like loosening the cork of an uncertain vintage. But Jack Collier's tale of human nature always eased slowly into the glass and never disappointed the listener. Back when Reagan was president, Jack had broken his cardinal rule and agreed to see a walk-in client even though it was late Friday afternoon. He had ushered a squirrely little man into his office and budgeted 20 minutes to evaluate the case. Changing straw into gold had never been Jack's strong suit. As the story unfolded, it seemed that the man, Mr. Dunbar, was an inventor of some note.

I want you to sue General Motors and when I'm done telling you about what happened, I know you're going to agree that they owe me plenty.



"Not much I haven't invented," Mr. Dunbar proudly volunteered. "Invented the Double A battery... Triple A, too... felt-tip pen... whitewall tire... and..." He rose as he spoke and placed a small object on Jack's desk. "...the Blue Dot Flashcube! There it is, sir... proof of my words."

Jack had looked down at the cube and then up at Mr. Dunbar and realized that he was dealing with a "BUG" who needed to be handled expeditiously. He decided to forgo an evidentiary lecture and opted instead to cut to the chase.

"Mr. Dunbar, a man who's as talented as you wouldn't come in here unless it was important. Am I right?" Mr. Dunbar had nodded in agreement. "So, sir, why don't you tell me about your problem? That way I'll know if I'm the right guy to handle it for you." From Mr. Dunbar's reaction, Jack's attempt to keep any trace of irony from his voice succeeded.

"Well, Mr. Collier, I can tell that you are nobody's fool." He paused to give his words added gravitas. "I want you to sue General Motors and when I'm done telling you about what happened, I know you're going to agree that they owe me plenty."

It seemed that Mr. Dunbar had been employed by General Motors' Truck Division for 30 years as a janitor. During that time, he'd submitted hundreds of suggestions to GM. As he surveyed Mr. Dunbar, Jack could only imagine the nature of the suggestions.

"Mr. Dunbar, did you make copies of your ideas before submitting them?" When Mr. Dunbar responded that he hadn't, Jack motioned for him to continue.

About a year ago, everything had changed. Mr. Dunbar had been assigned to a new part of the plant where the building was divided by a steel wall accessible through only one door. After about a month, Mr. Dunbar realized he was being kept away from the other side of the plant. He'd ask the other workers about their work, but they would just shrug and say, "Hey, you know... same old same old." Then they'd move away from him. He suspected that he was the only person in the plant who didn't know about the other side.

"I may not look like much to you, Mr. Collier, but I'm also nobody's fool. They were all trying to keep it secret from me!"

Jack had thought to ask just who *they* were, but he had learned over the years that not interrupting was the quickest way to the end of the maze.

"Did I tell you about the noise, Mr. Collier?" Mr. Dunbar had asked.

"No, Mr. Dunbar. Why don't you tell me about the noise."

"Well, sir, every time I got close to the door I'd hear this terrible pounding. It was like my head was in a big bell. It got so I thought it was going to bust wide open."

With that, Mr. Dunbar stopped, held his forehead, and wept a bit. Jack's 27 years of practice had left him immune to tears and over-rehearsed stories. After composing himself, Mr. Dunbar had continued. At first the noise was indistinct. It was, after all, a factory and factories are hives of noise and activity. Then the pounding became as addictive as it was painful. He needed it, yet it robbed him of his purpose and direction. He was becoming a drone.

"Mr. Dunbar, how loud is the noise right now, sitting right here in this office?" Jack interrupted with a gambit.

"What the hell kind of dumb-ass question is that? I don't hear nothing now. I only hear the noise at the plant!" Mr. Dunbar angrily leaned forward and Jack moved slightly toward his metal water carafe, just in case he'd need to offer the man some encouragement toward the door. But Mr. Dunbar settled back and smiled. "I only hear the noises when I'm standing next to the wall... got it?"

"Got it," Jack replied and settled back in his chair. The inventor was proving to be a man of many parts.

Mr. Dunbar realized that his obsession with getting to the other side of the wall could tip off the plant personnel to the fact that he had found a way to defeat the controlling noise. Once exposed, he knew that he'd be sent to another part of the plant. The wall had been their biggest mistake. Instead of driving him away, it was the flame that drew him to the truth on the other side.

Like all great men, Mr. Dunbar decided that he needed a bold plan and the courage to follow it through. Every day he moved closer to the door. He finally decided to just walk in like Patton

and take a look. He maneuvered his cart near the access door and then slipped through before anyone could stop him. On the other side was an entire production line and a light so bright and pounding so loud that he could barely stand it. There were shiny new trucks being driven away from the end of the production line. They were all different colors—so many, in fact, that they reminded him of a bag of Jelly Bellies.

