

SINGLE JEOPARDY

A Peter Sharp Legal Mystery

By Gene Grossman

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Peter Sharp Legal Mystery #1

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If a shipbuilder builds a boat for someone, and does not make it tight, and if during that same year that boat is sent away and suffers injury, the ship-builder shall take the boat apart and put it together tight at his own expense. The tight boat he shall give to the boat owner.

Number 235, from Hammurabi's Code of 282 Laws

1

Boating can be a great sport, but not in a back yard – which is where I'm presently doing my yachting, as the result of several moves choreographed by my soon-to-be ex-wife and her beady-eyed divorce lawyer, whose cheap business card should be changed to read 'Gary Koontz, Schmuck at Law.'

During the past few months, my sleeping quarters had involuntarily evolved from our bedroom, to the living room couch, and then out to this 1956 classic forty-foot Chris Craft Constellation, a bull-nosed cabin cruiser I've been restoring out here in the yard for the past seven years. Having been told to take the rest of my life off by the law firm I was formerly employed by, I'm sitting here

in the cabin of my boat/office talking on the phone to my San Fernando Valley friend Stuart Schwartzman.

One good thing about Stuart is that no matter how bad off you might think you're doing, Stuart can convince you he's doing worse... and he usually is. His cause de jour is suing the United States Government and some large corporations for poisoning him: he claims to be suffering from mesothelioma, a form of asbestos damage to the lining of his lungs that he claims was a result of spending four years working in the Navy as a ship's boiler room engineer.

To humor him, I prepared and filed a lawsuit last month so that he wouldn't blow the Statute of Limitations, and now he wants to go ahead with it by having the U.S. Marshall's office serve the lawsuit on all the defendants.

Wonderful. A federal case. Just what I need at this low point in my life. I tell him that now I'm semi-retired, I don't have the office staff, but I'll try to bring another attorney in on the case who is much better equipped to handle this type of lawsuit.

My involuntary retirement may not be such a bad thing after all, considering the fact that there'll be no boat restoration distractions from clients like Stuart. For the past few years, every time he calls it's to either file another lawsuit or go with him to meet his uncle Label, who's supposed to own a boat in the Marina.

When I was a kid growing up in Chicago's Albany Park, on North Kedzie Avenue, one of my favorite Saturday afternoon pastimes was packing a lunch and hopping

on my bike for a long bike ride down Lawrence Avenue, and then south along Sheridan Road, to Belmont Harbor. I would spend all afternoon there sitting on the concrete seawall, daydreaming, my legs dangling over the edge. I used to rest my arms on the middle rung of the guard rail – the rail that kept the have-nots without boats away from the privileged few ‘haves’ who not only had boats, but also had the political pull to get a mooring in the city’s most popular Marina. The daydream was usually the same... someday I’d have one of those big, shiny, varnished wood cabin cruisers, complete with an ornament that so many of them seemed to be displaying on their forward decks – a beautiful long-legged redheaded wife.

It took almost thirty years, before fate was kind to me - but with a string attached: I was allowed to achieve my dream, but found out you aren’t allowed to enjoy both the boat and the wife at the same period of time in your life.

There’s a tragic procedure that takes place in many marriages, all brought about by a conflict of goals. A woman will view a prospective husband as a work in progress... a project... an acquisition she can transform into something respectable who is safe to bring to boring social functions. On the other hand, a man looks at a woman, likes what he sees, and hopes that she stays just like that forever - without ever changing.

Unfortunately, the opposite of what they each hoped for usually takes place. The woman fails in all her attempts to change the man, whose traits are usually etched in stone. And on the other side of the equation, the woman

goes through all the personality and cosmetic changes, winding up being nothing like what the husband thought he would spend the rest of his life with. Some states have a six-month waiting period before a divorce becomes final, but it might be a better idea to put the waiting period in front, making it a six-month wait and then a brief trial period before the marriage is a locked-in deal.

Neither going through changes nor staying the same is necessarily a bad thing, but when either happens, it causes disappointment and strain on a marriage. That's what happened in our case. My wife Myra is still beautiful, but she progressed from being a gorgeous demure redheaded receptionist, to a legal secretary, to a paralegal, on to law school, passed the Bar exam and now is a ball-busting brunette prosecuting attorney with the local District Attorney's office. On the other hand, I have remained a completely unchanged, dedicated, poor, defense attorney representing the downtrodden (but in most cases guilty) people who have been charged with crimes by her office.

The philosophical difference between prosecution and defense attitudes can be enough to break up a marriage. This strain on the relationship is never brought out clearer than when the mind-sets collide head on at a social gathering. Most prosecuting attorneys eventually assume the zeal of people on a crusade to 'put away the bad guys,' who are all assumed to be guilty just because they've been arrested. Even the smallest file on a misdemeanor theft is no longer a case... it's a crusade, with the defense

attorney looked upon as being a troublesome barrier between the D.A.'s office and justice.

The calendar clerks never put Myra and I up against each other in the courtroom, but our being on different sides of the fence has created a Marcia Clark versus F. Lee Bailey type of atmosphere, as displayed on television every day some years back during the O.J. Simpson criminal trial. I'll never be able to figure out how that republican-democrat marriage of Mary Matalin and James Carville seems to have flourished so well unless they finally figured out how to do what my soon-to-be-ex and I never mastered: leaving our philosophical differences behind at the office.

Things got worse when we tried to bring our circle of friends together, because hard-nosed right-wing district attorneys with that prosecutorial badge-heavy swagger don't mix well with left-wing defenders of drug-dealers, pornographers and child molesters. But that wasn't all: when it looked like my boat restoring project was within a year of completion, we went boating with some friends and discovered that my beloved wife has a very low tolerance for motion. She can get terribly seasick at any distance more than 10 feet from the dock. Seasickness is quite common with self-centered people who have difficulty taking into consideration the boat, motion, other people around them, and other factors.

Our differences didn't stop just with the enjoyment of boating. I had to work my way through high school, college and law school by playing piano in saloons. Once we could afford a nice living-room piano, I discovered that my wife was tone-deaf and didn't like

the way I played. This was definitely a marriage-counselor's nightmare, so I guess that's why while I'm out here in the back yard sitting in an old boat, and my wife and her lawyer are inside that nice Brentwood home, scheming. Glancing towards the house, I notice his beady eyes peering out at my boat through the mini-blinds. He spends a lot of time ogling my wife and my boat... but it'll be over my dead body before he gets his hands on my boat.

I'm hoping that Stuart will tire of talking soon so I can get back to trying to fix an electrical short in the boat's wiring system before it burns the boat - and my wife's house with it. She owned the house before we were married, so she'll be staying here when my final eviction comes.

Fixing things on the boat are harder than I expected - mainly because I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Boat wiring is a lot different than house wiring: you can't just connect things with supermarket extension cords, because they're not heavy-duty enough to withstand the extremely harsh elements of a saltwater environment. Humans don't belong in the ocean, and the ocean keeps telling us that by trying to invade our territory just like we're invading its. An electrician friend of mine told me that I've done a nice job of cosmetically restoring this old tub, but without a complete re-wiring job it won't last too long after it's put in the water. Without a steady source of income, I'll have to cross that bridge when I come to it.

Note from the publisher:

To read the rest of this book and discover how Peter Sharp does when defending his friend Stuart against a civil lawsuit blaming him for the tort action of Negligent Nymphomania, and defending himself and another client against some criminal charges, order this book through www.LegalMystery.com.

And, to see pictures of Peter's old cabin cruiser, plus photos of other locations mention later in the book, you should also visit the website www.PeterSharpBooks.com