

I've got a sneaking idea, or I'd just get me a lawyer

A story by [Robert Drake](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

I don't suppose there's ever been a woman more plainspoken and down-to-earth than my mother. Not that she used rude or even rough language; indeed, she was one of the most tactful people I ever knew. (She always prefaced *suspicions*, but not *facts*, with "I've got a sneaking idea that . . .") But when it was called for, she just told it like it was and you could take it or leave it. Furthermore, she made no bones—in suitable company—about her likes and dislikes.

Yes, she thought women were smarter than men—at any rate, smarter about *folks*. (It was men that were more likely to make fools of themselves, with their big ideas and ambitious schemes.) But at the same time men had no monopoly on foolishness. And I guess it's all summed up in her comment on women who were always running off to consult their preachers or a counselor or an analyst or whatever about what to do if they were in any kind of trouble or needed advice of any kind, whether worldly or spiritual. Once I called her hand on the subject and asked her what she would do if *she* felt the need of advice or spiritual guidance. But that didn't faze her a bit: she just snorted and in a very peremptory manner replied, "Humph! I'd just get me a lawyer!" And that was that.

And I knew she meant every word of it too—just like she did when one of the local beauty "operators" had an unexpected turn of good luck. Her name was Violet Savage—which sounds like a name concocted by Evelyn Waugh—and she worked at the Elite Beauty Parlor down on the Square right next to the picture show. Her specialty was "machineless" permanent waves that used clamps on the rolls of curls instead of electricity, which made all the about-to-be curls emit steam and frying noises—and somehow always made me think of the Spanish Inquisition. But this was all before there was anything like the do-it-yourself-at-home kind of "cold wave" that appeared on the scene toward the end of World War II. Well, anyway, Violet's good luck happened to her when the married man she had been going with on the side for years and years suddenly lost his wife, and everybody around town felt that paved

the way for them to get married after a "decent interval." Not that they thought this would "make an honest woman" of her overnight, but at least it would terminate her living in sin for the rest of her life.

I remember the night after her predecessor's death—whose body was now on display for the visitation up at the funeral home, with a big marquee out front to tell you exactly who was dead and when the funeral would be—my father saw skyrockets being set off down on the Square but forgot that it was the Fourth of July, so he came home and told my mother, with something of a diabolical grin, it was obviously Violet's boy friend celebrating.

Well, that kind of humor ran in the family, but I just contented myself with remarking loftily that you just never knew what each day might bring (like a member of my mother's bridge club who just keeled over dead on the kitchen floor one afternoon while she was making watermelon rind pickle). And with some dramatic flair I remarked that Violet must have been absolutely flabbergasted to think her difficult situation had now been set right so unexpectedly—in the twinkling of an eye or like a thief in the night, you might say—and who would ever know just how she felt now? Well, my mother was sitting there in the living room reading a continued story titled "Look Eastward to the Morning"—which she freely admitted was a lot of junk but at least harmless—in the current *Ladies' Home Journal*, and she didn't even bother to look up from the page but merely observed, "Better," and went right on with her reading.

Because my mother was the last person on earth to cry over spilt milk. If you could mend it, then do it; but if that was impossible, you just had to go on with your rat-killing and that was that. And stouthearted Christian woman that she was, she was still thoroughly at home in the world—like she was about getting a lawyer if you needed advice. On the whole, she didn't seem to put much faith in preachers and such like. Whether she thought them too unworldly I don't know; but I know she didn't have any illusions about them. Because really, she didn't have a lot of confidence in men, and she often quoted her Great-aunt Ida Mae to the effect that there wasn't a man in captivity that you could really trust below the belt.

I suppose she figured that if you really needed or wanted advice, a lawyer would be your best bet because at least you went to see him with your eyes open and knew what you were getting into: it was business, and the last thing any sensible person would want at such a time was sympathy. (My father had always said that when anybody died and somebody asked how much money he had left, well, it really

didn't make much difference because the lawyers and other thieves would get most of it.)

In any case, neither of them believed in Santa Claus, not even the one who wrote, "Yes, Virginia." And I remember my mother saying she would be ashamed to tell that she had had to take her oldest child out behind the house and whisper in his ear who and what the jolly old elf was really all about. Because the family had had to do something like that for my father's oldest brother—Uncle John, the preacher—when he was already in his teens, and no wonder then that you couldn't expect anybody like that to be very much at home in the world.

In fact, most of the preachers she had ever known, she said, just seemed to think all you had to do was calmly sit in the swing on the front porch with your hands folded and God would provide. (They didn't seem to believe that God had given you sense and expected you to *use* it.) And as for herself, she had always had a dubious opinion about the Sermon on the Mount: she hated to think what would have happened to her if she had tried to behave like a lily of the field. And if she hadn't toiled and spun most of her life, she didn't think she would have ever made anybody think of Solomon in all his glory, much less the Queen of Sheba. As for fowls of the air and so on, she was inclined to think the Lord expected you to have gumption enough to fend for yourself—or else you'd starve to death.

It was all part of what you had to do, she thought, not only to stay alive but also to keep the world in motion. Like Jesus rebuking Martha for being put out with Mary for not helping her wash the dishes: she always said she was disappointed in him for saying that. Of course, somebody had to do it. You couldn't expect people to just sit around the house entertaining company all the time. And then what in the world were you to think of the prodigal son, who fared just as well as the older brother? I'm pretty sure she thought that whole business was unfair.

I imagine my mother also had her doubts about the concept of "holy waste" too, when you poured oil over Him whom you honored and revered—not because she was tightfisted or selfish, but, she might have asked, what good would it do? Maybe she was even somewhat like the old miser in one of Scott's novels who, on his deathbed, forbade his survivors to put more than one candle beside his bed because, he said, one candle was good enough to die by. She was nothing if not practical though thoroughly at home with God—only sometimes not altogether in perfect agreement with him.

But yes, you had to render unto Caesar that which was his and also make to yourself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, maybe even the unjust steward too. You might find it somewhat uncomfortable at times; perhaps there would even be times when you just didn't like it. But were there not also times which made provision for both the children of this world and the children of light?