SHEER HAPPENSTANCE

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Whenever my wife, Barbara Fox, and I go out to dinner with a couple we've only recently encountered, one of them will invariably ask us, "How did you guys meet?" We happen to have an interesting answer; and since my role in it predates Barbara's, I usually relate the story. Here's the condensed version, shorn of the elaboration and hyperbole that often accompanies the actual narrative.

I went to high school in New York with a guy named Joe. We knew each other but weren't particularly close. He graduated a year ahead of me, and we lost touch completely.

Over ten years later – after college, the Navy, law school and the early years of my first marriage – I landed back in New York as an associate in a law firm (Davies, Hardy & Schenck) where, lo and behold, Joe was one of the other associates. But after a year or so, Joe left to pursue a career in real estate, and we once more lost touch with each other.

Now fast forward to a Manhattan street corner almost 20 years later. My career is in full swing at Skadden, Arps, but my first wife and I have been separated for a few years. I bump into Joe, who's been successful in real estate and has a young wife and family. It's the kind of chance New York encounter that happens from time to time, and generally nothing comes of it. For some reason, though, we break the rule and make a lunch date.

At lunch, Joe and I find ourselves reminiscing about the good old days at that first law firm. It's been years since either of us has seen a number of the guys (women lawyers were scarce back then). Wouldn't it be fun to have a reunion? Now, there's a thought frequently expressed by old acquaintances and almost never implemented. But, wonder of wonders, Joe decides to hold a cocktail party reunion in his new apartment. He tracks down a number of lost souls and sends out invitations.

Late in the afternoon of reunion evening, Joe's vivacious wife, Marjorie, calls her even younger sister on the phone. The sister, who lives in New York, has recently concluded a long-term male relationship. "You've got to get over here without delay," says Marjorie. "Joe has invited a bunch of old farts over for a reunion, and I'm about to be bored to death. I need some support."

The sister grumbles but dutifully complies. And so, while I'm sipping a beer in Joe's parlor, the door opens and in walks this vision – who, our dinner companions have guessed by now, is Barbara. I sidle over to the Fox, and the rest, as they say, is history. . . .

Each time I relate this tale, I'm struck by how many coincidences and other events outside my control had to occur in order for that fateful encounter to take place. What are the odds of Joe and I starting our careers in the same law firm? Of our bumping into each other two decades later on a street corner? Of converting that chance encounter into a lunch? Of Joe organizing a reunion? Of Barbara and I both being unattached at the same time? Even after 25 great years of marriage, I still consider it sheer happenstance.

But lately, as I've reflected further on the subject, I've come to realize just how much of life partakes of that same chance character. And I'm not only talking about the vagaries of fate that may impact us – hitting the big lottery number, the onset of a dreaded disease, lightning striking the tree limb we're perched under – the kind of stuff over which we have little control.

No, what fascinates me is how the voluntary decisions we make traveling the road of life propel us in directions which lead to relationships and outcomes that wouldn't occur without those choices – but can make all the difference in terms of our future years.

The standard metaphor for this kind of thing is the fork in the road, and the classic poetic treatment here is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken". (Although you can't ignore Yogi Berra's unassailable dictum – "When you arrive at a fork in the road, take it.") Scholars have debated whether Frost intended his poem to be inspirational in terms of promoting individualism and non-conformity ("Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference"), or was simply trying to twit a hiking friend of his who fussed over irrevocable choices of a minor sort.

For me, however, the key to the poem is that, to the narrator, the two roads looked "really about the same"; and though he "kept the first for another day," he also knew full well "how way leads on to way," and thus doubted whether he "should ever come back." That's just how it is in life – one thing leads to another, and then it's often difficult to retrace your steps.

Of course, it's not always a matter of making a conscious decision about an important matter – or, as the songwriter put it, "Little things mean a lot." Listen to Longfellow's take on this:

> "Round about what is, lies a whole mysterious world of might be – a psychological romance of possibilities and things that do not happen. By going out a few minutes sooner or later, by stopping to speak with a friend at a corner, by meeting this man or that, or by turning down this street instead of the others, we may let slip some great occasion of good, or avoid some impending evil, by which the whole current of our lives would have been changed."

In the face of these seemingly random possibilities, Longfellow never wavered in his faith: "There is no possible solution to this dark enigma but the one word, 'Providence'."

