

Legal Services

Ed, the summer intern, sits just behind Shamayra who faces the cracked, duct-taped door separating the community legal services office from the East Village's hippies, heroine addicts and assorted others. Five days a week for four weeks now, he's listened to her screening applicants, letting the eligible through, the rest decrying without looking back, the office, its officious people, in loud, poorly-chosen words. Now accustomed to the diatribes, he doesn't listen and, if he does, doesn't look up.

Head down in paperwork concerning a notice evicting a mother and three children, no idea what to do despite two years of law school, he hears a young woman debating as adamantly as a squatter refusing to move.

"I want to see your supervisor."

"Ain't no supervisor. I'm telling you that we don't do no rich people's evictions."

"What makes you think I'm rich?"

"You livin on the East Side. You payin \$2,800 a month and your eviction's about something else because it says rent's paid. No poor person's paying that, living there."

"It's my parent's apartment."

"Ain't even yours."

"As a taxpayer, I pay for all this."

“We don’t handle no rock star divorces. An we don’t handle no \$2,800 a month apartment eviction. Y’all got money. Y’all get your own lawyers.”

Ed keeps his head down, hiding a quizzical smirk that he knows Shamayra will give him hell for. Yet he wants to see this entitled girl.

“I’ll copy your stuff. If the supervisor thinks different, they’ll call,” Shamayra says, grabbing the papers, turning, catching Ed averting his eyes. Shamayra, beaded hair swinging, twists her nose and curls her lips, sneering at Ed for his interest in this white version of what, from what he’s seen of Shamayra, also comes in black.

Ed catches a quick glimpse of a woman, possibly a college student, not more than his age, possibly younger, pacing, examining “Your Rights As. . .” pamphlets in the window. She’s oblivious to his stare so he lets his eyes linger. She has dark curly hair in which sunglasses sit like a raised visor. She carries herself erect, stretching every millimeter of spine, the posture either balletic or stern, not sure which. Her long thin frame is outlined by a tight, zippered sweatshirt that follows the contours of her chest, Levi’s rounding her hips and buttocks.

The woman turns and snatches her papers back from Shamayra. Ed heads to the water fountain from where he watches her leave.

* * *

Ed walks through the now dark streets back to the legal services office. Standing outside, he thinks about the three banks of fluorescent lights all tied to one switch, their glare about to put the office’s typewriters and copy machines, readily

saleable equipment, center stage. He risks it, opening the door, throwing on the lights, quickly locating the intake form in Samayra's "Out" box. It says she's Liz Teitel residing at an East Side address. It provides her phone number and says that she "Failed" to meet the "Income Eligibility Test" and has been "Advised to Find Own Lawyer." The box for "Non-Primary Residence" is checked on the eviction notice. Ed waits warily while the copy machine warms, quickly copying both forms, shutting the lights, leaving.

Ed runs up St. Marks Place, passing Cooper Union, its purplish sandstone portico dominating Astor Place where St. Mark's becomes Eighth Street. He turns left, continuing down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square Park. "Joints," "nickel bags," dealers around the fountain whisper, several knowing him. Passing underneath the red brick arch of NYU's law library, the finish line, he enters the Williamsburg-style building across from the concrete chess tables that anchor the park's southwest corner.

It's 10:30 p.m. when he finishes his research. He dials the number on the intake form, holding his breath during the ringing, the answering machine. He hangs up, second-guessing not leaving a message.

Ed strategizes while making stops at his regular, cheap bars, *Kettle of Fish* on McDougal, Lower Broadway's *St. Adrian's Company*, *Cedar Tavern* on University Place. Back at *Kettle of Fish* he pens dashes on a napkin, preparing for points he

hasn't yet thought of. Engage her in conversation. Console her about Shamayra's insensitivity. Sympathize about being tarred with parent's wealth.

By the fourth beer his strategy is coming fast. His story of disappointment, of having to drop out of an Ivy League school for lack of money, of supporting himself, struggling to survive from then on, dissolving her skepticism, disarming, melting, moving her, getting her to dinner, maybe bed. He'll ask what college she attended, what she studied, confirm she went straight through, contrasting it with his "path."

