

20th Annual Fiction Writing Competition

The Editorial Board of the *Georgia Bar Journal* is proud to present "Old Friends," by Greg Grogan of Douglasville as the winner of the *Journal's* 20th Annual Fiction Writing Competition. In addition, the *Journal* would like to recognize the contest's runner-up, "How She Set Him Up," by Stacey Leigh Malloy of Wrentham, Mass.

The purposes of the competition are to enhance interest in the *Journal*, to encourage excellence in writing by members of the Bar and to provide an innovative vehicle for the illustration of the life and work of lawyers. As in years past, this year's entries reflected a wide range of topics and literary styles. In accordance with the competition's rules, the Editorial Board selected the winning story through a process of reading each story without knowledge of the author's identity and then ranking each entry. The story with the highest cumulative ranking was selected as the winner. The Editorial Board congratulates Grogan, Malloy and all of the other entrants for their participation and excellent writing.

Old Friends

by Greg Grogan

Ike watched as the jury trudged out of the courtroom to begin their deliberations. He looked at the clock and saw that the time had reached 4:15 p.m. Years of experience had taught him that the odds of a jury decision being reached tonight were slim, especially when Judge Botch liked to be at home by 5:30 p.m. He packed his papers into his ancient black briefcase and winked at the court clerk. He stole a glance at the plaintiff's table and saw the three attorneys huddled as if some last-second strategy had crossed their collective mind. Ike walked over and cleared his throat to gain their attention. When they looked up from their chairs, he smiled and stuck out his hand.

"I know it's the custom to wait until after the jury comes back, but I like to go ahead and congratulate my opponent for a hard-fought battle. When the decision comes back, we'll be busy digesting it. I wanted to say you all did a nice job."

Ike went down the table shaking their hands as they mumbled back their appreciation. When he reached the end, he saw the plaintiffs shooting him daggers with their eyes.

He smiled his brightest smile and said, "You picked three very good attorneys. They did a great job with your case, and you should feel very satisfied with their services. I doubt you could have found better representation anywhere else in the city. I just hope my client didn't see their performance, or I may be on the street looking for work."



Photo by Frank Fullard

Ike then turned and walked up to the court clerk. She was shuffling her papers and jumped when she looked up to see him so close to her desk. He gave her his best smile.

"Lucy, it was good to see you again. How's the family?"

"We're all doing well, Ike. It was good to see you again, too. How's your wife doing?"

"We're fine. She's in full retirement mode now and keeps encouraging me to join her. I guess I haven't had my fill yet."

Lucy smiled, and Ike looked up at the judge. Judge Botch was looking down from his throne and over his bifocals at Ike. His black robe and black hair would have made him invisible against the dark black backdrop except for his pale white skin. He and Ike had known each other for years. They had taught at seminars together and had dinners with their wives many times since Ike began practicing law.

The judge asked, as always, "How many years have you been entertaining juries in my courtroom? Mind you, it's always a pleasure."

"I lost count once I passed forever, your Honor."

"I remember you and Dillard just getting started. You two court

hounds were always making me work too hard. Quoting laws and cases to me. I spent more time in the library than I did during my school days. Now I know to make the attorneys put their arguments in writing if it's that complicated. Either that or get a clerk to do the research for me. The wisdom of experience."

"I understand. We have paralegals, new attorneys and other workers who do things by computer these days that I don't understand."

The judge smiled and said, "I heard you mention earlier that you don't have many cases heading to trial in the near future. Are you slowing down?"

Ike had been talking to Lucy earlier about the lack of cases heading to trial, but the judge had not been on the bench. Judge Botch loved to leave his microphone activated, and he had a speaker in his office. He could hear everything being said about him by the lawyers. Ike had learned this lesson when he witnessed a criminal defense attorney pay for some of his less than flattering comments.

"No, not slowing down at all. I just have clients unwilling to risk what a jury might say."

Judge Botch gave a nod and excused himself from the courtroom. Ike grabbed his briefcase and walked out the oversized front door. He began the short trek to his office, but after just a few steps he heard a familiar voice.

"Blake, you old war horse. I snuck in the back to watch your summation. I think it was just like I trained you."

