

THE UNUSUAL CASE OF THE PURLOINED PORK CHOP

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The Honorable Sven Svenson, Senior Judge of Minneapolis Municipal Court, banged his gavel and announced in a quavering voice:

“This Court will recess for 15 minutes to consider the evidence presented. The Court’s decision regarding guilt and any punishment in the matter of the People vs. Lincoln will be rendered upon reconvening.”

The judge pushed his wheelchair back from the bench. The bailiff bellowed, “ALL RISE,” over his shoulder as he wheeled the judge to the door of his chambers.

The Bullpen

The stage for this courtroom mini-drama was set a week earlier, on the second Monday in January, 1975. At 8:00 a.m. that day, second year law student Eric Johnson, along with a dozen of his peers, assembled in the courthouse’s basement bullpen to meet the arrestees they would be assigned to defend as student public defenders.

In order to be sure to arrive at the courthouse on time, Eric had set three alarm clocks, stumbled from bed, shaved, and dressed in his one suit and tie, all before daybreak. The temperature outside was a reasonable 10 above, and Eric’s battered VW Beetle started on the second try. Unaccustomed to the early hour or the experience, Eric joined the thousands of other early morning commuters creeping along slushy streets past walls of blackened snow banks. Their goal far in the distance, the skyscrapers of downtown Minneapolis, silhouetted by a smudgy winter sun under leaden clouds. Eric rubbed his tired eyes and thought, “I’ll have to do this every day when I get a job.”

He’d circled the courthouse three times looking for an unmetered parking space, despite having just minutes to spare. Dashing to the main entrance, he ran through a puddle that wasn’t frozen solid, soaking his good shoes and socks.

Now sitting at his table in the stifling bullpen, Eric glanced across the room at the gaggle of shoplifters, drunks, taggers, bums, public urinators, and other misdemeanants who’d been arrested over the weekend. He thought, “One of those guys is going to be my first client.”

The trustees and matrons who’d accompanied the prisoners from the lockup huddled in the corner, talking and laughing. As the minutes dragged by, the room became filled with the odors of stale beer, cigarette smoke, BO, and dirty clothes. Eric shifted in his seat, squishing his feet in his wet shoes, releasing his own blast of sour smell.

Finally, a burly matron walked an elderly black man to Eric’s table and shoved him into the chair. She dropped a file on the table and turned on her heel.

“Now what do I do?” Eric thought. “Maybe I should read the file first.”

He opened the file and learned that the man’s name was Roosevelt Lincoln and that he’d been arrested on Saturday for shoplifting a T-bone steak from a Red Owl grocery store. Flipping through the pages to buy himself some more time, he saw that the police had interviewed two witnesses – Oscar Olaffson III, the store’s night manager, and Gaylord Stevenson, a customer. He also saw that trial would be the next Monday at 1:30 PM. A knot the size of a fist formed in his stomach and he began to panic. “Shit! Trial in a week! What do I do?”

It seemed to Eric that minutes passed before a line from a Perry Mason re-run popped into his head. He said, “Good morning, Mr. Lincoln. My name is Eric Johnson, and I’ll be your

lawyer, if you don't mind being represented by a law student. Now why don't you tell me why you're here?"

Mr. Lincoln's wrinkled face relaxed into a smile. He said, "Good morning, suh. I would be most pleased to have you as my lawyer." Eric was struck by the calmness in the man's voice, and his gentle and dignified demeanor. "The reason I'm here," Mr. Lincoln continued, "is I stole a package of meat from the Red Owl Super Market over on 25th street."

The Interview

Eric gulped. He thought, "My first client, and he's confessing? Maybe there's more to the story. There's got to be more."

"Well, Mr. Lincoln," Eric said, trying to organize his thoughts, "why don't you tell me everything that happened. Like why you were in the Red Owl, and why you took the meat, if you really did."

