

No Fee, No Win by Tom Afford
Excerpt

Prologue

My name is Matthew Months. I am former Senior Partner of Months & Co, the esteemed global law firm, headquartered in London. Before it collapsed, my firm had an annual turnover of £10 billion, and pre-tax profits of £5bn.

Average salary for each partner was £3 million. Junior partners, that is.

We expanded aggressively via an IPO and were one of the first ever law firms to do so. We were revered and feared due to our aggressive litigation. My firm's name sent shivers down opponents' spines. We were the 'go to' people, provided that you could afford us.

Our success was entirely thanks to me: one of the most ruthless Senior Partners in legal history. I reached the top doing whatever was required. I became filthy rich and successful and, it seemed, for the most part, unstoppable.

But then the firm collapsed. Many clients, investors and partners were ruined, overnight. And, of course, occasionally, I do regret that...

Yet, I can't take all the blame! People are far too trusting and naïve! Lots of reputations were ruined, including my own! But we'll come back to that sorry mess, later on.

*

I am writing to you now from HMP Battenhatch, in solitary confinement. It's extremely cold in my cell. The walls are whitewashed. There are hefty bars on the window. Many of my colleagues are stark raving mad! It reminds me of the first law firm that I worked for!

A small pane illuminates my sparse abode. There's a stainless-steel toilet, with no seat. A thin, springy bed that smells of faeces (not my own). And that's it. Aside from my notebook and biro, which I'm forced to hide. Plus, these horrific clothes: 'joggers' and 'sweatshirts', I think they call them. A far cry from the Italian tailored suits I used to wear.

I write this account, in part, as my last confession. I must try and set the story straight. There are countless fake narratives in the ether, spreading outrageous lies against me. But frankly most are not scandalous enough!

This is the only *true* account, straight from the racehorse's mouth. No other memoir details my horrors so completely. Reality is more bizarre than anything you could imagine.

Countless psychologists, psychiatrists and law-enforcers have hauled me over hot-coals, trying to find out what makes me tick. Well, good luck with that!

I've kept shtum about where the billions are hidden. I've kept it secret as only a lawyer knows how. But that was back when I thought I had a bit more time.

There are only a few days until I will be murdered.

*

Looking back over my illustrious legal career, and it really has been stellar... I realise how little I'll leave behind. When I die, there'll be no wailing mourners ripping their shirts apart. No family. No friends. In short, I have nothing; no legacy.

I thought my law firm would be sufficient, but it fell apart! My only bequest will be the horrific crimes that I've committed. The countless lives and reputations that I've destroyed. How can that be? The illustrious Matthew Months - a common criminal?!

Life rarely works out how you intended. There's always some hidden pitfall lurking somewhere.

*

Until recently, I'd been far too busy to reflect. It's only here in prison that I've really had the chance.

I've finally realised how fickle a career in law can be. How abstract 'the law' really is.

To the outside world, a legal profession seems concrete and immutable, but it darts and shifts like sands over writhing dunes. A legal career is like a dream that vanishes the moment you try and recall it.

*

This is much more than an autobiography or 'last confession': it's also a warning to those intent on pursuing law. Think again, *mes amis*; think again!

Glamourising law is one of the vilest crimes to man!

'I've always wanted to go into law...' (People frequently tell me that).

'I could have been a great lawyer, too...'

'Don't bother!'; 'No, you couldn't!' and 'You really wouldn't have!'

People toy with the idea of doing law, holed up in lesser jobs. Dreaming about doing something greater. Of *helping* people. Perhaps, even giving back. But, if so, then do not look to law...

Mostly, I blame films and TV shows. They're bigger monsters than me – for they say - 'Look at this glamorous lifestyle you're missing out on. If only you could do law too!'

Whereas I make no pretences.

*

Law attracts some incredibly driven people, but it also attracts narcissists and psychopaths. Foul ogres bent on trampling on wilting flowers. There are plenty of those sorts in law.

The profession also tends to draw in lost souls, trying to find greater meaning in their life.

Ignore law! You must find something else! There are far more intelligent pursuits. Other jobs that make better money, more easily. The legal profession is rapidly falling apart. Not just here and there, but everywhere you look!

Forget about becoming an arsehole in a shiny suit! There's little glamour. Much less wealth than you might expect (especially in the smaller, lesser firms). There's drama, but rarely the right sort. Not the exciting, life-changing kind. Mostly it's the oppressive, bone-grinding, why-am-I-doing-this? daily-slog kind. The my-wife's-leaving-me and my-kids-hate-me kind. It's only Managing and Senior Partners of City firms who prosper greatly. But jobs like mine are exceedingly rare, indeed. Some positions, you literally have to kill for.

Ultimately, you must remember - a law firm's pyramidal, like a scam.

*

Like other young-hopefuls, I started off idealistic about the law. But with time my perception has changed. Rather than rail against law's esoteric and archaic ways, I accepted that's just the way it had to be. Perhaps I shouldn't have. Perhaps I should have changed it. But the legal system's not going to improve in my lifetime, or even yours.

If I'd known all this earlier, I might have left law years ago. And my life could have turned out rather differently.