"If it isn't my old partner, Dillard Barnes, slumming around the courthouse. It probably was just like you taught only I did it with style."

Both men enjoyed a laugh before Dillard asked, "Did you go over and shake hands with opposing counsel?"

"Absolutely. Best lesson you ever taught."

"And?"

"They looked nervous. They were whispering and planning like the trial was just beginning. Not a smile among the three of them."

Dillard smiled. "Could you smell the stench of defeat?"

"Like the socks in a men's locker room."

"You didn't fall for Botch's old microphone trick, did you? I got chewed out for popping off about a poor ruling. He came tearing out

of his chambers and blasted me in front of the whole courtroom for that.”

“No, I always remember it.”

Dillard slapped Ike on the back, and they continued walking. Ike looked over at his old partner. He was taller than Ike and had more hair. He still had that little inflated gut but dressed nicely to cover it. Dillard was about 10 years older than Ike, but they behaved more like brothers than business partners.

Ike asked, “Are you free for a celebration drink?”

“Sure, let’s go.”

“I need to go to the office for a minute so I’ll meet you. Twenty minutes at the usual spot?”

“Sure. See you there.”

They had reached Ike’s office building, so they parted company there. Ike climbed the one flight of stairs and looked at the entry door. Barnes and Blake it read. The firm the two of them had started many years before. Ike pushed open the door and found the office buzzing. He passed the receptionist whose name he could never remember and headed to his office. They had started the firm with just the two attorneys and one secretary and now they had more than 50 attorneys. He couldn’t even guess how many people were on staff. As he walked, he received nods and waves. He knew most of the people but not all.

As he neared his door, he heard his name and turned. He looked down the hall and saw Chad Proctor, an attorney who had been with the firm for about 12 years, walking with several other people. One of the others was Rachel Frock, the firm’s accountant. Proctor walked up and shook Ike’s hand.

“How did court go today?”

Ike flinched and withdrew his hand. He always resented being asked that question by an attorney who never went to court. Proctor was a transactional attorney. He dealt with businessmen and families, but he had never stood before a judge or jury. Ike respected Proctor’s work. Respected it

enough not to pry, and now Ike felt that Proctor was not returning that same level of respect.

“It went well. I think we’re a winner, but you never know. I expect a decision sometime tomorrow around lunch.”

“Mr. Blake, it’s been a while. I’m Rachel Frock.”

“Of course I remember our accountant. You’re the one that keeps us out of trouble with the IRS and lets us know if we can pay our staff. I always pay special attention to the person handling the money.”

Proctor turned to the third member of his group and said, “Ike, this is Barkley Price. He’s a consultant we are bringing in to help us with some future plans. I’d like to talk with you about those plans tomorrow if you have time.”

Ike looked at Mr. Price. Price didn’t smile or offer his hand. Ike, not quite up to average height, was taller and thicker. Price wore thick glasses and had a pointed nose that led to a thin pair of lips. His demeanor was about as pleasant as a coroner, and he seemed to regard Ike with nothing more than the warmth a scientist might regard a specimen. Ike finished his inspection and nodded to Proctor.

Proctor flashed a phony smile and said, “I won’t keep you, Ike. Good luck in court.”

Ike put his briefcase on his office table and then walked on down the hall. He came to Dillard’s office and looked inside. There were a couple of books and old files on the desk, but otherwise things looked about the same as the day he retired. Ike missed his best friend and mentor being around on a daily basis. He closed the office door and headed for the front door. As he approached it he could hear Proctor talking. He was keeping his voice to a whisper, but it was still loud enough for Ike to hear. He made a detour and walked softly to the side of Proctor’s door. He stood on tiptoes and listened.

It was Proctor’s voice that said, “I tell you, it’s going to come back and bite us. We need to nip this in the bud.”

Ike stuck his head in the door. “What’s going on? That sounds serious from out here.”

Proctor looked up and said, “Not at all. Just an ethics problem we have to address. It’s fine now, but I want to tackle it before it spreads. It’s part of what I want to talk to you about tomorrow.”

Ike nodded and said, “That will be fine. I’m heading out. We’ll see you here tomorrow.”

Proctor waved and then asked, “Hey, you ever hear from Dillard?”

Ike answered, “Sure, talked to him today. He’s the same as always.”

