

THROUGH THE KEYHOLE!

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SCUMBAG, SCUMBAG

SCUMBAG & BY KEITH G. LAUFENBERG

-1-

THE ACCIDENT

"Accidents, accidents will happen."

—George Colman, *The Elder, The Deuce is in Him. Act I.*

I was just walking across the street after work one evening when it happened—a car whipped right past me and clipped me hard on my left side. I fell to the ground and was nearly unconscious, when two of my fellow workers helped me to regain my feet. I drive a bus in the city of New York and even though I was groggy, I still clearly remember the statements made by my brothers in the transit union that bleary, bleak dusky night—just before Christmas in 1999. It was my good friend Prometheus 'Pro-Joe' Johannsen, his eyes concentrating intently on the offending vehicle, who nodded knowingly at me. "One-t'ree-t'ree-fo' it

was an Atee-Ate Chevy Jackie—it looked to me like an Impala, light-blue or gray."

Just after Pro-Joe made this sagacious statement, my other brother in arms, who was supporting me with both his hands, turned his gaze towards me swiftly and with a shrewd smile, made an equally sagacious statement, when he hissed, "Jackie, youse ah gonna need to go and see youse a lawyah!"

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THE DECISION

Deliberate as often as you please but when you decide it is once for all.

—Publilius Syrus, *Sententioe No. 132.*

It was a week before I got out of the hospital and I had my left arm—which had been broken—in a cast and about two-dozen stitches in my forehead.

As I sat in my house in Howard Beach, in the borough of Queens, my friend's recent astute assertion, 'Jackie, youse need to see a lawyah,' came back to me and reverberated inside my cranium, like a stack of silver dollars falling into my lap.

I spied the Yellow Pages and reached out and grabbed it, flipping it open to the A's, for attorneys, then turned to the personal injury specialists, flipped a few pages and an ad that covered an entire page quickly caught my eye. It advertised the services of three brothers, Scumbag, Scumbag & Scumbag and, as I further flipped through the ensuing pages, I saw that there were advertisements for Scumbags everywhere. They were in every borough and every nook and cranny of every borough; Scumbags appeared to be running rampant in the legal profession, in this city. I figured I might as well go with a large firm and the Scumbag brothers with several full-page ads seemed as good as any. I grabbed the phone with my right hand then quickly transferred it to my left, so I could dial with my good hand. A whiny voice answered on the first ring, "Scumbag, Scumbag and Scumbag-ah, this is Sylvia,

how may I help youse, p1ee-eze?"

"Ah-er-um-nah, that is, I t'ink I need a lawyah."

Sylvia responded to my understatement with a slight chortle and hissed, "Well sir, then youse called the right place, which Scumbag were youse wishing to speak with then?" When I didn't respond but hesitated and began to stutter, she quickly barked, "Well sir, where did youse hear of our-wah firm?"

"Well, that is, I mean I looked in the Yellow Pages," I said and got another short chortle of laughter, or maybe even derision.

"There ah t'ree brothers sir, Slimy, Smiley and Shorty," she replied.

"Oh. I see. Well, any of them then—I guess—would be ..."

She quickly cut me off with a 'please hold,' and elevator music suddenly reverberated into my ear. Within a few minutes, she came back on. "Sir, Smiley and Shorty are engaged at this time but Slimy will talk wid youse very soon.

I squeaked out a quick 'thankyou' but she was already off the line and the elevator music came back on. Just when my ear was

almost as numb as my left arm, as I was switching the receiver to my other ear, a whining voice reverberated inside my head. At first I thought it was a siren, an ambulance or fire engine, but then I realized it was the lawyer, who I learned had the whiniest voice in Manhattan, perhaps even the world. "Ah, diz is dah Slime his-se'f, whom am I speakin' wid ple-eeze?"

"Ah-na-er-um-ah, John McGuire, ah, sir," I said.

"Maw-gwi-yah huh, well, sir, what is it I can do for youse?"

I told Slimy Scumbag what had happened and he whined loudly enough to puncture my eardrum and set my dog to howling for the duration of the conversation. I made an appointment to see him; it seemed the Scumbags had an especially heavy schedule but Slimy Scumbag would, according to Slimy Scumbag, never desert or abandon a client with such a grievous injury as had been done to me and he would work me into his schedule the following week. I wrote the date on my cast and hung up, then kicked my dog, an albino Pit-Bull, who was still howling, in his ribs, whereupon he pro-

ceeded to chew half the cast off my left arm.

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THE SCUMBAGS

A man might as well open an oyster without a knife, as a lawyer's mouth without a fee.

—*Barton Holyday, Technogamia, ii, 5.*

I know you lawyers can, with ease,
Twist words and meanings as you please.

