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Abstract

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CHAPTER ONE: OPENING STATEMENTS

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The noise grew increasingly more staccato as the distraught individual sitting next to me tapped her immaculately manicured nails on the oak tabletop. With her wool pantsuit, pearl necklace, and slick blonde hair tied up in a bun, she appeared to have just walked off the cover of *Vogue* Magazine. Somewhat self-consciously, I smoothed down my mauve blouse and picked an imaginary piece of lint off my skirt. A coworker had advised that I dress business casual yet I felt slightly underdressed in comparison to some of the other jurors. Drawing my attention back to the front of the courtroom, I watched as an elderly woman strode purposefully towards the bench, hindered only by a slight limp in her left leg.

“Please rise. Court is now in session, the Honorable Judge Miller presiding.”

Judge Miller replied with, “Everyone but the jury be seated. Mr. Rivers, please swear in the jury.”

An echo of “I do” from the jury, in response to the bailiff’s statements, made me chuckle inside. It brought me back to my wedding night two years ago, stirring up memories of Cabernet sauvignon and my husband’s ridiculous drunken impression of Donald Duck.

“Good morning everyone. I hope you have all enjoyed a lukewarm cup of coffee from Pearl’s Café across the street.”

A hesitant chuckle rippled across the room, bringing the tiniest of smiles to Judge Miller’s tired face. I had to give her some credit; at least she had a sense of humor. As the laughter died down, I noticed the stern expression on who I assumed to be the prosecuting attorney. I take it he had not gotten the chance to fill up on his caffeine. Either that or he woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. Judging by the curious glances the Hispanic man

sitting next to me was diverting towards him, I figured I was not the only one who noticed that the lawyer appeared to have a stick up his ass.

“Members of the Jury, you face a crucial task today of determining whether the defendant is guilty or not guilty, based on facts and evidence presented in this courtroom. The prosecution will provide information designed to verify the defendant’s guilt, building a case...”

Pausing mid-sentence, Judge Miller shuffled several papers around, giving the stink eye to two men in matching brown suits who were whispering animatedly in the audience. A vein in her taut forehead threatened to burst, a clear indicator that her patience was running thin. It looked like she could have benefitted from another cup of coffee herself.

“There will be no disruptions in my courtroom.”

The finality with which she made that statement caused the two men to abruptly close their mouths and look down in embarrassment at their laps. The one with the striped olive tie sunk a bit lower into his chair, no doubt trying to hide from the judge’s stern glare. I guess looks can be deceiving. In spite of the judge’s friendly features and amicable sense of humor, she sure knew how to command respect. Definitely not someone you would want to cross paths with in a sticky situation.

“The prosecution will provide information designed to verify the defendant’s guilt, building a case against the defendant. In other words, it is the role of the prosecution to substantiate that the defendant committed the accused crime. In the event that you are not convinced of the defendant’s guilt, this indicates reasonable doubt exists and the defendant is to be found not guilty. Is everyone clear?”

Not waiting for an answer, Judge Miller turned back to face the center of the room. It was clear that her no-nonsense attitude had made a mark on my fellow jurors for Mrs. Vogue Magazine sat up even straighter in her chair, pasting a faulty smile across her narrow face. I don't know why I was getting such strange vibes off her; call it instinct but her demeanor was rubbing me the wrong way.

A pause followed Judge Miller's rhetorical question, during which an awkward silence settled over the room. She looked over at the bailiff who was cleaning his glasses with his shirt rim, intent on wiping away whatever smudges were obscuring his vision. Hastily rising to his feet he proclaimed, "Your Honor, today's case is California v. Taylor."

"And is the prosecution ready?"

Again, another rhetorical question from Judge Miller who clearly expected nothing but utmost professionalism. Her slight southern accent made me wonder whether she was raised somewhere like Texas or Louisiana.

"Your Honor, ladies and gentleman of the jury, my name is Adam Lewis. Today the state is charging Samuel Taylor with violation of California penal code 187 for the willful, deliberate, first-degree murder of Grace Lemmons."