Proctor nodded. “If you see him again tell him we think about him all the time around here.”

“I’ll do it.”

Ike walked out and headed down to the bar that sat only four blocks from the office. He spotted Dillard occupying their usual spot. It was where they could look out the window and watch the pedestrians. Dillard ordered wine while Ike had a beer. They toasted to another victory. Ike mentioned it might be premature, but Dillard assured him it wasn’t. They discussed the firm, and Ike told Dillard about his conversation with Proctor. Dillard frowned.

“You better watch him. I sometimes think hiring that little snake was one of the worst moves we ever made.”

“He’s brought in business and handled the personnel. We always hated that.”

“He also handles the daily operations and finances. That worries me. We’ve given him a lot of power, and he enjoys it.”

“No arguing that. He’s pretty good at it though, and we have never had trouble with his decisions.”

“Not yet. He was cautious when we first hired him. He may not be that way now.”

Ike threw up his hands. “I get it. I need to double check him. I guess the retired guy can’t be bothered?”

Dillard shook his head. “I wouldn’t know where to begin. That was always your area.”

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They discussed the trial that just concluded and then moved on to other upcoming cases and clients. Ike stayed about an hour before excusing himself to go home. Dillard also rose and told Ike to send Maria his love. Ike promised to do so and headed home. On the short drive home he picked up a bundle of flowers. When he walked in, he smelled a pot roast and vegetables. He put the flowers in a vase on the table and found Maria in the kitchen. She spotted the flowers and smiled.

"I know two things when I see the flowers. You had a good court day, and you had a drink to celebrate. Flowers are both a victory present and an apology for not including me in the party."

Ike rubbed her shoulders as she dipped food on a plate and said, "You know me too well."

"So, did you get the verdict yet?"

"No, but I feel confident. I had a good plan, and the client actually listened to me on this one. I presented everything we wanted, and the jury seemed to be with me. I would be mildly surprised if we didn't win. I try not to be too shocked by juries, but I feel good about this one."

They sat down to eat, and Ike looked around. He listened, but didn't hear anything. His house was normally occupied by two teenagers. Julie, now 19, was a freshman in college who commuted to Atlanta each day. Brendan was 16 and, like most boys his age, never missed a meal. If at home they were usually on the phone talking so energetically they could be heard throughout the house. Ike hated cell phones and was the last holdout, but he eventually succumbed to the pressure and bought his whole family a set.

"Where are the kids?"

"Julie is studying with some classmates. She'll be home around 9 o'clock," she said. "Brendan is at a basketball game. He is still planning on playing next year."

Brendan had broken his leg in a fluke skateboard accident. His

spot on the basketball team had been secure but now was assigned to another student. He planned on taking it back during the summer camps. Ike, who loved watching him play, was hoping he might turn more energy to the academic side of school. Ike never considered himself the top student in the class, but he did make good enough grades to go to law school. Times were tougher now, and Brendan wasn't on the best path. Julie he didn't worry about. She was more driven and had big plans for medical school. He was the family's only attorney and probably forever would be.

Maria took her place at the table, and they enjoyed a quiet meal together. They lounged and slowly picked through two helpings while drinking a bottle of their favorite wine. Maria moved over and let Ike continue his earlier rub of her shoulders.

"Well, you haven't mentioned it. Did Dillard show up for court? He usually drops in on you during a trial."

"He did. He says hello. He thinks I've been a little too lax in controlling the firm. I assured him I'd look into it. I also told him it's easy for him to make that complaint while he does nothing."

"What's he complaining about? Isn't everything at the firm going well?"

"Seems to be. He just thinks Proctor is too sneaky. He had this consultant roaming around today, and I overheard Proctor telling him about needing to take care of a problem as quickly as possible. Proctor told me he wants to have a meeting tomorrow. The accountant was there too. It seemed a little strange. I guess I've been a little too busy with the trial to pay enough attention to things. Proctor sure seems to think he's the top dog now."

"Whose name is on the door?"

Ike chuckled. "Right to the bottom line, huh?"

They had a comfortable quiet night and went to bed at an unusually early hour. They read for a

little while before Maria put down her book. She squirmed next to him and closed her eyes.

