

## THE SECURITY BAR

Jim's beautiful view from his 10<sup>th</sup> floor hotel room of the expansive harbor with its surface water glistening in the early morning sunlight was tarnished only by the menacing sight of the long, wide and low flat roof of the edifice lying across the bridge which would soon be his destination. Looking at his watch, he realized that time was running short and he took one last small sip from his coffee cup and headed out for the elevator.

The top floor of a hotel was usually a prime location and was certainly Jim's favorite, but on this day, at 7:45 am, it was a bit of a curse, as the wait for one of the three slow elevators dragged on. Jim eyed the stairwell, but 10 floors would be a struggle for an overweight middle aged man with a bum knee so he took a deep breath and tried to be patient. When the elevator finally arrived, he found that the wait was not yet over, as the car stopped at almost every floor to pick up other passengers. It was easy to spot those who were likely to be heading across the bridge with him, especially the girls, mostly in their mid-twenties and none carrying a purse. Most of them were as silent as praying monks and an air of quiet nervous energy engulfed the filling elevator as it continued its descent. The passengers were jammed together like cattle by the time it reached the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, but the dropping little room continued to stop at each successive floor, where eager would-be travelers would grimace at the packed car, then spin away on their young heels to the nearest stairway.

The crowd in the elevator sensed the effect of the delay in their delicate timing created by the sluggish ride and seemed to burst from the car at the lobby level, beginning a brisk walk out the lobby door, down the street and across the bridge, merging with others from the hotel and eventually with others from other nearby hotels all streaming like lemmings toward the entrance of that same imposing building Jim had viewed from ten stories above. A few seemed oblivious to the rush and waited outside of the building, chatting with friends, taking the last drag on a cigarette or looking down at some notes as the milling stream of mostly young humanity passed them by to enter through the many doors of the building's front entrance.

Jim approached a plump gray haired woman sitting behind a sign saying "D-F", produced his ID and signed enrollment card and was given a photo badge along with her admonition to wear it in plain view at all times and to proceed to the second floor entrance at once. The escalator to the second floor of the building led to the center of an open space the size of a

football field filled with what Jim would later know amounted to about 2,000 people. Most of the crowd had roughly assembled into two lines, one facing left the other facing right. Jim chose the line to the left and fell in, peering ahead the 40 or 50 yards to the waiting metal detectors.

"This is ridiculous," whispered a young man with a three day beard to no one in particular. Most of the others nearby in line gave a nervous nod in his direction. A tall older man in the line, about Jim's age, looked around at the group, and, seeking the attention of the eight or so line-mates in either direction, he cleared his throat and began to speak.

"When I was in college," he started, in a professorial tone, "I had to take Phys Ed one semester and about four weeks of the class involved swimming." The tall man paused for effect. "The teacher, himself just a grad student, made the class, which consisted of about 25 boys, swim *in the buff*." Again he paused and looked around, seeing a few snickers on the faces of the listeners. "The teacher said that it was because the cloth fibers from the swim suits clogged up the filter of the pool. But do you know why he *really* did that?" Now he looked around and some of the listeners made wry faces as if they knew the answer.

"No, it is not what you think, he wasn't gay or anything, that I could tell even back then. He did it because he *could*." Emphasizing the last word and pausing one last time. "It was a power trip, pure and simple. And you know, I had not thought about that for over thirty years, until just now." All of the listeners finally acknowledged a comprehension of the meaning of his story as they looked down to the end of the line where a cadre of official looking older adults in business suits or security uniforms shuffled participants through the arched doorways of the metal detecting devices.

"Why can we only bring *one key*?" asked a slim pretty woman in jeans and a tank top. No one answered. The question was obviously rhetorical, but her boldness encouraged others to break their silence.

"For that matter, why can we bring dollar bills *but no change*?" asked another shy young lady in a quiet tone. A man wearing cargo shorts cut in saying "It's just a bunch of hype."

"Right," said another young man, glancing quickly back and forth to make sure he could not be overheard, then pointing at the tall older man. "It's like that guy says, it's a power trip, none of what they are doing makes any sense, but they can do it to intimidate us, to make us more anxious than we might already be. If you dared to ask them, they would make some 9/11 excuse, I'll bet."

"Or maybe Columbine or Virginia Tech." interjected the man in the cargo shorts.

The group had neared the end of the line and became silent again as they encountered the officials escorting the participants through the procedure for entry. At this point Jim strained to hear the exchanges between official and participant so that he could know the drill and meekly comply without drawing attention to himself.

"Empty your pockets completely, all pockets, and place the contents in this bag for inspection." An official would order, as another official handed each person a clear, gallon sized zip-lock baggie. A third official stood waiting to inspect the zip-locked contents next to a large trash receptacle.

"No cigarettes, they have to go." Spoke the third official to the scruffy bearded young man, pointing at the trash can. "You gotta be kidding?" the young man protested, "It is a full pack, unopened." The official stood stone-faced, blocking the entrance, waiting. Finally, the young man tossed the pack in the trash can, looked back at his comrades and said quietly "I'm going through this can afterwards and get that pack, it cost six bucks." The official stepped aside to let the young man pass, wearing the sly smile of the jailor. He would make sure that no pack of cigarettes would be found afterwards.

The pretty woman in the jeans and tank top was next, and as she emptied her pockets, she stopped and made a horrified expression, gasping "My glasses, where are my glasses." She frantically emptied every pocket several times and stammered at the official "They must be back in the hotel room in my *purse*." She practically spit the word "purse" at the man blocking the entrance, her expression conveyed the thought that she dared not utter in words, the fact that they had prohibited her from bringing a purse. "How much time until you close the doors?" she asked him. "Maybe ten minutes." He replied. "I can't read without my glasses, don't you understand?" She said in a scream stuck back in her throat. Tears were welling up in her eyes as she turned and ran full speed back in the direction of the escalator. Jim never saw her again, so he never knew if she made it back in time.

Jim passed uneventfully through the barricade and made a last visit to the men's room, knowing that he would not have another opportunity for three hours. An unnatural silence saturated the restroom, broken only by the sounds of flushing and the whir of electric hand dryers. A steady procession of blank expressionless faces passed Jim, each going through the motions introspectively, and avoiding eye contact.

The number on Jim's badge said 1629, and as he passed through the final set of doors into the larger room he looked at the seemingly endless rows of tables for a sign that would direct him to the 1629 table. It was the largest room he had ever seen other than a domed stadium. It took Jim several minutes to find his table among the thousand or so tables lined up and down the many rows. Two persons were assigned to each table, and Jim saw that his table mate was an amply endowed, attractive young lady in a very low cut top who looked up at him and tried to manage a weak smile as a greeting. Jim smiled back, wondering to himself what would possess someone to wear such clothes for this occasion.

In the center of the front of the room at a large podium stood an officious looking older woman in a brown suit who began giving instructions in the bland monotone reminiscent of one of the nuns who taught at Jim's grade school. When she advised the participants to complete the fingerprint card by putting their right index finger on the ink pad, Jim spied the girl next to him ready to dip her thumb in the ink. He grabbed her hand and pointed his index finger at her saying "This is the index finger." Then, as she put her finger in the ink he said with a smirk "You have failed already, even before you started." She didn't seem to enjoy the humor but it helped Jim to relax. He looked up at the woman in the habit-like suit, waiting for the next instruction. There was a long painful silence as she watched the many digital clocks in the room count down to the three hour mark. When the clocks all struck 3:00 she finally spoke again, saying:

"Break the tabs on your booklets and begin the Bar Exam."

© Louis S. Pettey 2008