The voice that was speaking belonged to the uptight attorney from the prosecution's side, his nose wrinkling slightly every time he mentioned the defendant by name. I could not help but notice the sugary sweet manner in which he addressed the jury panel, almost as if he was trying to gain our approval with each word. Sitting at the prosecutor's table was a clearly distressed couple who were both stifling their sobs with sopping handkerchiefs. At the mention of Grace, the woman blew her nose into the dirty cloth, attempting to compose herself. She briefly closed her eyes while drawing the rosary beads in her sweaty palms closer to her heart. I wondered

whether she was praying for life imprisonment for the defendant. Pointing to the emotional couple, Mr. Lewis continued his statement.

“Sitting before you are Lauren and Mike Lemmons, the parents of Grace Lemmons. They were both born and raised in Salinas so they consider this city to be their dearest home. Growing up, Lauren and Mike enjoyed a quiet and simplistic life with their daughter. Family game night for them consisted of trips to Valley Center Bowling Alley. Mike watched as his daughter graduated with honors from her high school, the countless hours that she spent in the John Steinbeck library clearly paying off. Lauren took Grace to each of her volleyball practices and cheered her on when she took home the award for Most Valuable Player. They loved their daughter dearly but unfortunately, no longer can...”

The prosecuting attorney almost sounded as if he were at an open mic reading, sharing his personal poetry with random strangers at a bar. The way he emphasized certain words, pausing periodically but not overly dramatically for effect, made it evident that he knew how to work an audience. He was definitely making a positive impression on at least seven members of the jury. They were clinging to every word he said, drawn in by his almost theatrical speech. I made a mental note of how he maintained eye contact with all of us, taking great care to look each individual straight in the eye while talking. I guess when you're an attorney, public speaking skills are necessary.

“On Sunday December 12, 2010 Samuel Taylor repeatedly stabbed his girlfriend Grace Lemmons to death in his parents' house. The weapon used in the killing was a ten-inch chef's knife bought by Mr. Taylor five days prior to the incident. Ms. Lemmons had gone to the Taylor household to help the defendant with a school project. Upon arriving at the

scene, police found Mr. Taylor kneeling over her deceased body, with the knife in his left hand.”

Although Mr. Lewis carried an air of confidence and authority, the way in which he spoke reminded me of an arrogant student who was used to getting his way. I could imagine him polishing his high school diploma on the weekends, while reciting off his many accomplishments to any of his friends that would listen.

“Because of the defendant’s actions that dreadful night, Mr. and Mrs. Lemmons have been robbed of the opportunity to say goodbye to their daughter. As they drive past Steinbeck Library every morning on their way to work, they are reminded of how quickly life can be given and taken within the same moment. These murders were not committed in self-defense but rather are heinous acts of malice. Mr. Taylor scheduled to meet with Ms. Lemmons in order to create an opportunity to seek revenge on his unfaithful girlfriend. He entered his house on December 12 with the intent of murdering the victim. We ask you to hold the defendant responsible for his wrongful actions.”

With this final statement, one of the jurors ran a leathery hand through his grey hair, nodding slightly in agreement with Mr. Lewis. I on the other hand wasn’t sure how convinced I was just yet. I was definitely looking forward to hearing what the defense had to say.

“Is the defense ready?”

Judge Miller’s crisp tone brought me out of my mental psychoanalysis of the other jurors. Although opinions regarding the case were not supposed to be formed until after all the evidence was provided, I couldn’t shake the feeling that some of the people sitting next to me had already reached a verdict. I wonder if they were this decisive in their everyday lives. It usually takes me

at least ten minutes just to settle on what to eat for breakfast; I couldn't imagine having to decide someone's fate in a matter of mere minutes.

A twig-like man in his late forties rose up out of his seat, knocking over a mile-high stack of papers in the process. The documents fluttered to the floor, creating a layer of what appeared to be artificial snow. Profusely apologizing, although to whom I was not sure since no one seemed to be paying him much attention, the slender man hastily gathered everything up, somehow also managing to give himself a paper cut. Grunting, he enclosed the injured finger in the palm of his right hand as he muttered under his breath. I almost felt as if I was watching a scene from *Dumb and Dumber*, except this was a one-man act.