“All the workers wore white coveralls and the floor was so clean you could’a eaten chicken and gravy off it without no worry at all,” he observed. But it also broke his heart because the truck being built was the same design that he had suggested to General Motors months before. They had stolen his idea and never given him credit.

“I gotta tell ya, right about then the pounding got so bad that I had to go back to the other side of the wall, just to get away from it.” It was then that he understood about the pounding. They had mapped the frequencies inside his head, probably from talking to the plant doctor. GM had hooked him up to some machine to adjust his brain so he couldn’t hear the pounding but would obey the orders.

If I could get on television, then everybody in America would know the truth and General Motors would give me everything they owed me...

“But I guess they screwed it up in my case, because I was still able to hear it and find out what they were up to. Once I knew, I couldn’t let ‘em get away with stealing my ideas like that. That’s why I did what I did.” Mr. Dunbar sat back into the chair and crossed his arms and grinned like he just won the Lotto.

“And just what is it that you did, Mr. Dunbar?” Jack asked, hoping that it didn’t involve explosives. It was as if Mr. Dunbar had been waiting for the question so that he could deliver his punch line. He slapped his hands down on the chair arms and leaned forward.

“Well, sir, I’m up against the biggest corporation in the world... am I right or am I right?”

Jack had nodded in agreement.

“So, I figured that I wasn’t going to just walk into the plant manager’s office and tell him that I knew. I mean, he’s just going to give me some song and dance and toss me out... am I right?” Jack’s head bobbed in agreement. “So, I figured that the only way to shake up those bigwigs and really get their attention was to get my story out there where everyone could see it. You know, to The People... the ones who buy the cars. Am I right?”

“Sounds good to me, Mr. Dunbar,” Jack responded, looking at his wristwatch. He hoped that borderline rudeness might accomplish what the agony of patience had not.

“Well, sir, I went home and started watching my favorite show, *Hollywood Squares*. You must watch it. Well, it just hit me, Mr. Collier... television. If I could get on television, then everybody

in America would know the truth and General Motors would give me everything they owed me because I’d...” He paused, trying to find the right words.

“Have the will of the people firmly behind you?” Jack offered up a Frank Capra ending. He was also wondering if *Hollywood Squares* could still be in live production.

“Yep. So you know what I did? I called up *Hollywood Squares* and left a message. Know what I told ‘em?” Jack had to admit that he didn’t have a clue. “I told ‘em that *ROSE MARIE WAS A SLUT AND A WHORE*. Well, that sure as hell got their attention. In no time Rose Marie was on the phone asking, *Why are you saying those mean things about me?* She was crying, Mr. Collier.” He paused and waited for Jack’s reaction.

Jack opened his mouth wide and laughed like he hadn’t in years. It was more of a roar that hurt as he choked, coughed, and cried. He tried to compose himself, but when he looked over at Mr. Dunbar’s mask of sweet innocence, he laughed even harder. The thought of an over-the-hill child star and washed-up television actress weeping on the phone in Burbank was more than he could stand. One of the night transcriptionists poked his head into the office, but Jack waved him away. Whether Mr. Dunbar was an accomplished liar or a man who’d forsaken his psychotropic medication didn’t matter at that moment.

“So Mr. Dunbar, what did you say to Rose Marie to settle her down?” Jack asked, wiping the tears from his eyes. He felt that they were in the third act.

“Well, sir, I told that pretty lady that I meant her no harm, but I needed her help

so that I could get onto television and tell the whole world about how General Motors had walked all over me and taken my ideas.” He looked over at Jack and waited for him to finish blowing his nose before he continued. “Mr. Collier, do you know what that sweet dear lady said? Well, she said I could come right on *Hollywood Squares* that Friday and they’d let me tell the whole world about what had happened.”

“Okay, Mr. Dunbar. Did you go on *Hollywood Squares*? Did you tell your story?” Jack was trying to guess the ending to this drama. Toward that end he decided not to ask how Mr. Dunbar had gotten to California on such short notice.

“Mr. Collier, you’re not going to believe this. Thursday night I went home and I made darn sure that my alarm was set so I could get to the studio. You gotta believe me when I tell you I made darn good and sure that that alarm was set... but it never went off!” He paused and looked at Jack, who gave a shrug and waited. “I’ve gotta believe that GM’s guys got into my place when I was asleep and monkeyed with the clock. I mean, there’s no other explanation... right?” He looked to Jack for validation of his conspiracy theory.

“Well, there’s that, or maybe Mr. Dunbar—and you tell me if this is possible—just maybe you forgot to set the alarm. That’s possible, isn’t it, sir?” asked Jack gently, staking everything on one throw of the dice.

