



Questions

FRED GUCCI, PART 7

Michael Parish

“MY FAVORITE CARTOON when I was a kid,” Fred Gucci said as he held open the door of the restaurant for Gary, “was in *SPORT* magazine, which no longer exists. *Sports Illustrated* is slicker, more high-toned Luce empire stuff, but it has no cartoons. In this case a huge fellow wearing a high number is running down the football field, with a small fellow on his shoulders holding a football. Players on the other team are bouncing off the big guy, and you see behind him a trail of opponents with those old fashioned typographical symbols for pain – pound signs, stars, exclamation points, *et cetera* hovering above them. Meanwhile in the stands one fan is saying to another ‘I still say O’Brien would never make first team All American without Dipowitz.’ A basic concept and truer today. As Newton said, he could see so far because he stood on the shoulders of giants. But nobody remembers the giants, just Newton.”

“Didn’t Einstein say the same thing about Newton?” Gary asked. The pair took two steps down into the wood-paneled room

and Gucci exchanged a warm hug with the owner. “I thought I’d show my friend here the best deal in midtown for lunch, Ramon. Buenos ...” he said as they were led to a table for four along the wall halfway back across from the booths. Gucci turned to Gary again as they sat down. “You’ll like this place. A little gem half a block from the Waldorf. You can pay two or three times as much and not get this kind of experience, and since it’s my turn to buy, I’m on the vector of quality, not the other Q word. It’s my father’s birthday, so we’ll have our own little toast and I’ll tell you a few stories, which was how I got off onto this line to begin with. Yeah, Einstein did say that, but in the space/time continuum Newton was earlier, relatively speaking. Joke, right? Good. Ask me about my latest case.”

“Consider yourself asked,” Gary said. “Also, how are we doing on that art thing? Did you make any progress?”

“Fred Gucci always makes progress. Fred P. Gucci – progress is my middle name. Progresso, actually, to be ethnically consistent. It’s a doozy, my latest case. I represent an

Michael Parish believes that having more questions than answers is – as George Orwell more or less said, more or less tongue in cheek – not imprudent.

ophthalmologist in a personal injury situation that arises in the context of professional disability. He can't sit down anymore, so he can't do the stuff with the big eye gizmo that lets him check your glaucoma and your visual acuity, as it were."

"What do you mean can't sit down?" Gary sampled the sesame bread sticks and found that they did not weigh a ton and were not made of concrete, but rather floated from his hand to his mouth and crunched in a fashion fully Mediterranean in its sense of accommodation.

"He's got this condo in Florida, as you might expect. And his wife likes to spend a lot of time down there. He's got a limit on her charge cards since she was burning them up, with the speed they were running through the store machines. But she made a deal with a local decorator to get new curtains for about \$25 grand, no less, to cover the two windows overlooking the golf course, and she wrote the check on his business account. They were in an unlocked drawer, the checks. Clearly negligent on his part."

"Twenty five grand for curtains? What were they ..." Before Gary could finish Fred put up his hand like a traffic cop and said "Custom made imported fabric – only the best. But good question. So he comes down for the weekend, runs across the bill for the curtains and starts screaming at her about what is this. Her answer – another condo is being built on the other side of the course, and she is worried that those people will be able to see in. They live on the top floor of this building, okay, so that's her reason. He is determined to prove her wrong, so he gets his binoculars, puts on his hiking shoes and goes over to the construction site – the building is about two thirds finished, including the roof, and he gets in and climbs up there to prove – he's got his camera too – that there is no way anyone can see into their apartment.

So he's trying to get the picture in focus and his foot slips. As it happens, there is a swimming pool in front of the building and someone has left a spade with its point up leaning against a wheelbarrow in the place where they are digging the pool. He hits it dead on, severing his urethra and doing other similarly horrendous damage. He bounced when he hit, otherwise he'd be dead, which in this case might be a viable option." Gary winced and felt himself rise up off his chair as he suppressed a sudden need to go to the bathroom.

"Ouch," he said. "To say the least. What did the wife say?"

