

IS THERE A LAWYER IN THE HOUSE?

by Jim Freund

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Wesley Milford was about to doze off on the flight from San Francisco to New York when he was startled to hear some unfamiliar words over the p.a. system. "Is there a *lawyer* on the plane? If so, please push the call button over your seat."

That's a new one, thought Wesley, who at 50 was indeed a lawyer – a partner in a prominent New York firm with impeccable professional credentials. His face was unmemorable, neither handsome nor homely, but with noticeable wrinkles under the eyes and a widening bald spot on the back of the head. Although sufficiently slim to avoid the need for diets, he lacked the muscular tone of someone who worked out regularly.

Never one to shirk responsibility, Milford pushed the button. A youthful and attractive female flight attendant, decidedly agitated, arrived at his row within seconds.

"Oh, sir," she said, her gamin-like face wreathed with concern, "please help us. We have a terrible problem in the rear of the plane."

Milford followed her down the aisle. *She walks with such an alluring stride*, he noted. *Now that's what I used to call a "stewardess."*

As he passed each row, the passengers looked up at him with a uniform gaze of respect. In the last row of the plane sat a small elderly man, staring straight ahead, his face ashen.

"Here we are," whispered the comely stewardess in Wesley's ear. "This old man is convinced he's going to die before the plane lands. Another passenger, a doctor, checked his vital signs, but found no specific ailment or impairment. The old man keeps insisting he has to speak to a lawyer."

Milford's eyes widened. *She's also quite well-spoken. . . .* Wesley leaned over the seat. The old man looked up at him, speaking in a barely perceptible but lucid voice. "I'm dying," he said, "and I have no Will. My children will inherit my property, but I don't want them to – they've been unkind to their father. Can you help me?"

Wesley turned to the stewardess. "Did anyone else answer your appeal for a lawyer?"

"No," she replied, "you're the only one, sir. It's up to you." The gratitude that shone through her winsome expression gave Milford devilish ideas. *I wonder if she has a date tonight. . . .*

Wesley didn't hesitate. "I'll handle this," he said, rolling up his shirtsleeves. "Miss, would you please fetch my attaché case."

Milford now went to work in earnest. He made a checklist of the requisite issues to be covered in the document. With gentle but probing questions, he divined the old man's intentions. The provisions of the Will took shape in rapid pen strokes on his yellow pad.

He was aware, of course, that serious questions of applicable law were being posed repeatedly as the plane crossed each state line. But this, he reckoned, was no time to be plagued by self-doubt. *I have to act, and I'll do what it takes.*

As the plane passed over Omaha, Nebraska, the Will was signed – witnessed by the doctor, the flight engineer, and the fetching young stewardess whose face, as she handed Milford back his pen, radiated hero worship. The document may have been improvised, but Wesley was certain it was fit for filing in probate court.

"How can I ever thank you?" sobbed the old man, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I have travelers' checks. . . ."

"No, no," replied Wesley in a voice devoid of ego. "The legal profession has been good to me. This one," he said over his shoulder, as he began to walk back down the aisle, "is on the house."

"PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR SEATS AND FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS."

The loud voice over the plane's p.a. system woke Milford up with a start. The old man – the handwritten Will – the alluring stewardess – it had all been a dream. . . .

"But what a dream!" exclaimed Wesley Milford the next day, seated behind the desk in his disheveled law office. "Just think, Madge, in

one fell swoop I was able to indulge every lawyer's secret fantasy – the joy of being really needed, the satisfaction of coming through under pressure, the fulfillment of easing an old man's last hours, the exhilaration of screwing his heirs. . . ."

"This was definitely one of your best," said Madge Clark, Milford's long-time secretary and confidant, who was perched on the arm of a pull-up chair. Madge – pretty, with a perky manner, lively mind and good sense of humor – was in her mid-30's and happily married to an architect. "You're getting more and more imaginative."

As the day wore on, Wesley made some progress with the mountain of minutiae on his desk. But by mid-afternoon, he was drowsy from the effort and the rigors of the long flight from the coast. . . .