He devours two greasy pizza slices, saffron-colored oil dripping into his lap, and then buys two quarts of Budweiser that he almost drops climbing the five flights to his apartment.

Flipping on the light, he waits by the door for the scratching sound of the roaches running for cover to stop, then feeds the cat and waters the plants struggling to survive on the slivers of light that make it through the gated, fire escape window. He rejects washing the dishes piled in the bathtub, a fixture that, despite improved living standards, in this apartment, still stands in the kitchen. Uncrumpling napkins, cracking the first quart, he practices.

* * *

"Ms. Teitel? This is Ed Rabinowitz. Community Legal Services. I'm not representing Community Legal Services. I was sitting behind Shamayra, the receptionist. Yesterday?"

"Oh. The supervisor. Have you looked at my paperwork?"

“I’m not, but I have.”

“Then why . . .”

“I’m a law student, my summer job. Do you work?”

“Are we going over my financial eligibility again?”

“I think I can help.”

“How?”

“Can we . . . uh . . . discuss it over dinner?”

“I have to date you to get help?”

“Either way, I’ll help you Ms. Teitel.”

“Liz. How?”

“Can you get your parents or their lawyer involved?”

“I can’t reach them.”

“Someone’s got to appear in housing court Monday.”

“Can you?”

“I’m just a law student.”

“Who’d know?”

“Probably no one, but it’s a big risk. Could keep me from getting my law license.”

“Can’t you be there as my friend?”

“I can explain it to you.”

“But you’d do it so much better, wouldn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. . . . I’d still need to know a few things.”

“I hope you remember what I look like. Meet you out front.”

* * *

Housing Court, downtown, off Centre Street, behind Chinatown, across from the Federal Courthouse, State Supreme Court, up from the INS. Ed unsuccessfully searches the hot, airless corridors, crowded as urinals during Seventh Inning Stretch, lawyers shouting names and slinking with clients behind garbage cans, benches, empty leaflet stands, anything that might brace them against the human swells.

Outside, in a weedy park in front of the building, amidst children scurrying in dirt, he sees a white woman with dark hair sitting on a bronze mushroom, part of an Alice in Wonderland sculpture, its toadstools, Alice’s wide dressy lap, several green patinaed trees, roots anthropomorphically bent like knees, all now seats. Saying her name, she turns, smiles, calm as if in good hands.

He guides her through the chaos, attentive to her following, faking knowing where he’s going. He figures he had to find a check-in desk, her family’s name on a case list, but he can’t find anything in the swarm.

“Teitel?”

“Who?” Ed asks, turning towards a man with a red cardboard folder motioning from the wall. Gently pulling Liz by the elbow, he works them towards the caller.

“How’d you know?”

“Berlin,” says the man, nodding towards the crowd, Ed realizing that, to Berlin, they stood out like whitecaps.

“The client?”

Ed nods.

“Putting in an appearance for her?”

“I’m not her lawyer. I mean not a lawyer yet. Just a friend.”

“Here’s the story, oh, what’s your name ‘friend’?”

“Ed.”

“Since it’s my apartment, m-a-y-b-e *someone* should introduce me,” Liz interjects, looking at Ed as if her being ignored is his fault.

“Liz Teitel, the tenants’ daughter.”

“Glad you’re here Ed because I think the little lady’s going to need some help. Nobody’s filed an appearance for her parents, so they’re what we call ‘in default.’ I represent the landlord, Pilstein Properties. I’m getting a default judgment today that the sheriff’s going to be enforcing while the two of you are looking up lawyers in phone books.”

“This is improper,” Ed says.

“You let papers sit around for weeks,” Berlin says to Liz. “This is what happens.”

“But we have a statute,” Ed insists, fumbling in a manila folder, passing Berlin a paper.

“The rent statute,” Berlin says. “So what?”

“So where’s your thirty day notice?”

“Thirty day what?”