Mr. Lincoln cleared his throat. "Well, suh, my food stamps run out, because I sent the last of them to my daughter. She cleans houses up north in the Iron Range, and just don't make enough to feed her and her baby girl, you see. I hadn't eaten for a couple of days, so I went down to the Red Owl, just to look at all the food, 'cause I knew my new food stamps was due right soon on the first of the month." He paused.

"Go on," Eric prompted, hoping the story would end differently in the telling of it.

Mr. Lincoln said, "So, I stood at the meat counter and saw all that meat, and I had a powerful taste for a fried pork chop." He pronounced "pork chop," "poke chop." "They had all that meat," he continued, "and I didn't think they'd miss one little package, so I took me a pork chop. But then I got caught."

Eric had a vision of Mr. Lincoln in an orange prisoner's suit being handcuffed and shackled by the burly matron. "That can't be!" he thought. "He stole the pork chop because he was hungry. He was hungry because he gave his food stamps to his daughter and granddaughter. I can't let him go to jail. But what do I do?"

He opened the file again and pretended to read while his mind grasped at straws. The printed words didn't register, but a conversation with an upper classman came back to him. The older student had just completed his assignment as a student public defender. "The system's so easy to manipulate," he'd bragged. "I got my client off with paying restitution and court costs, and attending a diversion program. First offense, so it was easy. If the prosecution insisted on going to trial instead, I had my guy ready to lie and say he didn't do it."

"That's it!" Eric said to himself excitedly. "Restitution and diversion!" To Mr. Lincoln, he said, "I have an idea so you don't have to go to jail. We can offer to pay for the pork chop and court costs, and you could agree to go to a class. What do you think about that?"

Mr. Lincoln clasped his hands in his lap. He bent his head down and shook it apologetically. "I don't have any money, suh," he said. "I could pay for the pork chop next month. I believe it was \$1.59. How much would court costs be, do you think?"

The upper classman's voice boomed in Eric's head. "Two hundred-fifty dollars made the whole thing go away. Piece of cake." Eric immediately saw the flaw in his thinking. He said, "Umm, maybe two hundred dollars."

"Lordy, suh," Mr. Lincoln said. "That's two months' rent money. No, suh, I can't lose my apartment." He looked up at Eric with worry in his dark brown eyes. "I do hope you can help me, Mr. Attorney Johnson, because I surely can't go to jail, either."

Eric read the grimness in the man's expression, but also saw telltale crinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth. He thought, "I'll bet he's quick to laugh when he's not stressed out." Again, he sensed the man's calm dignity.

"I will do my absolute best for you, Mr. Lincoln," Eric promised. "I'll interview the witnesses and research the law, and look for anything that might be helpful." He paused. Remembering the upper classman, Eric thought, "I can't ask Mr. Lincoln to lie, but I can ask him not to say"

Eric cleared his throat. "Mr. Lincoln," he said, "when we go to trial, it would be really helpful if you didn't tell the judge, you know, that you stole the pork chop. I mean, maybe you could kind of" he trailed off when he met his client's eyes.

Mr. Lincoln held his gaze. He said, "I will have sworn an oath to tell the truth, suh, in the presence of a judge and Our Lord himself. I cannot tell a lie, even if it means that I must go to jail."

A wave of anxiety washed over Eric and his stomach tied itself into a knot. "OK," he said. "I understand. We'll just have to do the best we can with what I find."

The First Witness

Eric sat in his VW Beetle outside the Red Owl the next night. It was 9:45 and 5 below zero, and he could see his breath inside the car despite the heater's best efforts. He was waiting for Oscar Olaffson III, the grocery store's night manager, to show up for his shift. The snow had been plowed into a shoulder high cliff along the curb, and Eric had to crane his neck to see the store's entrance. He hoped that Oscar would say something that would give his client a break. "Otherwise," he thought, "Mr. Lincoln will go to jail and it'll be my fault."

Not really, he told himself, but he felt guilty because he couldn't come up with something to use as a defense. He blamed himself for getting in the position where he had to defend a real person, who'd face real consequences if he failed, without having the knowledge he needed. Yet he'd jumped at the chance to work on a real case to escape the endless hypotheticals and abstractions of his law school courses.

