

*Even monkeys fall from trees.*

Stone Hunnicutt stood on a polished mahogany platform in his Egyptian cotton Brooks Brothers boxers and crew neck undershirt, about to buy the most expensive suit of his life, pondered what Master Tailor Noge Katsu meant. The balding Katsu seemed to Stone a practical man--he charged three-quarters of typical Gold Coast prices and didn't bother with fancy furnishings: the walls of the dressing room were painted a dull eggshell color, and the carpeting a clean but worn gray.

"Even the *Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year* needs to look successful," his wife Sydney had said a month ago, trying to convince him to make the trip from Madison to Chicago. She'd been chopping vegetables for one of her nutritious stir-frys.

"They all know I'm successful," Stone said. A few months earlier he'd been named *Best Business Lawyer* in Wisconsin by a state-wide magazine; this new *pro bono* honor would be bestowed by the Bar Association. "That's the only reason I was nominated. To bring in the cash."

"Don't be so cynical," she'd said. "You do good works."

"Not like you," he said. Sydney was a real *pro bono* lawyer, working for Legal Aid.

She threw a chopped breast of chicken in the wok, and it sizzled. "The award is for a lawyer who *volunteers*. I get paid."

“I told Jackson you didn’t get paid *enough*,” Stone said. Jackson Wood was president of the Bar Association.

“I can afford it,” she said evenly. “I’m married to a rich lawyer.” She added chopped celery and onion, bean sprouts and 20 raw cashews to the stir-fry.

“What if I weren’t?” he asked.

“Then we’d make do,” she said. He wanted to believe her. It was the girls--Meredith in medical school in Chicago and Caroline, a drama major in college in New York--who’d talked her into upgrading the old Formica kitchen countertops last year and even then, she’d waited for a sale on the granite the girls recommended. It occurred to Stone that even if they lived in a trailer, Sydney could be happy.

“Truth is, you couldn’t pay me to do what you do. That year in Boston nearly did me in,” he said. After getting his law degree, he’d worked for a landlord-tenant legal aid clinic near Harvard, waiting for Sydney to graduate.

“You’ve never said that before,” she said.

“I was afraid I’d lose you if I confessed, but I hated it. I hated representing tenants who were months in arrears on their rent and deserved to be put out, but then demanded damages for emotional harm if the landlord failed to obey every technicality of the eviction law, which they knew far better than I did.” In truth, he’d felt powerless to help the clients who came to the Legal Aid office. They’d needed so much more than what he or the law could offer. “I hated it when they cried.”

“And when they smelled,” Sydney added knowingly as she put a plate in front of him.

“So you agree, I don’t deserve it,” he said. He stabbed a piece of chicken with his fork. Usually the Bar Association chose one honoree who could hit up his or her friends for contributions, but for some reason, this year three persons had been nominated, all to be honored at the dinner, but only one to be announced as the winner. “I don’t need a new suit.”

Sydney sighed. “You do, and you do. Who do you know who deserves it more?”

He busied himself with his rice—a dirty brown--and added extra soy sauce to the chicken. She stared at the bottle but didn’t say anything.

“Michael Mitchell?” she teased, naming the previous winner. “You know I hate false humility.” Secretly, Stone had been shocked that Mitchell had won; Stone was older and had a longer and more diverse record of public service.

“It’s not false,” he said. “I’m just saying I didn’t do the work myself.” He’d been instrumental in doubling his firm’s commitment to *pro bono* work and had encouraged the young lawyers to get involved with work on behalf of single mothers, veterans and disabled persons. But he hadn’t done the work himself. He had in fact been jealous when the younger man had been chosen, not because he was more deserving, but presumably for the sole purpose of inspiring more participation at the junior level.

“And your billings are what enable your associates to do the work for free and better yet, utilize the firm’s considerable clout. So you deserve it as much as any of the corporate pigs.” He heard the tease in her voice. He and his best friend, Lou Desmond, were the two biggest rainmakers at Gordon & Newman, a large Madison firm, and pretty much ran the place.

“They shouldn’t have changed the format,” Stone complained. “I have to stand up there and be declared a loser! Reminds me of when Ted didn’t win that *First Novel Award*.” Ted was his younger brother and an acknowledged genius whose first novel had won two national awards and been named a *New York Times Notable Book of the Year*. At the much less prestigious *Midwest America* prize ceremony, each of the three nominees were asked to read for ten minutes after the broasted chicken dinner and then wait on the dais for the winner to be announced. Pia something. Not Ted. Although he applauded politely, Ted didn’t look genuinely happy for the winner--how could he be? In her overwrought acceptance speech Pia thanked everyone who’d ever encouraged her, including her fifth-grade spelling bee coach. She’d sounded to Stone narcissistic and painfully insincere.

