

“By now,” he said, “heads of perspiration are forming on Bong-a-la-desh-ee’s forehead. I stay there a moment or two more, I don’t say anything, letting the tension build. Then I walk out, and say as I go by him, my voice as soft as I can make it, ‘Fuck you, you fucking illegal, fuck fucking you!’ ”

Cerriere’s Answer



WE DON'T HAVE TO MEET CERRIERE FOR AN-
other forty-five minutes," Martha Tharaud
said to me as we stood on the corner of Maiden
Lane and Pearl, "so I thought, since it's such a beau-
tiful day, we'd take a walk around the neighborhood
first." She turned and pointed. "The Federal Re-
serve," she said. "A replication of the Palazzo
Strozzi in Florence. The Strozzi's were Florence's
bankers. The fifteenth century. I think that was when
Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*—I don't exactly re-
call. Beneath it—I'm not sure if you know this—are
small cells, like jail cells. There are thousands of tons
of gold in them. A quarter of the world's monetary
gold is seventy-five feet beneath sea level, beneath
Liberty, Nassau, Maiden Lane, and William streets.
Those pieces of sculpture in front of the Fed are Lou-

ise Nevelsons. Across the street from the Fed, the tall white marble-looking building . . .”

“The Chase Bank building,” I said.

“I was wondering if they were going to rename themselves Chemical Chase, or Chase Chemical, after the merger I guess it’s now just Chase. The Rockefellers’ bank. Who do you think had more money, the Strozzis or the Rockefellers? I’m pretty sure the Strozzis didn’t make their money in oil. Those magnificent huge, round black-and-white shapes made of aluminum, by Dubuffet, in front of the building—I try to go by them as often as I can. They’re really quite wonderful.”

Tharaud then turned in the other direction, suggesting that we walk down to the river. The late-February afternoon was bright and windy, with large clouds floating across the sky. “There’s a touch of spring in the air, a touch of April,” she said. “I love this breeze.” With slightly stooped shoulders, Tharaud walked quickly but cautiously, speaking slowly. She was in her early sixties, and one of the preeminent labor lawyers of her generation. There was about her a combination of sharpness and composure—she seemed to know at all times what she wanted to say, and listened attentively to what you were saying. Trim, of medium height, she was wearing a dark green trench coat over a navy-blue suit, an oval-shaped jade brooch pinned to one of its collars. Her hair, silver-white, was combed back and clasped by a barrette made of the same jade as her brooch, which, she said, she bought in Mexico in the fifties. “You know, I’ve never *not* worked down here,” she said. “I’ve worked down here for over forty years.

I’d never thought of it before now, but the Fed, you know, has changed, too. Everyone in my father’s day, all they would talk about was gold. I can remember hearing—this was over on Broad Street. A lawyer—his name was Arthur. Arthur Pendleton III. Pendleton & Strong—Arthur’s grandfather was the founding partner. By the time they got to Arthur, the blood was a bit thin. Arthur opposed—vehemently—the National Labor Relations Act, the minimum wage, unemployment compensation, Social Security. This was in fifty-three, fifty-four. The legislation then, you have to remember, hadn’t been around even twenty years yet. Arthur would say—it sounds almost quaint now—that his constitutional rights had been violated. He used to lift his finger and pronounce, “They are in violation of my constitutional rights!” He had the most horrible, scratchy voice.”

We waited at Maiden Lane and Water Street for the light to change. “Arthur”—Tharaud smiled—“even thought the Federal Reserve was unconstitutional. He’d obsess about it in his own thin-lipped way. He didn’t like me. I was a colored girl. A girl first, but, close behind, colored. Back then, we were colored people. Orientals. I’m told it’s bad manners to use the word now. Levantines”—the light changed and we crossed Water Street—“that was another thing we were, Levantines. You know, darkies. Then, of course, we were Communists, Bolsheviks—every one of us. Lenin was a Jew, of course—which, of course, he wasn’t. I shouldn’t have said every one of us—where,” Tharaud asked, stopping on the sidewalk after we crossed, touching my arm, “is my head? All of us were not only flaming Bolsheviks, we were

rich international bankers as well. The contradiction," she said, then sighed, "seems to have escaped Arthur. Not that he would have cared. Did you know that *I* was responsible for the First World War? It's too bad Arthur didn't live to see today. The Fed's now a big-time bond player—in addition, of course, to controlling the economy by determining the rates Arthur's banker grandchildren can buy and sell and make all their money at."