Gucci waved the waiter over and ordered for both of them without asking, although Gary found that he had fixed on one of the two things Gary himself had been unable to decide between. Only one Fred.

"She said he had no one to blame but himself, and filed for divorce on grounds related to his sexual dysfunction and of course mental cruelty and irreconcilable differences. My case is the disability case – I don't do divorces. It always turns out like this one – you might say he has no one to blame but her, but the law will never see it that way. It was his foot that slipped and the responsibility of the construction people for leaving the shovel that way, besides which he was probably trespassing even though he's a tenant/owner in the complex. And so on and so on.

"How is that funny?" Gucci said. "It's not, legally, funny. If it were, there would be no recompense, and I would have ended up in the wrong business, a proposition clearly contrary to fact. In all honesty, the man has been injured. He deserves recompense. Next question, why am I a good lawyer?"

Gary looked at Gucci and felt all the need in the world to tell him why he was a good lawyer, why he was a good person, why he was a great friend who, if Gary had kids, he

would ask to be their guardian. He felt the Gucci Glow again and he said – no answer but rather an amplification, an emphasis on the right question, dominated his response – the right approach to the situation – “Why?” he asked.

“Because while we are meeting with the insurance company and their lawyer to settle the claim, he passes out from the pain of sitting there. First he opens his briefcase, which contains all sorts of bottles of painkillers, and shoots himself up with a syringe, but it’s not enough. He turns white, becomes catatonic and starts swaying from side to side, then he falls over out of his chair, whacks his head on the maple conference table and bounces twice on the deep pile carpet. Gary, I would tell you this was the best job of witness preparation I ever did, but we have a bond of trust. It came from the sky – or maybe I know how to pick my clients better than I used to. They gave him one hundred percent of what they owed under the policy. One hundred percent. And what did I do? Why am I good? I showed up. Write that in your little shirt pocket memo pad with the leather case and your initials in gold which was given to you by the missus, correct, so you have to take it with you every day – happy six-months anniversary today also, by the way. Didn’t think I’d remember, right? So that’s a sterling result and he – again good client selection – gave me a bonus and a kiss on this leathery cheek. Changing focus, how’s the mastermind of world financial markets?”

Gary thought again. Fred had just asked “How” in his question. Answer a question with a question was an art Gary had learned from his dad, doing simple order of magnitude calculations when they’d been at the beach – grains of sand, tons of water in the lake, number of leaves on a tree in the middle distance – we are the questions we ask, Gary knew.

“What?” he said.

“What what,” Fred responded and they both broke out laughing. “Whaa-aat!” was the best Gary could do, good enough, all things considered. Gary knew the art thing would get covered – not that it made any difference, but that took care of his agenda and he could – funny thought – enjoy himself in the moment. “Who?” Gary asked, mentally patting himself on the back.

“My other new case? Try top five private family companies in America,” Gucci said. “Involved, you understand that’s all I can say, on behalf of two of the four parts of the family who have votes. Not a clean win because the faction that’s paying for this set of questions – which certain thoughtful people believe might be useful to ask about how the business has been run – don’t get along so well, and don’t know each other’s idiosyncrasies or body language. It’s like being the design consultant on an underwear show at Bloomingdale’s for the smart, over-40 set from Schussboom, New Hampshire and Wretched Excess, New Mexico, plus the spouses are along to provide their deep and insightful reads on the situation as well. At least there’s the food. No, no, no.”

Gary looked to see who Fred was no-ing, then realized the nature of the man’s rhetoric at the moment – Fred was like a man who ran from the bulletproof spot behind a tree to a bulletproof spot behind a stamped black iron cut-out of a Robo-cop, while also sitting in the tree across the way with a hunting rifle and sniper scope. His toughest questions were the scenarios he ran against his own best efforts. He was correcting his own record on the fly.

