

Alice Bingner

Phone: [REDACTED]

Category: *Essay*

Word Count: 1,424

My Introduction to District Court

I made my way to court that first of many trips with knees of silly putty. I knew my son deserved whatever punishment the court deemed prudent - but no mother sees her 16-year old, the favorite of her brood, before a judge, without trepidation.

I rode the elevator with a crowd of boys about 14. One read painstakingly aloud the sign in the elevator that said, "No smoking" and laughed. He pulled a cigarette from his pack and hung it from the corner of his lips. They all appeared to be going to an afternoon matinee. In fine spirits, noisy, jostling, emotionally they were much better prepared than I for the show we were about to witness together.

Two fidgety girls, age 15 or less, their velour coats hemmed to their buttocks, eye shadow green as apple leaves and mascaraed false lashes that would put a burlesque queen to shame whispered behind me. One wore sheer panty hose; the other leather boots that spanned bare legs to the knees. Like most of

the young audience they seemed restless when the bailiff failed to announce their friend's case at once. It was 1970. Court dockets were crowded with kids in the revolving door of the fairly new drug culture.

"I hear they stay here 'til 8 at night; is that true?" the girl with the shabbily bleached hair asked me.

"I'm not sure," I told her.

The other girl pulled a battered pack of Pall Malls from her coat. She sneered, "Let's go have a cig. With our luck we'll be here 'til then." They shuffled noisily out to the corridor.

I compared the sounds of the courtroom to the shuffling of a Virginia Reel without the music. The swishing of stiff taffeta petticoats irritated the silence. The girl beside me in the patchwork skirt riffled the pages of a paperback, awaiting her particular friend's appearance.

I could see the top floors of two hospitals from my seat. Is the sickness, suffering, remorse and hopelessness in them worse than that which I felt in the courtroom where I waited for my 16-year-old son to appear? I felt sorry for the mothers in

the maternity wards. Their pains currently, in my opinion, were symbolic of a future lived with heartache.

The girls dressed like streetwalkers, the boys in their shabby bellbottoms, the lawyers in their outlandish attire must have sensed similar vibes. The judge, groggy, defeated, bored by the repetitiveness and hopelessness, must have felt especially affected as I was.

“You want a court-appointed attorney?” The judge would ask. “You have no job? When did you work last? No savings? No bank account? No source of income to defend yourself with?”

I paid indirectly; all the audience and the participants did, because my son and the others who appeared that day had no money, no job, no income. They were able-bodied. This was before the job shortage. The boys and girls had no back account because they begged on the street or pushed dope to get funds minute-to-minute. The taxpayers have to defend their “alleged” criminal actions.

Through a window I watched the silent traffic pushing up the streets to the hospitals. Often a siren shouted “make way” as a stork screamed for recognition. I wondered where those babies would end.

The bland assistant prosecutor let the swinging half-door swish back and forth as unthinkingly he scuffled through it. The expressionless girl in the quilted skirt fingered the red fringe on her poncho and quickly turned the pages. A light-colored black boy shambled in, his blue velvet bells swishing against each other as he made his way up the aisle in mercifully quiet cork-bottom shoes. The prosecutor noisily riffled a few pages. A lawyer in blue denims, red shirt, a tie as wide as the freeway and busy looking as Times Square rolled his proud fingers over his handlebar mustache and sauntered to the front in his brown cowboy boots. His sideburns curled back.

My own son in black jacket, black shirt, black bells and black shoes, his hair cropped tightly by the jail officials, inched in in shackles from the door behind which the prisoners who were not out on bail are kept. There was no sign of the smile I've always loved.

A girl in blue leather jacket, high black suede boots over tight navy pants takes her place ahead of me. She wears earrings the size of embroidery hoops. The girl with her in long blue denim coat over unhemmed slacks looks like a walking pup tent. Her skimpy afro looks as if she usually covers it with a wig. Her attorney, a foot shorter, led her to where

she'd be next on the docket. You could hear the sniff attributed to cocaine users from various places around the room.

The public defender wore a chic gray jacket with a kick pleat from the built-in belt. His client dressed in expensive-looking low-slung pants and a fashionable jersey print. Her case for possession of marijuana was postponed. That substance was practically passé. Delay works wonders for most defendants. A boy in a ponytail, bright satin shirt, velvet bells, joined her as she left the courtroom with her bond continued once again.

Marijuana cases were negligible, as busy as the judge was with heroin and cocaine matters. They'd become the norm. Six cases were heard before Barry's came up. The word heroin rolled off tongues in that courtroom as easily as ice cream. In my lifetime, heroin had been associated with Harlem or the movies, not known in the normal town, not certainly in my family. I felt ill.

The judge sparred with a young woman public defender whose client had a nickname. "Tell me, is he known as The Chief or Chief, which?" The judge asked the flustered woman, whose smile seemed fixed while her hair did not. She kept patting it nervously. She conferred briefly with her mustached young man

whose black rings under dark eyes gave an almost gray shade to his face. Back she turned to the suddenly alert judge. "He's known as The Chief, your honor."

"Not Chief, but The Chief?" His honor pursued this whimsy, defying a titter in the courtroom.

The young lawyer and her comrades seemed to think of the court as a comedy of errors. (I'm not sure they were wrong.) They seemed to delight in the opportunity to try out their classroom techniques or maybe emulate a TV hero. They were melodramatic, as maybe lawyers have always been. They all appeared aware of the twist to the plot that the judge seemed guarded from: that courtroom justice is a farce. They knew - those unlearned but knowledgeable court defenders - that their clients would in the end beat the rap. They would get out on probation. The prisons are too full anyway. They know there's a loophole that protects the criminal almost every time.

One young court appointed defender in a sharp green plaid sports jacket asked the sleepy judge hiding behind his left hand (the right one supported his weary head) to dismiss his client's case. He wanted the youth in the modified afro not to be bound over to Circuit Court. "My client did not sell heroin. He was simply a contact man. He accepted the \$30 to get a spoon of

heroin but he merely passed this money to a seller. He did not sell. He was a contact man only." He sputtered.

My first hint that there was a little of an earlier day judge in the man on the bench was his conclusion (concurrent with mine) that this was entirely beside the point. He ignored the floor-pacing showman and bound the boy over.

Barry too was bound over to Circuit Court - his and my introduction to an endless series of confrontations with the law.

The young, frivolously dressed lawyers that day knew the game being played, as did the youth in the audience and those on the stand. In fact, they may have written the manuscript. What they couldn't know was the ones, who, like my son Barry, would continue committing seemingly petty crimes - not violent but criminal nonetheless - after another and ultimately spend most of their adult years behind prison bars. Their productive years wasted, their children neglected and sadly trending toward a repeat of history. A huge percentage of the offspring of prisoners become inmates as well.