Eric scraped a hole in the frosty windshield and peered at the door of the Red Owl. He'd gone to law school to get away from his small town and its closed-mindedness. Yet he struggled to cope with big city ways, and missed many of the values he'd taken for granted.

He couldn't understand how the upperclassmen could so easily manipulate profound legal principles, developed and refined over decades, to justify the dubious moral positions they proclaimed in class. "How did they lose their way so quickly?" he wondered every day.

In addition to that, he was in constant turmoil trying cope with the ivory tower arrogance of his would-be profession. Like the way his Constitutional Law professor shut down any attempt to discuss the Viet Nam War. Faculty and students alike knew that recent students were still dying in the war, but the professor focused instead on the principles of regulation of interstate commerce. "This war is just a transitory issue," the professor proclaimed airily. "Interstate commerce issues will resonate throughout your careers."

A short man wearing a Red Owl jacket hurried into the store. "That must be him," Eric thought and turned off the motor. He locked the car, took a deep breath, and looked up at the jet black sky filled with crystal stars. "That's the only good thing about 5 below," he thought, and hurried after the little man.

Eric caught up with him in the produce section, where he was rearranging the banana display. He said, “Mr. Olaffson, I’m Eric Johnson, and I’m defending Mr. Roosevelt Lincoln against the shop lifting charges you filed against him last Saturday.”

Eric was just medium height, but Oscar had to look up at him. He could have been Central Casting’s perfect grocery store night manager – short and officious, with a greasy comb-over, and a crisp Red Owl apron cinched by a belt with a box cutter in a holster.

He looked at Eric blankly, and then said, “Oh yes. The colored man who stole the Porterhouse steak.”

Eric asked, “Can you tell me what happened?”

Without a word, Oscar turned and headed toward the meat cooler. He stopped in front of the steaks and straightened crooked packages.

“I was over there at the end of the cooler,” he pointed, “and I saw this old colored man reach into the cooler and slip a Porterhouse steak into his pants. I followed him and saw him leave the store without paying. I stopped him and called the police, and that was that.”

Eric’s pulse quickened. He said, “It was a Porterhouse? You’re sure?”

Oscar Olaffson III drew himself up to his full height and said indignantly, “I know my inventory, and there was a Porterhouse steak not accounted for that day.”

Eric thanked him and walked back into the freezing night. The witness said Mr. Lincoln had stolen a Porterhouse, but Mr. Lincoln said he’d stolen a pork chop.

It wasn’t much, but it gave Eric a glimmer of hope.

The Girlfriend

Two days later, Eric called Annie, his girlfriend.

“Hi sweetie,” she said with her usual cheerfulness. “Where’ve you been?”

“In class and at the law library. I’ve been studying up on criminal law for my big case.”

“How’s it going?”

“Not great,” Eric said dejectedly. “I can’t find anything helpful in the law, and I’ve got terrible facts. I have a client who’s willing to confess, and a witness who kinda-sorta contradicts the police report. It doesn’t look good for my guy.”

“Well,” Annie said, “if he stole something and got caught, shouldn’t he go to jail? Isn’t that the way it works?”

“You wouldn’t say that if you met him, Annie. He’s a nice old man. Kind of reminds me of my grandfather. Mr. Lincoln stole the pork chop because he gave all his food stamps to his daughter so she and her baby could eat. I’m completely stumped, but a real attorney could find something, some angle.” In a lighter tone, he said, “Perry Mason could definitely get him off.”

“Who?”

“Perry Mason. You haven’t heard of him? The famous defense attorney who wins all his cases by getting the bad guy to confess?”

“Really? I mean, is he real?”

“No, it’s just a TV show. I used to watch it when I was a kid. It was on for years.”

She said, “Oh, yeah. I remember the ads, but I never saw it. It was too serious.”

“He had these great cases, like ‘The Case of the Scarlet Scandal,’ and ‘The Case of the Ruinous Redhead.’ I used to want to be an attorney like him.”

“How’d he get his clients off?”