Adding insult to the already public injury suffered by the “losers,” Pia disingenuously confessed that her book had started as a common writing exercise, a slavish imitation of her favorite novel, *Little Women*, and that virtually every sentence in her winning entry mimicked its style and content. Ted’s jaw dropped, and Stone had had to put his hand on their father’s shoulder to restrain him from jumping out of his chair. Within earshot of the judges and the buoyant winner, their father said loudly that all such regional prizes were rigged and had more to do with sexual politics than ability. Stone took their father by the arm and steered him away from the literati, feigning intoxication as an excuse for the old man’s rude and obnoxious behavior. If their father were alive today, he’d still be complaining about how that bitch stole the award from his son. “Give ’em a test,” he’d spewed. “We’ll see who’s smarter.” No amount of cogent argument could get him off that point; only someone as smart as Ted could judge Ted’s work, and their father had yet to meet such a person.

At the time, Stone had thought that it must take talent to pull off such a “creative” exercise. Afterwards, Ted corrected him. “Without authentic emotion of her own, her work will never sing,” he’d said. “She doesn’t care about her characters at all, or she would have given them their own sentences, not mere imitations.”

Consoling himself, Ted told Stone, “It’s such an honor to be on so many short lists,” which Stone thought was the kind of thing you could say glibly if you were, like Ted, a lot of short lists, but not if you were Stone. He turned his face to Katsu’s mirror and practiced a closed-lipped, “I deserve this” smile. Truth be told, he was very proud of the *pro bono* award—of being *nominated* for the award—even if it felt undeserved. In the mirror, he was startled to see a slightly younger version of his father: a high, lined forehead; aquiline nose; bushy brown eyebrows; sharp, defined jaw. He wished his father could see him now; wished he could have seen his full-length picture on the glossy magazine cover for the business honor.

But honors like Stone’s *Best Business Lawyer* or *Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year* awards, which could be bought through fundraising or popularity, wouldn’t have been good enough for his father. What *could* Stone have done that would be good enough for a man whose motto was “*Citius. Altius. Fortius, Scitius*”? Faster. Higher. Stronger. Smarter. That was Ted. Not Stone.

Their father had always had a certain blindness when it came to Ted. Stone wondered if the old man had even read Ted’s *Pater Noster*, a coming-of-age story about a young man coping with the loss of his new wife while his demanding and unforgiving father slips into dementia. Their father had not acknowledged the extent to which Ted drew from his own experience in writing the book. Perhaps vanity hadn’t allowed him to see himself through another’s eyes.

“How did you dare to paint such an accurate picture of Dad?” he’d once asked Ted.

“I knew he’d never recognize himself,” Ted laughed. “It’s what makes fiction more fun than memoir.”

The whole book-prize evening was embarrassing to think about, and, staring into the mirror, Stone raised his chin and braced himself for the darts likely to be thrown his way at the *Pro Bono* dinner by people like his Dad, people who thought he was undeserving. Thank goodness Sydney would be by his side, loaning him her impeccable public service credentials and her effervescent smile.

He hated the idea of not winning, especially since he, his firm, and his best client, Jay Shore had all doubled their contributions. They’d raised a record amount for the cause, but that sort of took the nobility out of winning. Proved his father’s case: Stone was not *Altius*.

Still, Stone liked to be thought of as generous, as someone who would help in a pinch or just for the pure pleasure of feeling productive and useful. But he knew that deep down there were limits and that he was not nearly as generous as others thought him to be. When he’d been a young teen, he’d been taken with the notion of self-sufficiency, which meant freedom from having to make a case to his father for an annual increase in his allowance. He answered an ad for a newspaper boy and earned what he thought was pretty good money by getting up three mornings a week at 4 a.m. to throw papers at suburban lawns from the back of a truck. He’d been working for about six months, saving for the car he was determined to buy when he turned 16, when his father suddenly stopped going to work every day. His mother said he was taking a break from his job as Director of Research at an agricultural chemical company, and there was nothing to worry about. But Stone noticed more casseroles on the dinner table. One day he was with his mother when she returned a lacey dress she’d purchased for a cousin’s wedding.

“Why are you taking it back?” he’d asked. “Can’t we afford it?”

Looking stricken, his mother had said of course they could afford it. “Your father says it just doesn’t look that good on me,” she’d said. He didn’t believe her. His mother was beautiful and anything she wore was just as stunning. By Stone’s account, it was the money.

