

“If any one bring an accusation against a man, and the accused goes to the river and leaps into the river, if he sinks in the river, his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river proves that the accused is not guilty, and he escapes unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser.”

From Hammurabi's Code of 282 Laws (law #2)

Around thirty-eight hundred years ago, someone probably said: “there oughta be a law,” and a Priest King named Hammurabi listened. During his forty-three year reign of Mesopotamia (1792 – 1750 BC), he wrote a set of laws that covered everything from murder, to eye surgery, to gardening. Some of his rules were quite harsh, but back in those days they seem to have gotten the job done.

1

I'm an Internet shopper naturally I couldn't resist ordering a matching yellow *Hummer Shake Flashlight* from the Sharper Image. I also buy my shirts, underwear, socks, and accessories online. The only things I won't purchase online or through a catalog without first trying them on are shoes, because I firmly believe that they are one of the two things that you must try out for size and comfort first before making a commitment.

Stuart disagrees. He's both a good friend and a client, and last week he went to Thailand to spend some time with his new fiancée. They met as a result of her appearing in a mail-order bride catalog on the Internet. I tried to explain my shoe philosophy to him, but it was too late. He's in love, which means his brain has now been replaced with another part of his body, as the thought control center.

Getting a bride through an internet catalog is a very difficult concept for me to understand, so I Google 'mail order bride' and to my surprise, there are almost ten million sites listed. Included are lovely ladies from the Ukraine, Russia, Thailand, China, the Philippines, the UK, Colombia, Korea, Ethiopia, and from countries that the UN probably hasn't even heard of yet. They're all looking to make an American a very happy husband, and if you order now, they'll probably throw in their country's disease du jour at no extra cost.

The phone is ringing, but the caller ID is having a problem; it can't seem to fit the caller's number in the display, so it starts blinking, in distress. I answer anyway, and to my surprise, it's Stuart. “Stu, welcome home, how was the trip. Hey, I hear there's a club in downtown Bangkok that's named

‘Lewinsky’s,’ and their big neon sign outside depicts a moving...” he cuts me off mid-sentence with a note of urgency.

“Pete, I’m not back in the states, I’m still in Thailand, and I’ve got a problem that needs taking care of.” I can tell by the tone of his voice that he’s worried. I just hope he’s not in jail, because I don’t know if they have bail bond places over there. As urgent as the problem sounds though, he doesn’t seem in a panic mode like most people in jail do, so I guess it must be just a business problem. He continues, and I find out that my suspicions are correct.

“Peter, I want you to do me a favor.”

“If I can, Stu. What do you need?”

“I need for you to be in La Verne during the next hour. Can you do it?”

This is the most amazing request I’ve ever had. Stuart is one of my closest friends, and he’s calling me from Thailand, to ask me to have sex with my neighbor, a lady named Laverne who lives on her houseboat, a few slips down the dock from my boat. This must be a bad phone connection, because I can’t believe he’s asking me that.

“Excuse me? Did I hear you correctly Stu? You want me to be in Laverne in the next hour?”

“That’s right, Peter, and I’m willing to pay you well for this service. Is there a problem with that?”

“I would say so, Stuart. First of all, Laverne is not home at this time of day. And second, my personal love life is none of your business, and certainly not the type of thing you should try to meddle in and insult me by offering money. What have you turned into, some sort of phone sex guy? You better get out of Thailand while you can, because I think you’ve crossed the line, so I’m going to do you a favor and forget you even asked me that question. Maybe it’s the water that you’re drinking over there, but you’re certainly not acting like the gentleman I always thought you were.”

“Peter, wait a minute. Oh, I see what... oh no, I didn’t mean Laverne your neighbor. Heck no, I meant the City of La Verne. It’s a town off the San Bernardino Freeway, next to Pomona, by the California Fairplex. I’ve got a customer of mine there, and the police are holding him for grand theft auto. He bought one of my used Camrys and I guess there was a glitch in the paperwork. If I don’t get someone out there in the next hour with the original documentation, they’re going to book my customer for grand theft auto, and I’ll get sued for everything I’m worth.”

Boy, is my face red. Who knew there was town out there named La Verne? I apologize to Stuart for misunderstanding him, and tell him that I’ll do what I can for his customer.