"I hate to tell you this, but I really thought you and Dillard were crazy when you started that firm. You both had pretty good jobs. You made it work though and made it very successful. Don't doubt your instincts if they tell you something's wrong."

Ike nodded and looked up at the ceiling. A consultant, an accountant and a lawyer were all in a room conspiring. It sounded like the start of a bad joke. He turned over all that he knew, but nothing made sense. The firm was bringing in plenty of money, and he had kept a fairly tight watch over expenses. He considered that Proctor mentioned an ethical problem, so it must involve someone's work. He didn't know of any trial or any negotiation that had gone badly. He would have heard about it since most of the clients were his or Dillard's. Some new ones had been brought in with the new attorneys, but everyone knew who made it rain. Clients had never been shy about calling his home to complain about some perceived slight, and he knew that hadn't changed. He tossed around until he decided to sneak downstairs. He listened and heard Maria's steady breathing telling him she was in a deep sleep. He treaded lightly across the floor and avoided all the known spots where it would pop. He turned on his computer and did a search on Barkley Price. He managed to find a biography of the man. He was not an attorney, or at least the biography didn't say he was. He was an efficiency expert who liked dealing with small companies. Ike turned off the computer and opened a drawer with faded sheets of legal pad paper. It was the original agreement he and Dillard had drawn up when they started the firm. It was a laughable four pages, and he wondered why they had never gone to a true expert to have it redone. He read through it for the thousandth time and went

back to bed. He mulled over the possibilities until he finally drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke the next morning, Ike looked around to find Maria had already slipped out for a breakfast meeting with her garden club. She had left him a biscuit and poached egg. He ignored those and drove to the diner that was near the office. He ordered eggs, a biscuit and gravy, and grits. While waiting, he downed a cup of coffee and thumbed through the local paper. His food came, and he put down the paper to eat. As he took his first bite, he looked across the tables and realized that Barkley Price was also in the diner. The two men made eye contact, but Barkley didn't return Ike's nod. Ike turned his attention back to his food but would sneak peeks over to Price. Ike never saw food delivered to the consultant and no one ever joined him. Ike took his time finishing his meal and then wandered over to Price.

"This is one of my favorite haunts. Are you a regular here?"

"No, this is my first time here."

Ike noticed that there was still no sign of food having ever been at the table. He looked Price over again while Price held his gaze steady on Ike's face. After an awkward moment, Ike said it was time for him to get to the office. Price made no move or comment, so Ike turned and walked out. He took a few steps down the sidewalk and decided to duck into the Western Auto store that had been around since he was a kid. He pushed open the glass door and moved quickly behind a floor model of a very fancy go-cart. After a moment he saw Price come walking down the sidewalk. Price was raised up on his toes and straining his neck to see ahead. He also was turning from side to side quickly and walking a pace which was difficult for his short legs.

Ike stayed in his hiding spot for five full minutes past his last view of Price. He then went to the office at a very casual pace. He looked over his shoulder more than a few

times, and he ducked into stores he thought might give him a chance to think. He was staring out into the street from the safety of a bakery window when a tap on the shoulder sent him into a frantic scream that would embarrass a second-grade girl. The employees at the bakery all broke in laughter as the customer who needed the creamer Ike was blocking apologized.

Ike made his way to his building and quietly opened the front door to the firm. As he was being greeted by the receptionist, he put his finger to his lips. She smiled and did the same. He then tiptoed down to his office and closed the door behind him. He sat at his desk and looked at the mementos from over the years. He thought about all the cases he'd handled and the ones he currently was handling. The current concerns must be about a current case. Proctor mentioned ethics. The consultant was watching him, and the accountant had been called in for something. They couldn't possibly believe he was stealing money from his own firm, but something was up. He opened his door, peeked out, and walked down to Dillard's office on the off chance of catching him. The door, to his surprise, was open. He looked in and saw Dillard sitting at his desk. He was flipping through some old mail. Ike closed the door behind him and plopped down in the familiar leather chair directly across from his old partner. Dillard looked at him wearily but with a slight smile.

"What's eating you? You look like you're seeing ghosts."

"Something is going on. Proctor is acting strange, and he wants to have a meeting today. There is some consultant skulking around, and I could swear the man is following me. The accountant is here."