“He always came up with some smoking-gun evidence just in time. He’d confront the bad guy with the evidence on the witness stand, and he’d confess.”

“So, Mr. Perry Mason wannabe, what’ve you got in your case? Tell me.”

“OK, seriously,” Eric said. “The prosecution has to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Mr. Lincoln stole a T-bone steak from the Red Owl. If I can show any doubt, any doubt at all, then the prosecution hasn’t met their burden, and Mr. Lincoln won’t get convicted.”

“And?” Annie asked.

Eric hesitated. “Well, umm, Mr. Lincoln says he took a pork chop, and the witness says he saw him take a Porterhouse steak, and the police report says it was a T-bone. So, does that create any doubt at all in your mind?”

“Gee, sweetie,” Annie said, “I don’t know. I mean I’d vote your way if I was on a jury, but I don’t think so. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Eric said glumly, “I know. I guess Mr. Lincoln’s going to jail.”

The Second Witness

The next Saturday morning, Eric stood outside Gaylord Stevenson’s door on the second floor of a shabby apartment building. Against all odds, he hoped this witness would say something helpful. He looked at his watch, decided 9:30 was late enough, and rang the bell.

He waited a minute and then knocked loudly. Eventually, he heard shuffling feet, and a stocky 30-something man opened the door.

“Gaylord Stevenson?” Eric asked.

“Yes, I’m Gay,” the man said.

And he certainly was. He was dressed in full drag, minus a wig. But it wasn’t drag-queen drag. Rather, the man wore a wrinkled gingham square dance dress with puffed sleeves and a lacey collar around the neck. His heavy beard bristled thorough crusty pancake makeup.

“Ummm,” Eric said, “I’m Eric Johnson? And, umm, I’m defending Mr. Roosevelt Lincoln against shop lifting charges? And I understand that you witnessed the event ... last Saturday”

Gay Stevenson rubbed his eye with his fist, causing his false lashes to dangle from the corner of his eyelid. “Huh?” he said, “what the fuck ... oh yeah, that old black guy at the Red Owl. Well ... come in, I guess.”

The room was darkened against the morning sun and smelled like stale whiskey and dope smoke. Eric sat on the couch behind the coffee table, which was piled with newspapers and dirty dishes. In the center was a large box covered by a towel. Gay Stevenson sat at the other end of the couch and crossed a hairy thigh over his knee.

“So?” he said.

Eric pulled himself together and said, “Can you tell me what you saw?”

Stevenson rummaged through the papers and dishes. “I need a smoke,” he growled. He knocked the clutter against the box in the process, and finally lit a roach from the ashtray.

He exhaled at Eric and said, “Well, I was shopping at the Red Owl and passed the meat cooler on the way to the produce section, when I saw the old guy reach into the cooler and slip a package of meat into the waistband of his pants. I remember thinking, God, that would be really cold. You know, in there with dicky and the twins?”

Scratching noises came from the box, but Eric focused on the crucial question: “Do you know what kind of meat it was?”

Stevenson looked at the box a moment and then at Eric, and said, "I'm pretty sure it was a New York Strip."

"Could it have been a T-bone or a Porterhouse? Or, a pork chop?" Eric asked, heart pounding with anticipation.

"No, I'm positive it was a New York Strip," Stevenson said. "I'd spotted a really nice one a couple of minutes earlier, and I went back to get it after I saw the old guy, but it was gone. Yup, it was a New York Strip."

The scratching now was so loud it couldn't be ignored, and Stevenson pulled the towel off the box. It was a glass terrarium, empty except for an immense scorpion. "Christ," Eric thought. "It must be nine inches long!" The scorpion saw Eric and charged at him, claws and tail in attack mode, only to crash into the glass.

Stevenson laughed and called, "Amory, Lovie is hungry. Will you please feed her while I talk to this nice young man?"

A voice from another room called back, "There's a mouse in the freezer, hon."

Gay replied, "Did you cut it up, like I asked you?"

The voice from the other room said, "Oh, for Christ sake!"

