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Maybe they *are* watching you

Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com
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New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts director Tracey Batt

This is my funniest law firm story. It's also 100% true. I know this because it happened to me.

In the summer of 1996, I was a summer associate at a large firm in New York City. Most of my compatriots and I had never received such enormous salaries, and we were shocked at the amount of autonomy we had in light of what the firm was paying us.

"I can't believe how much they trust us," one of my friends said. "Every time I take a 15-minute break to have a cup of coffee and read the newspaper in my office, I think that, if I can just move fast enough, I'll be able to yank open the door to my office and catch Wilford Brimley with a camera."

Wilford Brimley? You're afraid of Wilford Brimley? The kindly, mustachioed actor from "Cocoon"? The guy who wants you to eat your oatmeal? Yes, that Wilford Brimley. In the 1993 movie "The Firm," based on a John Grisham novel, Wilford Brimley had played William Devasher. William Devasher made life very difficult for young law firm associate Mitch McDeere, played by Tom Cruise. Devasher accomplished this by, among other things, photographing young McDeere in compromising positions and blackmailing him to make certain McDeere would do everything The Firm wanted him to do. Wilford Brimley's chilling portrayal of William Devasher was all the more terrifying because it was played by genial old Wilford Brimley.

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Fast forward a year or so. Because I started law school in the summer and graduated in January, I was able to take the February bar exam and start my career as an associate in mid-April 1997, following three weeks of R&R in Italy. That meant that I only had been working for the firm for about two months when Father's Day arrived. Despite my junior status, I was already deeply involved in preparations for a Copyright Arbitration Royalty Panel. I did not have time to wash my hair, let alone time to shop for a Father's Day gift. Believe it or not, this was before Internet shopping became ubiquitous, quick, and easy. My office computer did not even have Internet access.

I had this internal conversation with myself: "I need to go shopping, but they are going to fire me if I sneak out of the office at lunch time."

"Tracey, you are an adult. You are an attorney." (Although my admission was still pending in New York, I had been a New Jersey attorney for at least three whole weeks.) "You are allowed to leave the building for 20 minutes at lunch time. Really."

This seemed to be a reasonable argument. I ran across the street to a high-end sporting goods retailer with the intention of buying fishing equipment for my father. My attorney father recently had taken up "fishing." I put "fishing" in quotation marks because what he really did was sit in a boat, holding a fishing rod. Someone else paddled the canoe, baited the hook, netted the fish, cleaned the fish, and cooked the fish. What's more, these fishing trips did not involve evenings by a campfire eating fried fish and drinking beer. Rather, they involved bouillabaisse and French wines at a lodge. Therefore, I use the term "fishing" loosely. But I digress.

In any case, my quest was to find some piece of fishing equipment for my father, make my purchase, and return to my office, all in the space of 20 minutes. I failed miserably.

It took me ages to find something that I felt was appropriate to my father's minimal skill level, and the checkout line moved at a pace that can only be described as "glacial." I fidgeted. I made impatient noises. I checked my watch repeatedly.

"They must be looking for me by now," said my pessimistic internal voice.

"Don't be silly," responded my reassuring internal voice. "There is no such thing as the Associate Police."

My reassuring internal voice then proceeded to scream in abject terror as the man in front of me in line turned around. It was, and I swear to you that this is true, Wilford-freaking-Brimley.

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