No offense, Henry Wadsworth, but I guess I'm more in the Frost camp, emphasizing the role of human choice. However, it's not my intention here to get into a debate over free will versus determination, or whether what seems like sheer happenstance is actually part of someone's larger plan. (Still, I can't resist making the observation that if some superior being is indeed pulling the strings behind all this, he or she does work in some mighty mysterious and complex ways. . . .)

At the risk of being labeled irreverent, I recommend to all Longfellow-ites that they read my friend Bruce Jay Friedman's play, *Steambath*. What passes for the almighty here is a Puerto Rican steambath attendant, directing world-wide activities from a console and screen amid the misty haze. He does some good things – "The old lady with the parakeet, flies out the window, flies back in…" "Put bigger bath towels in all the rooms at the Tel Aviv Hilton Hotel." "Give Canada a little more rain." – and some not-so-good things – "I want that Pontiac moving south past Hermosa Beach to crash into the light blue Eldorado coming the other way." "Close up that branch of Schrafft's." "Give that girl on the bus a run on her body stocking." When questioned about his apparent lack of compassion, he replies, "I do plenty of good things. Half the things I do are good, maybe even a little more…. Nobody notices them. I never get any credit…. I let hernias get better…." It's "blasphemously funny" (*The New York Times*) and, as the critic from *Life* observed, "God would laugh at *Steambath*."

At any rate, my purpose here is to illustrate from my own experience how sheer happenstance can impact the major events in one's life – education, career, marriage and such. I hope that, after hearing my little stories, readers will reflect on their own lives and those of family members – discovering how much of what's happened to them over the years falls into the category of pure chance.

Take the case of my two sons, Erik and Tom, for example. Inasmuch as a great deal of each one's physical attributes, character and personality stem

from his distinct genetic makeup, let me now embark on another strange journey – an itinerary of some of the chance happenings and events that led to my meeting their mother, my first wife, in the spring of 1959 in Seattle, Washington. Just listen to the roundabout sojourns by which each of us arrived at that fateful rendezvous.

Barbro (I may have replaced wives, but I didn't stray very far with regard to their names) came from the small town of Östersund in northern Sweden. In her late teens, she left home and hearth for the East Coast of the United States, initially as an *au pair*. Barbro was fascinated by the idea of foreign travel, and her driving ambition was to become a stewardess for Pan Am, then the number one glamour airline with world-wide routes and long layovers in exotic locales. But Pan Am was the most prized of all flight attendant posts, and she was unable to land it on her first try (although she did manage to do so at a later time). So, for an interim job, she joined United Airlines and, after a period of stewardess training, was assigned to its small base in Seattle – arriving in town less than a month before our meeting.

As for me, I was then in the Navy aboard a vessel whose home port was Seattle. My ship returned there from a five month-long cruise a few weeks after Barbro's arrival. In another month, I was due to be discharged and would be heading back East to attend law school in the fall, following a summer traveling in Europe.

A week or so after our return to Seattle, one of my shipmates, Chris (who himself was about to leave the ship for transfer to another city), happened to be at the local Naval Officers Club (which I don't ever recall visiting myself). By chance, he met a United stewardess there, and they got talking. One thing led to another, and they arranged for Chris to bring some of his ship buddies over to her place the following night to meet a group of her fellow stewardesses.

The next morning on the ship, Chris asked me if I could come along to the impromptu party. I would have liked to, but didn't think I could. I'd made a date for that evening with my steady girlfriend at the time, a Northwest Airlines stewardess. Late in the afternoon, however, she called to tell me she'd been suddenly assigned to take a flight out that night. So, after driving Miss Northwest to the airport, I dropped by Chris's party, spotted the lovely Barbro, detected the charming Swedish accent, was swept off my feet – and two years later, after some back and forth, we made it to the altar.

Now, there's coincidence enough in that tale – the pinpoint timing between Barbro's arrival in Seattle and my imminent departure, the unlikely Officers Club rendezvous, the fortuitous Northwest evening flight. And, of course,

the twists and turns that resulted in Barbro being in Seattle from distant Östersund were legion. But this chance meeting would never have occurred had I not ended up on a ship based in Seattle, and therein lies an even more convoluted tale – one that involves another of the major decisions along life's path, the choice of a college, and that well illustrates the inter-connectedness of those life happenings that really matter.

