

In all the time I spent with my grandfather, he only gave me one piece of advice. I was ten years old at the time, but I made it a point to remember everything about the day he bestowed his wisdom upon me. Even then, I knew someday I would look back on that afternoon and consider it a significant milestone in my life. The advice didn't make much sense at the time. It seemed crude. Rough. This, verbatim, is what he told me: "Jakie, never lift a man so high that he can to piss in your face."

My grandfather was a well-mannered man, and except for that afternoon, he never uttered any profanities in my presence. He endowed his wisdom on me as we walked through Frick Park on a Sunday afternoon in autumn. The day was cold and the trees were bare. The air smelled of burning leaves and the sulfurous odor of the coke ovens on the Monongahela River.

I was wearing a Pirate's baseball cap, but my grandfather was bare-headed. I remember that my enraged grandmother had nagged him to put on a hat as we prepared for our walk. She'd followed him through the house, from the kitchen, through the dining room and living room and into the foyer insisting if he didn't he put on a hat, he'd catch cold and die and then where would that leave her? The minute he opened the door and told me to come along, she stopped her screeching, god forbid one of the neighbors might actually *see* her nagging him (as if they didn't hear her verbally browbeating him day in and day out). My grandmother was the reason he passed his Sundays walking in the park with me, his only grandchild, born to his only son.

With me, he was kind and gentle, his patience unending. Only later in life did I hear stories of his win-at-all-costs attitude in the courtroom, and of his cowering clerks and associates with withering criticism. If he was a contentious son-of-a-bitch, the only evidence I ever had of it was the

terrifyingly violent arguments he had with my grandmother. They'd argue about anything. Most of these screaming matches took place in the kitchen and usually centered on food. They invariably ended with my grandmother shrieking in German, and brandishing a kitchen utensil, most often a meat cleaver, while my grandfather roared his protests. After he died, she lost much of her fight, partially, I think, because she no longer had anyone to quarrel with.

I remember insignificant things about my grandfather – the mingled fragrance of cologne and cigars, his crumpled roar of a voice, the feel of his enormous hand holding mine as we walked through Frick Park on Sunday afternoons. I still have a hard time reconciling my memories of that truly "gentle" man who held my hand and patiently answered my tiresome questions, with the man whose reputation was that of a SOB who loved a good fight as much as he loved a good cigar. "Never lift a man so high that he can piss in your face." I assumed it was the essential piece of wisdom that had made him the man he was.

For years I believed his words were inscribed in gold leaf on the walls of the Duquesne Club, my grandfather's other refuge from my grandmother. I liked to think that the three-piece-suited, cigar smoking men sitting in overstuffed leather chairs in the reading room would raise their eyes from their newspapers and read my grandfather's words inscribed on the paneled walls, nodding their heads in knowing agreement.

They were fighting words, and though I guess I could admire that in him, I am and have always been a non-confrontational person. My grandfather's querulous behavior certainly turned my father against him. I don't blame him. Growing up in the shadow of fighting Abe Gold must have been a real pain in the ass, especially for the shy, book smart kid my father was. It took a long time, and I mean a *long* time, for him to come to terms with it, something like forty years.

But the point is that like my father, I don't like to fight, or want to fight – for anything. I just want to be left alone. But as my father warned me, (from all too painful experience) things aren't as easy as that.

I was a shy kid and my shyness was sometimes mistaken for some sort of intelligence, an assumed aptitude that piqued the interest of teachers and coaches who wanted to take me under their wing and appoint themselves my mentors.

Now, when you're ten years old and your grandfather tells you not to let anyone piss in your face, you tend not to trust anyone who offers you any favors. I'm sure the intentions of those would-be mentors were probably good, but I didn't want any part of them. I just wanted to be left alone to play in the sandbox by myself.

This reticence to accept a helping hand has been both a godsend and a hindrance in my life. It has saved me from more than a few bores, overly

enthusiastic teachers, overzealous coaches. But there have been times when I should have accepted a helping hand and didn't. You don't always have to climb the mountain when the train can get you there in twenty minutes. But I have to admit I liked watching my would-be mentors' faces sour as they recognized the fact I didn't want their help. That 'to hell with you then' expression would rise in their eyes, and then I could go on with my life, happily unmolested.