“Marked in yellow. You need to give thirty days written notice before commencing one of these primary residence proceedings. Your eviction’s null and void. You throw them out and . . . well . . . we’ll sue.”

“Why you little. . . . What are you? Pre-law? We’ll refile after we do this notice thing. Give me a call,” Berlin says, giving Ed his card. “You got a future with my firm. Plenty of L&T.”

“L&T?”

“Landlord and Tenant,” Berlin says, shaking his head.

“Can we go?” Liz asks.

“I don’t trust him.”

“But he’s a lawyer.”

“I’m going to make sure. Wait for me outside where it’s cooler?”

“Can’t I go home? Won’t there be a paper or something.”

“Guess I could stop by with a copy,” Ed says, disappointed, hope for lunch disappearing.

“Thanks. Leave it with the doorman, okay,” Liz says, shaking his hand, walking off.

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“This yours?” Shamayra asks, slapping the Teitel papers on Ed’s metal desk.
“S-O-M-E-O-N-E left them on the copy machine.”

“I made a copy, okay,” Ed says. “Looked it over to learn something. No big deal.”

“An’ that present there’s no big deal neither?” Shamayra says, leaning her very large upper torso across Ed, barely missing his face, dragging her finger across a gift-wrapped book lying by his in/out basket, sucking off imaginary icing, waddling away, her mouth pulling free with a loud smack.

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Ed’s waiting at the bar at Panchito’s on McDougal where the note inside the gift, the book “*Law of Sexual Harassment*,” said he should be at 6. At 6:20 he gives up. Tossing back his second vodka, he heads out, his eyes darting from the insufficiently busy hostess leveling stacks of menus to a face and upper torso outside the door, backlit by late afternoon sun.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Liz says, extending her hand.

“Just got here,” Ed lies.

“Hope you like Mexican?”

“Love it,” he lies again, the cheese and sauces invariably upsetting his stomach.

“Drinks?” the hostess asks, sitting them at a table.

“Want to share some wine?”

“I don’t drink much,” Liz says.

“How about Sangria? We’re celebrating.”

“Half a carafe?”

“A full,” Ed says to the hostess. “Almost the same price,” he says to Liz.

“Get to your father about the eviction?”

She explains her discomfort about dealing with her father, a successful businessman on a European vacation with her mother. Her father’s job as a senior vice president of an aerospace conglomerate entitled him to the East Side, company-paid apartment she’s occupying, this gratuitous comment supporting Ed’s assumptions about her family’s financial status, what it could explain, like how someone could ignore legal papers for thirty days.

Consuming baskets of chips dipped in replenished bowls of hot, spicy salsa, Ed explains what the legal system will do if she doesn’t get her parents involved soon, the pitcher of sangria, which he finishes, burying concerns about indigestion, about a meal he may not be able to afford. He orders another pitcher under the influence of which he becomes discursive, artfully aspirating from her details of her life from which he weaves a profile indicating what might impress her that, in turn, he takes into consideration in deciding what to say.

She’s the middle of six children, raised by a stay-at-home mother whom she seems to despise more deeply than her reasons seem to support, growing up in what sounds like a really nice house in a rich suburb, with pool, maid, country club

membership, big car, her father mainly absent, unpleasantly mercurial and dictatorial when there, Liz and her siblings, by her description, waifs denied the life to which their adult hindsight says they were entitled, clothed from Filenes' bargain tables, given clunkers that had to be returned with tanks topped off.

Then a lull, both silently picking at their cheese-covered combination plates, Ed lacking a question, a pending subject, a segway to his own deprivations, his social conscience, concern for social justice, self-reporting slanted towards what he thinks she wants to hear.

“Where'd you go to college?” she asks.

“Actually, I'm an Ivy League drop-out.”

“Which one?” she asks before he can explain that he's gone to several colleges with breaks in between, supporting himself throughout, the story illustrating how much a risk-taking experimenter he is, how he rolls with punches, makes do, reinvents himself to survive, omitting how contrary to his own nature these forced transitions were, the facts, shorn of feelings, casting him in an attractively false light.