A little later that afternoon, Madge appeared at the door. "Wesley, there's a Miss Vernon here to see you. She says she met you at a dinner party last week. She knows what a busy man you are, but she thinks you'll remember her – and, forgive me for saying so, but if you don't remember her, you must be brain dead!"

Wesley, intrigued, put aside the tedious papers he'd been working on. "Okay, I'll make time for her." When Madge left, he took out a comb and ran it through his hair so as to minimize the bald spot.

Two minutes later, in pranced a knockout redhead with luscious lips and curves to die for. Milford, who hadn't been able to place Vernon's name, now recalled her in technicolor. They had indeed chatted over cocktails at the home of a mutual friend last Friday, only to be separated at dinner by an inflexible seating arrangement. Wesley couldn't recollect the particulars of their conversation, but once again he found himself awash in the tantalizing perfume that marked her presence.

Laura Vernon sashayed over to Wesley's desk, her ample bosom jiggling with each step. She held out a manicured hand across the document sprawl. "Wesley Milford," she began, the cornpone huskiness of her voice sending vibrations through his spinal column, "I hope I'm not troubling you too much. But I recalled what you said to me last week – that if I ever needed legal assistance, I should look you up. Well, sugar, I need some now, and I need it bad."

Wesley replied, in a tone designed to inspire confidence, "Miss Vernon, it's no trouble at all. You've come to the right place. Tell me your problem, and let's see what I can do to help you out."

Miss Vernon sat down on the small couch and crossed her legs. Wesley's gaze took in the deep slit in her skirt riding high up on her shapely thighs, then swung down to her trim ankles and spike-heeled shoes. "Please call me Laura," she said. "And I'd find it easier to talk about this delicate subject, if you would come out from behind your big desk and join me over here on the loveseat."

Wesley dutifully complied, although there was barely room for the two of them. The physical contact between their bodies sent a frisson of forbidden pleasure across his midsection. *Oh*, he thought, *wait 'til I tell Madge about this one. . . .*

"The thing is," said Laura Vernon, her voice now a pitiable lament, "my husband has left me – just like that." She placed her hand on Wesley's knee. "I'm all alone in the world."

"I'm sorry to hear that Laura," said Wesley, attempting to shoe-horn some genuine empathy into the carnal craving that possessed him. His lawyer's instincts then turned to a more practical consideration – his fee. "Did the rotter leave you . . . uh . . . broke?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Vernon. "As a matter of fact" – and here she moved her mouth so close to Wesley's ear that her whispered words echoed like a thunderbolt – "I'm worth millions. . . ."

"WESLEY, YOUR FIVE O'CLOCK HIRING INTERVIEW IS HERE."

It was Madge's voice over the intercom, jolting Milford back to the reality of his Laura-less office. Miss Vernon's ample curves and big bucks lay tantalizingly beyond his grasp. *Dammit*, he thought, *that was primetime – I wonder if I'll be able to resuscitate her after I finish the hiring interview. . . .*

Not that Milford was a ladies' man. Like the President of his youth, Jimmy Carter, Wesley's occasional bouts of lusting were confined to the heart. For the last 18 years, he had been married to an exemplary woman, an admirable wife and mother to their two children, who fulfilled all

his needs – except that she was the most literal, unimaginative person he'd ever known. And that meant there was no way he could possibly regale her with sprightly tales of his fantasy adventures.

Yet he felt the need to confide these hi-jinks to someone – that was half the fun. He couldn't share them with his partners – they would have thought he was crazy, and probably taken a nibble or two off his share of the firm pie. So Madge was the perfect choice – interested, imaginative, non-judgmental, and reliably discreet.

"Okay, Madge," he replied over the intercom. "Bring the student in. But remind me, I've got a real good one to tell you about later on – you even have a small cameo role with a great line of dialogue."