We walked to the corner of Maiden Lane and South Street. On the other side of the street, past a small parking lot, was the East River. Across the river was Brooklyn Heights. "It's funny how you remember things," Tharaud went on. "Nineteen fifty-three—it seems like eons ago! Arthur D. Pendleton III. I'd just graduated from law school and had been on the job only a month or so—it was October, I remember, a chilly, gray October day. Lewis took me with him to a bargaining session for the maritime people—there were some old-school dock workers back then—Steve DePietro, Jack 'Moho' Mohoney, from when this island was really a port." I asked where the docks had been. "Down here," Tharaud said, waving her hand toward the harbor. "Up the Hudson, too. What is now Battery Park City was docks. It was after the war that things changed. In the fifties a number of piers burned. Arson. The city bought them out. I worked with Lewis Harris back then. Lewis was a great lawyer.

"You know," Tharaud said, stopping, "why don't we go back? There's a fast-food place on Pearl, they have a few tables—you can sit and talk and no one will bother you. We'll be closer to where we'll be

meeting Carriere. I don't want to walk too far." We walked back up Maiden Lane. "Lewis was a phenomenal lawyer," she continued. "Lewis Harris helped change considerably—and for the better—the living standards of hundreds of thousands of people. I remember one time we were in the middle of a contract negotiation, when Arthur looks at me, then looks at Lewis, and then starts in on Trotsky. Can you imagine that? Trotsky! He had this curled upper lip, Arthur—God rest his soul—his curled lip starts twitching, like this . . ." Tharaud stopped and held her upper lip, moving it up and down. "The very *thought* of Trotsky had him in paroxysms! He asks Lewis—I, by the way, did not exist—which, Arthur never realized, made me into a very dangerous person. You make someone invisible and you make them into a very dangerous person. Arthur asked Lewis if he knew that Trotsky was living in the Bronx—that he wasn't in Holy Russia right before . . . Arthur couldn't even *say* the word revolution! 'Did you know that Trotsky's real name wasn't Trotsky?' he asked Lewis, this very mean look in his eyes—I can see it as though it were yesterday. 'Trotsky's *real* name was Leon Davidowitch Bronstein. Bronstein!' He spit the word out—I'm not exaggerating. There was spittle coming from his mouth. He pronounced 'stein' 'stine,' not 'steen.' God, what an unpleasant human being.

"Now, this street has changed," Tharaud said, nodding in both directions, as we came again to Pearl Street. "The place we're going to, Ying's"—she gestured in the direction of the Brooklyn Bridge—"is over here. Years ago it was a tailor's. This glass monstrosity"—she nodded in the other direction—

“was built in the late fifties. Copeland Gerard was one of the original tenants. They used to be up and around the corner, on Cedar, near William. I love Cedar. It still has the look of a dark canyon. Your old-fashioned, downtown one-way street. We used to be on Liberty near Nassau. Lewis used to say, ‘Liberty begins and ends with the Federal Reserve.’ I have never forgotten it. I remember it every time I see the Fed—which has been nearly every day of my life for the last forty years. Copeland Gerard, by the way, is a very good firm. If I needed a management firm, that’s who I’d hire.”

We walked into Ying’s. We ordered Cokes—Tharaud, also, a serving of white rice—paid, and sat at a Formica table near a window facing Pearl Street. “I like the name—Ying’s,” Tharaud said. “Up the yin-yang—that’s what it reminds me of. One of my younger partners says it all the time. He’s from Wisconsin, this young man. Superior, Wisconsin. Way up north, on Lake Superior, near the Minnesota border, not far from Duluth. He’s always talking about Wisconsin. Mostly how cold the winters are. He’s always saying that, historically, it’s one of our most progressive states. To which I add that, indeed, it has been, and is—and that it’s also the state that gave us Senator Joseph McCarthy. Up the yin-yang”—Tharaud smiled—“right? My partner’s great third cousin—or something like that—was, of all people, Thorstein Veblen. I want to say something about that, but, for just a moment—because that’s all he’s worth—the former senator from Wisconsin. A lawyer, you know, McCarthy. A lawyer whose lawyer was Roy Cohn.” I

asked Tharaud if she’d known Cohn. “Yes, I knew him,” she said. “A very famous man in his time, Roy Cohn. During the Simpson thing the younger lawyers in our office were talking about how famous Johnnie Cochran is. Johnnie Cochran’s fame is—I was tempted to say was—nothing, nothing compared to Roy Cohn’s. I asked them what they knew about Cohn. All they knew was that he was secretly gay but openly contemptuous of homosexuals. Contemptuous isn’t a strong enough word—not when you’re talking about Roy Cohn. He had very powerful friends, Mr. Cohn. An insider’s insider’s insider—he had something on everybody. Well, he was—whore isn’t the right word. He certainly was a whore. Pimp is more like it. Every species has its perfect flower. The perfect lawyer pimp. A footnote of a footnote of a footnote of a footnote—he doesn’t even deserve that. Boy, he hurt a lot of people.”

