

## THE BALLOON OF WILLIAM FUERST

WILLIAM FUERST WAS VERY TIRED. He'd been a lawyer for twenty years and he was very tired. He'd been dragging himself to the office. He could barely make his morning court call. The telephone had become his enemy. The minute he walked into the office the receptionist would hit him with a sheaf of calls. Little urgent notes on red and white message paper. Monday mornings were the worst. All the crazies were waiting for him. The lonely widows: "Oh, Mr. Fuerst, I hope I'm not disturbing you. I had the most awful experience with one of the delivery boys from the drugstore. I gave him a fifteen-cent tip for bringing me a package"—probably a bottle of bourbon—"and he called me a bitch. Now isn't that insolence? Don't you think so? You do think I'm right in reporting him, don't you?"

As soon as he'd hang up and reach for his cup of coffee, the receptionist would hit him again. She knew just when he was at his early morning ebb and she'd let all the crazies come pouring through the switchboard. Finally he'd open his office door and scream at her, "No more calls! Not one, goddammit!"

Then there was the matter of the time book. His was a little black book that he filled with squiggles—time records of his phone calls. After he shut off the calls at the board he'd have to reconstruct time for the time book. It was like taking the calls all over again. "Mrs. Hardiman, .25-call." Fuerst had invented the office decimal system. He remembered when he'd called the special meeting of his partners. He was convinced that a phone call couldn't take less than fifteen minutes. We should keep track of the phone calls at a decimal value of .25. One had to consider the interruption in flow of the lawyer's work, the break in rhythm of the lawyer's concentration. He still remembered his little speech. The way he gracefully used his hands at the conference table, gesturing, holding the red pencil like a conductor's baton. Every call should be treated uniformly as .25. One of the three partners wasn't even recording phone calls. He pointed the red pencil at the offender. He tapped the red pencil impatiently and stared. He was only forty then, still bright-eyed, interested in efficiency. Adamant. At \$60 an hour, each call was worth \$15. Ten accurately recorded calls a day were worth \$150. He smiled at his three partners. That would pay the receptionist's salary for a week. The partners agreed to the Fuerst decimal system. For five years he'd been proud of it. He'd put it across with the red pencil baton like a conductor leading a reluctant quartet, positively, deftly, with graceful gestures. The Fuerst decimal system had worked.

Now he was forty-five and very tired. He just didn't give a damn. In fact, his head was leaking time and he was gald about it. He didn't tell

any of his partners about the time leak. He always now had the feeling that there was a slight hissing of air from his ears. No one else could hear it, though. A hiss of all the useless acts he performed every day. His vitality, his intelligence, his youth, all being drained away from this secret rent in his head. He knew there was a tiny leak in his head and he'd have to repair it. How to fix it though he didn't know. He'd think about it.

He tried to reconstruct the calls for his time book this morning before he left for the morning court call. There was the woman and the delivery boy. Oh yes, then the man who bought a lemon. The engine was falling out. Some lawyer out in the suburbs had referred him. The man had no money, so Fuerst told him to call Legal Aid or Consumer Fraud. The man called back three more times for advice. He couldn't mark those calls down. Why had he taken them? Why couldn't the receptionist have screened them out?

Then there was the glazier he'd represented in a divorce. Now the glazier was remarried to a younger woman and his first wife was suing for back support. The first wife had taken a lover, though, and they were living in the glazier's house with the glazier's eight year-old boy. The glazier wanted Fuerst to take the child and the house away. He listened to his client screaming that his ex-wife was a whore. Fuerst hummed to himself and, as the man screamed, doodled patterns—whirlpools of the client's frenzy, circles, triangles, and hexagons. Fuerst could hear a buzz saw in the background cutting glass. Finally the man hung up. When the phone clicked off, Fuerst immediately sensed the hissing sound of air escaping from his ears. He wondered if anyone else heard it. He looked around the office. The stenographers were busy typing. The receptionist was staring at her switchboard.