So I went through adolescence, four years of undergraduate study, and two more years of graduate school, and emerged with an academic, yet rather fundamental cynicism about the world. I thought I could get through life just fine if I just kept myself above it all. My first job, working at City Hall, knocked a little sense into me, but by the time I emerged from my next job at the law firm of Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells, I'd learned that fate's too mean a son-of-a-bitch to let you get through life unscathed.

After all was said and done, my heart was darkened, only a shade deeper perhaps, almost imperceptibly. It didn't make me forswear love or change my party affiliation, nothing that dire, but it led me to reassess the meaning of my grandfather's words, even as I was forced to apply them to him. Maybe that is what he'd intended that Sunday afternoon in Frick Park. This is how it all started:

It was early May 1990 and spring had come late. It had been raining steadily for eight straight days. The Mayor's special task force I had been working on had handed in its findings on corruption in city hall and a Grand Jury had handed down several indictments. The Post-Gazette still found the indictments worthy of column space, although it had been bumped off page one by news of fifteen-year-old gang bangers shooting one other. The paper was full of accounts of the drive-by shootings that had shattered the almost small town quiet of the city of Pittsburgh. The news of the indictments at city hall was relegated to the city page and to an occasional angry letter to the editor.

The task force had been established by the mayor after the election. I got the job both as a reward for my work on the campaign (which I did to get credit for college) and to help pack city hall with warm bodies loyal to the new mayor. So, fresh with a graduate degree in public administration I undertook my assignment to ferret out corruption in City Hall with the zeal of a religious convert, and a paycheck to match.

In the end, you could say I learned two important lessons from my days on the task force. One: it is impossible to change city government, and Two: it's pretty damn hard to live the high life on the salary of a civil servant, even one charged with the noble task of fighting corruption. I should have expected the hostility exhibited by the people I investigated, hell, they were scared of losing their jobs. But I was more surprised by the attitude of those

who I thought were on our side. Apparently not everyone in town was delighted with the vigor with which we did our duty.

The mayor had unseated an incumbent in the primary and the general election was a mere formality, because he was a Democrat and a Republican had hadn't held the Mayor's office in Pittsburgh in this century. After the bruising primary there was a call from within the party to mend fences, which was heeded as a single, gargantuan reality asserted itself – you can only air so much dirty laundry when it's in your own party. So in the end, after all the hard work done by the task force, far fewer indictments than recommended were passed down.

After a year and a half, not only had I failed to change city government single-handedly, but I was also still stuck in a sparsely furnished apartment in Shadyside and driving a used car. The only solace I could take from all this was that someone had leaked the recommendations we'd made to the DA to the press, and a few letter-writing zealots were having a field day of it on the editorial page. One crotchety old man suggested that they reinstate the pillory so city residents could vent their anger at the bureaucrats who had squandered their tax dollars for so many years.

Other letters urged additional crackdowns. Still more cited the indictments as further proof of the decay of morals in society – man's own inhumanity to man, yadda, yadda, yadda, yadda. Another troubled soul blamed the breakdown of government on human consumption of animal flesh and the use of their skin and fur for clothing. All in all, it promised to be amusing reading for the bus ride home.

I was getting ready to leave when one of my co-workers, Phil Hendricks, barged into my office and informed me that the managing partner of Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells had just phoned the mayor to inquire about my services. Hendricks was somewhere between thirty-five and eighty-years-old and convinced his work was the most important enterprise in all of City Hall. I suppose he was harmless enough, but he kept trying to set me up on a blind date with his second cousin twice removed or something like that.

"How do you know this law firm is interested in me?" I asked.

"I overheard the mayor," he replied, happily tugging on his suspenders.

"What, are you tapping his phone now?" I asked.

"Very funny guy," he replied. He leaned over my desk so close that I could see his nose hairs quiver in excitement. "This is serious fellah. Rifkin, Sampson is a big firm. Big firm."

"I have no experience in law," I said.

"You've got a reputation," Hendricks said. "And they've been having troubles recently."

"I've got a reputation? Come on Phil."

"Of course you have a rep, a good rep," he replied. "Young kid with a pedigree like yours, grandfather a legend around town, comes in and single-

handedly implicates half the city comptroller's office of improprieties everyone knew they were doing..."