Tharaud lowered her voice. “Did you notice the girl who took our order?” she asked. “It’s a game I play. You can figure out the entire political and economic picture by looking at one single employment relationship. Go ahead,” she insisted. “Take a look at her.”

I turned and took a quick look. “She’s how old, do you think?” Tharaud asked. “Twenty-two? Twenty-three? Chinese, I’d say—but why not be honest about it? I can’t distinguish among Asians very well. I assume she’s Chinese. Very pretty but very frail—not even five feet. She can’t weigh more than ninety pounds. Speaks English with no trace of an accent. Think she was born here? I have no idea.

Where do you think she lives? Queens, probably. I wonder if she understands her polygraph protection rights.”

Tharaud was referring to small posters behind the counter that summarized an employee’s statutory rights under various federal and state laws, including the federal Polygraph Protection Act and New York State’s Workers’ Compensation Act.

“Of course,” Tharaud said, “it doesn’t matter. Since there’s no union, if Ying’s wants to fire her, Ying’s can fire her. How about if she slips and falls on some noodles one of her fellow workers spilled on the floor and fractures her knee? Or her skull? She fractures her skull. She’s clearly an employee. Do you think she’d file a comp claim? Do you think that if she filed a comp claim it would upset Mr. Ying? But let us say—in the world of the hypothetical, of course—let us say, nevertheless, that she wishes to exercise her statutory rights. How, then, does she go about it? Where does she find a workers’ comp lawyer? Maybe that man in the brown double-breasted suit sitting over there”—Tharaud moved her eyes across the room—“maybe he’s a comp lawyer. Should we ask him? I really shouldn’t be such a snob. How do I know? Maybe he manages life-insurance accounts in one of those buildings around the corner on John Street. Maybe he’s an over-the-counter trader in one of those old buildings on Broad Street. What do you think this girl is making an hour? That we know. Minimum wage. Five dollars, roughly, an hour, forty hours a week—two hundred dollars a week, eight hundred a month, ninety-six hundred a year, before taxes. That gives her about seventy-five hun-

dred dollars for food, rent, a night on the town, health insurance, and, if she has children—do you think she has children? I didn’t see a wedding band, but who knows? If she has children, who is taking care of them? Not day-care—day-care costs over five dollars an hour. Maybe she’s married and her husband’s an institutional investor—how do I know? They had a good year last year. Maybe she’s doing this so she can be among the people.”

Tharaud finished her Coke. She hadn’t touched the rice at all. “About a mile, a mile and a half, from here, there are sweatshops, you know. Not facsimiles, either—I’m talking about bona fide sweatshops. A few blocks away from the courts and One Police Plaza. No different from what you had a hundred years ago. Women. Some of them have been kidnapped. A form—what am I saying, a form? Indentured servitude. That’s what it is. These women are kidnapped or sold, then shipped here, then hired out to make clothes or forced into prostitution, to pay off the perverts—the depraved, evil perverts—who smuggled them here. A few blocks from your très chic SoHo restaurants, some of which—Savoy, for instance—I frequent. Compared to them, I’d say this girl is of a higher class—if, by class, we mean the amount of economic control you have over your work. I’d say she has more economic control over her work than a woman her age in a sweatshop, wouldn’t you?”

Tharaud stopped, silent for a moment, positioning her body sideways in her chair and looking out the window. “Why don’t we get out of here and walk some more,” she turned to me and said. “We’ve still got a few more minutes before we meet Carriere.

We're meeting him at the Dean & Deluca's near Hanover Square. The light this time of day there—it's what I imagine the Viennese Belle Epoque cafés to have been like. It's a reconversion of the old Cocoa Exchange building—twenty-foot-high ceilings, large ceiling fans, large windows. As for Cerriere—well, you'll see for yourself."