—*John Gay, Fables, Pt ii, No. 1.*

I walked into the building, in downtown Manhattan, and it was hard not to be impressed. The Scumbag, Scumbag & Scumbag office encompassed the entire ninety-first floor, and it held as panoramic a view of the entire mass of wondrous city-life as I have ever been witness to. Yes, it was all there, laid out for any and all to gaze upon, in all its glory and circumference. There were the crammed-together skyscrapers, and the polluted, smoggy airwaves veritably wafted past the office's windows, while all you had

to do was turn your eyes downward to see the multi-congested city-streets, where the traffic appeared to be engaged in a mindless, senseless game of bumper cars, even while a gaggle of pedestrians pushed and shoved their way forward and, as anyone could plainly see, were still able to travel at an equal if not faster pace than the bumper-to-bumper autos, trucks and buses, not to mention an occasional motorized scooter or cycle that jumped over and onto the sidewalks, even as helmeted New York City policemen and transit cops chased after them, screaming jeeringly at their backsides, all the while holding that transfixed grin of all loyal public servants who drew their pay from the city's coffers while engaging in a daily exercise routine that pumped their lower extremities to the max, while they effortlessly passed by numerous robberies, muggings and assaults, assuring themselves of a path to better health and a longer life-expectancy. When I mentioned this view to the secretary, she quickly informed me that the structure also accorded such an envelopment of the city that you could—from time to time—view several muggings in

progress in Central Park and the surrounding regional area. When I mentioned to her that the Scumbags might be able to drum up some business there, she informed me that they already employed several street-sweepers, who made daily and nightly sweeps of the area, for any and all bodies that might, perchance, still be breathing. She told me that they used only the newest, state of the art city equipment and city employees on the job, even as they freelanced for the Scumbags for happy meals and free legal advice. She also mentioned that the Scumbags employed innumerable professional eye-witnesses who would, for one or more Ben Franklin's, testify to whatever, whenever and wherever called upon. She was not the person I had talked to on the phone, her name was Celestine, and she made it quite clear to me that I was approximately five minutes and thirteen seconds late for my appointment with Slimy—to which I displayed my left arm, now encased in a new cast. "Oh, sorry, ah-er-um, had ah get a new cast on my arm, heh-heh, hah."

She cast a disheartening sneer my way and

I collapsed into a leather armchair, where I noticed about a dozen Hustler magazines, lying on the cushions. I grabbed one and the centerfold immediately popped open, revealing a naked woman in a pose only Hustler could conceive. The model looked eerily familiar and I stared over at Celestine, the secretary, and realized it was either her or she had a twin sister. The Hustler model's pose left nothing to the imagination and when I turned the page—lo and behold—what did I see but a full-page ad, advertising the legal services of none other than the Scumbag Brothers of Manhattan, New York.

I glanced at my watch and saw I had been sitting in the waiting room for over an hour but when I looked up to complain, the secretary-slash-Hustler model, Celestine, was nowhere to be found. I heard footsteps and a slight man in a pair of blue jeans, coke-bottle glasses, and a soiled tee-shirt came walking out. Could this be one of the Scumbag brothers, I idly speculated, but then another man appeared, in typical lawyerly garb; a black, pin-striped, silk suit, tasseled loafers, and a silk tie with the impression of Mickey Mouse and his trusty dog Pluto in its center.

He wore a red long-sleeved shirt, sporting glistening cuff-links, a stick-pin in the middle of the Mickey Mouse tie with a diamond in its center, and a Dick Nixon facial expression, with the trademark facsimile of a smile illuminating every dittle in his mouth. The client stopped for a moment: "But Mister Scumbag, they said it could be deemed an act of God."

The lawyer, who turned out to be Slimy Scumbag, hissed, "*God*, God, you say? Fine, fine, we'll sue Him too." As the client exited the office, Slimy Scumbag nodded at me, "are you McGuire?"

I stood up and stammered that I was and we shook hands. His hand was so slimy it felt as if a snail had crawled into my palm. He told me his name was Slimy Scumbag but his friends all called him The Slime and what did my friends all call me? I told him Jackie and he wrapped his arm over my shoulder and hissed, "Well, come on back Jackie; 'id youse know I used to drive a bus before I 'as a lawyah?"

He steered me into a large, ornate office, where he introduced his two brothers, Smiley, whose office we were now in, and Shorty. Smiley's hand was doughy, like

putty, and Shorty's was so small that he actually only shook my middle finger. He was sitting in a high-chair and I figured the little shyster to be no more than about three and a half feet tall, but I, as a great many others before me, had shorted him, for Shorty Scumbag was a full four feet in height; forty-eight and one-quarter inches from stem to stern. After I and Slimy, who I had spoken to for but a brief few minutes on the phone, filled Shorty and Smiley in on my sad, hapless tale, Shorty - who despite his diminutive stature, was the real power-broker of the trio - informed me that they would get right on the case and that I would be paid quickly and handsomely, as he intended to immediately expedite the matter. He nodded at his two brothers, excused himself, and left the room, just as Smiley shoved a pen towards me and told me that they would need my signature on their standard contract. It was a much longer contract, however, than I could have imagined, for I had thought that Smiley had set it down on top of a book, when, in fact, the contract itself *was* the book; all two hundred pages of it. I looked at Smiley's

perennial Smiley-face and signed it, then shook both their pasty paws.

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THE CONTRACT

It is a true saying that one falsehood leads easily to another.