"They didn't convict anyone, remember?"

"Doesn't matter, you've got the reputation, and now Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly and Wells wants you, you lucky son of a bitch."

"Wait Phil, let's start from the beginning. Tell me again. Who called?"

"Rifkin himself. Sounds like the old man's on the warpath." Hendricks rattled off a short history of the firm. All the men whose names were on the door were still alive, some more so than others, a few senior partners had recently jumped ship, and another was under indictment for some sort of real estate fraud.

I knew a bit about the firm. It was one of the top three in the city, a competitor of my grandfather's old firm.

Rifkin, Sampson had represented or been of-counsel to a number of large companies around town, mostly mid-size steel firms.

Hendricks kept talking. "Justice Department...Securities and Exchange Commission...investigations...a fellow, Buxton? Blanton, yes Blanton...Asian holding company... fraud...indictments...gorgeous secretaries."

"I have no skills they could possibly be interested in," I said.

"You have a reputation for finding things out," he replied. "A very good reputation. The Mayor highly recommended you." He looked at me earnestly, and I wondered what this cousin he was trying to set me up with could possibly look like. He was about thirty pounds overweight, slicked his hair back with some oily tonic, and possessed a wardrobe that could make a used car salesman blush. "At least meet with Rifkin and see what he's offering," he suggested with a gap-toothed grin. "It's a golden opportunity."

He left my office and I glanced through a small article on the business page about the firm in the Post-Gazette. It was rather vague. There was a quote from the managing partner, claiming that the troubles they had been experiencing, would, in the long run, provide them with an opportunity to strengthen the firm. It didn't take a genius to read between the lines to tell there was more to the story. After all, it's not often that even large law firms make the newspaper. You can be assured they see to it they don't.

I can't deny I was interested, but being some big shot lawyer's personal hatchet man was not a role I relished. Maybe they really were interested in my abilities. But mention of my "reputation" and the allusions to my family history made me nervous.

The Mayor's secretary called me and said he wanted to see me immediately. So much for going home early, I thought. The Mayor stayed brief, telling me significantly less than Hendricks had. When he finished telling me what I already knew, he said he was going to miss my good work and handed me a slip of paper with the law firm's phone number on it.

Once I got back to my office I glanced at the piece of paper and picked

up the phone. A cold voice on the other end of the line answered.

"Mr. Rifkin's office."

"Ah, yes, this is Jacob Gold."

"Yes Mr. Gold, we've been expecting your call."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Mr. Rifkin will meet with you tomorrow morning at 9:30."

I was silent.

"Does that suit you?"

"Yes, I...suppose so."

"Good we'll see you then. Good bye," she said, then hung up.

I sat for a moment listening to the dial tone.

"Christ," I muttered.

So there I was, twenty six years old, with six years of college and nothing to show for it except two diplomas and a car loan. Law firms paid well, extremely well compared to City Hall. And then there was the looming threat of becoming accustomed to life in local government. A little voice in the back of my head reminded me that if I wasn't careful, I'd wake up in thirty years and realize I'd only made it to the fourth floor of city hall, having become the same sort of lifer I'd recommended for indictment. Worse yet, I could turn into a Hendricks. Maybe this thing with the law firm was just the thing I needed.

Hendricks stuck his head in the doorway.

"You gonna meet with Rifkin?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Have a ball," he said. I told him I would and put on my raincoat and headed out the door.

"Lucky dog," he said as I passed him in the hallway. He shook his pudgy head. "Lucky dog."

The next morning I caught my bus, the Shadyside Express in mass transit parlance, around the corner from my apartment. The bus ran along Walnut to Ivy, then followed Ellsworth, turned right on Bayard and right again at North Neville. At Centre, it descended a hill to the busway, a roadway open only to busses that ran through Skunk Hollow, the ravine that separates Bloomfield from Oakland and Shadyside.