“Yale.”

“Why leave such a great place?”

“Parents got divorced. Wasn't money for tuition.”

“Financial aid?”

“They wouldn't fill out the forms.”

“You asked?”

“No, but they didn’t have anything. My father lost his job. My mother was just starting as a teacher.”

“Wouldn’t the school help?”

“Didn’t ask. Figured they’d ask my parents to pay something.”

“But you must have worked like crazy to get in?”

“Did,” he answers.

“They just put you out?”

“I didn’t press for anything,” he offers, omitting the alcohol and drug abuse that, by then, was affecting him.

“And it was those crazy ‘60’s,” he adds, trying to commune about those gay times, the music, the politics, Leary, Alpert, Hoffman, Ginzburg, Kent State, the Moratorium, the marches, Watergate, Nixon’s resignation, the school shut-downs, psychedelics, the rest.

“I don’t see how anyone could give up something so valuable.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he says, backtracking, trying climbing through one of the holes she’s shot in his poorly received explanation, hoping that, by acknowledging possible self-deception, by crediting her with triggering an important realization, she’d cut him some slack. “Maybe I just didn’t want to be there.”

“I can’t imagine them not seeing you through.”

“I was in a tough place. At the end of high school I started becoming very political. Being in a rich people’s college with a bunch of frat boys reading classics

while Vietnam raged, with all the inexplicable inequality and unfairness in the world, I wanted out. Wanted to be a member of the working class. Joined the youth branch of the Communist Party.”

“I think it’s important to help others. I ran Walks for Hunger in high school. Worked on a kibbutz in Israel junior year.”

“I was a bit further out on the limb than that,” Ed says, trying to conceal the wry smile he can’t help cracking, stifling a condescending snicker that her narrowing glare says she’s already detected.

“And what exactly were you doing? Making Jane Fonda’s travel arrangements?”

“Ending the Vietnam War,” he says, throwing out his generation’s best “Get Out of Jail Free” card, the mother of all justifications for youthful indiscretion, for doing any crazy thing, the purpose justifying rejecting the preconceived, validating ignoring what the military-industrial complex programmed everyone to believe, think, tolerate, do, okaying existentially reassessing every aspect of social organization. Yet the normally resounding phrase, and all the alternate lifestyles and constructive and destructive behaviors and self-seeking it ennobled, suddenly sounded unconvincing.

“So what exactly did you do to end the war that couldn’t be done from Yale?”

“Good question,” Ed says, draining his sangria, excusing himself for the bathroom that he doesn’t need to use.

Inside the bathroom, Ed splashes water on his face. From leaning against the towel dispenser, he slides to the floor. He could just tell her the truth. That there were so many reasons why he left Yale. That mainly that he'd gone home to take care of his father whom his mother had just left. That no one objected to him doing that, to throwing away what he'd worked for, to risking being drafted and sent to Vietnam. He did his best to keep the man going, making sure he ate, showered, shaved, dressed right, took the train, returned home. Being so stoned himself, it was the barely sighted leading the almost totally blind, Ed, so zoned out, barely getting himself to work. Although it was noble to have taken care of his father, he just doesn't want to talk about the man or his state. Nor does he want to risk stumbling into, or being broken on cross-examination about unsavory aspects of his own life, Liz perhaps thinking that he'd sunk himself by being so stoned all the time that his wits weren't about him.

"So?" Liz asks over a table cleared of all but two empty sangria glasses. Her "So?" sounds conversational, in the vein of moving on, giving him a pass. Running a red nail inside one of the cloth shoulder bands of her halter top, she asks how he made it to law school, emphasizing "law school" as if a lofty attainment. Thinking about the black shiny bra strap she's hooking with her nail, he hears something about "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," surely a cutting of slack.

"How about you? What's your passion?"

"Dance."

“I suspected. You look like a dancer. The way you carry yourself.”

“I take classes most days. Then audition . . .”

“How do you live?”

“They help me.”

“Supportive?”