Dillard listened intently, thought about what he had heard, and then said, "I told you Proctor was a mistake. He's a worm. What are you going to do?"

"Me, huh? Not a team anymore?"

"I'm retired. I couldn't help even if I wanted. I've totally lost touch with the daily life of this place, and I was never good at it. Just remember who started this place. You started it, and you can end it."

"I don't think the paperwork really works that way anymore. We let in more partners, and we signed agreements. I'd need time to have an attorney update me on our corporate rights."

Dillard sat silent for a moment before saying, "I never thought our firm could turn into something this complicated. I'm only here for a moment. I need to answer this e-mail and get out of here."

Ike took the hint. He started to get up when he heard a sound from the hallway. Not a loud noise, but enough to get his attention. He turned but saw no one in the doorway. He looked back at Dillard who seemed oblivious. Ike rose and quietly walked to the door. He leaned forward and looked out and saw Price walking quickly down the hall. He started down the hall in the same direction and then heard his name being called. It was Proctor.

"Ike, can you join me in my office?"

Ike tried to find a reason for not complying, but could come up with nothing. "Sure, I need to stop by my office for a moment." Ike scampered into his office and sat down at his desk. He checked his five phone messages, but none were from the courtroom. He looked at his cell phone but no one had called him on that either. He looked at his active files. Some were worth big money, but most were not worth nearly enough for a comfortable retirement. He logged onto his computer and checked the company bank accounts. All looked good. He then switched back over to the company system to look at the lawsuits being handled by the firm. He was very proud of the system they had installed and their use of technology. Clients could go online to look at progress being made on their cases and to ask questions. Lawyers

were required to update the case file with every passing event. The paralegals scanned documents into the system and put notes in the file showing court dates, deadlines and timelines. It had been slow developing but a great success. Today, however, Ike was denied access. He tried his password at least five times until the screen told him he had used up his allotted number of incorrect login attempts and that he would have to contact the technology department to gain access to the system.

Ike sat there for five minutes trying to decipher the meaning of this. He never forgot his password. He had never so much as needed two tries to log in. Only someone with authority could cut off his access to the information. He could still see the bank accounts, and he considered that much more confidential information. He realized that Proctor would come looking for him if he didn't move soon, so he got up out of his seat. He walked the hallways nodding to the other workers and slowly made his way to Proctor's door.

When he arrived, he saw Price and Proctor sitting in chairs and waiting. Ike's blood rose to his cheeks as he looked at Price, but the small seated man merely returned his glare with a dispassionate look. Ike stood behind an empty seat.

Proctor said, "Ah, there you are. Have you heard from the courthouse?"

"No, I'm expecting it any minute."

"Have a seat."

"I'll stand."

Proctor looked over at Price and then took a deep breath. He pulled out a folder and cleared his throat. He was about to start talking when another person entered the room. Ike had his back to the door so he jumped at the sound of the voice behind him.

"Excuse me, sir. You wanted to see me?"

Ike turned to see a young man, maybe 25 years old, standing in a nice blue suit with an empty legal

pad in his hand. His skin looked almost white washed, and he had thick red hair. He stood so straight that Ike considered the possibility he was a cardboard cutout except that his mouth moved.

Proctor looked relieved. He smiled and said, "Yes, please come in."

The young man walked around Ike and stood next to the seated Price. They exchanged a look that Ike took to mean they didn't know each other but didn't like each other. Both then looked expectantly at Proctor who was now digging for another file. Once he found it, he flipped it open and flashed another small smile.

"Ike, I'd like you to meet Bill Newcastle. He is the newest attorney. He comes highly recommended by the professors at his law school and by Tony across the street at Smith and LaCross. He'll be a big help in some of our transactional work. Bill, this is Ike Blake. I'm sure you don't need any background information on him."

Ike stuck out his hand. Bill took his hand and gave a tender shake. He looked like he might get physically sick, so Ike took his hand back quickly. They stood in awkward silence for a moment before Ike decided Proctor wanted them to talk.

"So, Bill, how do you like it so far? Everyone treating you well?"

"Yes sir. I'm trying to dig in and get started."