“No goddamn way!” Again Mr. Dunbar abandoned his clownish demeanor and looked every bit the cheated inventor. Jack



immediately recognized the error of his question and shifted toward the carafe. He cursed himself for breaking the rule about never seeing clients late on a Friday when the office was empty.

“So, what did you do?” Jack hoped that moving Mr. Dunbar forward would take them off a collision course.

“You’re not going to believe this, Mr. Collier. I finally decided to go over to Gander’s Bar and have me a pick-me-up and some breakfast. I was sitting there feeling pretty low when Buzz—he’s the guy who owns Ganders—yells over to me, *Jesus Christ, would ya look at that. Hey, that’s you, isn’t it?* So I look up and there on the TV was the *Hollywood Squares* thing and there I am sitting in a box and I’m telling everyone how GM stole my ideas and then tried to use their radio beams to make me a zombie and everyone is being really nice. Rose Marie, she gives me a hug and tells everyone that they should phone GM and tell them to do the right thing by me since I’m such a fine American who worked for them for so many years.” He paused to gauge Jack’s reaction and upon seeing the attorney’s smile, he continued.

“Well, I’ll tell you, in about a minute the phone in Gander’s rang and it was for me. Ya know who it was?” Mr. Dunbar looked to Jack to provide the answer, but the attorney shrugged. “It was the plant manager at GM. I don’t know how he knew I was there, but he says to me that he’s just watched *Hollywood Squares* and that they are now willing to deal... except that there is one thing that I have to do before they will pay me.” He paused again and waited for Jack to prompt him so that he could continue. Jack complied.

“Okay. What is the one thing you have to do so GM will pony up the bucks?”

“I have to file a lawsuit against General Motors to prove that I’m really serious and once I do that, they’re going to pay me everything.” With that, Mr. Dunbar settled back into the chair with his arms crossed.

Like many attorneys, Jack considered himself a student of human behavior and a trained observer. While Mr. Dunbar didn’t ring true, he was an oddly likeable man who deserved something more than the bum’s rush. But over the years, Jack had learned that no matter how gentle his words and manner were

when rejecting a client, that person always reacted with anger and shame. Since he had never perfected an exit strategy for these moments, he adopted the semi-direct approach.

“Sir, how did you get my name?” Jack deadpanned his question.

“You don’t want my case, do you?” Mr. Dunbar responded, sounding scalded. Jack drew in his next breath and then relaxed.

“Mr. Dunbar, I’ve spent a good 30 minutes listening to your story, but I’ve been wondering—and it’s for my own records, you see—how did you get my name? Were you referred to me by another client...another attorney?”

“You don’t believe me, do you? You think I’m a liar!” Mr. Dunbar’s voice rose. “You think I’m a looney, don’t you?”

Jack’s face was a mask. He sat in his chair with his hands resting on the pad with the small cube between them.

“Why would you say something like that, Mr. Dunbar? I just need some information for my records. Don’t you want to tell me how you got my name?” He asked a few more questions dealing with dates and names to focus the man and reassure him, but the well was now poisoned. He also had to worry that Mr. Dunbar’s next stop might be one of the attorneys who probably advertised on *Hollywood Squares* and that he’d be the next target of opportunity. He had ridden this horse far enough.

“Mr. Dunbar, I don’t think that I’m the right attorney to handle your case.” Jack kept his eye on the inventor and got the impression that he had heard this sort of rejection before. “However, I’m going to grab a retention agreement for you to fill out so that I can keep in touch with you.”

He excused himself and headed down the hall to the supply area to grab the form. He was gone less than a minute, but when he returned Mr. Dunbar’s chair was empty. He walked to the now empty reception area and then into the building’s lobby, but Mr. Dunbar was nowhere to be seen. Jack locked the front door to the suite and went through each office, closet, and storage area, but without a sighting. He repeated the search with the transcriptionist, but there was no trace of Mr. Dunbar. Jack returned to his office and checked to see if anything was missing. Standing behind his desk, he looked down and saw the small blue cube still in the middle of the blotter. He picked up the cube, squeezed it, and laughed to himself. It was a cleaner break than he had thought possible. He placed the cube in his desk drawer with his other talismans and drove home.

In the years since Mr. Dunbar’s visit, Jack has embellished the story to where it is considered a classic. Usually someone, after the initial hearing, would ask him if he still had the cube. Jack always milked the moment with a pause.

“Sure do. I’m nobody’s fool, you know.” ■



Randy Judd is a graduate of the Detroit College of Law and has been a licensed attorney since 1979. An English major at Oakland University, he chose law over Eugene O’Neill. He was a senior trial attorney with AAA, but now has a practice limited to arbitrations and some contract legal work. He thanks his friend, former office mate, and dive buddy, John Zorza, for providing a creative spark for this short story.