

ENLIGHTENMENT

By Ace Boggess

The other lawyers hated Gene. So did the secretaries. Judge Diamante in Courtroom B despised him, as did Judge Deter, although that honorable master oversaw criminal cases and rarely found Gene standing before him waving briefs. Oh, none of them wanted him dead, *per se*. They just wished to have his light snuffed out. They tired of seeing his face.

Gene Somner wasn't a handsome man. His dirt-brown hair frizzed to points, some of which then bent back into curls. His eyebrows rose like gravestones above his sunken eyes. He resembled a cartoon dog with cartoon mange. None of this was helped by the scar below his left eye—a reminder of the time he fell. Yet, even having these deficiencies, Gene bubbled with charm and charisma that would've made him attractive enough if not for the battery-powered lantern he carried everywhere he went.

Before his fall and subsequent recovery, Gene hid in the darkness like everyone else. He came to work before sunrise, felt his way along the blackened walls of the lobby, rode the abysmal elevator to the third floor—flinching from the glow of the third-floor button—then shuffled through the office in hesitant steps, not stopping while he grumbled, “Hello, Sharon. Hey, Roger. How's it going, Emily?” as if he saw his coworkers through a cave dweller's eyes. After that, he spent his days on the phone, arguing points or making deals with other shady lawyers. On a bad day, he hid behind dark sunglasses while he cowered in the back of a cab on his way to the Courthouse and the black hole that was Courtroom B.

Everyone accepted Gene in those days. The other lawyers sat in inky dark of their offices, their hands nervously doodling on complaint forms or motions for summary judgment. The secretaries sat with *their* hands on their laps, panicking only when the little red light on the telephone flashed. Even the judges were content to wallow in the vacuum of their spacious chambers—chewing the ends of their gavels while wishing they were somewhere else, somewhere with a bit less sunshine peeking around the closed Venetian blinds.

Then, the accident happened. Everything changed. Gene returned to work after a couple weeks of recovery, wandered to the center of the waiting room, coughed twice, said, “This won't do,” then swiveled on his heels and left, his feet making clackety-clackety-swoosh sounds as if he were tap-dancing out the door. When he came back an hour later, he held that lantern at chest height in front of him, illuminating the well-worn chairs, the stacks of unread magazines, Liz the receptionist drawing back in her seat and whimpering as if she had just been fired. “Morning, Liz,” he said. “It's good to see you.”

No one knew whether he meant to do it. Was it an attempt to end his suffering? Had thought cancer finally eaten through all the invisible marrow of his spirit? Or was it, like he told those miserable policemen, nothing more than an accident? He said he went to the window in his bedroom. Someone had left it open, and he intended to slam it shut and pull the blinds. He

explained that his head was still filled with the day's business and that it was so dark in the room, even with the window open, that he didn't see the foot stool—the loose carpet, the family dog—stumbled over it and pitched headfirst out into the cold January dawn.

Of course, there were many holes in his story. Who in his household would've opened those blinds, let alone the window behind them? Not him, certainly. Not his wife, Charlotte, who hadn't worked in years and did nothing now but sit in her chair and watch a blank TV. Not his daughter Caroline, either. True, at nine years old, she was still young enough to enjoy a little nightlight plugged in while she slept, but she was approaching her teenage years when, like everyone else, she would embrace the blackness all around her.

Aside from that, how did Gene not bang his head against the window frame or slap his palms on the sill? How was his plunge from the second story not interrupted by a knee against the wall?

No matter. Gene stuck to his version. He was a good lawyer. He knew what facts he best kept to himself.

The lantern put out a halo with a six-foot radius. The light was jaundiced and dim, but, in constant black of the halls and conference rooms at Meursault, Heath and Somner, it blazed a harvest moon, highlighting metal desks, paintings of sailboats against pastel skies, and the sad, frightened faces of anyone who wandered into range. Many thought it carried a smell with it, too. Some described the odor as being like kerosene, but others said burning dust. One of the partners teared up as she described the scent of rain in the center of a muddy field.

Whenever Gene walked past a desk, the lantern held in front of him like a birthday cake, the young associate or intern seated there would turn away or cover her face with both hands before he could get a good look at her bandit's mask or cheeks melting into batter in the bowl of her chin. Some quickly reached for a bottom drawer, opening it and fumbling through the nonsense files within. They weren't trying to look busy for the boss—and he *was* the boss, albeit one of three—but pushing themselves as far as possible from the painful yellow glare of that portable sun. They preferred not to be seen, even by their own eyes.