No matter how often I traveled the busway, it never failed to fascinate me. It took less than ten minutes to travel from my cozy little gentrified neighborhood to the steel and glass edifices of the central business district. In between lay forlorn, trash-laden Skunk Hollow. The other passengers didn't seem to notice the low warehouses, the brewery, the litter strewn about the hills and along the railroad tracks. Instead, they occupied themselves with the magazines of their trades or reading books and newspapers. Some people chatted amongst themselves, though not often. Most stared blankly ahead as

though they'd rather face a firing squad than endure another day at work. All were oblivious to the waste scattered along Skunk Hollow.

The variety and volume of trash along the route was amazing. There were porcelain toilets, hundreds of tires, dinette sets, deflated basketballs, enough bricks to build a Taj Mahal, baby carriages with broken wheels, claw footed bathtubs, dozens of shopping carts. If you took an early morning bus, you could sometimes catch people dumping garbage down the hill from the backs of trucks. Coming home evenings, sheets of newspaper drifted along the roadway like tumbleweeds.

The garbage that people had dumped and thought was out of sight and out of mind, was laid out for all who rode on the busway to see. At one point along the route, a white liquid flowed from a pipe and streamed down the hill into an acrid little creek that ran along the railroad tracks. Often, riding home from work, I'd wonder who in City Hall had been bribed to ignore the illegal discharge of the liquid.

What caught my eye about the time of my interview at Rifkin, Sampson was a refrigerator that lay on a hillside, stripped of its doors. I thought it strange that someone thoughtless enough to throw a major appliance off the side of a hill would have taken the time to remove the doors for safety's sake.

I was also fascinated by my fellow mass transit riders. The same people rode the bus every day. We were a small community in a sense, bound together by the ten minutes it took to travel downtown. There was a woman who wore a purple rain coat no matter the weather, and an old man who slept all the way into town. Sometimes he would snore, but when the bus came to his stop he'd wake and exit as though he hadn't been dozing at all.

A blue-suited man sat in the same seat every day reading the Wall Street Journal. An equally serious looking blue-suited man read The Hockey News just as intently as the broker read his Journal. There were the usual secretaries reading romance novels, wearing tennis shoes and pastel pants suits. The business-suited women wore fancier running shoes, as though they planned to break into a sprint as soon as they exited the bus.

A plain woman with limp blonde hair read the Bible, moving her lips as she followed the text with her finger. She did not wear tennis shoes. My favorites, though, were the squirrel couple, a milquetoast pair who spoke in muted whispers and timidly held hands. They'd chatter, glance about the bus nervously, and then resume their conversation.

Then there was the redhead who got on at Centre and Neville, the last stop before the busway. She always dressed in black and had long legs and a practiced, distracted look about her that would have served her well on any fashion runway in Paris – something between a smirk and the face you make when you catch a whiff of something funky. The businessmen would stare at her dressed in her black, they in their pinstripes and blue. Even the squirrel man stole glances at her as she sashayed her way down the aisle, his eyes

following her ass until he felt the icy stare of his squirrel wife.

The morning of my interview, I was extremely nervous about meeting Rifkin. It was raining. When the redhead boarded the bus she was wearing sunglasses. Her immense black purse swayed with her hips as she walked down the aisle and took the empty seat next to mine. She glanced at me as she sat down and I think she smiled, but I was too nervous to notice. As the bus made its long descent to the busway, I turned and noticed the refrigerator lying on the hillside, open mouthed, gaping at the sky.

The redhead smelled of just a hint of perfume. I didn't look at her. I tried to concentrate on the smell of her perfume and tried forget the butterflies in my stomach. I looked down at my shoes and stole a glance at her long, stockinged legs. Even her feet were beautiful. Unbelievable, beautiful feet! The other passengers looked at the two of us approvingly, as though they thought we made a fine couple. I averted my eyes and turned to her. She smiled politely. I felt my ears redden.

A lady sitting further behind us was talking about her cat and I tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but only caught bits and pieces. "And I asked him, is it kitty leukemia?" she said. "I couldn't have handled it if it was leukemia...so I said let me keep Boots at home so he can die a respectable kitty death..." As I listened to her go on about her cat, I wondered if the redhead had a cat. I decided she probably did.

Did Rifkin have a cat? No probably not. Perhaps he had a dog, some kind of big, nasty breed, a mastiff or a Rottweiler – the kind they train to kill on command. I took a deep breath and tried to relax as the bus rounded a curve and the skyline of the city came into view, its spires looming ominously in the gray morning.

