

Confessions of a Summer Associate Days of Wine and Lexis

BY GORDON MEHLER

After the blizzard of expensive lunches, after the moonlight dinner-dance cruise, after the ballet tickets, the health club passes, and the word processing machines, I finally understand what Holmes meant when he said that "a man may live greatly in the law."

I was a summer associate at a large New York firm, and for three months I was part of a world that most people in their twenties never see: a world inhabited by lawyers who take cabs to court and to firm softball games, where waiters in black bow ties try to stand at attention as they hand you a platter and a glass of iced tea in the firm dining room, a world in which one can phone a multipage memo into a central dictation system on a Sunday night from the comfort of one's bedroom and find a typed copy on one's desk the next morning.

"What blows me away," said one wide-eyed 26-year-old shortly after our nearly \$900-a-week compensation was announced, "is that I'm making more money at the beginning of my career than my father is making at the end of his."

To be sure, there were summer associates from wealthy families at our firm, but there were also many for whom high living had meant sending one's shirts out to be laundered or buying a pound of pistachios. Among the older summer associates, one fellow had taught high school for ten years and another had labored extensively as a stevedore on the docks of San Francisco. I spent part of last summer in a doorman's uniform at a fancy Manhattan co-op, carrying packages for socialites, sweeping out the lobby, putting up with nasty tenants and measly tips.

I focus on this sudden change in living standard because, to me, it was the most interesting as well as the most unsettling aspect of my summer experience. In my third week, a partner took me to a deposition at a solo practitioner's office, and the contrasts between our firm and his leaped out at me: cramped quarters, cheap folding chairs, walls in need of repainting, a manual adding machine in the corner, no messengers to cart books off to the Xerox room, no air conditioning.

As the sweat beaded on my face, I realized how spoiled (even greedy) I had become. What used to be fine was no longer

good enough. When a partner took me to a working lunch in the boardroom of a bank president, I arched my eyebrows when his secretary dared to serve us *canned* apricots for dessert. Midway through the summer, at a firm dance at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a waiter approached and whispered something about an after-dinner drink and a cigar, and even though no one had ever whispered those words to me



before, I responded imperiously, "Yes, that will be fine," as if I were a shipping tycoon.

On a separate level, however, I began to wonder about the quid pro quo. Here we were being paid enormous sums of money while some of our friends were doing volunteer legal work. One would think that our salaries would be enough to win us over, and yet the firm was eager to sweeten our stay with a grab bag of supplemental goodies. Were they trying to romance us?

Many associates thought the question was silly. Didn't I understand that we were in a competitive market for top law students? Didn't I realize that if our firm failed to hold its ground in the War of the Perks, it could not attract the people it wanted? But this free-market explanation could not obscure the fact that we would not continue to receive roses without thorns.

Although I could not have had a much better summer, I realize the pressure will increase if I become a full-time associate next year. Informed rumor has it that lawyers at the large firms are among the most heavily worked professionals in the coun-

try and that there are three reasons why this is so. First, crises generated within the course of multimillion-dollar litigation are responsible for much of the overtime. Second, impatient clients want answers immediately, and they feel they are paying enough to get them. Third, most lawyers are compulsive. Slip us a problem and we start drilling like a pack of woodpeckers.

I received proof of this just after we received a memo that explained a bomb had been set to explode in our building at 4 P.M. Someone heading to the elevator passed the office of one fanatically hard-driving lawyer. "Aren't you leaving?" he asked. "Sure I am," was the answer, "but it's only twenty to four."

Perhaps the hard work is the most convincing reason for the firm's largess. If the work environment were not so pleasant, some associates might quit and become forest rangers. Producing a quality product on short notice requires extreme effort. Therefore, the firm must facilitate concentration by eliminating unnecessary distractions. Lexis terminals are being placed in every lawyer's office so legal research can be done by swiveling one's chair and pushing buttons. When we have to stay late, we can bill a nice dinner to our clients and take a cab home.

With our bellies full and our coffers teeming, it was easy to forget that our relationship to the firm is financial as well as personal. The firm does not intend to lose money on us. When we become first-year associates, it will bill our time at two to three times our salaries. In rough figures, this means some client will pay a dollar for every minute an associate works. The firm can afford to treat us well.

When the summer was over, I remembered that I, like many of my classmates, had left college with a closed mind toward corporate practice. I had listened to the countercultural theorists portray Wall Street lawyers as the harlots of industrial capitalism; I had heard about the one-track workaholics and the high divorce rates and the realms of mind-numbing print. But having found aspects of this practice considerably more stimulating than I had imagined, having worked with people who are as nice as any I have met, and having experienced the feel of quality cream bond paper, my mind is open again.

I could end up in a low-paying job in an office without carpeting, but of one thing I am certain: that in the next life I will ask to return to the land of the summer associates. Mr. Justice Holmes certainly knew what he was talking about. □

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