So now, travel back with me to high school – to my senior year at Horace Mann in New York, where I'm in the middle of the college choosing process. I had done well in school and – back in those halcyon less selective years – basically had my pick of institutions, Ivy League or otherwise. The college that most appealed to me was Amherst. I was smitten by its bucolic setting in the rolling hills of Massachusetts; it was small enough so I wouldn't be anonymous; its neighbors were Smith and Mt. Holyoke (not insignificant for a guy coming from an all-male high school environment); and my football coach, who knew their football coach, had written him a fulsome letter of recommendation for me.

This was the fall of 1951, and the Korean War was on everyone's mind. With the military draft in full swing, we feared that the Army might draft anyone without a deferment right out of college. The idea of fighting a land war against Communist Chinese hordes near the Yalu River didn't appeal to me one bit; whatever patriotic fires might have burned in me from World War II were banked for this savage and unpopular military engagement.

The classic college deferment was R.O.T.C., which seemed more palatable than the alternative; and since we were almost certain to be drafted after college anyway, the period of mandatory service didn't compare too unfavorably. As for the branch of service, in terms of the Korean War, there was no comparison – the Navy won hands down. Far from freezing their butts off in the frigid hills north of the 38th parallel (Army and Marines) or braving MIG's and murderous anti-aircraft fire while going after the bridges of Toko-Ri (Air Force), the Navy men ate heartily at clean mess tables and slept in warm bunks every night, before lobbing a few unopposed shells in the direction of Inchon harbor.

To top it off, the Navy had a special NROTC scholarship program, called the Holloway Plan. If you were fortunate enough to be selected, the Navy covered your entire college tuition, bought your books, and paid you $50 per month toward living expenses (which at the time seemed a meaningful stipend). My family wasn't wealthy, and the expense of sending me to a good college was definitely going to constitute a stretch for them. So, although neither my father nor mother ever pushed me in that direction, I thought that getting the NROTC scholarship would be an appropriate gesture on my part toward my parents, who had supported me unselfishly up to that point.

I decided to apply for the scholarship and was accepted, subject to a physical exam. The need for the exam, however, almost did me in – not because of any bodily defect, but because of its date and time. The Horace Mann basketball team was in a tight race for the league title, and I was a starting guard – not a star, but part of the successful team fabric. The exam coincided with the day we played Adelphi, one of our toughest foes. This was a big game. Our coach might not have gone as far as telling me to forget about the Navy physical, but he certainly made me aware of how displeased he was by my prospective absence.

So I had to make a tough decision. Believe me, I seriously considered not showing up for the physical. In the end, though, as badly as I wished to play against Adelphi, I didn't want to blow the scholarship. So, in my usual style, I tried to fit everything in – hoping against hope that the physical would be over in time for me to make it to the game, which was being played at Adelphi's home court in one of the outer boroughs. But, as one might have expected, the exam dragged on interminably; and by the time I arrived at the Adelphi gym, the game was already underway, with Horace Mann behind by seven points. As I burst into the arena in my street clothes some of our fans recognized me and cheered my arrival. It was a heady moment for yours truly – Freund to the rescue. I located the locker room, changed as fast as I could, and took a seat on the bench.

The timing was ideal to insert me into the game – hopefully providing an emotional lift for our beleaguered team. But the coach – perhaps out of pique, maybe to teach a life lesson to his young charges – simply refused to acknowledge my presence. Even with some fans chanting "put Freund in," he sat there impassively, sticking with substitutes at my position for the rest of the game, which we ended up losing. From that standpoint, it was one of the worst days of my young life (although, by the way, we still managed to win the league championship). On the other hand, I did pass the physical – a crucial step in this long journey I'm presently relating.

Being accepted in the Holloway program was good news, but there was one hitch. To take advantage of it, you had to attend a college with a Naval ROTC program. And Amherst had none. So, although my heart was still in the Berkshires, my head said, "Take the scholarship and settle for a second choice."

With Amherst eliminated, my decision was between Princeton and Harvard. Most high school seniors who have a choice between Harvard and any other school pick Harvard, presumably for the prestige factor. In my case, Harvard also had something else going for it. My best friend at the time was headed there and urging me daily to join him so we could room together. We went up to Cambridge for a weekend to check the place out and had a wonderful time.

I then decided to compare a weekend at Princeton. My parents had friends from Ohio whose son (whom I'd never met) was at Princeton, and they arranged for me to spend a weekend with him. This fellow was pleasant enough, I guess, but definitely not my type, and the weekend was a near disaster. So the pressure to opt for Harvard was strong indeed.