*

False accounts try to glamourise my lifestyle, portraying me as this rich hot-shot lawyer. But it's my duty to give you the truth, warts and all.

Take it from someone on the inside: literally! It's impossible wrestling law, success and power. They've been horrific, unforgiving years. They've sapped everything and left me a husk, at times even questioning my own sanity!

I pray that others might read this tale and learn from it. Learn from my mistakes, even if I cannot.

I send a heart-felt message to all those still trapped in law. Solicitors, barristers, judges, paralegals; whether you're at the top or the bottom of the pyramid... my advice to you, *learned friends* is get out now. Get out, for the love of God!

Unless you're Senior Partner; then stay and reap your just rewards.

*

This account is all I have left: my last two-pence...

All we have, ultimately, is our hard-fought life-lessons. We must share them. We must pass our message on.

*

My story didn't start off in the law. Like many others, it took me a while to get there. No doubt you want me to race ahead to the grizzly end. But we must start at the very start, for it's essential.

Your past haunts you. It clings to you, no matter how hard you try and shake it. It lingers like a ball and chain that you drag around. When you assume it's far behind you, it catches up and smacks you in the head. Often at times when you least expect it, and extremely hard.

My first confession? Perhaps, it's the biggest one! I wasn't even always on the right side of law... I started out a cold-blooded criminal! That's right, Matthew Months. A gangster. Who would have thought it?!

*

I was taught in law, early on: say what you're about to say; then say it; then repeat what you've just said. (A barrister taught me that.)

To give you an outline, my account looks like this: -

Firstly, I'll give you a flavour of my childhood. I got lost on the path to law, but it all links up, eventually.

Then I'll chart my rise as a criminal-gang-lieutenant, and the tense relations with my would-be mentor. I'll detail the horrific struggle it took to break away. (Sometimes it was literally murder.)

I'll describe my early days as an aspiring lawyer in a sleepy, commuter town, including the farcical backstabbing and lying required to survive. No doubt this will chime with many lawyers practising in the shade of the City sun.

Next, I'll detail how I dipped in and out of London firms, then fell from grace and struggled to get back again. For a while, I was left looking in, from the outside!

Eventually I caught a lucky break. And built my ferocious law firm out of naught. But it was hardly ever plain-sailing.

And at the end, I'll give you what you really want. Details of my madness and horrific fall from grace. How I ruined the world and my most important clients.

But I'll save this bit for closer to the end. For I figure that's what you really want to hear about.

*

Forgive me as I write a rapid pace if I stumble or occasionally repeat myself. My hand is being forced, literally. Bear with me if I slip or miss bits out or sometimes jumble things.

Enough prattling; let's get this story going! Where to begin? Why don't we start at the very start!

*

I was raised in the Midlands, or the Middlings as it should be called. My father died when I was very young. My mother brought me up as best as she could. She tried hard, but we were always desperately poor.

We lived in a run-down flat next to a graveyard, beside a main road that hurtled into town.

I'd shown promise, academically, early on, and got a government-assisted grant to attend a private school - one of the only decent schools in town. I remained there until my mid-teens, but before obtaining any formal qualifications.

(I don't think these government scholarships exist anymore. I wonder how many bright poor-kids have slipped through the cracks. If I regain unfettered access to my billions and survive this awful joint, I might even set some up, again.)

Certainly, I couldn't have afforded private school without a scholarship. Winning one jettisoned me into a new and exciting world, full of possibilities. It gave me hope that something better lay ahead. But regrettably, that dream was not going to last. My funding was revoked by the government before my GCSEs. The Lord giveth and taketh even more. And it fucked me, royally...

I was forced to leave my cushy education, whilst all my rich friends simply shrugged and stayed the course. Life dragged me back, kicking and screaming to the streets. The need to earn money raised its ugly head. I felt a primal desire simply to survive. That ferocious ambition propelled me throughout my life. The sense that poverty lay lurking, around every corner. At the time, it was heart-breaking to lose it all. But with hindsight, it helped me rise to the very top.

*

In law, particularly in City firms, undue regard is had to education. Academic education, that is. The school of life counts for naught! You need a fancy scroll on velum, confirming you went someplace that people had actually heard of, and also, ideally, finished somewhere near the top. Education *is important*. But it's not everything. At least, it shouldn't be...

Sadly, for many law firms, it's all they care about. If you didn't attend top universities, and if you didn't achieve the highest marks, the best firms wouldn't give you the time of day. The computers ruled you out from the get-go. And if the computers didn't, the miserable HR cretins did. You failed before you even stood a chance.

The barrier isn't really about *education*. It's about going to the *right* places. Oxbridge, ideally. You stand a much better chance if you studied there.

But I've always wondered, are Oxbridge-types necessarily the best candidates? I've known plenty of Oxonians and Cantabrigians who've lacked any common sense. Loads who've had overinflated senses of self-worth. I've always wondered, by choosing them, how much raw talent have you turned away?

I saw little point arguing with the status quo. I knew I couldn't change the law by myself. The profession is terribly set in its archaic and esoteric ways. So, when I applied to my first firm, I made sure that I ticked all the right boxes.

