

*Lowell B. Komie's
Lawyer Stories
James R. Elkins*

Lowell B. Komie's fiction, first published in 1974, spans Komie's fifty years as a lawyer—fifty years of meeting with clients, responding to their demands and idiosyncratic sorrows; fifty years commuting to and walking the streets of Chicago; fifty years of dealing with the quirks and foibles and ethical lapses of his fellow Chicago lawyers and judges. Komie has made a life for himself in the ways of the law, and we find in his legal stories, a writer-lawyer's tacit knowledge of lawyers and their secret world. The Komie characters that emerge from this world lead lives marked not by great drama, but by everyday struggles, whimsical acts, and deep longings. With these characters, it is the aspects of life which evaporate before they can be fully captured, that Komie finds a way to portray with a subtlety and vividness that suggest that the reader's life too—surprisingly—must be shaped by these same, effervescent dramas of absence and longing to be found in everyday life.

The pleasures in reading Lowell Komie's stories are many and varied. The stories, beautifully written and perfectly crafted, are observant, poignant, and haunting; they provide a perfect antidote for readers weary of the plot-driven, action-oriented legal thrillers whose characters are so eminently forgettable they are erased from memory the moment the reader turns the last page of the book. As we follow Komie into his fictional world, we learn to slow down and become attentive to the sentiments, longings, and failures that shape the lives of his characters. Komie's stories are meditations on the ordinariness of a lawyer's life—commuting to the office, the pressure to pay bills, the oddness of a client who seeks the lawyer's help, the struggle to maintain relationships when the impetus is to withdraw, a personal and whimsical response to sorrow, a deepening sense of wistfulness, the

struggle to go on with life. Komie has created in these stories a tableau of meditation fables by which we gain insight into the life of a character, not by the history and the larger world in which the character lives, but by the brilliantly etched details of a life observed. Reading Komie's fables one gets the sense of turning the pages of a lawyer's scrapbook, story to story, compiled from a lifetime of watching, seeing, remembering, longing, failing, struggling on. Komie's story album features the richly simple lives of those who take up the law, bear the burdens of a lawyer's life, and learn that the legal profession provides no immunity from life's reversals, no ultimate sanctuary. This is a world beyond winners and losers, a world where Komie has his characters, in their own quiet, subtle, unusual, and subversive ways, survive and maintain their dignity.

Komie follows his characters with an anthropologist's eye for ritual, those rituals that capture the ephemera of experience and ill-defined sentiments which would be lost but for the sweet magic of Komie's stories. It takes a practiced writer's eye to make memorable a lawyer's meeting with a client, the drafting of a will, a law student's interview with the partners of a law firm, a woman lawyer's growing sense that all is not well in her life, a tired lawyer's recognition that his life has come to no great end, an AIDS-infected lawyer's decision to take his own life. There is, in Komie's stories, an exposure to lives lived in the shadow of what we cannot name—the absence of what cannot be found, longings that cannot be fulfilled. In those stories, Komie practices the alchemy of fiction, the transfiguration of the ordinary and the everyday into a storied world of characters who go on living with us after we've put the story aside.

How are we to describe characters from stories that follow with us, as Komie's do, when the reading is done? There is a phrase in my neighbor, Kevin Oderman's book of essays, *How Things Fit Together* (University Press of New England, 2000), that captures something of the essence of a Komie character—a character who “persists in darkness and in yearning, where desire hums as an absence.” There is, in the Komie stories, a sense of longing or yearning of the characters rooted so deep in the fabric of the character's life and in the story that its source is a mystery; these are characters sentenced to live in the shadows of their own lives. Yet, they are not dead to the world, or to the desire which “hums” so loudly “as an absence.” It is the great beau-

ty of life's hum and its absence that these characters represent, and makes them fit companions for us as we leave the story and go about our own lives.

We are, in these stories, so present in and to the ordinariness of everyday life that it's easy to lose sight of the extraordinary ways Komie's fictional lawyers find to hold on and anchor their lives in a world that provides few safe harbors. These stories wrench the reader out of complacency, and undermine the fantasies rooted in high-minded notions that we can make ourselves secure, beyond struggle. There are moments in the stories, and in the lives of the characters in the stories, in which the lawyer (law student, judge) seems so entrapped, so tired and weary, that a dead-end has been reached. Yet, in the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the whimsical, the small and the poetic, the failure and the courage, the characters hold out for themselves and the reader a sense of hopefulness that confronts our depression. We learn from these characters more than they have been able to articulate for themselves.

Jayne Anne Phillips, a writer with roots in West Virginia far from Komie's Chicago, reflecting on the short stories of Raymond Carver, characterizes Carver's work in ways that seem custom-made to fit Komie's stories: "Carver, in prose plain and still as clear water, addresses large questions and has the wisdom not to answer them." Komie seems to work this same literary vein—how are we to go on, what kind of life is possible, when the great glories of success and contentment have not been visited upon us? With greatness passing us by, having found no paradise on earth, or in the practice of law, Komie, as Phillips says of Carver, "vocalize[s] a hard respect for losses inevitable and quiet as the fall of ash from a burning cigarette." Komie's stories show an appreciation for the quiet fall of ash, and yet, the stories transcend the "stark and unadorned" world of a Raymond Carver story. (Jayne Anne Phillips review, "The Secret Places of the Heart," appeared in *New York Magazine*, April 20, 1981.)

It would be false witness to Komie's considerable talents and his previously published collections of short stories and his novels, to suggest that a collection of stories featuring lawyer characters would appeal only to lawyer readers. Reading Komie's stories, it becomes increasingly obvious that Komie is one of the finest writers of legal fiction in our time, and that readers who care nothing about legal fiction,

and still less about lawyers, will find these stories compelling. Ultimately, a good story transcends its genre, and Komie's stories do exactly that—these stories may have lawyers and judges and law students as characters, but the stories are no more limited by this fact than they are by their setting in Chicago. With careful attention to detail, and his poignant accounts of personal struggle and the defining rituals of everyday life, Komie has given us legal fiction of such great subtlety and complexity, such original literary fiction, that we will now forever know him as the lawyer-guardian of our secrets and quiet tuggings of the heart. If this is legal fiction, it is legal fiction at its best, legal fiction of the kind that desires an audience who knows and cares nothing about lawyers, an audience of readers who seek in their fiction, stories that might change the way they feel about themselves and about the world.

James R. Elkins, Editor, *Legal Studies Forum*
Professor of Law, West Virginia University