We walked on Pearl over to Wall Street, and then down Wall to the East River. I asked Tharaud how she thought Wall Street had changed. "Eighty-two, eighty-three, to eighty-seven—the four to five years in the eighties when the Federal Treasury was looted—that was the big change," she said. "The Boom. A lot of these high-rise office buildings—a number of them went into bankruptcy. The Seaport—none of that was here at the end of the seventies. It used to be just a market. Over on Broad, on Stone, near Beaver, two blocks from the Stock Exchange, the grand buildings of the twenties boom—some of them are empty, they look like ruins. Although there may be more money down here now, sheer quantity, in real dollars, than ever before, at least in my lifetime. They've started building again. The money has to go somewhere. Such strange times! I'm glad I'm at the end of my career. I remember when we used to talk about economies of scale—now it's speed. Economies of speed! My partner, Veblen's grandcousin or great-grandcousin, he was surprised I knew who Thorstein Veblen was. Of course I know who Thorstein Veblen was. He'd be like who today? There's really no one like Thorstein Veblen today. He was the one, you know, who came up with the term 'conspicuous consumption,' a hundred years ago. It's still in

the language—I heard it used the other day. Veblen believed—he was sure of it—that capitalism couldn't survive without being managed from the top. That it would destroy itself and everyone with it. I asked my partner what he thought of cousin Thorstein. Now this is a very socially aware young man, a very good lawyer—I'm very fond of him. Do you know what he said?"

Tharaud smiled. "Cousin Thorstein was primitive.' Primitive! At first I thought, no—I was about to argue with him—when I realized he was right. Even Keynes is primitive now. It would be interesting to ask one of the millions of bachelor's or master's degrees in business administration out there if they've ever read anything by Keynes. An old friend who teaches economics at Princeton—he's about to retire—told me, not long ago, that there are collections of Keynes's writings that have *never* been taken out of the Princeton library since they were published in the early seventies. This is Princeton. Imagine bringing up Keynes in one of these megahouses—some of them with more money than most countries in the world. You'd have more luck talking about—who knows? At some point one gets the idea, doesn't one?"

We walked on South Street, then turned on Old Slip. "But," Tharaud said, putting her hand over her eyes to protect them from the sun, "you want to know what I think about lawyers, not about John Maynard Keynes's books in the Princeton library. I'm probably, actually, not that bad a person to ask. How many women attorneys are there in my generation? Not many. Lawyers. God, I don't know. Let me think. What, now, as I approach the end of the journey,

do I think of lawyers? God, I'm sounding almost wistful."

"Have you been aware of the fact that you're a woman?"

"Have I been aware of the fact that I'm a woman?" Tharaud suddenly bristled. "What do you think? Have I been aware of the fact that I'm a woman." There was a long silence. "I really don't know what would make you ask a question like that. What it's like to be a woman in this business! I'll tell you what it's like. I can't even remember all the indignities. It makes a difference now that there are more of us—but, at another level, it only means that the indignities change form, and in some instances even multiply. A whole lot of women disappear in this business. Where do they go? Is anyone trying to figure out what happens to them? Why not? Tell me, why not?"

We came to Hanover Square. Tharaud said that she would like to sit a few minutes before meeting Cerriere. We found a bench in the Square. "Theodore Dreiser," she said, after we'd sat in silence for a while. "Dreiser said the favorite drama of the American people is the story of a murder trial. Nineteen twenty-five he said it. During *that* big-money boomtime. Notice he said the favorite drama, not the *real* drama. The real drama? No one wants to talk about it. Work. Wages. Hours. Conditions of employment. Employment! Listen closely to what people talk about—it's what people talk about almost all the time. Let me tell you this about law. One of the fundamental legal relationships in any society—as fundamental as the relationship between the state and

who the state deems its criminals—is the employment contract. It is certainly as fundamental as a commercial transaction, wouldn't you say? Everyone has one, or wants one, or for some reason or other will never be able to have one, or keep one, right? What's more fundamental than that? Why the big secret? Explain to me, will you—what's the big secret? Why not Court TV on how we are employed? 'What we do unto others and do unto ourselves.' "

Tharaud turned and looked straight at me. "I've got a word of wisdom for you," she said. "Here's a bit of wisdom for you. Pardon me if I sound patronizing. But you want to know what I think? I think the truth eventually will be revealed. That's what I think. Eventually the truth will be revealed. Sound like a preacher, don't I? Well, it's true. Eventually it will. Lawyers, the best of us, we know how to reveal it, too. I've always liked the verb we use—ferret. Lawyers know how to ferret out what's true from what appears to be true. Truth exists somewhere between what you can prove and can't—that we know. In due course, what can be proved and what cannot be proved will be clear to us all. I believe it."