—Cicero, *De Oratore. Bk. I, sec. 33.*

As it turned out I hadn't been on the job when the accident occurred so I couldn't draw a worker's compensation check and when I tried to call the Scumbags they were always out and never returned any of my calls, so I returned to work, after barely two weeks at home. I worked in the dispatcher's office for a month, until after my cast came off, than returned to my usual route. It wasn't until nearly six months later that I finally heard from the Scumbags, when Celestine, the Hustler model-slash-secretary, summoned me to their office.

Apparently, the guy who had hit me had been driving a stolen car - one that he had

also been using as a gypsy taxicab - and the car had also been involved in an armed hold-up. They had found the car, a 1988 Chevy Caprice, in a section of the South Bronx that even the cops didn't venture into without armed backup. The registered owner was the proprietor of a pawnshop in Albany and had reported the car stolen a week before my accident. The Scumbags had sued everybody they legally could, and a few they couldn't, and had finally determined that the source where the money would have to ultimately come from was my own no-fault insurance policy.

Once again, they ensconced me inside Smiley's office and informed me that they had settled the case. When I asked them how much and they told me that it was for thirty-three large, I was shocked because I hadn't been prepared for that much money. I guess my face must have mirrored my feelings, as Smiley beamed his usual happy-face and informed me that only he and his brothers could have brought this case to the successful conclusion that they had, with their fine-tuned legal manoeuvrings and close contacts on the bench. Shorty and Slimy both beamed

smiles almost the equal of their brother Smiley's, but then they all scowled, after Smiley handed me a check, and I yelled, "Uh-yay—hey wait—waaaaaaait jus' a freakin' minute here. Youse settled it for t'irty t'ree t'ousan' simoleans and I'm supposed to get sixty percent of that? It's in the contract?"

Shorty quickly and lithely jumped down, out of his highchair, and waddled towards me menacingly. He sneered and quickly showed me that shorting clients was right up his alley, indeed, it was his specialty. "Daaa-at was on page one pally; page t'irty-one, paragraph six, subparagraph E countermands that, and if that ain't enough, go to one forty, paragraph one, subclause F."

I was just about to say something when Slimy chortled, "Shorty's right, of course, and if that ain't enough for youse, youse can go to page eighty, paragraph twenty-two, subsection A—heh-heh, I wrote that one myself."

After they had all weighed in on the matter of the contract, I stared at the check in my hand, thirty-six-hundred and fifty dollars, and had to give them a piece of my mind.

"Bu' ... but this ain't right, it ain't right— youse, youse guys can't do this?"

They all just mimicked Smiley's beaming countenance, as he handed me a card. "Take ah card Jackie; call when youse need a Scumbag again."

But I wasn't about to be put off that easily and I scowled and growled at them all. "Hey, hey wait a minute. I'm from Howard Beach, man, and, and I got friends, man; youse know who lives there, man? The Godfather, and I know the dude, better believe it too, man."

I stared at them and tried to smile but they all erupted at once and I was whisked out of their office, as Slimy barked, "youse t'ink youse can scare a Scumbag, Jackie my boy, well, lemme tell youse how big the Scumbags are in 'is city? Whoever youse know, we know one bettah, for every wise-guy youse know I know a Dick 'at 'id plug 'em in a New York minute for enough ah the long green that we spread around. Jackie, the Scumbags in 'is city got juice you ain't even nevah hoid of, okay? Youse might know a wise-guy ah two but the Scumbags, hah, we know the guy dat shuts him down or puts a bullet in

his head, if youse get my drift. Why, we got connections goes to the power bases in every facet ah this government and national government too. My bruddah Shorty knows the president poy-sun lee, Jackie, so take youse check my boy and be t'ankful youse hadda Scumbag representin' youse."

-EPILOGUE- LAST CHANCE

To go into the water and grasp the foam.

—Unknown. A Chinese proverb.

I have to admit that I slunk out of their office that day, but I was determined to get payback. Before I cashed the check, I called my cousin Vito; he knew everybody. "Yeah, Jack-oh," he said, after I told him my tragic tale of woe, "youse only chance is to sue those chumps, freakin' lawyahs. Shee-it, I know the best lawyah in ah city too man. Represents my union; woikin' people, youse know, Jackie? A woman, though?"

I smiled benignly. I was beyond that. "Man Vito, I don't care. Hell wid that man, I need

some payback. What's her name?"

"Serena, my man, Serena Scumbag," he said and I practically fainted.

I cashed the check the next day. I bought a

used Chevy. Got a great deal too; bought it from a pawnshop owner, upstate.

POETRY

BY DAVID MCLEAN

this evening

we wait to become memories, knowing roughly what we like, while the evening solidifies around us, pregnant with night and meaningless time. but we bear it no ill will, this evening that smells like us, like nothing full of love



what decays already

what decays already is memory
and if children deserved to be evil there,
like reminiscent devils fondled by a moral god
i might will them alive again in me

their crippled fingers touching
every nothing, cannibals
and the grateful meat
that needs them

devils assembled on my lonely beach
for tea, sitting around the table god stole
me from the house of his enemies,
hallowed hearth at which i worship

these potent heathens. in my sky
maniacal murderess moon
and under a sullen sea, me -
my lunatic guilt

and the sea's bloody complicity
beating in me