

Rude Awakening

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One of the most bizarre happenings of my youth abruptly altered my choice of profession. It also made me very cautious about giving unqualified respect to public figures.

I grew up politically when parties introduced volunteers and aspiring politicians to rigorous training over a long period. One learned the ins and outs of the party and earned growing levels of responsibility. I worked hard and gained the attention of local leaders. Near the end of my college years I was even approached to run for a so-called safe seat in the legislature. But that was not to be.

I was elected in 1963 to the position of State College Chairman. My task was to organize the state's collegiate political clubs. I had campaigned diligently and was delighted with my election. Later, I was also appointed arrangements chairman of the

college division of the party's national convention in Miami Beach.

In these roles, I met many elected officials, staffers and attorneys. I was impressionable and admired those who won elections. As an award for service, I was sent to Washington, DC as a summer intern at the party's national congressional committee. I liked what I was doing and they liked me.

One fateful night, that changed. After enjoying a group dinner, the other man at the table made a rather crude and brazen sexual overture to the women. The rest of us were taken back by the behavior. We told him so and he left. We watched him go to a telephone and make a call. A short time later an exceptionally attractive woman met him. After we talked through the situation, I said goodnight and headed to my room.

In the hallway, a man I knew from party meetings took me by the arm saying he knew where we could have a good time. We arrived at a room with a locked door. He tapped, the door opened a little, and someone looked at us past the chain. The man who took me to the room assured the doorkeeper that I was "o.k." As we entered the room I was stunned.

The exceptionally attractive woman who had come to meet the man from dinner was there in the room. She was on a bed nude. Two men were arguing over who would have sex with her next. At the other side of the suite was a circle of nude, cigar smoking, drinks-in-hand, sometimes erect, men. They were telling jokes and queuing up for their turn in bed. I do not know if the woman was a paid prostitute or an otherwise willing participant. It didn't matter to me. I was appalled and frightened.

Several men were shouting at me to get in bed with her. It dawned on me that everyone had to sleep with her so no one could talk about anyone else. One man was so impatient that he began and I was able to walk to the bar, fix a drink, and survey the scene. Once I was no longer the focus of attention, and while the other man continued having sex with the woman, I slipped out the door.

The men in the room were of local, state and national prominence. My image of them was shattered. After wandering around for a while, I called my principal mentor who was a woman and asked to come to her room. I described the scene and expressed my disillusionment. She was shocked on one hand, but obviously more aware than I of the players and their disgraceful behaviors. We decided to do nothing and to hope that they would leave me alone.

Around the pool the next day, as I walked among the wives and children of the men who were in the room the night before, I got more than casual looks. Within 24 hours of returning to college my phone rang and a demand was made that I meet a representative of the group. I declined. They made me an offer that I couldn't refuse. We met at a public hotel, the only place I trusted to be with any of them at the time.



There was little small talk at lunch. I was subjected to a number of threats with details. One promise they made was to block my admission to the State Bar no matter how high I graduated in my class or how well I scored on the Bar exam. They also said they would slander my mentor who gave me a room in her house in exchange for helping with her three children.

Not knowing what to do, but in full emotional alarm, I risked talking to a senior party member who I hoped was wise enough to counsel me. He found the story so incredible that he did not believe me. Later, I found out that he had called an attorney at the congressman's office and confronted him. Now, I was really worried.

I may never know how, but cooler heads prevailed. They decided that pressure would push me public. They gambled that if they left me alone, I'd be quiet. They were right. A twenty-two

year old is no match for a corrupt system. As the months passed, I began to feel safe. I abandoned my plans for law school. At the time, I had branded all attorneys and politicians with the sins of those I knew. I walked away from politics. I joined the Peace Corps and moved to California for training.

No story, written nearly 30 years later, can demonstrate the impact that these events had on me. I've been generous in my characterizations of the players. Some of the people are now dead. Others live with their own conscience. I took my underlying motivations for politics and became an environmental activist. Today, I work with people to develop values and modify addictive behaviors in order to reduce situations like this one. Years later, when I recovered memories of my sexual abuses as a child, I understood more fully why this event had an impact beyond my initial outrage.