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# The Counsellor

JOHN UPDIKE

One feels reassured, in the presence of the counsellor. There are those humming brown elevators that lift you toward his firm, and that stunning receptionist whose face is as soaked in powder as a Turkish Delight used to be in sugar, before the candy manufacturers began to feel the pinch. And then, his view! All of the metropolis seems encapsulated in his windows like a town in a spherical paperweight—the spires, the bridges, the penthouses, the traffic jams, the harbor, all there, twinkling. He rises in a cascade of pinstripes. His face is so clean and rosy it looks skinned. He is broad-shouldered, and, well, not exactly four-dimensional, but making more of the three dimensions than the rest of us do: he *bulks*. “Fill me in,” he says, “on the problem.”

While being filled in, he leans back in his chair and presses his fingertips together. They must teach that in law school—a variant of prayer, with the eyes wide open. He does not take a note. For he has beckoned in another lawyer, younger, less bulky, to take notes, on a yellow legal pad held on his gaunt knee. One feels, of course, wretched, fetching one’s clinging shreds of the organic world—life, that begins in the bursting of membranes and ends with a relaxation of the sphincter muscle—into such impeccable presences, such well-groomed offices. Since childhood one has been told that there can be no squaring of the circle, but one hopes of the counsellor that he can cube an egg, and a scrambled egg at that. He leans forward, touches the desktop with his elbows, lets his slow silence bulk him larger, and at last offers, “There may be a way around that.”

One could cry in gratitude.

With manicured hands he outlines in the air a program of counter-terror, writ responding to writ, tort (from *tortus*, crooked) nullifying tort. There may be depositions taken. The demeanor of the judge cannot be foreseen. You want to call a bluff, but you don’t want to call it to the point where it *feels* called. In a situation involving X, Y, and Z, who is to say that Z will prove rational, and not do the self-destructive thing? This is still a free country, with great opportunities for self-destruction. There are variables. Variables cost money. Show me a free variable, I’ll show you totalitarianism. In a nation of laws not men, brinkmanship prevails from sea to shining sea. *Et cetera, sub rosa, entre nous.*

A twinkling maze of imponderable possibilities has arisen above the counsellor's glass desktop. One feels driven outward, from one's petty fate to general considerations, of an abstract and ramifying nature. One asks,

Q.: What is justice?

A.: Depends on the state. Justice in Delaware is mere mischief in South Dakota. Alabama, who knows? Had a client last week who was made to look pitiable in Alabama. This same fellow came up smelling like roses in Maryland. *Non serviam*, I say.

Q.: Do you feel you are providing an essential service?

A.: I service human foolishness. If foolishness were non-essential, it would have faded away aeons ago, with the hand-held flint chopper. *Requiescat in pace*, chopper.

Q.: Let me put it another way. Do you feel that the noble intent of the law is always commensurately served by its minions?

A.: Define me a minion. We build on air. All of us. We build on air. When the Pilgrims landed at that there rock, this was lawless forest. From here to Big Sur, lawless forest. Now we've got such a structure the average man can't go two hours without committing a misdemeanor. I don't say that's good. I don't say that's bad. I say that's a fact. Out of this fact some fortunate few of us have generated an industry. Out of some other fact our worthy colleagues at the bar have generated a contrary industry. It all comes out in the locker room, where they polish your shoes while you shower. Define me a minion, I'll give you a misdemeanor. *Sic semper tyrannis*. You follow me?

Q.: I'm getting there. Can you estimate how much this lecture has cost me?

A.: It would be ill-advised to comment at this time.

Q.: Can you tell me if you think we have a case?

A.: It would be premature to venture a comment this far down the road.

Q.: In general, *sub specie aeternitatis*, what are my chances?

A.: All I can say at this juncture is, *Nihil ab nihilo, de profundis*. Best of luck to you and yours. I've really enjoyed our conversation. [One stands to go.] Here, let me show you these Polaroids of my wife and kids. Cute as buttons, huh? The house in the background, we bought it for seventy grand in 1967, it would go for two hundred big ones now, easy; and that leaves us an acre out back to retire on. Keep your nose clean, your powder dry, your chin up. Have a stick of Juicyfruit, foul stuff but it saved my sanity when I gave up smoking ciggyboos. If that ain't your cup of tea, take a lick of the receptionist on your way out. Ha-ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha-ha.

At the hourly rate his counselling brings, each "ha" has cost 25¢.