The following day, Milford was sitting by himself in a small conference room at another downtown law firm, about to begin what he anticipated would be an arduous negotiation. His adversary was a stubborn quick-tempered lawyer named Biff Bullpit, with whom Wesley had tangled on several other unpleasant occasions. *It's just like Bullpit*, Wesley mused, *to keep me waiting like this*. The conference room was borderline claustrophobic and the temperature unusually warm – *probably another Bullpit gambit*, thought Wesley, as he sank lower in the soft swivel chair. . . .

When all 250 pounds of a scowling Biff Bullpit finally made an appearance at the door and negotiations began, it was just as Wesley had foreseen – a titanic clash of wills between the two of them over an important disputed issue. Neither man gave any sign of yielding an inch. The decibel level began to rise precipitously.

"Enough of this," thundered Wesley. "I won't listen to any more threats from the likes of you, Bullpit. You know what my position is on this issue. It constitutes an equitable resolution of our clients' dispute – and I'm absolutely immovable."

Bullpit exploded out of his seat and headed directly for Milford. "Why, you lowdown dirty skunk, how dare you talk to me like that! As for your immovable position, here's what I think of it –" and with that, Bullpit smashed his fist into the table right next to Wesley's water glass, spilling the contents over a file of vital papers.

Wesley was stunned by Biff's precipitous assault and slow to react. *Holy cow*, he thought, *Madge will get some kick out of my latest touch*

– *water-drenched documents*. He finally pushed his chair back from the table and attempted to stand up. But before he could rise, Bullpit was all over him – arms flailing, elbows in his midsection, the huge bulk of the man smothering Milford’s slim body.

As he struggled, Wesley’s mind raced ahead. *This will never do. I didn't start this, but by God, I'll finish it.* And summoning heretofore untapped sources of strength from his flaccid body, he proceeded to execute a tricky maneuver he had once seen in an action movie. With a lightning fast lunge, he hurtled out of his chair and whipped around to the rear of Bullpit. In a flash, Wesley had pinned the bully's arms and gained a chokehold so devastating that Bullpit cried out for mercy. . . .

"CHRIST, THE AIR CONDITIONING MUST BE ON THE FRITZ IN HERE – IT'S LIKE AN OVEN!"

It was Biff Bullpit, standing just inside the door of the conference room, his well-tailored jacket showing no signs of their titanic struggle. Milford had to suppress an urge to lecture him – *Listen, Bullpit, don't you dare knock over my water glass ever again.* . . .

Following the actual negotiations – which were indeed heated but never turned physical – Wesley returned to his office and entertained Madge with a detailed recap of the fantasy brawl. "Oh my gosh!" she exclaimed, getting into the spirit of the occasion, "I would have had to resurrect your documents with a hair dryer!"

Wesley busied himself with catch-up work for the remainder of the afternoon and, after Madge left, into the early evening. When he felt he'd toiled enough, he turned on his stereo and listened dreamily to Sinatra's *Only for Lovers* album. Putting his feet up on the desk and closing his eyes, he envisioned himself pub-crawling in Vegas with Frank and the rest of the Ratpack. . . .

A little later, when Milford left the office, he took the elevator down to the building's underground garage. It was a private unattended parking area, empty except for his car and one or two others. As he approached his vehicle, Wesley noticed a man lurking in the shadows just behind a concrete pillar.

Milford had no time to react before the man emerged, aiming a pistol at Wesley's midsection. The man was squat with a menacing look and

a large scar curling down the left side of his face. "Remember me, Milford?" he said in a snarling tone.

Wesley peered intently at the man's face, especially at the scar, and then it all came back to him. The man, whose name was Nestor Wolf, was the ne'er-do-well brother of Wesley's client, Rutherford Wolf. Or his *former* client, to be more precise, since Rutherford had died some six months ago. "Why, you're Nestor Wolf," said Wesley.

"That's right, counselor. And since you've got such a good memory, you must also remember the reason I'm aiming this gun at you now."