Nevertheless I chose Princeton. In retrospect, I think it came down to this. I had spent my entire life to that point amid the urban sprawl of New York City. Harvard was smack in the middle of a smaller city. Princeton was perched like a pearl among trees and grass, and looked just the way I'd always pictured a college campus to look. That did it. As things turned out, it was a great decision – I fell in love with Princeton that fall, and our affair is still hot and heavy after 57 years. And, for purposes of my narrative, the choice of Princeton – which, as you can see, was far from inevitable – started me down the road that led me to that Seattle rendezvous seven years later.

The next major step along that road occurred during my senior year at Princeton. I had done well in college in all respects except NROTC. My marks in the various Naval Science subjects like artillery were mediocre; my uniform was scrungy enough to cost me periodic demerits; I was no John Paul Jones on board ship during the summer cruises. In my final year, when every senior in the unit was in command of something, I proved so inept at close order drill that my tenure as squad leader (the lowest possible rung of command) was abruptly terminated in favor of a junior, and I was ignominiously returned to the ranks.

That was the year the Navy solicited our views on what type of sea duty we wanted for the three years of service that lay ahead. A battleship? A destroyer? In truth, I didn't want to be on any ship at all. But wasn't there some kind of vessel I could tolerate? My eyes scanned the list of possibilities. And then it hit me – how about a hospital ship, complete with nurses! I immediately checked the appropriate box.

Just in case the Navy was unable to accommodate your specific vessel choice, you were asked to indicate the larger category of ships it fell into, so they could at least partially fulfill your desires. A battleship, for example, was a "Large Combatant"; a destroyer a "Small Combatant." A hospital ship was an "Auxiliary," so that was the category I checked.

I've often tried to visualize the scene that I'm positive occurred in Washington at the Navy's Bureau of Personnel when they received my papers. I can just hear the reviewer of my application chirping to his colleagues "Hey, Harry, listen to this. One of those Princeton boys, no less, with the lowest Naval aptitude in the entire class, is asking for a hospital ship – to stay near the nurses, I'll bet!

Let's see now, what *other kind* of auxiliary can we put this bozo on – one where the female companionship isn't quite so close. . . ."

I'll never forget the day that spring when we received our orders to active duty. Everyone on campus was comparing what he got. "Hey, it's the *Wisconsin* for me!" "Look, I'm on a can in the Med!" My orders assigned me to the USS Staten Island AGB-5. I had no idea what an AGB was – except I knew instinctively that it was *not* a hospital ship. Based on the vessel's name, it could have been a ferry, although I noted that the home port was across the continent in Seattle. No one else could figure out what kind of ship I'd landed on, so we sought out crusty old Chief Petty Officer Abbott, who had been in the Navy forever and seen just about everything. "What is it, Chief?" I asked – "what kind of ship am I on?" A look of absolute glee appeared on Abbott's face as he contemplated the orders received by his least favorite midshipman. "Get this, boys," he said to our group, his rotund body bouncing in merriment. "Lady-killer Freund here has been assigned to a goddamn icebreaker! I bet he won't be getting much at the South Pole!"

And that's the story of how I happened to end up in Seattle in the spring of '59. And how my boys, Erik and Tom, ultimately came into being. Pure happenstance. . . .

One of my favorite Michel Legrand songs is "On my Way to You," For those of you who ended up in the right place but who may rue or regret some of the choices made along the way, the Alan and Marilyn Bergman lyric is something fine to chew on.

> "So often as I wait for sleep / I find myself reciting / the words I've said or would have said, / like scenes that need rewriting. / The smiles I never answered, / doors perhaps I should have opened, / songs forgotten in the morning. / I relive the roles I've played, / the tears I may have squandered; / the many pipers I have paid / along the roads I've wandered. / Yet all the time I knew it, / love was somewhere out there waiting. / Though I may regret a step or two, / if I had changed a single day, / what went amiss or went astray, / I may have never found my way to you. / I wouldn't change a thing that happened / on my way to you."

A few months ago, I showed my mother, Marcy Freund, a draft of this piece. After reading it, Mom – who's about to turn 102 this year and is still mentally sharp – said, "I like this, but you left out an important chance meeting"

"Which one?" I asked.

"How I met your father."