"Good. Don't let anyone haze you. If you have any questions, come see me. You have any interest in litigation?"

Bill exchanged a look with Proctor who nodded. "Yes sir. I believe I could handle myself in a courtroom. Mr. Proctor assures me I'll get my chance."

Proctor stood and shook Bill's hand. "Thanks Bill. I just wanted you to meet with Ike. He's a legend around here and the mentor of many attorneys you'll meet. A good one to know."

Bill smiled and walked out. Proctor resumed his seat, and Ike could see that Price was growing

a little agitated at something. Ike didn't mind since he had reached that same condition. He watched Proctor put up the personnel file of "Bill" and then open up the same one he had taken out before the interruption. Proctor had a look of discomfort which Ike didn't trust.

"What going on?" Ike began.

"Since when am I not included in decisions to hire someone for the litigation side of things? Why is my access to our company files disabled and who authorized it? Why is Price following me?"

Proctor looked surprised by the sudden barrage of questions and shocked by the last bit of information. He stammered for an answer but only coughed. He looked at the standing Ike Blake and nodded to the chair.

"Don't you want to sit down? This conversation may take a few minutes," Proctor finally sputtered out.

Ike shook his head. "I'll stand, and I don't know how much time I have. If you want to say something then say it."

Proctor held up his hands to protest his innocence. "Ike, I'm not alone on this. Please sit so we can have a rational discussion. I want to start by finding out about Price following you. I wasn't aware of this."

Price leaned forward with a smile and answered, "I do my homework. He needed following so I could confirm my suspicions. You have an obligation now, Proctor. I expect you to act."

Proctor's face turned red. "I know my obligations, my responsibilities and my loyalties. If you think I don't, then you are sadly mistaken."

Ike could tell that Proctor was just getting started, but Ike's cell phone interrupted. It was Judge Botch's clerk calling to say that all parties were needed back at the courtroom. Ike stormed out of the office without looking back. He grabbed his briefcase and walked out of the firm's lobby without speaking to anyone. As he walked, he buttoned up his coat and

straightened his tie. He took about 10 steps before he realized he still never had an answer from Proctor on any of his questions. He was nearing the courthouse when he heard a familiar voice catching up. He turned to see Dillard huffing his way up the sidewalk. He slowed to let Dillard catch up and catch his breath.

"Dinner tonight says that the jury comes back for you right now."

"Phone call didn't sound that way. You're on."

"So, what happened back at the office? I caught a glimpse of that fellow you were telling me about. He looks like a snake."

"Something's up. Proctor was about to dredge something up when the judge called. I guess I'll find out later."

"Might be sooner than that."

Both men turned to see Proctor and Price following them to the courthouse. Ike ignored them and kept walking. Dillard did the same. They kept walking up to the door

of the building. Dillard suggested that he keep going to see which of them was being followed. Ike agreed, and they made their plans for the night.

Ike climbed the stairs and walked into the courtroom. The judge was sitting on the bench but no other parties or clients had arrived. He called Ike up to the front.

Judge Botch asked, "Ike, how long have we been in this business? It seems like 50 years."

"Been a long time, Judge. The earth was just learning to spin I think."

"The jury has three questions. We'll wait for everyone before bringing them out."

Ike's client walked in and Ike informed him of the situation. They took their seat as the plaintiffs walked in and were informed of the jury's request. Before the jury entered, the judge looked out and a frown crossed his face. He looked over at Ike and then nodded to the deputy. Ike turned to see Proctor

and Price sitting toward the back of the courtroom. Otherwise, the room was empty.

The jury entered the courtroom while everyone stood. After they were seated, everyone else was allowed to sit back down. The jury read their questions to the judge. Two concerned evidence and one concerned damages. Judge Botch met with the attorneys to provide the jury an answer all sides could stomach, and then the jury was so instructed. Afterward they were sent back to their deliberations. Ike had to assure his client that questions meant very little and that to guess the meaning was pointless. They talked for about 10 minutes before Ike was summoned back to court. All the while Price and Proctor sat watching.

Judge Botch called Ike up to his bench and turned on a rarely used static barrier that prevented anyone else in the courtroom from hearing what he said. He leaned forward anyway.