Wesley quickly recalled the situation that was the probable cause of his present predicament. Rutherford Wolf had owned a farm a few hours outside New York City. His brother Nestor lived and worked on the farm for most of his adult life. Rutherford's original Will bequeathed the farm to Nestor outright upon Rutherford's death. But then Rutherford, a widower, remarried. Shortly thereafter, he suffered a mild stroke. His new wife, deeply concerned over his health, pressured Rutherford to change the Will provision. So Rutherford called upon Wesley to write a codicil, leaving the farm to the new wife. Less than a year later, Rutherford had a major stroke and died. Nestor, expecting to receive the farm, found himself frozen out of his brother's estate.

"You recall, don't you, Milford? Using your damned lawyer's wiles, you deprived me of what was rightfully mine." Nestor trembled with emotion as he spoke. "So now it's your turn to feel some deprivation. We're going to take a little drive out to the farm. You like that soil so much – let's see how you like being six feet under it!"

Oh, thought Wesley, this is a good one today. And I have to remember to tell Madge that juicy 'six feet under' line. . . .

Although the situation appeared to call for desperate measures, Milford decided to display a calm exterior. "Well, I'm game for a pleasant excursion to the country," he said. "Now, Nestor, please don't be alarmed – I'm just reaching into my jacket for the keys to my car." Wesley's hand slid slowly inside his jacket pocket.

Nestor, remarkably agile for his rotundity, lunged forward and whacked Wesley's arm with the butt of the pistol. "Don't pull that stuff on

me, wise guy – I'm up to your tricks. Take your hand out of your pocket. I'll reach in there myself for the keys."

The swiftness of the blow surprised Wesley, and he even felt something resembling actual pain. *I'll have to admit, he thought, these are getting more and more realistic. . . .*

Wesley removed his hand from the pocket, and allowed Nestor to retrieve the keys. Nestor unlocked the car and opened the driver's side front door. Wesley, seeing his opportunity, made a lightning move to slam the door on Nestor's arm. But Nestor easily deflected the effort, and this time belted Wesley across the forehead with the gun butt, drawing blood.

The blood felt to Wesley like real blood – reality run rampant – and the pain was so intense that Wesley decided he'd had enough of this particular fantasy adventure. *There's not even a pretty girl in sight. . . .* Still, he liked to end these capers with a special flourish, and for this one, he had a sudden inspiration.

Milford got into the driver's seat and fastened his seatbelt. Nestor, pistol drawn, sat on the passenger side, ignoring his own seatbelt. As they exited the garage, Wesley mentally reviewed his plan. The idea was to smack the car into a wall – his seatbelt protecting him, while the untethered Nestor would either crash head-first into the windshield or be smothered by the airbag, but in either case, rendered impotent.

A few blocks later, Wesley spied the perfect wall for the planned operation. No pedestrians were nearby. He swung the steering wheel sharply to the right and hit the gas pedal hard. But Nestor, ever alert, reached over and yanked on the emergency brake, bringing the vehicle to a sudden stop. No airbag deployed. Nestor's right shoulder was wedged against the dashboard, which cushioned the blow for him. But Wesley's seatbelt had been loosely fastened and didn't fully restrain him – he was impaled on the steering wheel and knocked temporarily unconscious.

As he regained consciousness with a splitting headache, Wesley had one of those light bulb moments of total clarity. *Hey, wait a minute. I wanted this adventure to end and it didn't. Meanwhile, I'm taking a lot of physical punishment that hurts like hell. . . .* And suddenly, through his pain, Milford reached the startling conclusion – *This is no fantasy. . . .*

As the initial shock of his realization began to wear off, Milford's mind started functioning again. Life can and does imitate art, he realized. He recalled his favorite example of that axiom – the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in the late 70's, occurring within months after the release of *The China Syndrome*, a movie based on the same subject matter.

Nestor took over the wheel for the balance of the trip, driving with one hand and pointing the gun across the seat at Wesley with the other. Conversation subsided and the journey was uneventful. But like the car itself, Wesley's brain was going a mile a minute, desperately trying to devise some means to extricate himself from this imminent peril. It was a real challenge – Nestor may not have been a rocket scientist, but he was holding the pistol and appeared to be quite resolute.