Well, I certainly couldn't argue with her – that was indeed a fateful day for yours truly, well deserving of a spot in my personal pantheon. So I asked Mom to revisit the scene, which she promptly proceeded to do, minute by minute – her memory of that day being as lucid as if it just happened, rather than having occurred almost 85 years ago.

It was Easter Sunday 1925, and Mom (then Marcella Coleman) was spending the day with her girlfriend, Connie Freund. (That last name was strictly a coincidence – no relationship at all.) They were in Connie's home, an apartment on 77th street off Central Park West, expecting to have a date with two fellows. As it happened, though, the guys had to go back up to Yale; so Connie and Mom were passing a boring afternoon looking at movie magazines.

The phone rang. The caller was a friend of Connie's named Murray. "What are you doing today?" he asked her.

"Nothing," she replied, "but I'll be taking the train back to college in Boston later this afternoon."

Murray wasn't easily dissuaded. "Why don't I just come over for a little while and play the piano for you. And by the way, I have a guy with me…."

The guy was my father, Sylvan Freund, who at the time was a Penn undergraduate. Although Murray didn't attend Penn, he had played the piano at Dad's fraternity, which was how they met. Murray, a New Yorker, had urged Dad (whose home was then in Far Rockaway) to come into the city, where Murray would introduce him to some girls. Presumably, Connie was Murray's first choice for fixing up Sylvan – perhaps because of their common last names.

Connie replied that she had a girl friend at the apartment. Murray mentioned that his friend was driving his father's Packard, and so they could take her to the station. That did it – Connie told them to come over, even though it would just be for a few hours.

The boys arrived, and that was it. Dad ignored Connie and only had eyes for Mom. She, in turn, was attracted to him – although, she now admits, it may have been partially attributable to his Packard.

They took Connie to the station, dropped Murray off at the subway, and were finally alone in the car. Dad said, "Why don't we go to Tip Toe Inn and get

something to eat?" Mom agreed. On the way, though, Dad took a detour to visit Grant's Tomb on Riverside Drive. And that's when he uttered the magic words: "Can you hold New Year's Eve for me?"

Mom replied, "Are you crazy – it's nine months away. I might not even know you then."

Here was Dad's response: "You'll not only know me – you'll probably marry me."

And all this took place before they even got to Tip Toe Inn! When Dad went back to Penn that night, he wrote Mom a letter from the train, stating, "I meant every word I said." And he did.

So that's how I ultimately made it into this life. But I can't help wondering…. What if the Yale guys had shown up? What if Mom decided she wanted to spend Easter on Fifth Avenue in an extravagant hat? What if Murray hadn't met Dad at the piano in the fraternity house? What if Murray hadn't brought Dad into the city to meet girls? What if Dad had been attracted to Connie? What if he hadn't been driving the Packard? What if he weren't so incredibly romantic on an empty stomach? And the answer to each of these queries is – you wouldn't be reading this now!

Okay, enough about romance. How about another area that's also vital yet more prosaic – our careers. Does sheer happenstance play a role?

I suppose it's true that for some people, the choice of career is almost foreordained – a youngster who's going into his dad's business, for instance, or someone who always wanted to be a doctor. But for me – and, I find, for many others who have shared their thoughts with me – there was definitely a chance quality to the whole thing.

My eventual choice of career turned out to be a splendid one for me. Someone looking back at it today (who isn't aware of the reality) might view it as a natural evolution, since the tasks I performed as a lawyer – counseling clients, doing deals, writing books and articles, speaking and teaching – all seemed to play right to my strengths, as it were. But believe me, this career wasn't foreordained one little bit. And who'd have thought that the damnable icebreaker would be responsible for my eventual choice of profession? But it was. So, for those of you who also had an unlikely prod in the direction you ultimately followed, here's how it happened for me.

Back in college, when many of the guys were worrying about what they wanted to be when they grew up, I refused to even think about it. Maybe that was because, in fact, there was *nothing* I particularly wanted to do. I wasn't tempted to go into my father's (and grandfather's) business which, although turning out a quality product, was only marginally profitable – and at which my father worked so unstintingly it was almost painful to observe. And business generally held no allure. (I remember having a subscription to *Time* magazine and avidly devouring its contents each week – all except the "Business" section, which I passed up with regularity.) I liked to write, but never saw it as my life's work. Teaching held some interest, but the low pay scale was unenticing.