Tharaud stopped. Her voice softened. "I apologize for my little fit of anger," she said, then paused. "I get carried away sometimes. I apologize." She looked at her watch. "One last piece of wisdom, and then we've got to go and see Cerriere. It's something that you don't realize until you're older. Most people are dim. I don't mean mean or stupid—although there are plenty of dim people who are also mean and stupid—I mean something else. A thickness, a thick-headedness, a dullness. When you're younger you say

to yourself, who am I to presume someone is dull? But the older you get, you realize you've wasted so much time, so much time lost. No appreciation of subtlety, of beauty. That's what it is. That, finally, is what it is. To know anything about beauty, you have to take the trouble to learn. Most lawyers are like most everyone else—they don't take the trouble to learn anything other than what puts money into their pockets. I know it sounds like a cliché, but it isn't even a cliché anymore—no one talks about it anymore. What happens is, one day the dimwits wake up in a 'what-is-life-really-about?' stupor, but it's too late, it's already over, so they try to bring you down into their misery. It happens over and over again—every generation, the same thing happens. How many lawyers do you know who think of themselves as sophisticates, cosmopolitans, when, in reality, they don't know very much about very much at all. In the scheme of things it's all so silly, but, in the scheme of things, there are a lot of people hurt by it, really hurt. I'm not sure, either, what you can do about it, other than protect yourself, protect what you believe in, those whom you love. I'm really not sure there's a whole lot more you can do about it."

You're not curious what it is we've just settled?" Cerriere asked, putting his copies of the settlement agreement into his briefcase. "Didn't Martha tell you how much is going into the coffers of Tharaud Tineman & Conway? Tell him, Martha. Go on, tell him."

Tharaud smiled. "Robert's client—more precisely, a managerial employee of Robert's client—has

what my male colleagues call a 'pussy obsession.' Isn't that what you'd call it, Robert?"

"Precisely, Martha. That's precisely what it was."

"Robert's client—but why get graphic? Robert's firm was smart enough not to play hardball on this one. Robert"—Tharaud turned to me—"is the rising labor and employment law star at Villard Steinman, you know. Old Judge Villard—the judge would have been proud of Robert. Robert's devotion to his clients is touching."

"Martha really doesn't like me very much," Cerriere said, turning to Tharaud. "Do you, Martha?"

"That's not true, Robert," Tharaud said. "What makes you think that? I like you, Robert—it's your clients I don't like."

"Don't think that Martha's not liking me hasn't been a problem either—professionally, I mean," Cerriere said. "I don't know if you're aware how much power Martha has. Martha Tharaud puts her name on a complaint and Tharaud Tineman & Conway gets two hundred fifty thousand, just like that. Like magic! Isn't that right, Martha?"

"Your problem, Robert, is you're too sensitive," Tharaud said. "You must remember that it's nothing personal. In fact"—she turned to me again—"compared to his partners, Robert's a splendid fellow. You've probably never had the pleasure of meeting the senior partner in the labor and employment law section of Judge Villard's great firm, James C. Halley. Though I'm worried about Jimmy. The last time I saw him he looked a bit—what's the word—large? A little like Warren Harding. But I mustn't forget that Jimmy has strong genes. 'Of humble beginnings, James C.

Halley, of Akron, Ohio.' A child of the Great Depression. Jimmy will tell you all about it. 'The burdens of the smokestacks at dawn and at dusk.' "

"You surprise me, Martha," Cerriere said, standing up to take his suit jacket off. He fixed his tie, then ran his hands through his thinning brown hair. He had hazel eyes, which, when he wasn't speaking, took on an aggressive, edgy expression. His voice was quick and sharp. "I thought you'd be on the side of the large, Martha," he said, moving his chair back from the small table to accommodate his tall, thin frame, then sitting down. "I don't know how familiar you are with the kind of work we do," he said to me. "Or I should say the kind that Martha does. Martha's one of a kind, you know. Hiring, suspension, retirement, discipline, promotion, harassment, firing—you name it, Tharaud Tineman & Conway brings it."

"Why is getting fired last on your list, Robert?" Tharaud asked.

"Don't interrupt me, Martha," Cerriere said. "I wasn't finished speaking. It's not very good manners, you know. May I finish?"

Cerriere looked at me again. "Martha's modest. No one in this business is more generous than Martha. She'll sue anyone! The greatest equal-opportunity lawyer alive!"

"What Robert is . . ."

"May I finish, Martha? Please?" Cerriere paused a few seconds. "May I talk now, Martha? Is that all right with you?"

Tharaud was silent.

"Thank you," Cerriere said, "thank you very much." He paused again. "Now, where was I? Oh,

yes. Martha's generosity. Not only large, horrible corporations," said Cerriere. "No sir-ee—not Martha. It doesn't matter who you are. A small mom-and-pop business. Schools—Martha *loves* to sue schools. Universities—any place of education. Government. How much have you made suing the government, Martha? Conservative estimate. Ten million? Look! She won't answer. I'll bet it's more than ten."