A second later, a young black man walked into the living room wearing only tights that left nothing to the imagination. He stopped in his tracks when he saw Eric. "Well hello, pretty boy," he smiled, devouring Eric's face with his brown eyes. "What're you doing the rest of the morning?"

Eric decided it was time to go. Gaylord Stevenson had given him another sliver of hope.

He said thanks and sorry to disturb you, and bounded down the stairs two at a time into the bright winter sunshine.

The Strategy

Monday, the day of the trial, arrived before Eric knew it. As sometimes happens in January, a raging blizzard had shut down the Twin Cities over the weekend, and Eric had been housebound. By mid-morning on Monday, the streets were passable, and Eric was able to make his way to the courthouse in time for his noon strategy meeting with his case supervisor.

Eric sat on a bench in the cavernous marble lobby, watching throngs of gray and brown overcoats enter and leave the building. The odors of wet wool and steam heat filled the lobby, punctuated by occasional blasts of frigid winter air as people opened the doors. He spotted Oscar Olafsson's Red Owl jacket in the crowd. The man hurried in from the cold, sloshing across the lobby in his galoshes and clutching a subpoena in his gloved hand.

The case supervisor was Lars Iverson, whom Eric knew slightly from law school. Lars had just passed the Bar exam, and now was a junior attorney in a criminal defense firm. Eric waited on his bench, clutching his file, thinking glumly about his case. After a few minutes, he saw Lars walking down the staircase at the far end of the lobby. He made his way through the crowd and sat on Eric's bench. They shook hands and Lars said, "Well, what've you got." Eric gave him the file, embarrassed by the sweaty palm print on the cover.

Lars skimmed the pages and said, "That's a tough case for your first time out." Eric emphasized the T-bone vs. Porterhouse vs. New York Strip vs. pork chop discrepancy, but Lars said, "It doesn't really make any difference. It's still shoplifting." Eric sighed dejectedly and said, "I know."

"Have you prepped your client?" Lars asked.

“No, I – ”

“Shit, Johnson. Are you trying to lose this case?”

“Hey, man, back off!” Eric bristled. “The storm ... I was trapped in my house all weekend, and my client doesn’t have a phone, so just lighten up. I’m going to talk to him before the trial.”

Lars waived his hand dismissively. “OK, OK, do that. I’ve got about five minutes to talk trial strategy with you.”

Eric took his legal pad out of his file and poised his pen, ready to take notes.

“Your client will have to testify,” Lars said. “You’ve got no other witnesses, and you don’t want the prosecution to win by default. Start him out easy, so he’ll feel more comfortable. Ask him his name and where he lives. Maybe what he did for a living, and if he has any kids. Try to make the judge see he’s a real person, not a poor black criminal.”

“Uh-huh,” Eric mumbled, writing rapidly.

“Now, you have to approach the incident carefully. Don’t let him blurt out anything incriminating. You might ask him if he went to the Red Owl, give him a chance to deny even being there.”

“He won’t,” Eric said. “He told me he wouldn’t lie, even if it means going to jail.”

“Jesus, where do these people come from?” Lars grumbled. “This is serious shit, not Sunday school.”

Eric had an idea. He said, “Well, he’s so focused on being honest, I could ask him if he took a T-bone. He’d surely say no.”

“That’s good,” Lars said. “Yeah, that’s good. Ask him about the Porterhouse and New York Strip, too.”

“Yeah, but won’t the prosecution ask about the pork chop on redirect?” Eric asked.

“They don’t even know about it, probably, and you’ve gotta be sure your client doesn’t mention it. So, if he denies taking the other meats and doesn’t admit that he took the pork chop, the judge’ll have to decide based on your client’s and the witnesses’ credibility. At least it shouldn’t be a slam dunk for the prosecution.”