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THE RESOLUTION EXPERTS



"Mr. Blake, do you know that man seated with Mr. Proctor?"

"Yes, your Honor. His name is Barkley Price. He is a consultant who helps companies run efficiently. He also helps with mergers and that sort of thing. Proctor has brought him in for some reason."

The judge leaned even more forward. "That's his biography you're reading me. Do you know why he's somewhat infamous?"

Ike just looked back and said nothing. He hated to admit he had never heard of the man until just yesterday. The judge held his gaze for a moment and then told Ike to follow him to his chambers. They left the courtroom and disappeared while Price and Proctor watched.

Once inside his chambers the judge took off his black robe. He sat down and motioned for Ike to do the same. They began talking and didn't stop until they were interrupted by the court clerk. She let them know the jury had reached a decision. The judge slid back into his robe, and they walked back to their positions in the courtroom. Ike wasn't surprised to see Proctor and Price still in the courtroom, but was surprised to see them talking to his client. He didn't have time for a confrontation, so he motioned for his client to join him. He could see that all three men were unsatisfied with the conversation, but when his client sat down, no words were exchanged. There would be time later.

The plaintiffs and the defendant remained stoic as the jury announced they found in favor of the defense. Ike turned and shook hands with his client who was immediately on a cell phone reporting the news. He gave Ike the thumbs up as he walked away from the table. The plaintiffs slowly moved out the doors, and he heard their attorneys mentioning appeals. That would be someone's problem for some other day. He looked over at Proctor and Price who were making their way to his table. He stood and waited.

Proctor walked up and shook his hand. Ike accepted his con-

gratulations while Price stood by silently. Price always looked like he had swallowed a particularly sour lemon. Ike held his gaze on him for only a moment before beginning to shuffle papers into his briefcase. His mind was racing with the information the judge had provided him, the jury verdict and the presence of these two men. Ike knew the confrontation was coming, and he hated waiting.

"So, what was it we needed to talk about?"

Proctor's smile faded away. "Don't you want to wait until we're back at my office?"

Ike waved around the empty courtroom. "We're alone. This is as good as my office. Let's talk."

Proctor looked around to verify what Ike was saying. "Ike, we're worried about you. You have carried this firm for so long, but I don't think you're the same guy you were before. The partners and I have decided to cut back on your role at the firm. You should seriously think about a full retirement. Enjoy the success you've had. We'll buy you out. Rachel Frock has put together a package that is very substantial. She will have it finalized today, and we were going to make you a formal offer. I really hate to have this situation."

Ike looked over and could tell Proctor was struggling. He really did seem to hate talking about this. Good. Proctor also adequately explained why Rachel had been around. Ike still wanted to know about the weasel named Price who seemed to be rather enjoying himself at this moment.

Ike looked at Proctor with his best eye contact. "What is Price's role in this?"

Price raised himself as tall as he could muster. He gave Ike a patronizing smile and said, "I'm a corporation consultant called in to see what could be done to make this a smooth transition. The partners were given certain powers, by your and Mr. Barnes' original agreement that will enable them to buy you out and continue this firm with no glitches. If

you've read the agreement, they can vote together and oust you without any recourse on your part."

Proctor reacted like he'd been kicked. "Price, don't act like that. The man's a legend around here, and I owe him. Give him respect."

Price shrugged and said, "Old news. He's lost it." He turned to Ike. "Seeing Dillard today? Is he in the courtroom? He died about six years ago, you know, so no one sees him but you."

Ike stood still and tried to remain as calm as he could. Dillard's death had been hard. His mentor and best friend dying of a sudden heart attack was shocking to the entire county. It took the firm several months to find a means to cover the clients and cases Dillard handled, but the good will had never been the same. Ike was getting ready to respond when the side door to the courtroom opened. Judge Botch walked out and directly to them. He was smiling and approached with a confidence that said he didn't care if he was interrupting or not.

He faced Ike as he said, "Mr. Blake, another fine piece of work today. I trust your client is satisfied with your efforts."

Ike answered, "We haven't talked since the verdict. He ran out of here on his cell phone. I'll follow up with him tomorrow, but I don't see how he can be unhappy."