Fuerst sat down and stared out the window at the lake. The phone rang again. An officer from his bank. Maybe he should put two Band-Aids over his ears to stop the hissing. He took the call from the banker. Fuerst was ten days overdue on his term loan. In twenty years as a lawyer, he'd managed to accumulate a bank debt of \$15,000. When he thought about it, he began to sweat. The perspiration was barely perceptible but it was like a fine mist across his forehead. The young man from the bank had been polite: "Perhaps, Mr. Fuerst, there's been a mistake? We haven't received your payment. There was \$2,000 due on principal and \$950 on interest ten days ago." Fuerst lied to the young banker and told him the check was in the mail. Now the only problem was where to get \$3,000? Maybe he'd go to another bank and borrow it. But then he'd have to lie about the \$15,000 owed to the first bank because no bank in Chicago would give him another three when he was still out with fifteen. He could just imagine the conversation. Another

young loan officer, another pinstriped suit, silk tie, shoes gleaming. “And what did you say you did with the \$15,000, sir?”

“Taxes, it mostly went for taxes. And then some remodeling on the house. I don’t know. It just grew. But I can handle it. (It was none of this kid’s business whether he could handle it.)”

Fuerst put his hat on the back of his head and his raincoat over his shoulder and took one more call. He was ready to leave for court. The call was from a man who wanted new instructions in his will.

“I want to be cremated,” he said plaintively to Fuerst without saying hello. “And I want it in the will. No urn, Fuerst, do you understand? No *urn*. I want my ashes taken up in a plane and scattered over Lake Michigan. Scattered to the winds. I want my eyes given to Northwestern. I want my heart and my liver given to the University of Chicago.”

“I don’t know if we can do all that,” Fuerst said quietly.

“Why not?”

Fuerst could hear the familiar whine toward frenzy in the client’s voice.

“Why not?” the man shouted. “Don’t tell me that can’t be done. My friends are doing it.”

“Giving parts of their bodies away?”

“Everything, hearts, lungs, eyes. What’s the big deal?”

“Nothing. I’ll take care of it for you.” Fuerst hung up. He had a vision of a pilot in an old biplane, struggling with the box containing the client’s ashes. The pilot has a white silk scarf streaming around his throat, and, when he tosses the ashes into the slipstream, they blow back into his face and smudge his immaculate white scarf. Fuerst smiled.

At the courthouse, William Fuerst kept his eye on his hat and coat. They don’t teach a course about that in law school. Hat and Coat Watching 103. In the divorce courts in particular it’s always important to keep one’s hat and coat in full view. Hung out of sight in a back room . . . the lawyer returns from losing a motion at the bench . . . whisk . . . he’s also lost his hat and coat. A double loss. So Fuerst sat at the divorce motion call carefully watching the slim tapered obelisk where he’d hung his raincoat and his hat. The clothes post reminded him of the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde and the lawyers scurrying around the courtroom reminded him of automobiles in Paris. No, that was not really true. They reminded him of fish he’d seen in a lagoon in the Florida Keys—barracudas, sharks, stingrays, lethal fish that will prey on you and rip your throat open. They don’t teach divorce law in the law schools, like how to drop \$1,000 to a judge’s campaign fund. (Drop a dime and make out like a bandit on motions for fees and child support.) Fuerst can remember his constitutional law professor in the wrinkled

suit with the glasses on his nose droning on and on for a semester about *Marbury v. Madison*. Nothing about how to schmeer in the divorce courts. Fuerst would drop a dime, too, if he had any money to schmeer. The banks have all his money on overdue notes. Anyway, he was specializing now in keeping his eye on his hat and coat on the obelisk. He couldn't think clearly about bribery. Also there was the matter of the slow leak in his head.