Gene often paused just long enough to say, "That's a lovely pair of earrings, Janet. Are they new?" Or, "Hey there, Bob. How're Margie and the kids?" Or else, "Happy Thanksgiving, Shelly. Is your family visiting this year?"

Replies came in noncommittal grunts sounding more like *Help!* than yes or no. Not that anyone wanted help. All just wanted him to leave and take his infernal candle with him.

Gene usually complied, moving on to the next station, connecting the dots on a path he drew to his office. Then, he plopped down in his comfortable leather chair, placing the lantern on the edge of his desk. It was often less than a minute after that when he reached for the intercom while, throughout the building, a dozen secretaries crossed their fingers or folded their hands in prayer, dreading whose button he'd push, which soldier he'd call to the front. Soon, eleven sighs of relief were heard, along with a single whimper when Gene's static-riddled voice

came out of a box, saying, “Missy Rae, would you please bring me the Bennetti file? Thank you very much.”

First hints of sunlight dyed the snow pink. Six untracked inches of accumulation covered the yard like icing on a pan of sweets. The temperature had reached the mid-teens for an overnight low, leaving the snow hard-packed enough to smack a falling body yet soft enough underneath to give a little and cushion the blow.

Gene couldn’t remember the fall or the sickening whump his body made when it struck the icy shell of his lawn. He didn’t recall much of anything about that morning—not how long he lay there damaged and freezing, not which neighbor bravely peeked out through horizontal blinds long enough to see him and dial nine-one-one, not the arrival of the ambulance and two fire trucks. Even so, he liked to believe that he lifted his head at that moment and saw their collage of red lights flaring up like a forest fire, flickering like a disco ball on the dance floor of hell. He kept that image with him, though it wasn’t true. He blacked out ten minutes before the first siren could be heard wailing up the hill toward his house.

The lantern wasn’t the only artifact Gene excavated from some ancient world. One evening, when he had to work late to prepare for the next day’s deposition of a witness, Gene disappeared for half an hour and came back with a black box under his arm. It was smaller than the smallest laptop. In the hazy glow of the lantern, it resembled a mini tool kit.

“A lot left to do tonight,” he said as he passed Elaine’s desk, the closest one to his office. She was considered his personal secretary, so it fell to her to suffer through the extra hours. “If you haven’t eaten yet, now would be a good time.”

Elaine pretended to smile. Then, before Gene had made it through his office door, she was up and gone, not about to miss her chance to escape. She ate slowly at a smoky diner down the street. On her way back, she snuck into the liquor store for a few airplane bottles of Early Times, the first of which she drank in the law firm’s elevator. One of her long brown bangs fell on her lip and stuck there, pasted by boozy wetness, until she reached up and, frustrated, brushed it away. It was that kind of day, she thought. Then the doors opened, and her ears were assaulted by some god-awful racket.

Elaine, tight-fisted and square-jawed, stormed down the hallway like a school teacher seeking out a spitballer in the back of her classroom. There, at the end of the corridor just beyond her station, was the open door to Gene Somner’s office. The lawyer’s face stayed hidden behind a thick, clamped stack of documents he read by lantern light. On the desk in front of him stood the small black box, a silver arm rising from it as if pleading for attention. Out of it came that buzzy, bouncing noise. “*Mister Somner*,” she said, thinking this might qualify as a hazardous work environment and wondering if she should place a call to OSHA.

Gene lowered his papers. “Oh, hello there, Elaine. I hope you had a pleasant meal.”

“Mister Somner,” she droned a second time, adding, “what in the name of God is going on here?” She couldn’t believe she said that. *Oh, well*, she thought. *A girl can only take so much.*

“I have all this work to do,” Gene answered. “Nothing like a little music to help me relax and focus my brain.”

Music, she thought. *Funny, I didn’t recognize it.* “Is that that rock’n’roll?”

“Absolutely,” said Gene. “Do you like it?”

She didn’t. Then again, maybe she did. It sounded kind of familiar, after all. Yes, she had heard it before, although she couldn’t place it. Some kind of carpentry song, she decided, with its catchy little refrain about fixing a hole in the roof. “I...,” she began, trying but unable to answer her boss’s question. “I...,” she attempted again.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Gene said.

Elaine wanted to argue, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, she found herself bobbing her head in the gesture for yes. *Yes*, she nodded. *Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes*, she continued, all the way back to her desk where she kept it up until time for her to leave. The music hypnotized, she decided later. It had to be *that*, because not once during the entire evening did she stop nodding *yes* long enough to think about her boss’s irritating light.