Rifkin had single-handedly broken unions and had built and dismantled oil and steel corporations. He had the distinction that few men have – public institutions named for him while he was still alive. He had buildings named for him and his money, and I was sitting there on the Shadyside Express wondering if he had a cat.

The bus stopped abruptly on Liberty Avenue and the redhead got off. The squirrel man watched her waltz down the aisle, his little wife glaring at him. The religious lady marked her place with a satin page mark and the brokers folded their respective papers, slinging them under their arms. I straightened my tie, took a deep breath and tried to assume the air of a young man from the Mayor's office with a reputation, whatever the hell that meant. I got off at Fifth and Smithfield and headed to the address I'd written on a scrap of paper.

The firm's offices were nestled in the top three floors of one of the post-modern skyscrapers that dominate the Pittsburgh skyline. These steel and glass structures had sprouted up in the 1980s to reap quick profits in the

then-booming real estate market. These new alcazars were the nouveau-riche of the architectural world. They dwarfed the monuments built by industrialists at the turn of the century to house their robber baron empires – Frick, Oliver, Mellon, Benedum – the oil and steel magnates of "old" Pittsburgh. Those venerable buildings had facades of marble and granite, named for the captains of industry who had built them. The new buildings were flashy, named for the development companies that had leveraged the money to finance their construction. They were called "center" and "place" as though they were suburban shopping malls. Many of them housed upscale shops, pretentious boutiques and overpriced restaurants to shop and eat in while lawyers and CEOs feasted on the financial donnybrook of the 80s boom economy in the towers that rose above their tree-filled atriums.

Of course the 1980s were simply an unusually bullish blip in the course of economic history, and it ended soon enough. But the damage was done – the old Pittsburgh robber barons had been overshadowed. In '80s the corporate heroes, even in conservative Pittsburgh, had been the corporate raiders, the white knights and their associates. The old captains of industry, ruthless and deadly in their time, were remembered for the libraries they'd funded and for the charitable foundations that bore their names.

As the recession of the late eighties hit, the new office plazas became monuments to the quick money made and lost by real estate developers, men with short term outlooks and heavy burdens of leveraged debt. Within ten years of their construction, these towering structures were foreclosed upon by banks or sold by their developers for pennies on the dollar in bankruptcy sales.

The "Centre" in which Rifkin, Sampson, Kelly & Wells had its offices was sheathed in stainless steel and tinted glass. The first three stories housed one of those atriums filled with upscale boutiques, the sort the average Pittsburgher could never afford to shop in.

As I exited on the forty-fifth floor and stepped into a reception area replete with marble floors and walnut paneling, I realized it was a long way from the corridors of City Hall. It also occurred to me that even when the economy was in recession, lawyers would continue to roll in the dough.

An aging, but still very attractive receptionist took my rain coat. She smiled. "Mr. Rifkin will be with you shortly," she informed me. I examined the surroundings. The art work was nondescript, abstract pieces mostly. They looked as though one of the partner's wives had painted them. I later learned that to be the case. Never underestimate lawyers.

The woodwork was of very high quality but nothing flashy. To the casual observer the decor said they were willing to pay for the best. Harried-looking associates rushed down a broad stairway, and office boys in shirt sleeves scurried by, carrying files and stacks of books. The corridors I could see down were devoid of artwork and fancy trim.

A gray haired man walked swiftly down a corridor and stopped in front of me. His deeply tanned face was sharply contrasted by stark white hair combed almost into a pompadour. His face was etched with wrinkles which made him look regal enough to be sculpted in marble and set in the middle of the lobby. A finely tailored gray pinstripe suit he had probably purchased in one of the stores in the building's lobby, neatly hugged his lean figure.

"Jacob?" He demanded.

"Mr. Rifkin," I said, standing to shake his hand. His grip was firm and he stared me deeply in the eye, holding his chin high, as though posing for a portrait. He carried himself like he knew he would soon be immortal, an icon, revered by all who looked upon him. It was as if he just knew even more buildings would be named in his honor, his portrait hanging in their lobbies. He paused, as though affording me another opportunity to admire him before guiding me down a corridor with his hand on my shoulder. We walked in silence at a quick pace I took to be his usual and stopped in front of a set of double doors. He gestured for me to enter, ushering me into a conference room dominated by an enormous table encircled by high-backed leather chairs. The windows looked out on the Monongahela River and Mt. Washington. Two other men were already in the room seated midway along one side of the table.