After the divorce courtroom, he walked slowly over to Probate where the judges were more honest but still it was necessary to protect your hat and coat from the lawyers. He hung his raincoat and hat on a Probate obelisk. Here you only schmeered the clerks at Christmas with bottles of Scotch and maybe a box of cigars. There were a few well-dressed women lawyers seated in the courtroom. Fuerst could tell by the exchange of glances between a young woman and an older man that there was a special relationship between them. They were too animated. Her cheeks were flushed. She touched the top of his fingers and swept her hair back over her shoulders and laughed. There was byplay.

Fuerst watched them and then he remembered a young woman at law school. She'd sat next to him in the first semester of Contracts and there'd been byplay between them. At least Fuerst had thought so. He remembered her long eyelashes, her reticence, the very pale face and silken auburn hair. Occasionally they'd speak between classes, in the basement with paper cups of coffee. She was having a hard time. She was reluctant to talk about it. She just didn't understand some of the courses. He tried to get her to join a study group, but she never came around. In the second semester she disappeared, and they found her one afternoon in her room hanging from the noose she'd made of her bathrobe cord. She'd stepped off her wastebasket and choked herself to death because she couldn't handle law school.

In those days there was no student health service with therapists. Fuerst had thought that all women law students eventually hung themselves or else became librarians. Then suddenly they reappeared as confident young women with silk bows on their blouses and gold rims around the soles of their shoes. Eyes flashing, some of the young ones had even whipped him badly in argument in the Federal Court. So now, in the Probate Court, he would only nod to the women and sit at one side far away from them, remembering the lovely young girl with auburn hair who stepped off her wastebasket. His eyes were on the coat rack, his hands just playing with the hair at his ears, feeling for the movement of escaping air. His face showed no sign. He had a smile, a confident smile.

After court, he took the elevator down and walked out on the Civic Center Plaza. The sun was beginning to break through the morning fog,

and, as he crossed the Plaza, he removed his hat. There was a man in front of the Picasso statue selling helium-filled balloons. Fuerst bought one and a spray can of helium for his youngest child. As he walked back to his office, on impulse he filled the balloon and then, just at the entrance of his building, he let the balloon drift away. No one paid attention to him. He watched the balloon surge up past the girders of a high-rise under construction.

When he returned to his office, the receptionist handed him another sheaf of messages. He carefully hung his hat and coat and went back to his office and closed the door. He tried to see his balloon out the window rising above the Chicago skyline. He couldn't find it. Then it occurred to him that he could patch the leak in his head with the same can of helium he'd used to inflate the balloon. At least he could replace the lost air. He didn't realize that helium would change the timbre of his voice. He gave himself a trial squirt. When the receptionist hit him with the first call back to the new sheaf of crazies, he answered with a high, tiny voice that sounded just like Mickey Mouse.

"Hello," William Fuerst squeaked in the Mickey Mouse voice.

It was the same man who called previously about his ashes. "Is that you, Fuerst?"

"It's me," the Mickey Mouse voice said.

"It don't sound like you."

William Fuerst opened his mouth wide and give himself another squirt of helium. He could feel a slow cessation of the hissing in his head as if the rent were sealing.

"Fuerst. Do you understand? No urn. My ashes. No urn. Do you understand? Get a plane. A pilot."

"I understand," William Fuerst squeaked.

The hissing sound had stopped, though. He held the phone away and felt for movement of air at his ears. There was nothing. He put the client on hold. He knew that if he was silent for a while, the timbre of his voice would return to normal. He dropped the can of helium into his pocket and wondered what would happen if he lit a cigarette. He wanted a cigarette badly but he didn't want to end his career by immolating himself. He couldn't remember whether it was the *Hindenburg* or the *Graf* or was it the *Graf Spee*? Was it helium or hydrogen? He couldn't remember. The phone buzzed again. He gave himself another squirt. "Hello," he answered in the tiny squeaking voice.

"Is that you, Fuerst?"

He put a cigarette in his mouth and struck a match. He held the match in his fingers for a moment and stared at the sudden brightness of the flame and then touched it to the cigarette. Nothing happened. "Okay," he said into the phone, "you have my attention."