They arrived at the farm, set in a desolate landscape and seemingly unoccupied. Nestor ignored the main house and headed for the barn. Locating an old shovel in the tool shed, he used it like a cattle prod, herding Wesley into a wooded grove a hundred yards away. "Here's the spot," said Nestor with a snarl. "Start digging your grave."

Wesley began to dig, half-heartedly at first until Nestor pistol-whipped him for moving at too slow a pace.

The first tactic Wesley attempted was simply an unabashed plea for his life. "It wasn't my fault, Nestor. I was just carrying out orders. Your brother was under the influence of that woman. . . ."

"Shut up and dig," said Nestor. "I'll be taking care of *that woman* next."

A few minutes later, Wesley tried a different approach. "If you kill me, Nestor, the authorities will get you."

"No, they won't," Nestor replied, his voice full of confidence.

"Yes, they will." Wesley Milford, who considered himself to be an officer of the court, disliked dissembling – but certainly, in these dire circumstances, a small lie was permissible. "I managed to leave a clue back at the garage that will lead the police right to your doorstep."

"Bullshit!" roared Nestor, although his next words suggested to Wesley some uncertainty. "What goddamn clue?"

Wesley stopped digging and looked up at his captor. "Come on, Nestor, do you think I'd be so stupid as to reveal the clue to you – so you can go back later and undo the thing?"

Nestor gave Wesley a whack with the pistol, but it wasn't full strength, and although it stung, Wesley felt he was making progress. Now he took another tack. "Besides, Nestor, even if the police don't find you, killing me won't get you the farm."

"I know that," said Nestor, "but at least I'll have my revenge."

Wesley shook his head slowly from side to side. "Revenge may be sweet, but it's not as good as ending up with the property. If you let me live, I can get you the farm."

This time, there was no "bullshit" eruption from Nestor, who was obviously intrigued. After a moment, he asked, "How?"

Aha, thought Wesley, *he's hooked*. "I can say that Rutherford's initial stroke was more serious than people realized, so that he was not of sound mind when he made the codicil."

"But you testified in the probate court that he was."

"I can say that I lied."

Nestor's tone was skeptical. "Why in hell would you have lied?"

Wesley had anticipated the question and was ready with his response. "Look, Nestor, another law firm had done Rutherford's original Will. I needed to validate the codicil in order to take over the handling of his estate. It meant a big fee for me, which provided plenty of financial motivation to lie."

Nestor tested him further. "But you'll be disbarred for lying – maybe even have to go to prison."

"Perhaps, although I have a good law firm behind me. But even so, that's preferable to being six feet under. . . . Think about it, Nestor."

Wagging the pistol slowly in his hand, Nestor mulled over the prospects for a minute before asking the obvious question. "If I let you go,

how do I know you'll do what you say? How can I be sure you won't turn me in for kidnapping and attempted murder?"

Once again, Wesley was prepared. "Good question, Nestor – I might have expected someone as intelligent as you to ask just that. I've given this some thought and here's how it works. I have a yellow pad in my briefcase in the car. I'll write out a confession about how I lied in court, and then I'll outline the steps I'm committing myself to take in order to undo the damage. You'll have the pad, and you can hold me to it."

Nestor pondered this without comment for several moments. Wesley, worried that his flimsy rationale wouldn't stand up, moved to bolster it. "And I'd have to be crazy to go to the police – the minute I revealed to them that I'd lied in probate court, they'd lock me up and throw away the key."

Nestor thought for another minute and then said, "Okay, you've got a point – the revenge would be sweet, but I really want the farm more. Let's do it. . . . But first, take your shovel and fill up this hole."

When the ground was level again, they returned to the car. Wesley's attaché case was in the back seat. He opened the rear door, got in, and put the case on his lap. Nestor, pistol still in hand, sat in the driver's seat, swinging half-way around to maintain surveillance.

