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Second Prize, Essay

NOTIONS AND ADJUSTMENTS

From as far back as I can remember until I got seasoned enough to gather an impression on my own, my daddy had a philosophy that I should see one of everything so I could function properly in society. Most of the time just catching the last few minutes of a TV show about something or hearing by word of mouth from a friend was not enough for my daddy, as he said, "That's how experiences appear, not as they really are."

Many times we toured the industries around the area: the textile mill, a sawmill, a trailer company, most of the stores to see what they sold (which wasn't much in Haleyville), how the skilled labor worked—welders, carpenters, brick layers, and government agencies and the employees within. By the time I was about eight I thought I'd seen about all there was to see until daddy told me one night that the next Saturday we would go to the traffic court.

I had no idea why he said *traffic* because as far as I knew there wasn't but one kind of court, and judging from all the Perry Mason shows I had seen I was bound to see at least a couple of murderers, crying ladies, plenty of shouting, and a judge dressed in black with a serious disposition who would constantly bang a wooden hammer on his desk.

I immediately got out my Sunday shoes and polished them as good as an eight-year-old boy could and changed my career from veterinarian to lawyer. When the big day finally arrived it couldn't have been a minute sooner. We drove up to city hall and even though I'd been in there a few times before, I didn't know where the courtroom was, but as big as that place was a courtroom could be hidden anywhere in there.

Before we could get into city hall we had to use the side door because the sidewalk in front of the front entrance was torn up and extremely muddy, but what difference did it make how you entered as long as you got in? After we entered it took me

a few seconds to get my bearings straight because of the new perspective I was taking.

We walked up to the police area and I knew where we were and then we started slowing down. There was a door about twenty-five feet down from the police door. I had never known what was in there before but I had suddenly realized that the courtroom was beside the police station. That way the criminals wouldn't have to be hauled in the paddy wagon at all.

When we entered the room I couldn't believe what my eyes were telling me. This courtroom was about the size of a school classroom except there were pews everywhere instead of desks. My whole world of pre-conceived ideas was caving in around me and soon after we sat down I rationalized that this place wasn't the courtroom at all, but a holding tank and we were to stay there until it was all right to go inside. It was like the food inside a cow's first stomach before going on to the second stomach to get properly processed.

Soon the place started filling up with people sitting in ones or twos with guilty looks on their faces as if they had gotten caught with their hand in the cookie jar. Before long, Daddy and I were surrounded by these loose-knit groups. I started to take on their characteristics. Soon after that I started feeling as I was guilty of something. Three minutes later I confessed to myself that I was guilty, even though I didn't know what of, but I told myself I *didn't mean to do it*.

All of a sudden the side door opened and in walked the mayor. Now I knew I had to be in the wrong place. He sat down at an office desk at the front of the room and asked who wanted to come up first. No black robe, no wooden hammer thundering for order, and you could even see his feet sticking out from under the desk he was sitting at and I didn't even know judges had feet. Besides, I didn't know mayors could be judges. It reminded me of Petticoat Junction on television

where one person served as postmaster, mayor, and justice of the peace.

After this initial shock, I understood that the people sitting around me were the ones on trial. It amazed me that our judicial system would allow murderers, thieves, and forgers to approach the bench-desk at will and state their case.

The first criminal walked up to the mayor and they mumbled something to each other and the criminal left under his own free will to roam the streets and commit more sinister crimes. This happened about three times in a row. It reminded me of watching television with the volume turned all the way down. Finally some man with healthy vocal cords stated his case. It was a speeding violation. The next few cases were for running stop signs or red lights and speeding. I was tremendously disappointed. All I was going to get to see were people who did the same as everyone else except they got caught.

One time I looked up and saw somebody I had seen before. He was the big brother of one of my classmates. He was very young, about fourteen, and I figured they got him for a bicycle violation, but it turned out he was driving a car without a license. His fine was fifteen dollars, but since he didn't have it, he asked the judge if he could pay a dollar down and the rest later. The judge asked him if he ever went to church and he looked at the judge as if he were offended.

Later on a woman walked in the door and went straight to the desk. She was black and blue all over her face and arms. She asked the judge to put her husband in jail for beating her up but he told her that this was only a court for traffic violations. It was good to know that someone besides me had the wrong impression about the court and the way it functioned.

All during the court the only thing that kept me from going into shock over the trivialities of what was going on was my polished shoes. In a world

full of misconceptions, the only thing that retained its original value was my shoes. Everything else was dull and not at all what it was supposed to be, but my shoes just kept on shining.

The session finally ended and as we were walking out of city hall, Daddy and I forgot about the torn up sidewalks and the mud and, consequently, we got mud all over our shoes, and yet, it didn't bother me. As we were leaving the parking lot of city hall I looked back one more time. City hall really didn't look that big at all. It wasn't even as big as the Piggly Wiggly and it would even be smaller if the fire trucks weren't kept in the side of the building.

Thirteen years later I woke up one morning and immediately started getting ready for an Alabama Supreme Court Session being held at Norton Auditorium on the UNA campus. I was running late so I grabbed the first pair of tennis shoes, but I found they were soaking wet. The next pair of tennis shoes I grabbed were saturated. Then I remembered the night before. I had washed them and they still weren't dry. The only pair of sneakers I had left that were dry didn't have shoe strings but that suited me just fine, except when I started walking, the shoes didn't.

It looked as if I was going to have to wear real shoes if I were going to wear shoes at all that day. That meant my all-purpose church, wedding, funeral, anti-sneaker shoes. While I was lacing the shoes I noticed how dull the shine was but it had been years since I had properly taken care of my shoes. Then too, they didn't make shoes they way they used to.

I finally started toward Norton and on the way I remembered when I was eight I made a trip to traffic court. For some reason the spring disappeared from my walk and my feet felt heavy. As I spotted Norton I was amazed at the size of the building and how solid it looked. When I got inside to the lobby it was so crowded that it

reminded me of hundreds of wind-up toys placed at random.

As I filtered my way into the auditorium itself, I sorely missed my sneakers and their maneuverability. Wearing those fancy shoes was like pulling a wagon behind me.

The metallic blues and the slightly faded purples of Norton game me a feeling of cold, impersonal futurism. Hearing the steady buzz among the crowd, I had to keep reminding myself that this was going to be a court session instead of a prize fight.

When court finally started the judges mumbled among themselves. I supposed that the "winner" was chosen by drawing a name from a hat. From where I was sitting I had a distorted look at distortion. When I looked down to my feet all I could see was black because of the shadows thrown that way. I felt like I was floating, as if I had no base, and was being pulled toward the stage.

The next thing I knew I was by myself in the lobby of Norton. As I walked out the door of Norton, the sunlight caught the corner of my shoes and gave them a sparkle that I'd never seen before. ●