Lars snapped open his briefcase. “Let’s see who the judge and prosecutor are.” He pulled out a copy of the court’s trial calendar. “The judge is Sven Svenson and the prosecutor is Ingrid Olson. This isn’t getting any better. Svenson should’ve retired years ago. His mind is gone. He’s completely senile and has been really erratic lately, handing down big jail time. He held an attorney in contempt last week for requesting a recess to consult with his client. And Ingrid Olson is the daughter of Hangman Judge Olson.” He laughed. “Jesus, Johnson, you couldn’t have picked a worse first case.”

Eric agreed, but it was even worse than Lars thought.

Eric had taken Ingrid on a date one time when he was a first year student and she was a senior. She was the law school’s “It” girl, but of course a male student couldn’t say that about a woman law student. Ingrid was smart, striking, and drove a Porsche. She had a judge for a father, was politically connected, and had a bright future.

On a dare, he’d asked her out, and was shocked when she said yes. The evening had gone nicely until they’d gone for coffee and started talking politics. She became enraged and stormed out of the coffee shop when he said Richard Nixon was a liar and a crook, and should’ve been impeached and prosecuted. “I guess the daughter of Hangman Olson would be pretty conservative,” he reflected while brushing his teeth that night.

Not long after that, his VW slid into her Porsche in the law school’s snowy parking lot, crumpling her car’s rear fender. She’d despised him ever since.

Shoving the memory aside, Eric decided to wait for his client in the courtroom. He asked Lars where it was. “It’s in the basement – Courtroom B-3. Go down those stairs and follow the heat pipes overhead to B-3. I’ll find you down there as soon as I finish my next meeting.”

Eric trudged down the stairs, thinking, “I’m going to get my ass handed to me and my client’s going to jail.” He followed the heat pipes until he found a heavy wooden door with “Judge” stenciled in gold leaf and “Svenson” written on an index card taped beneath it.

He stepped into the courtroom to see if his client was inside. BAAWHAAM! The door slammed shut behind him. He jumped. When his heart slowed down, he took in the scene of his first trial.

It was a tiny room, lit dimly by fluorescent lights and gray sunshine from the dirty window above the judge’s bench. The weak light couldn’t hide the scrapes and gouges in the bench. The metal attorneys’ tables were dented and scratched, and the linoleum floor was chipped. The walls were industrial beige. A fluorescent light flickered and buzzed, and Eric thought, “So much for the majesty of the law.”

He sat at the defense table to wait for his client.

Before long, Ingrid Olson strode in as if she were already the District Attorney instead of a junior prosecutor trying an insignificant misdemeanor. An assistant followed with her files, easing the door closed. Eric smiled hello, but Ingrid ignored him. Lars hurried in and sat next to him. The bailiff wheeled Judge Svenson to his bench.

Just as the judge called the case, Mr. Lincoln slipped through the door at the back of the courtroom. BAAWHAAM! It slammed shut, and everyone turned to stare at him.

The Trial

Ingrid Olson presented her case crisply. The arresting officer testified that Mr. Lincoln had stolen a T-bone. As expected, Oscar Olaffson testified that he’d taken a Porterhouse, and Gaylord Stevenson testified that it was a New York Strip. Eric tried everything he could think of to discredit their testimony on cross-examination, without any luck.

Ingrid rested her case and looked at Eric as if to say, “OK bohunk, now make my day.”

Eric wanted desperately to ask Judge Svenson for a short recess so he could talk to his client in the hall, but remembered that the judge had held an attorney in contempt for doing just that.

He called Mr. Lincoln to the stand.

The elderly man shuffled meekly to the witness chair. Eric sensed the man’s gentle humility and dignity, just as he remembered from their interview. He hoped the judge and Ingrid would get the same sense of the man, but the judge looked drowsy and Ingrid looked like a bobcat who’d flushed out a fawn.

With great reverence, Mr. Lincoln placed his hand on the Bible and swore to tell the whole truth.

“OK,” Eric thought. “Everyone needs to take a deep breath.” To calm Mr. Lincoln’s nerves, as well as his own, Eric asked him the usual preliminary questions.

Mr. Lincoln recited his name and address calmly. Responding to Eric’s questioning, he said that he had a daughter and granddaughter, and that he’d been a laborer most of his life, until he’d been injured and couldn’t work anymore.