I knew this would happen. Not too long ago Stuart made what he considered to be a fantastic connection with a Tony Soprano-type of character in New ‘Joisy’ named Billy ‘Z,’ who offered to sell Stuart some like-new Toyota Camrys for much less than wholesale Blue Book. After doing some investigation, we found out that they were all either stolen cars that had been recovered by the insurance company, or ‘lemons’ that were re-purchased by the factory. For the first several months everything was going fine, but I knew it

would only be a matter of time before someone's paperwork mistake back there might catch up with one of Stuart's customers out here, and it looks like it finally did.

"Calm down, Stu, if the paperwork you've got in the office is all in order, then we should have no problem. All you have to do is send Vinnie over to the police station with the file and everything will be okay."

"I asked him, but you know Vinnie. He's deathly afraid of police stations, it's like a phobia of some sort."

I'm quite familiar with Vinnie's fear. It was especially exacerbated not too long ago when his fiancée Olive crashed into a police car while Vinnie was giving her a driving lesson.

"Okay, then what about Olive? She's not afraid of cops. Olive's not afraid of anything."

"Yeah, I know she's fearless, but I'm afraid she'd never find the police station. It's out in La Verne, on the way to Palm Springs off the 10 Freeway. Peter, you've gotta help me out on this one."

If there's anything I don't feel like doing, it's getting on the freeway before Noon. Besides, I'm supposed to attend the monthly luncheon meeting of the Venice Criminal Courts Bar Association, and if I get there on time, I can sit at the same table as my ex-wife Myra, who's the recently elected District Attorney of our county. If that doesn't work out, maybe I'll bump into Deputy City Attorney Patty Seymour. We seemed to hit it off not too long ago, and if it wasn't for the fact that Myra told me Patty was a lesbian, we might have gotten something going. She invited me to be her guest at a luncheon her club holds each month. While there, I didn't think much about the 'L.L.B.' banner hanging on the speaker's lectern, because that's the abbreviation for the degree that most of us got when graduating law school. Later that day, Myra took pleasure in letting me know that it really stands for 'Lesbian Legal Branch.'

Myra and I still disagree about Patty. Just because she attends those luncheons doesn't necessarily mean that she's a lesbian. After all, I was there too wasn't I? And I'm certainly not a lesbian. Although I must admit that I share a common interest with them because I'm also strongly attracted to good-looking women. Somewhere in the back of my mind I keep thinking that given the opportunity, I can get Patty to switch over to our side. Stuart suddenly brings me back to reality. He's still on the other end of the line, calling from an extremely long distance.

"C'mon, Pete, whatta say? I'll pay you your regular rate of a hundred fifty an hour to take care of it."

He finally gets my attention. This problem should be a no-brainer. I shouldn't have to drive to La Verne, because if I get the paperwork in time, all I have to do is hand it to Myra at the luncheon and ask her to use her cell phone to call the D.A. in La Verne and have the guy released. The whole thing should take less than five minutes, and the extra one-fifty will cover my picking up the lunch tab for everyone at our table. I can act like Diamond Jim, and Stuart will pay for it all.

“Okay, Stu, send Vinnie over here as quick as you can. The meter will start running right now, because I’m going to be forced to just sit and wait for him to get here.”

Stuart agrees. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be that aggressive with my fee when it comes to helping out a friend, but taking into consideration that in the last year I was responsible for collecting around two million for him in settlements for his faith healer’s diagnosis of the non-mesothelioma, being sued by a weight-loss client for negligent nymphomania, and for the death of his uncle in a plane crash in Thailand, I know that he’s one of the richest people on the block, so there’s no guilt on my part.

Vinnie will probably be here in twenty minutes, so I’ve still got time to call Myra and get this mess taken care of. Maybe she’ll even take my word for it and have the guy released from the La Verne Police Department. I call Myra on her private line. My direct access has nothing to do with the fact that we were once married; it was a political debt she repaid for my helping to get her opponent to withdraw from the election. Unfortunately, knowing her private line number only gives me the access. Most of the time she’s impossible to budge and I don’t know what a favor from her office looks like.

She hasn’t left for lunch yet. “Hello, this is District Attorney Scot speaking.”

“Hey, it’s me. Are you going to the luncheon?”

“Yes, Peter, I’m just on my way out of the door. What can I do for you? Please make it snappy, my driver is waiting downstairs in the garage.”