“They give me money. A place to live.”

“Sounds like a great place.”

“So what kind of lawyer are you going to be?”

“Civil rights. That’s why I’m working at legal services. I also work at a firm down on Wall Street. Helps pay tuition.”

“Were you pre-law?”

“No. Art.”

“A painter?”

“No.”

“Sculptor?”

“Not exactly. I was a conceptual artist. You see I was working days, driving a cab, going to school at night. Art was easy, but I didn’t know anything about it.”

“What kind of art?”

“Blocking off classrooms?”

“Stopping people from going in?”

“With cinderblocks. You really don’t want to know.”

“Will this law firm hire you after law school?”

“If I want.”

“Why not?”

“Same reason I don’t want to be a lawyer.”

“Which is?”

“Doing it for the money.”

“What you rebelled against?”

“I guess so. But maybe I’ll do civil liberties work, though it’s hard straight out of school.”

Liz, catching the waiter’s eye, motions for a check.

“I’m sorry. I, uh, really can’t afford to pay for all this,” Ed says, knowing how little cash that would leave him.

“What makes you think I expect you to pay,” Liz says not entirely kindly, possibly remonstrating.

“How do we do this?” he asks, examining the bill, putting his half in cash next to her credit card.

“They know,” she says as the waiter claims the bill folder.

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Outside, remaining stray daylight brightens her face. They stand by the curb saying nothing. Not looking at one another, then catching a glimpse, then looking down. Behind them, Mamoun’s Falafel, the Figaro Coffee House. Up the block, the

NYU law school, Ed's soon-to-be alma mater that, finally saying something, he points out.

"That's a very good school," Liz says.

"They couldn't reconcile my checkered past with my LSAT score. I did first year at Fordham, then transferred."

Silence returns and he wants to kiss her. He suspects that, despite his rocky start, she's preliminarily approved, initial due diligence completed, the subject, after some evasion, credited for putting much in the open, acknowledging questions warranting further investigation, demonstrating sensitivity, the ability to listen, accept criticism, willingness to change. But he wants proof.

He decides to take the risk of reaching for her but, just then, she says she wants to take a cab home, her imminent departure relieving him from having to decide whether to act, leaving him second-guessing. He weighs the effect of giving her time to digest all this, a subject to which he knows he'll return back in his apartment, a quirky place that, anyway, might be too little, too strange, too much for her too soon. He jumps into the street and hails a cab just turning off Bleecker, getting ahead of people already waiting a half a block down, wondering why he's rushing to pass up this chance not taken.

She interposes herself between him and the door, opening it herself, saying "I can take care of this." He watches her slide in, her black skirt riding up, his eyes drawn to a thin gold ankle bracelet.

He leans in to be heard, then further. As magnetism begins closing the gap between their faces, she digs the heels of her hands into his chest. He quickly locks his elbows, propping himself above her, resisting gravity's ready excuse for continuing down.

"Don't do that."

"I was just . . ."

"Ask first."

Apparently certain that he'd obediently continue to hold himself aloft, she removes her locked arms, sliding one hand onto his bicep, then down to his hand gripping the edge of the seat. Confused, his heart stops, or speeds up, he isn't sure which.

"Come on. They want the cab if you don't," the cabdriver says, referring to a couple by the driver's window.

Ed pushes up onto his fingertips, readying to get out. Liz whispers "I just broke up with my boyfriend," a statement Ed thinks may mean "I like you but I need time," though she doesn't seem one to soften blows.

Liz lifts her head as Ed continues back, the two rising, his hand slipping out of her fingers, her eyes focused behind him.

Turning around, Ed faces an angry couple wanting in, the man berating Ed for incivility, the cab driver insisting he wants to get going.

“Oops,” Ed says, feeling a hand on his ass, the shock prodding him towards the man who jumps back, neither apparently wanting more than verbal aggression.

“Come on,” Liz says.

“So I’ll call you . . .”

“Come on,” she repeats, irked, sliding over, Ed sliding in though he’s uncertain that’s what she means.