“The old man hired a guy twenty years ago to take over for him, everybody went about their pursuit of pleasure, and then the manager in training suddenly died. The case began within minutes. These young people

are wanting, now, to know their grandpa better and he's asking them 'Where were you?' We're trying to give them something grandpa will find interesting to talk about, which can only be money, comprehend? Why am I talking about money? You have become money since I met you, *inter alia*. That's Latin, BTW, no extra charge. These people grow money like mushrooms – clothing, electric power, commodities trading, finance companies, agribusiness, import-export of course. Currencies domestic and foreign. The best part is the old man is deaf, so he pretends they are saying things to him that he wants to hear, repeats them back as if that's what they said, and thanks them for their insights. My own poor part lies in pretending to misunderstand what he's saying in a way that's helpful to our side. It's going to be a slow process, and you know what? If the younger generation wins, there's almost no doubt they won't know what to do with the operation any more than a parakeet can swing a baseball bat. What the case does is satisfy the essential criteria of complexity, absurdity and amusement factor, plus it gets me out of New York one week a month, more or less, which is just about right."

Money was replaced by lettuce, romaine in this instance, a Caesar's Salad, a better punctuation, Gary thought, than he'd seen other places. Made by a master craftsman for a person who had discovered he was a god, or the next best thing, a ruler of men. Gary wondered if the anchovy had been added to disguise the presence of poison if necessary, then felt as if there would be a question on this issue before they said goodbye. Ruminant presided, crunching, the bovinity of tongues, sharpness of aged Parmesan properly flaked.

"See what I mean?" Gucci said, working his napkin like a hostile witness well into a cross examination. He shook himself, almost

like a hound of some large lost breed.

"Where this happened, Gary – that covers where, for now, right? – is irrelevant. It happens everywhere money and people coincide, which is almost the same as everywhere. An infinity of money and people would create a stable universe, as Newton and Einstein would agree, and you as well, I hope? Yes. But only if it's everywhere. Short of that ... problemo – winners, losers, hurt and benefited, you turn the individual into numbers with dollar signs and the job gets done at some cost. Works at the trust fund level – otherwise ..."

"Don't get philosophical on me, Fred." Gary was surprised by his lippiness. "Now would you tell me the truth if this is your dad's birthday as well as my six-month anniversary? Or ..." The word "what" died in his mouth for the moment. To even be asking a question like that, about which he'd had no thoughts while entering the restaurant or thinking ahead about the beauty of another chance to sit in on the Fred Gucci trio, Fred, Anti-Fred and Gary on drums, was a buzz all its own. To have this be the question he most cared about, even for an eighth-note's worth of time, was worth all somebody's advance info on the next federal reserve move and much, much more. Objectivity means you don't care more about one dime than the one next to it, and it goes on from there, a difficult idea as the money mounts up and starts to look like a fortress, or a castle, or a corporate jet, or a pension contribution in this uncertain world.

"Who would ever get deep on you, Gary? Not me," Fred said. "And I appreciate your refraining from using the word 'When' in your last remarks – you thought it was 'What?', right? No, 'When.' Analytically, it's when. Also when can never come too soon, you and me-wise, and where is here. It is both my dad's birthday and your six-month anniver-

sary and also Felix's birthday, my son who is your partner since I don't remember exactly *when*, and as we walk down Lex on the way back to your office, and see where we can find that good bottle of champagne you now know you need to acquire – for this fine lad of ours – what would your criteria be and why? I think I got all five W's in on that – *how* I'll never know – excellent. How did I do that? Practice, practice, practice, practice. You hit someone with all six of those questions at once – especially why – it overwhelms their defenses, and something human and flawed pops out, much more often than not. At that

point, chico, you are halfway home."

"Ole, I think." Gary responded. Later, as they walked out arm in arm, all questions of art fully resolved, Gucci signaled over his shoulder about the bill and Ramon San Martin nodded like he was heading in a corner kick the way he used to do from Pele with the New York Cosmos when they were a soccer team instead of a cocktail. As they turned toward Lexington Avenue, Gucci turned his head toward Gary and asked him why he thought Caesar salads had anchovies in them but not olives. "I give up," Gary said – "Why?" *GB*