“I’ve got some paperwork to give you, but I’d like you to take my word for it and call La Verne to have someone released.”

“What’s this about Peter?”

“One of Stuart’s interstate car customers. The paperwork wasn’t processed in time and he was picked up for GTA. I’ve got the original paperwork here, and if you make the call and have the guy released, I’ll bring the paperwork to the luncheon and lunch will be on me for you and everyone at our table today.”

“Sorry, sunshine, I can’t second guess one of my deputies. One of my dividend checks came in today, so I can handle my own ten-dollar lunch. Have a nice trip.”

So much for access. I’d better make a call to La Verne and make sure they know I’m on the way. Myra’s Deputy District Attorney out there was in and said she’ll be waiting for me at the police station. No doubt she’s curious about what kind of guy could actually have bedded her boss. I’ve never been to La Verne before, but thanks to the wonders of Mapquest.com, I know that it’s 50.27 miles from the Marina and should take me fifty-four minutes of freeway driving. I press ‘Ctrl-P’ for a copy of that Internet page so our office manager can include it with Stuart’s invoice.

There’s a knock on the hull, probably Vinnie with the paperwork. I’m glad he’s finally got himself a steady job working for Stuart. When I first represented him he was directing porno movies, but now he’s driving an armored vehicle for Stuart. It’s one of two old converted Brinks trucks that Stuart had re-painted

to read *He's taking it with him*. Stuart rents the trucks out for funeral processions and gets hired by disgruntled heirs for three hundred fifty a day. Vinnie and his fiancée Olive both now drive the armored vans for Stuart when they're not helping him out at his warehouse, which is full of Camrys and weight control stuff that he sells. Vinnie comes up the boarding ladder onto the fifty-foot Grand Banks trawler yacht that I live on here in the Marina.

“Hi, Mister Sharp. I've got that paperwork for you. You know that Olive and I are getting married soon, don't you? I mean, you think it's too soon for us?”

“Vinnie, in all the years I've been giving legal advice to people, I've always refrained from telling anyone my opinion about whether or not they should get married or get divorced. That's a personal decision that you have to make on your own, and when I hear someone asking me my opinion or advice on whether or not they should take that step, it always seems like it's not me that they're asking. They're really asking themselves, and just letting me listen in on the question.

“So here's my advice. First of all, would you like to see her right now? I mean, do you spend a lot of time thinking about her and wish you could be with her? If the answer to that is yes, then you must ask yourself what you really want to do about it. If the answer is 'get married,' then don't listen to what anyone tells you. Just do it. But if the answer is that you don't think you're ready yet, then don't hurt her feelings by stringing her along and try to let her down as tactfully as possible.”

'Cold feet' is an ailment that affects most men. I had it once, and now Vinnie does. Every guy in the world probably has it at least once in his life. There's no cure for it. Not even time can heal this sickness.

The drive to La Verne is completely uneventful and lacking scenery. From the 405 Freeway down the 10 and all the way past Covina, the only thing to see is traffic and industrial parks. At one point you can see Forest Lawn Cemetery, but I wouldn't exactly put that place on the tourist map. I must have made this trip hundreds of times over the past twenty years while going to Palm Springs or Las Vegas, but I've never stopped in La Verne. A friend of mine's father-in-law teaches history at the nearby university, so being a college town, I'm sure there are plenty of educated people there. Looking at some of the townspeople, I guess that La Verne hasn't passed the same ordinance we have in Marina del Rey, making it a crime for any woman weighing more than two hundred pounds to wear shorts in public.

I pull into the center of town and circle around a few times looking for a parking space. Driving a Hummer has both advantages and disadvantages, and finding a parking space to fit in is definitely one of the downsides. The Police Department offers a few 'guest' spots, but I'd have to park on top of a squad car's fender to get into the only space available, and that wouldn't be a good move in a town where you're trying to make a nice impression.

Another couple of times around the block convinces me that the only place I can conveniently get in and out of without causing any collateral

damage to other cars is a passenger loading zone. The green curb is a nice contrast to my yellow Hummer, so I rationalize that the space was designed for me to park in it. Lettering on the curb states that there's a twenty-minute parking limit, but that should be no problem. I figure it'll take me less than ten minutes to completely convince them to release Stuart's customer, so I can get back here with plenty of time to spare.