“Mister Somner,” the baritone voice bellowed through this new darkness. “Mister Somner, Mister Somner.” Then, softer, it said, “I don’t think he can hear us.”

Of course I can hear you, thought Gene, who didn’t open his eyes once during the ambulance ride. *Now leave me alone. I’m dead.*

When did the darkness take over? Gene didn’t recall a time when folks weren’t hiding in their shadows, closing the blinds, sitting in silence at their desks and faking their work because they couldn’t see the pages in front of them or even the hand with which they wrote. Sure, he kept a sort of nostalgia for college tailgate parties in the lot before a football game, and there were images in his head of a day at the beach with arms flailing and waves crashing against his tiny back while his parents in front of him argued just on shore. But those were fantasy images like scenes from a film, as if there were a time when he still sat in a crowded theater staring down the glare from a movie screen.

Gene wasn’t the first to dabble with a bit of light at the office, although he was the first to bring his own. Sometimes it happened when certain medicines were tried. A young associate would visit his doctor and return with a fresh amber bottle of pills. He tried to keep it to himself,

because no lawyer wanted his colleagues to think he might be crazy. Even so, it became obvious as soon as the associate first attempted to open the office blinds which had long been nailed shut. So, that lawyer would switch on his desk lamp and plunge the room into light. In the days that followed, he would work much harder than normal, getting motions written and filed, conferring with clients who preferred to be left alone. His output went up, as did his effectiveness. But it never lasted. A few weeks would pass, or maybe a month. Then the desk lamp stayed on less and less as the work piled up again and the associate realized how deep of a hole he had dug himself already. Two, maybe three months tops, and the darkness was back for good. It always seemed as if that lawyer spent two months staring at the mess he had made of his life and, after that, decided it would be best if he didn't have to look at it anymore.

Gene awoke to a blazing pain behind his eyes. Or in front of his eyes. Something blazing, anyway. There were tubes in one arm. A cast covered the other. Looking down, he could see the blurry outline of a bandage on his face. Gene knew there were others on him, too. His body felt as if it were stuck to flypaper or else made out of wood. He sensed a sort of lightness inside him that came from somewhere other than the morphine massaging from under his skin. What was this strange impression? he wondered. He thought it might be paradise or Shangri-La or the Elysian Fields, but those places wouldn't leave him mummy-wrapped on a cot.

Gene saw movement and attempted to raise his head for a look, but the morphine dizziness weighed on his neck and dropped him straight back down. "Hello?" he moaned to whomever was there. He hoped it might be his wife.

Moments later, a creamy brown face stared down from a few inches above him. The woman had dark eyes that nonetheless seemed to carry torches in them. He caught a hint of her burgundy uniform as she backed away. "Mister Somner," the nurse said in a voice so soft it left his spine tingling even more. "You're awake. That's outstanding."

"Where...?"

"You want to know where you are? You're in a room here at the hospital. Sisters of Mercy. You've been here almost twenty-four hours."

"What happened to me?"

The nurse came in close again, looking at his pupils, then pulled farther away. She left a breath of her peach-scented perfume that drifted down and settled around Gene's nose. "You don't remember?" she said. "You had a fall. We've all wondered about you. Wondered if it was..." She left the sentence dangling there.

"I don't know," Gene muttered, then added, "I'm not dead."

"No, it wasn't that bad of a fall. Course, honey, truth be told, Doc says you almost froze yourself to death."

"The Doc?"

“Doctor Tillich is your attending. Doctor Hess treated you in the E.R., but he gave you over to us. Anyway, Doctor Tillich will be in to see you, now that you’re somewhat with us. In the meantime, get some rest. I’ll just flip these lights off and leave you be.”

Gene didn’t know why he said what he did or what came over him, but he heard the words and knew they were his as they echoed from his half-closed mouth. “No, please. Leave them on awhile longer.”

“Anything you say, sweetie.” The nurse backed out of his room and closed the door.

It was almost winter again, nearly two years since Gene’s accident, and the cold had begun seeping in through fabric and walls. In the firm’s black hole, the dark made everything seem that much colder as if an underground root cellar without any central heating. The staff wore sweaters and turtlenecks, the lawyers their heaviest suits, often with long-sleeve shirts hidden underneath. Most bumbled around, *brrr*-ing and groaning, rubbing their elbows and sometimes their ankles for that extra bit of warmth. The office smelled stale and cold like the inside of a walk-in freezer.

Gene sat at his desk, warmer than anyone in the glow of his lantern. Even so, he should’ve expected a bad day. It had been so long since he’d had one.