Wesley opened the attaché, held up the yellow pad for Nestor to see, and then lowered it back into the case which he would use as a desk to write on. Unbeknownst to Nestor, however, as Wesley was performing this maneuver, he managed to flick on a small digital voice recorder that he always kept in the case.

"Let's see," said Wesley, narrating his efforts loud enough for Nestor – and the recorder – to hear. "Obviously, I'm *not* going to write anything in here about you kidnapping and attempting to murder me. . . . I'll just start out in a neutral tone by saying something like this" – and he began to write as he spoke – "I, Wesley Milford, feeling contrition at the unfair result of my wrongful action, hereby confess that I lied when I testified in probate court that Rutherford Wolf was of sound mind at the time of executing his codicil. In fact, Rutherford did not, at that time, have the requisite mental capacity to perform this act. . . . How's that for a start, Nestor?"

Nestor grunted acquiescence. Wesley kept drafting and narrating aloud – providing a thorough statement of the circumstances surrounding the codicil, but interspersed with some offhand remarks ("I could write this more easily, Nestor, if you didn't point that pistol directly at my head") to indicate that he was being held under duress.

When he had completed and signed the document, Wesley handed the yellow pad to Nestor and closed his attaché case. Nestor read the full text and appeared satisfied. They then drove back to town without further incident, Wesley dropping Nestor off at a seedy hotel where he'd taken up temporary residence. "I congratulate you, Nestor," said Wesley through the open window, "on letting your head rule your heart."

Upon arriving home, Wesley called the police to arrest Nestor, which they promptly did. Nestor indignantly produced the yellow pad, but the telltale voice recording did him in. The tabloids picked up the story, and Wesley became a 15-minutes-of-fame folk hero for his clever handling of such a dire plight. His wife and kids cheered his appearances on TV interviews. His partners gave him a standing ovation when he appeared at their weekly luncheon.

"I'm so proud of you," said Madge, after Wesley had finished regaling his secretary with all the gory details. "It must have been a tremendous shock – when you first realized this was real and not just one of your daydreams."

"You're not kidding," said Wesley. "As a matter of fact, I consider this incident to be – if you'll pardon the pun – a real wake-up call. I've undergone a life-altering conversion, Madge. It's time that I grew up and put those childish fantasies behind me. . . ."

And, true to his word, Wesley Milford changed overnight into a staid and serious attorney, playing it by the book, eschewing every temptation to re-enter the heretofore vibrant world of daydreams. "I'm boring this way, I know," he confessed to Madge, "but at the same time I'm experiencing a renewed sense of self-esteem, such as one feels when he's kicked the nicotine habit."

A few weeks later, Milford was in court to argue a complicated motion in a case unrelated to the Rutherford-Nestor affair. The judge presiding over the hearing was a beady-eyed pompous man named Pringle, who

Wesley despised from prior bad experiences. The courtroom was stuffy and overheated.

During a recess in the tedious proceedings, Wesley's co-counsel Ed Philips went out to get them some much-needed coffee. Wesley remained at the counsel table, forcing himself to pore over some complex documents. . . .

When the hearing resumed, Wesley attempted to introduce one of the documents into evidence. Opposing counsel objected on the ground that she hadn't been provided with a copy of the document in the pre-motion discovery process.

Judge Pringle gave Wesley a disapproving look and said, "I'm sustaining counsel's objection, Mr. Milford. And I must say, I find your behavior – attempting to strong-arm the court with a document that you didn't even have the courtesy to reveal in advance to opposing counsel – to be extremely shady."

"Now, just one minute." Wesley was up on his feet, gesticulating wildly at the judge. "I won't accept that kind of slur on *my* honor from *your honor* or from anyone else. Just who do you think you are – sitting up there in an ill-fitting black robe on your miniscule throne! What gives you the right to be so goddamned high and mighty. . .?!"

"PSST! HERE'S THE COFFEE, WESLEY. . . ."

It was Ed Philips, shaking Milford's shoulder as he placed a cardboard cup on the counsel table. . . .