I said that I had a first in law from Cambridge - St John's College. I boasted several top academic prizes. And a long list of extracurricular achievements.

'How did you manage that, if you dropped out of school?' you might cry.

Well, of course, there is a simple answer.

I lied. I span a yarn. I kept fibbing and somehow got away with it! My achievements belonged to some guy whom I could no longer afford to be around. I stole this guy's identity. He went to Cambridge and studied law, and so did I. He won top legal prizes, and I did too. I learned to walk and talk like him, to dress like him, and with time, I almost became him!

Instead of Oxbridge, I cut my teeth working in a meat factory. Slaughtering animals and mopping up steaming guts. In many ways, that was ideal training for the law...

From the meat factory, I graduated *cum laude* into hardened crime. I learned about money-laundering, extortion, theft and arson, eventually making second-lieutenant in a crime gang. (It's a bit like making partner in a law firm. But with a lot less backstabbing.)

'How did you get away with it? Lying, so obviously? Surely some bright boffin called you out?'

Well, you'd think so. You'd certainly hope so! But many lawyers are far too busy to check little details like the truth... It was taken on trust that if I said I was the part, if I looked the part, I must be the part.

Common-sense passes many lawyers by. Lies slip past by the bucket-loads.

Lawyers are like busy worker bees. Concerned with making their honey-fees. Too busy pollinating to notice wasps amidst their ranks.

Having a fake Oxbridge degree certainly helped me out. But equally important was the fact that people liked me. My name and face fit. And the rest, as they say, is history.

By lying, I avoided tonnes of useless baggage - like legal degrees and crippling debt. I dodged years of blood and sweat working as a paralegal. I bypassed all that and got straight to practising law.

It wasn't just my fake education that got me there. It was my ruthless criminal training. Street-smarts, honed over many years. Persevering in the face of adversity. Honing my entrepreneurial spirit, come what may. And knowing how to eliminate the competition...

*

Matthew Months isn't my real name; it's not my 'birth-name'. Like much of me, it's entirely made up. I am *English*, but my original name sounded a bit too *foreign*. I figured MM sounded better. Like

someone who has their roots in the landed gentry. I regretted changing my real name, looking back. But I felt that I had to, just to get noticed in the law. And doing so helped me break ties with my criminal past.

*

In law, as with everywhere, people tend to treat you differently if your name doesn't fit. Certainly, that *used* to be the case and, I imagine, still is. Notwithstanding law firms profess they're more accepting.

Justice might be blind, but it isn't deaf. Deep-seated prejudice still remains. Sometimes the bias is unconscious. Other times, it's blatant and outrageous.

I re-invented my name, just like I re-invited the rest of me.

'What an unusual surname!' people would cry. 'Months?!'

'Yes,' I'd reply, with a nasal twang; 'It's Plantagenet!'

They'd look impressed and wander off. Plantagenet, indeed!

Some law firms might have hired me with my real name, but perhaps less for *who* I was, than a need to fill quotas. For law firms to *seem* diverse to the outside world.

'That's nonsense!' I hear you cry. 'Law careers are solely based on merit!'

But are they, really? Consider this: I had a friend with a background and name similar to mine. He was extremely bright and got a scholarship at a decent school. He got top marks and read law at a good university. But he ended up working at a tiny, high-street firm. He'd struggled as a paralegal for donkey's years. Larger City firms didn't even invite him to interview. Because his name was far too long and lilting.

My friend was treading water with inhuman pay, even after giving law his all. After performing consistently. After billing the earth. He just couldn't progress. He couldn't escape from his tiny high-street firm. No London firm would touch him with a punt-pole! So, one day, he chose to leave the law entirely. He worked in a restaurant and earned a lot more money.

'The law's competitive!' I hear you cry. 'People aren't necessarily prejudicial!'

But I've seen it time and time again. Smart, hard-working people, overlooked, simply because their name didn't fit. So, I changed mine and made damned-sure that it did.

*

I always suspected things would have been different if my father hadn't died when I was a boy. I never really knew him, growing up. I simply sensed a shadow where he used to stand.

My mother brought me up, but she wasn't around much when I was young. She was too busy working several menial jobs. She was intelligent but tended to put out one fire by starting another fire. She seemed drawn to people, in particular, who were unavailable. It made my childhood rather

No Fee, No Win by Tom Afford – excerpt
Copyrighted, no use or dissemination is permitted without the author's permission.
All rights reserved.

tricky. I never had a father; just a string of father-figures. I had to become my own boss right from the very start.

*

I'm not writing this with a vintage Mont Blanc pen. I'm using a tatty chewed-up biro that's rapidly running out of ink. Everything's banned inside here. Everything's a potential weapon. Not just for hurting others, but yourself. Cheap biros are perfect for killing folk.

It's ironic, when you think about it. As a solicitor, I used my pen as a sword. I weaponised my words, both for good and harm. But now my pen's a literal shank; a killing tool!

I must hide it, my tatty biro; I'm forced to guard it with my life. I must preserve this scruffy manuscript. For my life is very nearly over.