That Friday, when Stone came home with his paper route pay, he left his envelope of cash on the kitchen table while he ran to the bathroom. When he came out, his mother was holding the bills in her hands. He stopped in his tracks. His mother’s lips were trembling and her eyes were wet. She rushed over to him. “I am so touched, Stone. You are such a good boy. Thank you! But, honey, really, we’re O.K. Your father’s new job starts a week from Monday.” Stone realized that his mother was giving him credit for an act of unselfish generosity that he in no way intended. “That dress, honey, really didn’t fit. Come upstairs and let me show you the one I bought yesterday.” He followed her to her room, where she took a beaded powder blue dress from the closet and swirled it so its full skirt looked as though it were dancing. She was so obviously delighted with her new purchase and the good son she’d raised, he decided there was no need to disabuse her, especially since she was returning his money. He hoped, however, that she wouldn’t tell his father. He’d probably call Stone stupid for thinking his paltry paper route earnings could cover such an elegant dress.

Now, glancing in tailor Katsu’s dressing room mirror, he saw his legs sticking out bright white from his dark socks and felt like a grand-champion pig headed for slaughter. Four more weeks of worried anticipation. Writing a speech that might not make it out of his suit pocket. Feeling like a fraud one minute and a cheated loser the next.

Choosing a suit at the tailor's had turned out to be more complicated than simply pointing to one of the finished suits. Seated at a library table in windowless but brightly lit room lined with clothes racks, Katsu guided Sydney and him through a huge book of fabric swatches, much like an album of floor coverings at a home improvement store. Prodded by Sydney, Stone selected a medium gray cashmere and a somewhat darker silk lining. Then he had to answer dozens of questions about details he'd not noticed before: not just the size and shape of the lapel, but also of the collar, the jacket vent, the cuffs, the pockets. He'd had to choose buttonholes and thread colors. Stone pointed to the navy blazer he had on and Katsu nodded as if to say he understood that Stone dressed far from the cutting edge of fashion--that the less the suit drew attention to itself, the better. "Traditional," Katsu said.

"My wife says you were named the *Best Master Tailor in Chicago* by one of the local magazines," Stone said while Katsu stretched a yellow tape measure across his shoulders.

Katsu bowed slightly. "If one man praises you, a thousand will repeat the praise," he said.

"If that one man is very influential," Stone said. "There are many tailors in Chicago. The recognition must've been good for business."

"Only one customer," Katsu said, without much interest.

"Hard to believe," Stone said.

"One customer, one suit," Katsu said.

"But surely you got more than one new customer from the article. Me, for instance?"

"Not everyone wants the best," Katsu smiled. "Not everyone can pay."

“Still, it’s nice to know that others praise you,” Stone said. He had himself relished his *Best Business Lawyer* title. Of course it was subjective, but the recognition mattered to him.

“It’s nice to know the suit fits,” Katsu said. He lifted Stone’s arm out straight from the shoulder.

“You are too modest, Mr. Noge,” Stone said.

“Even monkeys fall from trees,” Katsu said, but did not explain himself. “You have a special occasion, yes?” He dropped Stone’s arm.

“No,” Stone said, then realized he was about to buy the most expensive suit of his life and he should tell the truth. “Actually, yes. I’m being given an honor by my professional association at home,” he said. He feared “home” sounded small-town and hick-ish, and so added, “in Madison.”

“What did you do for the honor?”

It was the question he’d thrashed through with Sydney, but it still plagued him. On the surface of things, he probably deserved it, but inside, he wasn’t so sure. Regardless, he wanted it.

“Not enough,” he tried to laugh, and then he realized he hadn’t won the award yet. “I’m one of three nominees. The winner will be announced at a dinner.”

“You write a book?” Katsu asked, running his tape around Stone’s chest.

“No, I’m a lawyer. My brother writes books.” He was relieved to shift the conversation away from himself.

“What kind of books? Have I heard of them?” Katsu asked.

“He’s a literary writer,” Stone said. As soon as he said it, he realized it sounded snotty and condescending. “He’s not famous. One book. Not on the best seller list or anything.”

“Lists don’t matter,” Katsu said. “Did he write the best book he could?” He motioned for Stone to separate his feet so he could measure Stone’s inseam. “I have very few customers, but my customers are very particular. They know the best when they see it. And they pay more for it,” he chuckled. Stone could appreciate that. His clients paid more for him; he paid more for Katsu’s suits. It seemed fair to him.

Katsu stood up and bowed slightly. “All done,” he said. “Come back in two weeks. And don’t worry. *Makeru ga kachi.*”

“I don’t speak…” Stone started, but Katsu smiled, “Sometimes, to lose is to win.”