I get directed to the Chief's office, where I have the pleasure of meeting with Wendy, the Deputy District Attorney, and Stan Olshansky, La Verne's Chief of Police.

As I enter the office, I notice that they're both glancing down at their wristwatches. This is not a good sign. It could mean that they're both in a hurry to get somewhere else, or that they're pissed that they had to wait so long for me to get there. After the introductions are made and the paperwork is shown to be satisfactory, the Chief picks up the phone, and acting upon an affirmative nod from Wendy, orders the jailer to cut Stuart's customer loose – with an apology.

That takes care of Stuart, but I can tell by the expressions on their faces that they're still not happy. "Hey, I've got an idea. It's almost two in the afternoon, and from the lean and hungry looks on your faces, I'd say that you haven't eaten lunch yet, so since I'm on an unlimited expense account this afternoon I'd be honored if the two of you would be my guests for lunch at the best place in town."

This suggestion definitely gets their attention. They look at their wristwatches again and both agree that the public government owes them some time to eat, so it's a done deal. Now all I have to do is get my Hummer out of that loading zone.

"Great, I'll go get my car, and we can go to lunch in style. I'll be right back." The Chief stops me.

"Oh no, Mister Sharp, that won't be necessary. One of the best places in town is a little Italian café just a block or so down Third Street. We can go out the parking lot exit of the station and walk over there in just a few minutes. They've always got my regular table reserved, so we can sit right down when we get there."

So much for obeying the law. This puts me in an awkward situation. In order to get out of that loading zone to avoid a ticket, I'll have to use the offense as an excuse to get my car. The ethics computer in my head quickly balances both the good and bad results of an admission like that and the Fifth Amendment wins. I decide not to incriminate myself and we go to lunch. Actually, I shouldn't have to worry about it, because I know the kid will add the amount of that parking onto Stuart's invoice.

Per the Chief's suggestion, we go out the back door and walk about two blocks to the Italian Café in the center of town. Sure enough, there's an outdoor table reserved for us under the canopy, and we sit down to start our lunch with some hot Italian onion buns that get immediately dipped into a small container of garlic and oil.

This lunch is much more enjoyable than I thought it would be. The Chief is in his thirtieth year of service and will be retiring next year. He's got plenty of stories to tell, most of them about his experiences on the job in some much larger cities. Other than a car backfiring a few blocks away, it's a quiet, pleasant afternoon lunch. The quality of this place is confirmed when I'm brought the special chopped salad I designed and ordered, which includes the usual greens and tomato plus extra chopped onions, garbanzo beans, anchovies, chopped garlic and mushrooms. As a courtesy to anyone within a ten-foot radius, I keep an extra tin of breath mints with me whenever I order my special salad. The Chief orders one of the house specialties, an angel-hair pasta dish covered with large pieces of salmon.

Wendy, the Deputy D.A. was transferred out here a few years ago from Pasadena. She's married to a court clerk and is rather dull as far as stories about experiences go, but she's friendly. When the check comes, I pick it up and walk over to the cashier's counter. While paying the bill, the cashier looks past me.

"Hey, Chief. Did you hear the gunshots?"

The Chief looks at her with a puzzled expression. "Shots? What shots?"

"Oh, about twenty minutes ago, you know, when I brought your lasagna over, there were some gunshots over on the other end of town."

She must be talking about what we thought was a car backfiring. I sign the credit card receipt and we all start walking back to the station. The Chief is using his walky-talky, bawling out someone on the other end for not notifying him about the incident. I can hear the flustered employee on the other end apologizing. "Gee, Chief, you told me a million times that you didn't want to be disturbed while you were at lunch."

The Chief is anxious to get back to his office, so we're walking at a pretty brisk pace when a California Highway Patrol squad car pulls up and cuts us off just as we're about to cross the street. We stop dead in our tracks not knowing what's going on as the two CHP officers jump out of the car with their guns drawn. One of the State troopers shouts out some orders.

"Step aside, Chief. You too, lady."

The Chief and Wendy follow their instructions. There were only three of us walking together, so with those two ordered to step aside, that leaves only me. I haven't felt like this since kindergarten when I lost out in a game of musical chairs. Both cops are now pointing their guns directly at me.

"Peter Sharp, you're under arrest for the murder of Michael Luskin. Please turn around and lock your hands behind your neck."

At least they said please.