While our legal system is by no means perfect, I had always assumed it was the best that can be humanly achieved. In this, my last editorial, I want to tell you about someone who disagreed.

Hamid looked like an ordinary American college student—short and scrawny in T-shirt, jeans and baseball cap, wispy hairs on his chin. But then he asked for permission to sit, and with a charming enthusiasm began speaking about himself and his homeland. His round cheeks flushed as he bragged of an older brother who had recently died in Jerusalem.

I said nothing.

Encouraged by my silence, Hamid chatted that suicide bombing was the holiest act in his people’s war of national liberation and that he yearned to soon follow his brother to heaven. He said he could tell by my eyes that I understood, that even though I was a lawyer, I did not seem corrupt.

When you’re silent, impassive and a young woman, as I was then, people inflict all sorts of assumptions on your pretty face.

You are really lawyer? It is true? Hamid wanted to know.

He pronounced lawyer as loyal.

I nodded.

He nodded too while gazing at some point past me.

But you, you represent people who are good and you believe in their causes, he finally said.

No.

We were both startled by the sound of my voice. I didn’t show it. Hamid jerked back slightly.

I explained I did personal injury law. If someone was hurt and had a valid legal case, their cause, if they had one, didn’t matter.

Hamid’s mouth contracted.

But they must be believer as you are.

You mean religiously? Not at all. You could say my cause, as an American, is to not discriminate on the basis of religion.

This answer made me feel rather noble.

Why are you lawyer?

I continued feeling noble by saying—and it wasn’t a lie—that as a lawyer I had tools with which to work to compensate people for wrongs committed against them and to give individuals a chance against corporate and governmental power. My clients’ religious or political beliefs make no difference to me. In short, if you’re hurt and you have a good case, I’ll get you paid.

Yet as I spoke, Hamid’s face paled, my words seeming to drain out his blood syllable by syllable.

Then you are corrupt, he whispered when I finished. His eyes were wounded.

It’s hard to describe what I saw. I remember Mark Twain saying that words are only painted fire; a look is the fire itself.

Our mutual dismissal seemed insignificant at the time, for this encounter with an aspiring suicide bomber happened long before 9/11.

But I shrugged off Hamid’s disappointment in me. In our culture, making money is not corrupt. Representing clients whose beliefs differ from ours is not corrupt. As Kelly Tillery’s “A Nation Born of, Built on and Saved by Compromise” ably indicates in this issue, fights for ideological purity actually threaten our survival. Not only that, our law school professors taught that the mark of a good lawyer is the ability to argue either side of a case with equal vigor.

In our culture, what is corrupt is a misuse of entrusted power for private gain or undue advantage. For examples of such abuse, please read Steve LaCheen’s provocative cover story on his postgraduate legal education, “Looking Back, Fifty-Five Years On.” Herein is corruption as we understand it. Even our Supreme Court agrees.

Thus Hamid and I were so far apart in our definitions of corruption, he dismissed me. And, in my mind, I dismissed him too. Our mutual dismissal seemed insignificant at the time, for this encounter with an aspiring suicide bomber happened long before 9/11. When terrorist attacks occurred far far away; when most Americans, in our unholy innocence, trusted we were safe.

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