Tharaud was sitting back in her chair, a vacant look on her face. Cerriere stared at her, bemused. "Look at her!" he said. "You don't like this, do you, Martha?" Tharaud looked at him without any expression on her face. "I have to admit," Cerriere said to me, "I'm somewhat surprised by Martha's comment about Halley's fat. Fat is not supposed to count, is it, Martha? Every once in a while it does, though. In fact, there's a recent California court of appeals case—you'll like this. A prosecuting attorney wants to remove three women as jurors in a murder case. One's obese, one's hair is braided, the third's obese with braided hair and wears a dashiki. The prosecutor says he doesn't like young, fat, counterculture sisters—he probably would have liked to have thrown in lesbian, but that would have created problems—and says they don't like him because, sensitive people that they are, they pick up on his negative vibe. Upheld. In California, a juror's appearance or dress may be grounds for peremptory removal. A person—notice, Martha, that I said 'person'—very fat and poorly groomed might not be in the mainstream of people's thinking. Something like that. There's no need to put too fine a point on it."

Cerriere laughed out loud. "Just look at her!" he

said, nodding at Tharaud. "Relax, Martha. You'll have your chance. I'm just not finished yet. You know, don't you, what she's probably thinking?" Cerriere asked me. "The Disabilities Act. Right, Martha?" Tharaud didn't answer. "Look," Cerriere said, smiling. "Look at her. She's getting pissed off! You can see it in her face. They all get like that. You should hear her partner—Mike 'I-am-the-great-grandson-of-a-poor-Hibernian-potato-eater' Conway. At least Halley really grew up working-class. Conway's just full of shit. You should hear him. He's *gooooood*. Brings an Irish tear to your eye. The perfect touch of brogue. You should hear him say 'discrimination'—he, like, lolls the word around his tongue in this deep, *deeeeeeeep* voice. I'm not very good at imitations," Cerriere said. "*Dee-scrimm-in—ay-shun*. 'How about if you're a faggot or a lesbo, Mike?'"

"You're married, aren't you, Robert?" Tharaud asked.

Cerriere looked at her. "Yes, Martha," he said, "I'm married."

"What's your wife do?"

"My wife's a management consultant, Martha."

"Does she work for someone?"

"Ah! I get it! Martha's so subtle! Never transparent, not Martha! Has my wife ever been sexually harassed? Good, Martha."

"We have clients like your wife—what's her name, did you tell me her name, Robert? At one of those meetings so popular these days in American business, management sitting around earnestly . . ."

"Earnestly?" Cerriere said.

"That's what I said, Robert. Earnestly. They're like you are, Robert. The mission, the values, the vision of the company—it's no joking matter. While the help—including some of the jokers sitting around the table—are terrified of being fired. Simple question, Robert, which you need not answer—but what if, let's say, one of those fellows in management who's hired your wife's firm that day . . . By the way, Robert, is your wife an employee or an independent contractor?"

"Cut the shit, Martha. We know what you're going to say."

"What if nice-guy management asks your wife—how old is your wife, Robert? Early- or mid-thirties, like you are—I'm sure she's very sexy, too. Men like to look at her, right? What if one of those nice fellows at the meeting asks your wife what color her panties are? Cause of action, Robert?"

Cerriere rubbed his eyes with his fingers, then shook his head wearily, before looking directly at Tharaud.

"I haven't upset you," Tharaud asked, "have I, Robert? Have I upset you? These things, of course, do not happen. Not to graduates of the Wharton School. But"—Tharaud sat up in her chair—"let's say, hypothetically of course, that it does happen. Of course it would never *really* happen—but if it did, and were to continue—like in this case we just settled. By the way," Tharaud said to me, "Robert didn't tell you—did you, Robert?—that by not litigating this case he saved his client, oh, maybe, a half million dollars. That's about right, isn't it, Robert? What if," she asked Cerriere, "that nice fellow asked your

wife if she gets moist between her legs when she's around him, Robert?"

"Enough, Martha," Cerriere said.

"How about, 'I know you're thinking of me when you're fucking your husband,' who would be you, wouldn't it, Robert?"

"That's it," Cerriere said. "I'm not going to sit here and listen to this bullshit."

There was a long, tense silence. Dean & Deluca's was almost empty, except for a man and a woman having coffee at a table across the café. A young man was mopping the floor near where we were sitting.

"We should move," Tharaud finally said, her voice softer. "The smell of the disinfectant is too much."

"I'm going to go," Cerriere said. "It's not like we can get into a fistfight." He started to smile.