It began around ten-thirty that morning when the lantern flickered twice. Gene frowned and touched his hand to the top of it, waiting to see if the light sputtered again.

At noon, Gene went to lunch at that smoky diner down the road. It was run by an Iranian, but sold the best Italian pastas. Gene sat at his table alone, reading and rereading the table cards and trying not to wonder what his life was all about.

When he returned to work, he sat down in his leather swivel chair and replaced the lantern on his desk. That’s when the light began pulsing again, this time in bursts of three or four as if a real flame off a lamp filled with gas or kerosene. Gene touched the lukewarm glass, tapped gently on the metal top, took the lantern in both hands and swayed it left then right, but the light seemed to grow a bit dim.

Batteries, he thought.

Gene was still playing around with it when he heard a gruff, fake cough coming from his doorway. He glanced up and barely made out the shadowy outline of one of his partners, Reginald Meursault. “Oh, Reggie,” he said. “Hello. Good to see you. Come in, come in.”

“No thanks,” said Meursault. “I prefer to stand.”

“Oh? Suit yourself. Well, what can I do for you?”

Something shifted about the man, and Gene got the impression he was looking away. When Meursault spoke, it was in the deep, solemn baritone of an undertaker. “Well, Gene, I believe we need to have a talk.”

“All right.” Again, Gene motioned toward a chair, but his partner declined. “Okay, then. Talk, I guess.”

Meursault hesitated, falsely clearing his throat. “You see, the thing is, Sandy and I have been discussing a few, err, issues.”

“Such as?”

“What to do about your ... situation.”

The lantern flickered several times and then steadied. The dark figures dancing on the walls and ceiling would’ve mesmerized Gene if he weren’t so busy listening to his partner’s words. “What are you talking about? What *situation*?”

“Your clients,” Meursault replied.

“What about them?”

“We’ve had some complaints.”

Again, the light sputtered and dimmed. Gene ignored it. “Complaints?”

“Yes, from your clients.”

“Why would they complain? I bring in the highest settlements in the firm.”

“I know,” said Meursault.

The light skipped about like a madman with his shoes on fire.

“Frankly,” Meursault explained, “it’s your attitude.”

“What’s wrong with my...?”

“And again, to speak frankly, it’s the main topic of discussion here in the office, too.”

The light grew dimmer.

“You put people off. That’s all I can tell you. No one wants to be around you. That’s why the other lawyers settle with you for such high figures. Neither they nor their clients want to deal with you and your nonsense. And yes, frankly, that’s what *your* clients say about it also.”

“But the money!” Gene said, raising his voice. The light brightened for a moment, then faded to a low shine.

Meursault said, “Yes, good money. We’ll miss that.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The thing is, like I told you, Sandy and I have been talking about this for some time now. If you were an associate, we’d have to terminate your contract. But, we can’t do that.”

“Damn right, you can’t.”

“So, we’ve decided to buy you out. Sandy and I intend to split your shares. We’ll take your name off the masthead, if you like. Or leave it. It’s up to you. Don’t worry, we’ll give you a fair price.”

The light was almost gone now. It pulsed and brightened from time to time like a dying firefly half-smashed on a windshield, but for the most part, it offered no more visibility than the cherry of a cigarette seen down a blind alley at midnight.

Gene took a deep breath and said, “What if I don’t want to sell my shares? I’ve put my life into this firm. I have rights here, don’t I?”

“That’s true. It’s your choice in the long run. But, still trying to be frank with you, Gene, if you don’t sell to us, then Sandy and I would expect to sell to you. Maybe you can come up with that kind of money. I don’t know. What I do know is, we can’t work with you anymore.” Meursault paused again. Quiet echoed through the mostly-dark. When the partner spoke again, his voice was calmer, friendlier. “Listen, Gene. That’s a good chunk of change coming your way. I suggest you take it. You’re still, what, forty-five?”

“Forty-eight,” Gene sighed.

“Forty-eight. Take a year off, relax, get yourself together. Maybe you could take a long trip.” *To Antarctica*, he didn’t say. “Then, when you’re ready, you can start your own firm and do with it what you like. Anyway, think about it. We’ll want your answer by the end of the week.” His voice trailed off in the darkness as it moved farther and farther away.

The lantern was so dim now as to be unnoticeable. For the first time in almost two years, Gene allowed darkness to envelope him, to permeate his skin and reach inside him to the hollow places he tried to keep in highlights. Like a schoolboy, he lowered his head onto his desk and slept. He didn’t dream and, when he woke, the last spark in his lantern had burned out.

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