"Mr. Sampson," Rifkin said, gesturing to a portly old man with a few thin wisps of gray hair on his head. The old man nodded. "Mr. Wells," Rifkin said, gesturing to the other man, whose face and hands were dotted with liver spots. Neither man stood. Rifkin motioned for me to take a seat across from him as he sat between them, holding his head high as he always would. I leaned across the table and shook the frail men's hands.

"As you may have read in the papers," Rifkin started as I took my seat, "our firm has been affected by a series of setbacks that have led to the removal of several partners, our firm administrator, and an unfortunate reduction in staff. Obviously, the image of this firm has suffered severely, Jacob."

"I have no experience..." I started.

"The paralegal work you will be performing does not require any formal training," he replied.

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea of what a paralegal even does."

"Oh, it's rather simple stuff. Most of the girls we have here at Rifkin, Sampson don't even have bachelor's degrees. A trained monkey could handle it. That isn't important. What is important is that you are well respected around town and we would like to use you here. I have already had the necessary papers drawn up. You should find the terms more than satisfactory."

"I'm really not sure..."

"We'd like to have you on our team," he said, smiling artificially. "Now,

Mr. Sampson and Mr. Wells have previous engagements." Wells and Sampson nodded and stood up. Sampson grasped Wells' arm and together they shuffled toward the door which Rifkin held open for them.

Once he shut the door behind them, he shook his head. "It is very hard to watch friends deteriorate like that. I think we had thought we'd have retired by now, but there never seems to be a right time." He paused again, then continued on as solid as ever. "I hope you'll agree to join us. I went to the University of Pennsylvania with your grandfather. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," I replied.

"He was a few years ahead of me. He was quite a pirate." He smiled genuinely for a moment. "He sold me the answers to a Latin test once. Even then, he was a go-getter. I greatly felt the loss when he died."

"He was quite a man," I said, stung by the image of my gray-haired grandfather selling test answers as an undergraduate.

"Now," he said as he stood and walked to the window, "I have done things in my career that I am not proud of to get where I am today. I hold no qualms about that, but I take great exception to deceit, especially deceit on the part of my own partners. I cannot tolerate it. Your grandfather did not, and I do not think you do either."

I felt I should have said something. I'd hardly uttered a word and felt the interview slipping away. At the same time, though, it seemed to be moving toward an inevitable conclusion.

"I've read your report to the Mayor," Rifkin continued. "I have personally spoken with him about you. I know everything about you. I know and respect your father. I know your personal history, your school history. I know how you performed in your capacity with the Mayor's task force. Jacob," he paused for effect, looking me in the eye sympathetically. "I know of your disappointment with the leniency given to the men you cited for improprieties. This position could provide you the opportunity to forge a meaningful reputation as a problem solver. You could write your own ticket from here. It would be an excellent introduction to the law. You could have superb references to any law school in the country if you wished, or we could keep that firm administrator position open..." He stopped and took a manila envelope from a credenza and handed it to me. "These are our terms. As I said, you should find them satisfactory."

"I don't understand..."

"This firm needs a good housecleaning," he said. "You are to be the maid. You will report only to me. I have invested my entire life in this firm. It is my second wife if you will. This," he motioned with his hands, "is my accomplishment. And I'll be damned if some young conniving sons-of-bitches are going to destroy all I've worked to build." He stopped and cleared his throat.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I have business to tend to. I will send

Jeffrey Kilmer from support services in to give you a quick tour." With that he left. I was alone in the conference room. The sun glinted off the enormous conference table. I walked to the windows and watched the muddy Monongahela as it roiled on its relentless course, flowing by the city on its confluence with the Allegheny to form the Ohio, and continue on to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico.

I opened the manila envelope and examined the single sheet of paper it contained. On it was written a salary and benefits package with a total value typed at the bottom right hand corner of the page. I could have said no, but I didn't. I was to be the highest paid maid in Pittsburgh.