"It's always been an advantage of mine," Tharaud said with a laugh. "Robert," she said to me, "is referring to a famous fight between a partner of mine and a partner of his. Over on Theatre Alley, across from City Hall Park. It really is an alley—between Beekman and Anne. It must have been the alley behind the theaters that were on Park Row—Park Row was a theater district at the turn of the century. A real punch-out. I'm trying to remember when that was."

"Twenty years ago," Cerriere said.

"That sounds about right," said Tharaud. "The city was close to bankrupt. I can't even remember what it was about."

"No one knows what it was about," said Cerriere. "When I started at Villard, everyone used to talk

about it. Syrett"—he said to me—"that's Martha's partner, kicked the shit out of Marrow, my partner. Marrow is an asshole, but so is Syrett. You can't deny, Martha, that Syrett is an asshole."

"Syrett is an asshole," Tharaud said. "He lost five or six teeth. He had to have a bridge put in his mouth, then dentures. Roger's known to take them out at partners' meetings. A kind of reminder to all of us of his devotion to the firm."

"There's a firm picture from around then," Cerriere said, shaking his head. "Marrow's got a bandage over his nose and his jaw's broken. Syrett literally busted his chops. Marrow's got this ugly, crooked nose—his jaw's unhinged. It moves around when he talks. We have clients who take a look at him and can't stop laughing. He looks like fucking Frankenstein."

"We really should move," Tharaud said. "The smell of whatever this young man is mopping—it really is too much for me."

We moved to a table on the other side of the café, tiptoeing over the wet floor. "So Martha tells me you're here to find out what we do," Cerriere said after we'd seated ourselves at another table. "I'm a neophyte. Martha was practicing before the Wagner Act was passed."

"Not quite," Tharaud said. "I was opposed to it, though, because it gave too much power to the government."

There was another silence.

"Do you ever wonder what that young man's life is like?" Tharaud asked.

“Here we go,” said Cerriere. “So, tell us, Martha, what is his life like?”

Tharaud looked down at her watch. “My friend here wants to know what we do, Robert. Why don’t we get on with it.”

Cerriere was rubbing his long fingers again into his eyes. “Why don’t we do this,” he said slowly. “You say what you think it is I do, and then I’ll say what it is I think you do.”

“Fair enough,” Tharaud said, and then was silent.

“Beware. Martha Tharaud’s thinking,” Cerriere said.

“Essentially . . .”

“Essentially,” Cerriere cut in. “Earnestly, essentially—good, Martha.”

“What Robert essentially does is advise his clients how to fire people without incurring liability.”

Cerriere started to interrupt, but Tharaud stopped him. “You agreed to let me say what I think it is you do, Robert, didn’t you? That is what I’m doing. Let me do it. Then you can say whatever you want.”

Cerriere, arms folded, sat back in his chair.

“I don’t know,” Tharaud went on, “if you’ve ever seen the reports Robert’s firm puts out. They write handbooks. Newsletters.”

“We don’t do that, Martha,” Cerriere said.

“How to fire people,” Tharaud said. “Not kids who work for Burger King or this young man who’s mopping the floor. They get fired and that’s that. Off they go—wherever they go. No, Robert advises his clients how to fire the Roberts of the world.”

“You know, Martha,” Cerriere said, “you amaze me. Simply fucking amaze me.”

“They have all sorts of new words for it, too. ‘Deselected.’ That’s one I heard for the first time the other day. Deselected. ‘Sorry, we have to deselected you.’ Then there’s ‘decruted.’ ‘Excessed’ is another. ‘Surplussed.’ Isn’t that wonderful? ‘You are being surplussed.’ Then, of course, there’s riffing. R-I-F-ing. ‘Reduction in force.’ Robert’s a reduction-in-force-er. He enforces reduction. You’ve got to be strong to do that!”

Cerriere started to speak but Tharaud cut him off again. “Are you, or aren’t you, going to let me finish, Robert?” Cerriere was silent. Tharaud took a deep breath and continued. “I remember after the war—I was still in high school—the words used were ‘redeployment,’ ‘reconversion.’ Now it’s downsize. Job security, economic security—kids these days don’t even know what they mean. It’s like World War II to them—‘there were atomic bombs dropped on Japan and there was job security.’ Though, of course, there was never really that much. Anyway, it’s history now. Robert and his partners figured out how—I should say their clients paid them enormous amounts of money to figure out how—to get half the number of people to work twice as hard, with three, four times as much output. You pay a certain few a lot of money . . .”

“That’s it,” Cerriere said.

“Pay a certain few a lot of money to cut your work force in half, then eliminate half—two-thirds, if you can—of the rest. Downsize—doesn’t it really mean eliminate? Then why not just say ‘eliminate,’ Robert?”