Eric decided it was time to move to the substance of the case. Fingers crossed under the table, he asked, “Did you go to the Red Owl on the night in question?” He tried to beam a mental answer to this client: “Say no!”

Mr. Lincoln looked at the judge and then at Eric, and said, “Well suh, yes I did.”

Eric fought to keep his disappointment from showing. “Alright,” he said to himself, “this is it. Ask the \$64,000 question.” He cleared his throat.

“Mr. Lincoln, you’ve heard the arresting officer’s testimony. Did you take a T-bone steak on that night?”

A trickle of perspiration dripped down Mr. Lincoln’s face. He wiped it away with a handkerchief. He said, “No, suh, I did not take a T-bone steak. I did not take a Porterhouse or a New York Strip.” He paused. Elation began to stir deep inside Eric. He beamed another mental message: “Don’t say anything more!”

The elderly black man looked at the Bible lying on the corner of the bailiff’s desk. He sat up straight in the witness chair, and said, “I stole a pork chop.”

Eric felt like he’d been punched in the gut. He thought, “Congratulations, Perry Mason. You just got your client to confess to the crime on the witness stand.”

Ingrid looked triumphant and contemptuous. Lars held his head in his hands.

The prosecution waived cross-examination, and both sides waived closing arguments, Ingrid probably thinking she couldn’t do better than the defendant confessing, and Eric thinking he’d only make matters worse.

Then, Judge Svenson declared the recess.

The Verdict

Eric looked at his watch. “The judge has been in his chambers for 30 minutes. Maybe that’s a good sign.”

Ingrid had passed the time taking notes on the files her assistant carried for her. Lars had dashed off to another courtroom as soon as the recess began. Eric had tried to look busy, but wound up drawing pictures of cars he hoped he could afford someday. He dreaded the conversation he’d have tomorrow with the professor who ran the student public defender program, but at the same time, felt a tiny ray of hope because the judge had been considering the evidence for so long. Mr. Lincoln didn’t know what to do, and Eric didn’t know what to tell him, so he sat stoically in the witness chair.

Ten minutes later, the door of Judge Svenson’s chambers opened and the bailiff wheeled him to his bench. Eric and Ingrid snapped to attention when he rapped his gavel. Bright sun shone momentarily on the judge, illuminating the threadbare shoulders of his robe and flecks of dandruff.

“In the matter of the People vs. Lincoln,” Judge Svenson said in his reedy voice, “this court has fully considered and deliberated upon all of the evidence presented, and . . .”

He coughed. He coughed again. He coughed repeatedly into his handkerchief, long hacking coughs. Eric looked at him with concern and thought, “Gosh, he looks like he just woke up.”

The judge wiped his mouth. He fumbled for a Kleenex and wiped his eyes. It seemed like minutes passed before he continued.

“This court has fully considered and deliberated upon all of the evidence and is prepared to render its decision. And that decision is this: This court finds that the evidence is contradictory. The prosecution witnesses have testified that the defendant stole a steak – it’s not clear whether it was a T-bone, a Porterhouse, or a New York Strip, but it is clear that the prosecution’s case rests upon the fact that it was a steak. The defendant, on the other hand, has testified that he stole a

pork chop. This court cannot convict the defendant of stealing a steak when the defendant has testified under oath that he stole a pork chop. The charges against Mr. Lincoln are dismissed.”

He turned to Mr. Lincoln. “Mr. Lincoln, you are free to go, sir.” The judge banged his gavel and the bailiff wheeled him away.

Eric shook hands warmly with Mr. Lincoln and smiled at Ingrid. She stormed out, assistant in tow, nearly colliding with Lars as he entered the courtroom.

Eric thought, “Holy shit! I won my first case! Maybe I’m good at this, after all. It feels great, being on the side of the good guys. Maybe I should be a public defender after I pass the Bar.”

A moment later, he said to himself, “Wow! I can’t wait to tell Annie!”

* * * * *

The Unusual Case of the Purloined Pork Chop is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.