I don't recall in those days ever considering law as a career. Back then, lawyers weren't nearly as much in the news or all over the TV screen as they are today; it was a more refined profession, operating in large part quietly behind the scenes. Since our family knew few lawyers, there was no avuncular prompting. So, while many classmates were taking the law school aptitude test or interviewing prospective business employers, I stood off to the side. Knowing I had to serve three years in the Navy, I figured I'd make the decision of what I wanted to do during that period. This made for a most enjoyable undergraduate experience, devoid of the kind of pressure so many youngsters feel today to find a job or enter a graduate program.

During my first months on the ship, the only career decision I made was that I did *not* want to make the Navy my career! But I seemed no closer to being tempted by anything else. And then, unexpectedly, I found my calling.

When an enlisted man on a ship went "over the hill" or committed some other dereliction of duty, the captain would convene a special court martial to try him, find the seaman guilty and sentence him. The consequences were serious, too, ranging up to six months prison time, loss of pay and a bad conduct discharge. The accused was entitled to be defended by an officer, but the defense counsel didn't have to be a lawyer so long as the prosecutor wasn't one. On a large ship, I might never have gotten involved in the process, but our icebreaker had only a small complement of officers. Moreover, because the duty was so tedious, we had more than our share of seamen going astray.

As a very junior officer on the ship, my first assignment was to sit as one of the five judges on a special court martial. Most of my fellow judges were craggy old warrant officers with little patience for the process and a low regard for the accused. I'll never forget watching one of them doodling while he listened to the testimony about a seaman's AWOL – doodling a hangman's noose.

Then one day, I was assigned as defense counsel, and that's when I found my calling. It was a job that none of the other officers wanted, so it was continually available. You only had to read one book – the Manual for Courts Martial, which I devoured. Although my clients were convicted with regularity (after all, they were clearly guilty), I fought hard to keep their sentences to a moderate (non-noose) level. And just once – this is a good tale that I've told elsewhere, in the story "You Gotta Get Me Off!" from my book *Smell Test* – I even squeezed out a "Not Guilty" verdict.

I disliked almost everything else about the Navy, but I found the court martial work interesting. And since I had no other prospects, it wasn't a big step for me to decide to apply to law school. I sent in my application from the Antarctic – thereby probably taking advantage of Harvard's geographic diversity quota! – and took the test when we returned to Seattle. And that's how my career at the bar happened to come about.

But that step, plus three turgid years at law school, only served to get me into the profession. The crucial moment in my legal career occurred in January 1966 when I joined what was then the small law firm of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom. The journey from under 20 lawyers back then to two thousand in 2007 is one of the great American business success stories, and I'm proud to have played an active role in it. There's no doubt my life would have been a lot different had I ended up somewhere else. So, just how did I happen to get on board the Skadden express for the ride? It makes for another good story – one that should make you readers reflect on just how you ended up where you did.

This one begins at Harvard Law School. (Yeah, I know, urban sprawl and all that – and my dislike of the place during those three years confirmed the wisdom of my undergraduate decision. . . .) I didn't intern during my summer breaks (as the law students do today), so I had no inside track anywhere. And in those days, there were no publications like *The American Lawyer* or law blogs, which now provide a lot of information on what's going on at particular firms. So, when it came to a choice of where to practice, I was pretty much flying blind.

Most of the prestigious New York law firms weren't interested in me. One large firm of reasonable stature did make me an offer that I was tempted to accept but ultimately turned down. There was a strong Princeton contingent at that firm; and while that would ordinarily have encouraged me, I had the distinct feeling that the only reason I was getting the offer was the old school tie. Poor little Jimmy – he just wanted to be wanted for himself! (P.S. That firm never really went anywhere. Had I joined them, I might still be there today, mired in competence-without-verve.)

The outfit that recruited me most heavily was an excellent mid-sized firm in Cleveland, of all places. They flew me out there at the firm's expense. A partner met me at the airport, and drove us through the fashionable suburb of Shaker Heights (". . . and here's where you'll be living, Jim. . . ."). I was greeted warmly at the firm, meeting a choice cross-section of the lawyers, ranging from senior partners to bright young associates, all of whom mustered up gobs of enthusiasm over me. A select group then took me out for a superb dinner at a private club. It was all very heady, and I found myself wondering, "Hey, why not the midwest?"