Why not get rid of it all? Pensions, health insurance—go all the way! Take control of the government and eliminate—eliminate all those inefficient obligations the government imposes on bosses. The beauty of it being, the more people you eliminate, the higher your equity. Up it goes! Up, up, up, up, up!”

“You can’t even hear yourself, can you, Martha—you’re fucking pontificating.”

“Robert can’t stand ideas,” Tharaud said. “Can you, Robert?”

“Do you know what?” Cerriere turned to me. His voice was even again. “Martha is right. She’s right. I am convinced. Martha has convinced me. From now on, I’m going to advise my clients to keep employing people they *don’t* need, to make sure that the people they *don’t* need are happy and content and have a high sense of self-esteem and *don’t* feel victimized. That they should pay them five times . . . Why not ten? Pay them ten times what they’re worth because they’re nice, decent people.”

“Are you finished interrupting me yet?” asked Tharaud.

“I am finished interrupting you, Martha. I am sorry I interrupted you. You can finish. In fact, I’m looking forward to it. Just one more thing—it’ll take just a second. In Bosnia. Allegations—of course, only allegations. A detailed indictment. A Bosnian Serb. Forced a Muslim prisoner—I’m sorry to be so graphic here, but the law, after all, can be a very graphic business. A Bosnian Serb forced a Muslim prisoner to bite off the testicles of another prisoner who wouldn’t stop screaming. Well, he stopped screaming. Don’t

cringe, Martha! It’s the real world! Pol Pot—you remember Pol Pot, don’t you, Martha? Pol Pot ordered everyone who wore glasses murdered. I wear glasses when I read—I’m sure you do, too, Martha. I don’t think either of us would have fared too well under Pol Pot’s executive mandate, now, would we have?”

Tharaud began to gather the papers scattered on the table, putting them into her briefcase. Cerriere leaned close to her and laughed. “Mop Boy!” he said, nodding toward the counter, where the young man who’d been mopping the floor was talking with another employee.

Tharaud stopped and stared at him.

“Mop Boy!” Cerriere said again. “I must say, Martha, I’m touched by your concern for Mop Boy. Please don’t worry—I assure you—Mop Boy will do just fine. Where do you think he’s from? Brazil? How about Brazil. Let’s say he’s managed to get himself here from Brazil.”

“Why do you say Brazil?” Tharaud said. “He’s probably an actor on his day job.”

“You asked what his life was like,” Cerriere said, “so I’m telling you what I think, Martha. I think he’s a light-skinned Brazilian. If you don’t like Brazil—how about Lithuania? Hypothetically, of course—let’s say that he’s a dark-haired Lithuanian. Or maybe Honduran. Let’s say he’s Honduran.”

“He’s not Honduran,” Martha said.

“You think Mop Boy wants to go back to Honduras? Why doesn’t Mop Boy want to go back to Honduras? Mop Boy! Mop Boy’s not stupid. Something goes wrong, Mop Boy, obviously, has figured out how

to find someone to take care of him. It was either figuring it out or what? What happens to a mop boy in Honduras? Look at him over there—he's eating an apple Danish! He's drinking cappuccino! The law of Mop Boy—at least, Martha, you can get a hold of it. Mop Boy at least has his mop and pail—at least he knows what and where it is. Mop and pail is mop and pail. Cyberspace, Martha—what can you get a hold of in cyberspace? Have you ever thought of that?"

Carriere's voice had gotten so loud that the man and woman at the nearby table had gotten up and left. The employees behind the counter kept looking up from their work at him.

Carriere stood up and put his suit jacket on. Tharand and I were still sitting. He spread his long hands flat on the table, leaning forward, his voice low, almost a whisper. "The entire world's banking, communications systems, everything on TV, in books, movies, newspapers, music, everything," he said, "everything that can be is being reduced to digital bits, Martha. Ideas! You like ideas so much, Martha . . ."

He stood straight again, taking his briefcase off the chair. "How's a terabit for an idea?" he asked with a smile. "You don't even know what it is, do you, Martha? It's a new optical fiber—the next generation of optical fibers. Invented by the Japanese. A trillion bits a second—transmitting the equivalent, in one second, of twelve million telephone calls *simultaneously*. And terabits are *before* the next wave of telecommunications mergers and joint ventures starts kicking in. Everything is up for grabs, Martha, and no one even

knows what he—or she, or she, Martha—is grabbing."

Carriere stopped. "Except, for my client," he said. "My client knew precisely what he was grabbing. That you are right about, Martha. About that, I admit, you are absolutely right."