The perils of a pupil

Kim Franklin, who is a barrister practising at Lamb Building, recalls her time as a pupil


I am a Pupil. What trainee solicitors are to solicitors, pupils are to barristers. Most people have a boss, I have a pupil master. The greatest help I can be to him is to pretend that I’m not there, so although my desk is in his room, I say nothing in the morning.

I don’t tell him how I was chased into the gutter by a Rolls Royce on the way to work. He drives a Rolls; I pedal a bike. He is not interested in the price of inner tubes, or the price of anything for that matter, save perhaps dining room tables at £3,000. He earns a fortune – I don’t. In a way I’m lucky, for until recently the archaic nature of pupillage required that I paid him (100 guineas) for the honour of working with him. Now he lets me do it for nothing – literally.

From the pile of pink ribbon bound documents heaped on his desk, I take my pick. “The case of the mouldy strawberries” sounds interesting. Whilst reading details of delayed aeroplanes flying from deepest strawberry growing sub-continents, studying airway bills and examining photos of several hundred thousand strawberries gone off, the phone rings. An American client wants to change one of my pupil master’s drafts. This does not go down well.

Wherever he goes, I go. Him striding purposefully, me trotting behind carrying the books. Living in the shadow of such greatness is not easy. You have to be careful of what you say. I don’t always get it right. He is in court today so on the way over I comment, “So Mr Weinburger didn’t rate your Statement of Claim then?” Disbelief seizes his features.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.”

Of course, too late I realise my mistake.

“No, no, I meant – obviously Mr Weinburger failed to appreciate the subtlety of your finer points.”

But the damage is done and we complete the journey in silence.

I don’t have to wear a wig and gown in Court, but I do have to wear a uniform. The rules of women’s dress have to be plain black or very dark, high to the neck with long sleeves and a plain white collar . . . “It’s a good thing nothing has changed on the fashion front since 1922.

When the judge rises from a particularly tedious “Trial on the documents” no doubt anxious to leave aside all considerations of whether Borough Dustmen should be paid the same as those employed by the District Council and turns instead with enthusiasm to consider his luncheon menu, I rush to my sponsor for help.

“I think I’ve blown it”, I tell him over the oak table and bench set-up to be found by those dining in Temple Bar. My sponsor, a guardian type figure and a barrister advises me.

“Don’t upstage your pupil master when the clients are around (or when anyone else is around for that matter). Distribute some well timed flattery but keep quiet and busy and always carry a load of 10 pences.”

“He doesn’t take the tube,” I contribute, anticipating their purpose. “He drives.”

“Then he’ll need them for the meter.” By way of conclusion my sponsor tells me, “Just remember to raise his spirits when they flag.”

Are they ever likely to, I wonder as I rush back to court. With five minutes to go, I sit in the court room and munch on an apple. In strides my pupil master bedecked with wig and gown.

“Having a picnic in court are we? Don’t let the judge see you.” After lunching on Beef Tournedos and a glass of good red wine, I doubt whether the Judge would be interested in my apple. If he is, he’s welcome to it.

We return to chambers after court, the question of parity of dustmen’s pay still unresolved. The somewhat squalid ceremony of “afternoon tea” takes place in a dingy tea room. Learned members of chambers scramble for a clean cup and an Earl Grey tea bag whilst one of their number relates an amusing anecdote of the day, in which they, as a rule, feature prominently. I make sure I laugh at the right time whilst cunningly positioning myself by the biscuit barrel. We enpaupered pupils must take advantage of what opportunities come our way.

I return to my desk and the mouldy strawberries, my sponsor’s advice in mind. Intending just to beaver away quietly and try to do the work as my pupil master would, I settle down to draft a defence against the claim. The more intricate details of the Warsaw convention and other relevant legislation defeat me – but I’m proud of my attempt. In his turn, my pupil master takes up the case and reads through the papers. He picks up the phone and contacts the solicitors Messrs Slower Still and Sleeping. In a derisory tone he asks just how he is supposed to draft a defence on the facts given. Is he, he’s welcome to it.

Unceremoniously my draft is returned. The unspoken question of how I managed to do it given the glaring defects in the available information, hangs heavy in the air. In order to salvage what remains of my tattered self esteem, I resort to flattery as a tactical device and I suggest that perhaps the clients were so impressed by his previous performances that they thought he was a magician who could make bricks out of straw. This falls on stoney ground.

But I am not completely out of luck.

“Do you have any 10 pence pieces on you?” he asks.