Then the firm made its one fatal mistake. They dropped me back at my hotel by 9:00 p.m. I went up to my room, flushed with the wine at dinner; changed from a gray suit into my bar-hopping togs; took the elevator down, exited the front door, and emerged into. . . downtown Cleveland at night! You could hear a pin drop. To a boy born and raised in New York City, the silence was deafening. Not a single place was open. That midwestern house of cards came crashing down around me – it was going to be New York City or nothing.

The firm I eventually chose was a mid-sized firm with pleasant people, who treated me and my close friend Bob quite well during the interviews – the main feature of which being a three-martini lunch. Bob and I both decided to take the plunge together. Within weeks, after our arrival at the firm, we each realized our decisions had been seriously flawed. The people were fine, but the firm lacked both a strong cadre of clients and the rainmakers to bring in new ones. Still, lawyers didn't move around much in those days, and it took me three years to get myself into motion.

When I finally decided to leave, I consulted a good friend who was an associate at a fine small firm. He very much wanted me to join them. At the time, I had no other prospects, and this would have definitely been a step up for me.

My friend's firm took the process of associate selection very seriously. In fact, they insisted that I spend an hour with each and every lawyer in the firm, partners and associates. It was an interminable process, but one they prided themselves on, in order to display their level of commitment. They let me know they really wanted me, and I thought seriously about the prospect of joining them.

Bottom line, though, I couldn't see myself working at a firm that labored so long and hard over what to my mind was not that big a deal. (I recall a variant on Groucho Marx's fabled dictum flashing into my head – I didn't want to be an associate at any firm that cared that intensely about the decision to hire me.) If I'd gone with them, I would probably still be there today – spending a good part

of my day interviewing applicants. Needless to say, life wouldn't have been the same.

So, I slogged onward to find a better job. In those days, good firms were generally unwilling to hire associates laterally – talent was supposed to be home-grown. There was no organized method of going about locating where vacancies might exist. And then someone – I can't remember who, perhaps it was the Harvard Law School placement office – told me about Ken Everett.

Ken was a Harvard Law School-educated partner at an unpretentious firm in New York City. For reasons I've never been able to fathom, he became the self-styled matchmaker between HLS-trained associates looking for work and firms looking for lawyers with HLS degrees. I doubt he was compensated for this – I believe he just decided to fill a gap by providing a valuable service.

I'll never forget the day I found myself sitting in his office, watching him dip into the contents of a large file drawer in his old-fashioned desk. He didn't know me, but he was trying hard to come up with something for which I might be qualified. After a few false starts, he struck pure gold.

"Hey, Jim, here's one you ought to try. It's a real good small firm, which is very much on the make. You would be coming in as the senior corporate associate, replacing a guy who just left to go inside with a firm client."

As he pronounced the firm name, which I had never heard, each unfamiliar syllable – "Skadden… Arps… Slate… Meagher… Flom" – made it sound more like a guy falling down a flight of stairs. But, to make a long story short, I went for an interview, was struck by the go-getting attitude of the place and the livewire people there, and decided to take the flyer that gave wings to my professional life.

All of which is a long-winded way of making the point that coincidence and happenstance have played an enormous role in many of the most significant events of my life – finding my wives and producing the boys, getting an education, and moving into and succeeding with my career.

Often, while all this is occurring – when you're in the midst of one of these chains-of-events or decisional cycles – you don't even know it's happening. It's only when you get to a distant vantage point, from which you're able to gaze back with some perspective, that you can see what occurred. And the corollary of this – at least for someone like me, for whom the glass is usually half full – is that so many of the most rewarding aspects of life emerge almost serendipitously from some of the most mundane moments, or even from decidedly unpleasant

surroundings. Of course, we can't ignore the flip side of this – that just when everything seems terrific… (which is why we say, "knock wood.")

Anyway, if you find yourself mired in the Antarctic, or cursing yourself for choosing the wrong firm, take heart. You may be setting yourself up for one of the great rewards or decisions of your life. And as for mundane moments, if I hadn't bumped into Joe on the street corner, if Chris hadn't met the stewardess at the officers club, if I had nixed the physical for the basketball game and lost the Navy scholarship, if I hadn't gotten myself assigned to an icebreaker that needed defense counsel, if I hadn't been fortunate enough to see downtown Cleveland on a weekday night – well, I'm sure everything would have turned out quite differently. . . .