The judge put his hand on Ike's shoulder and said, "Only when he sees your bill." He turned to Proctor and stuck out his hand. "Good to see you again. What brings you over to the courthouse? I thought you stayed tied down in contracts and other transactions."

Proctor took the offered hand and shuffled his feet. "I came to talk a little business with Ike."

"Oh," was all the judge said at first. Then, after a moment of silence he said, "Keep Ike happy if you can. He's one of the best litigators around, and I've seen quite a few."

Ike, Proctor and Price all stood silent. Price looked like he wanted to take a punch at someone. Ike liked seeing the other two becom-

ing uncomfortable and thought about how to make matters worse. It then dawned on him the opening the judge had given him.

"Well, to tell the truth, these men were telling me how I'm not needed anymore at my firm."

Price responded. "We didn't say that. I pointed out that you may not be as mentally balanced as you need to be when serving the firm's clients. I have read the original agreement, and the partners have every right to consider you a risk and vote you out of the firm if they're willing to pay you a package that is legally sufficient."

Proctor, now emboldened, said, "We don't want him out. I feel that we have an obligation to our clients, and I'm not sure he is mentally capable of handling his responsibilities. The current case is closed with a good result, but what if it had gone badly? What if the client knew that Ike still sees and talks to a very deceased Dillard Barnes?"

Ike looked to see what reaction the judge would have. He had none. He slowly pulled out a faded purple rag from his jacket pocket and displayed it over his hand. He let the three other men look at it for a moment before smiling.

"Do you know what this is?"

All three shook their head.

"It's my lucky hanky. I was given this purple rag by my father when I was in law school. He told me it had brought him luck in the war since my mother had given it to him. I never come to work without it. Some people might think I'm a little crazy."

Price held up a hand to protest but the judge cut him off. "I know a criminal attorney who is very good at his job. I would want him to represent me if I was ever in a criminal problem. He eats peanuts every night before a trial. He has a slight allergy to them and he gets sick as a dog all night. He doesn't feel right if he doesn't go through that ritual though. I know another litigator that has to wear black shoes on odd numbered days of the month. There is also an attor-

ney who wears a fraternity pin he found on the street. He was never a member of the fraternity, but he wears that pin every time he's in court. Swears it's his good luck charm. Shall I go on?"

Both Proctor and Price stood silent. The judge looked over at Ike. "Do you see Dillard when you're not having a trial?"

"No sir."

"Does he show up when you're on vacation?"

"No sir."

The judge turned back to Proctor and Price. "I don't see a mental problem. The man had a mentor who died. He uses the memory of his mentor and old friend as a way of bouncing ideas around in his head. I've seen much worse."

With that the judge walked out of the courtroom and left the three standing there. Ike could hear the air conditioner running and could see the sweat breaking out on Price's head. Proctor was looking at his shoes like they were strange new things that demanded attention.

Ike said to Price, "How many hours have you put in on this situation?"

"About three weeks worth."

Ike started laughing. "I'm sorry to inform you that you have wasted your time. I actually have read that original agreement. In fact, I read it again last night. Did you read the part where the partners have to agree to bring in a consultant for the purpose of fundamentally changing the firm? The partners have to agree unanimously. I don't remember agreeing to that. I think forcing the founding partner to leave the firm counts as a fundamental change. I bet I can convince a judge and jury of that too, so I'm going to be a partner for a while."

Price turned another shade of red and turned to Proctor. Proctor just shrugged. Ike began laughing again and started walking to the courtroom door while the other two began to argue. He waited for someone to call his name but no one did. He pulled open the courtroom's heavy oversized door and found

the judge waiting on the other side in the hallway. The judge was leaning back on the wall but stood up straight when Ike walked near.


The judge asked, "Well, did you tell them off, or are you still an owner?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided. Thanks for coming to my defense out there."

"My pleasure. The microphones picked up very nicely, and I couldn't stand what I was hearing. What we talked about still stands. If you feel like leaving I would strongly consider leaving the bench and starting something new."

"Just the two of us old guys starting up a new firm?"

The judge smiled. "Yes, just the two of us. What do you think Dillard will say about it?"

Ike shrugged. "I'll let you know." 



Greg Grogan is a native of Douglas County and graduated from the University of Georgia. He spent 10 years as a Fulton

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