

A Sad Procession of Witnesses

by Hal Herring

Holli Rose was the young woman who police used to set Dick Dasen up for his arrest on the afternoon of February 7th, 2004, the arrest that led to his trial on 14 counts of promotion of prostitution and related sex crimes. She is a tall dark-haired woman who looks older than her twenty-three years. As she testifies, she is never too far from tears, the sadness upon her as plain as the severe black suit she is wearing. Rose said on the stand last week that she went to Dasen in the summer of 2003, to get money to escape an abusive boyfriend, the father of her daughter, and began a relationship with Dasen which included what has by now become a kind of repetitive chant of the female witnesses in this trial: "He came in...took off his clothes, performed oral sex...used sex toys...got dressed, went over to a little table and wrote out a check."

Dasen she said, was always kind and gentle with her, and early in their meetings asked her to be, Rose said "one of his regular girls." As defense attorney George Best made clear, there was never an explicit declaration by either Rose or Dasen that the money was in exchange for the sex acts. She has not been charged with prostitution, or promotion of prostitution, even though she brought her friends to Mr. Dasen for sexual sessions, and received large amounts of money from him, a fact that Best hopes will suggest to jurors that she has been pressured to testify against Dasen in return for her freedom.

Rose seems traumatized by her experiences in jail and in the Montana State Women's Prison, and perhaps, traumatized by that February day at the Blue and White when Dick Dasen was arrested. When asked by prosecutor Dan Guzynski how she felt about setting Dasen up, Rose replied, "I have mixed emotions about it, to be honest." Rose began to cry, and she appeared extremely fragile, a woman called upon to explain the inexplicable, who has risen from unimaginable depths, unsure if she will remain on the surface. "Why did you set up the meeting for the police?" asked the prosecutor. Rose answered, crying. "I knew if that money was available I'd always go back to it, and not only me but other girls in the same situation. It had to stop."

Legal questions aside, one certainty has emerged in the long testimonies of these women. Dasen took fantastic risks to satisfy his hunger. Rebecca Fowler, a Native American woman from Great Falls who conducted sexual meetings with Dasen in Kalispell, often brought her husband along, and he would stay in a nearby room, holding a walkie talkie in case she needed help. Fowler testified that she and her husband had long used the walkie talkies for their usual business, which was shoplifting from stores in Great Falls. They were addicted to meth, too. Once, Fowler said, she became impatient and disinterested during a sexual session with Dasen, and Dasen lost his temper and grabbed her by the throat. She keyed the walkie-

talkie, and her husband rushed to her aid, fumbling with his key at the door of the room where she and Dasen were having their session. The two men stared at each other as Dasen quickly left the room, Fowler said.

Summer Mahlen, who was eighteen when she was taking appointments to meet Dasen, said that she once chased after Dasen with a 9mm pistol, planning to shoot him for having full sexual intercourse with her friend Jenna Clark, when their agreement had been for only the usual—Dasen performing oral sex on them both, for the price of \$1000 apiece. Clark had made a distraught call some of their men friends, too, on a cell phone from the motel room, hysterically trying to explain what had happened, and these two men friends had rushed to the parking lot of the motel, bent on a vengeance that, apparently, they did not, then or ever, wreak.

But there is uncertainty, too, in that stange, fog-swept country that lies beyond all legal definitions, but does not necessarily lie beyond the humanity and judgement of the jury. Although George Best works very hard to create an image of Dasen as a victim of a kind of unholy and predatory covenant, the notion drifts uneasily into view everyday, even without Best's work. One witness called on Friday, who was sixteen years old, and working at Kentucky Fried Chicken when she met with Dasen for sexual appointments, had given him a false name for every meeting. Dasen eventually learned her true name, and age, when the witness's sister called him from Louisiana and informed him of the falsehood, and he stopped asking her for sexual meetings, though when she called him months later he resumed helping her, without sexual or any other kind of repayment.

Most of the women did usually call Dasen to meet when they needed money, and Dasen, at some point early in their relationships, did tell some of them that he would help them whether they met with him for sex or not. And

the women, most of them, were living an existence that is unsympathetic in the extreme, long aimless days of riding around with whoever owned a car at the time, living in motel rooms, squandering days and nights and huge amounts of money in casinos, most of them with needy children somewhere in the background, obscured by the haze of methamphetamine.

It does not take a genius in oratory to indict that lifestyle, and while Best may seem intentionally disingenuous in his constant harping on “drug parties” and his endless questions about where the women obtained their drugs—as if he were an agent of the police instead of a defense attorney—he is carefully and repeatedly painting a picture of a world where anything goes, out of wedlock children, dope of every variety, lies and desperation and predation and crime, sex and idleness. In short, everything that is wrong with our society. In a week or so, he will paint a careful portrait of an opposite world, one of business and church and getting up early to get your work done, sobriety and making your payments on time, and he will let the jury ask themselves who exactly has the most credibility.

Witness Joy Ferguson, who was charged with prostitution for several meetings with Dasen during 2003, was trapped in a relationship with a man who seemed bent on killing her, who beat her and screamed his hatred and derision at her in front of their children. But she had no car, and no where to take her two children. She was no drug addict—she had seen enough of that when her sister’s husband overdosed and died, and she had watched her sister’s futile efforts to escape the rain of dope that was drowning her, too. But Joy— one of the most forthright and self-possessed witnesses so far in this trial— worked for low wages at the Super One, and Dasen seemed like the only way to save her life and that of her children.

Ferguson testified that she met with Dasen at his home, where the encounter

went beyond the usual oral sex and included intercourse. That day was February 7th, 2004, the same day that Dasen would be arrested at the Blue and White Motel with Holli Rose.

There is another image that stands out. When witness Jenna Clark was asked if she had ever seen Dasen after the fracas at the Hampton Inn with Summer Mahlen and the 9mm pistol, the disputed sexual intercourse, the men friends rushing to the “rescue”, she at first said no. But Clark thought for just a second, and told this story. “I did see him later that winter. He knocked on the door of my trailer by accident, and said he was looking for a girl named Michelle that lived in my trailer court. He didn’t recognize me, so I re-introduced myself, and he asked me if he could come in and talk. But I told him it wasn’t a good time. I had my children wrapped around my legs, checking out what was happening.”

A successful and respected businessman, driving a shiny new SUV, on a freezing afternoon in a long Montana winter, wanders into a trailer court, and meets by accident a woman that he thinks is a stranger, a woman like Ms. Clark, with her long hair and classical Irish beauty, and her obvious fragility born of methamphetamine and bad choices. The door to the trailer is open, and the cramped heat and chaos of children and poverty lies there, just three steps up from where he is standing, behind the woman. “Can I come in and talk?” he asks.