“Judge Miller, Your Honor. Jury members, hello.”

Raising his hand in a half-wave, he gestured towards the jury, staring for a moment too long at Mrs. Vogue Magazine who proceeded to cross her legs in return. I had to stifle a laugh at the somewhat disgusted look on her face, reminding myself that there were more important things to focus on.

“I'm Jon and I will be representing Samuel as his defense attorney. Actually, my name is Jonathan....Jonathan Miguel but you can just call me Jon. Not that it really matters, but I just thought I would mention that.”

Mr. Miguel's bald head glistened with sweat, highlighting his flustered demeanor. The crooked orange and purple argyle tie around his neck made me cringe internally. Although I was no fashion designer myself, I knew that a flashy tie was either a hit or miss, and in this case, it definitely missed the mark. The man not only needed to attend a public speaking seminar, but could also benefit from a personal stylist.

“On the night of December 12, Grace Lemmons was tragically murdered as a result of unknown circumstances. However, the defendant, Samuel Taylor, is not to be held responsible for these actions. In fact, Mr. Taylor arrived at the house at what was likely moments prior to the crime, catching a glimpse of a hooded figure running from the house. Instinct kicked in, prompting him to chase after the hooded figure who turned left on Wickery Drive after jumping the front yard fence.”

While he spoke, Mr. Miguel nervously twisted his fingers together, almost as if he was hoping to create an origami masterpiece out of them. He reminded me of myself during my socially awkward high school years. I only hope that I was slightly less harried than him.

“Unable to keep up with the rapid pace of the individual, Mr. Taylor ran back to the house to check on Ms. Lemmons. After finding her badly injured upstairs, he pulled the knife out of her chest. It was at this point that police arrived on the scene after being notified by a neighbor who heard...”

Pausing to reference his jumbled mess of notes, the defense attorney cleared his throat before proceeding. From my peripheral vision, I noticed a sly smirk creep across Mr. Lewis’ amused face.

“...after being notified by a neighbor who heard quote screams and commotion.”

A quick survey of the room informed me that I wasn’t the only one who believed the likelihood of Samuel returning to his parent’s house at the *exact* moment the “real killer” made his/her escape was quite slim. I wondered if anyone else other than the defendant saw the hooded figure as well. However, the saying goes that “the truth will set you free”, so I figured as long as both sides told the truth, or at the very least their versions of it, then things would work themselves out in the end.

“After you’ve heard all the evidence, I ask that you make what you feel is the correct decision. Although I would really hope your decision is in favor of the defendant. That would be ideal. Alright, anyway I think that’s all I have to say.”

He glanced down at his notes for what must have been the tenth time in a mere five minutes. Scratching his head in momentary confusion, he gave a slight bow towards the jury panel before ending with one final statement.

“Thank you for your time everyone.”

I half expected Mr. Miguel to conclude with, “and that’s all folks.” At this point, whether Samuel actually committed the crime was almost out of the question. His lawyer was certainly not the right person for the job. Surely, they could have coughed up a more eloquent and persuasive attorney. Maybe someone who didn’t pace back and forth like a broken toy soldier.

CHAPTER TWO: WITNESS TESTIMONY

With a somewhat relieved expression on her face, Judge Miller proclaimed, “Prosecution, you may call your first witness.”

Rising elegantly to his feet, Mr. Lewis served a generous smile to the jury. Judging from the cocky expression on his face, I had a feeling that things were about to get interesting.

“Thank you your Honor. I would now like to call to the stand Mrs. Alexandra Jenkins.”

A wiry redhead purposefully strode to the front of the courtroom, her lanky legs giving her the appearance of a giraffe.

“Will the witness please stand to be sworn in by the bailiff?”

Following the formal procedures, Mrs. Jenkins calmly took her seat at the witness stand. Her eagerness struck me as a bit odd but I dismissed that thought from my mind as the prosecuting attorney began his line of questioning.

“Mrs. Jenkins, is it true that you have been Mr. Taylor’s neighbor for over twelve years now?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“So would you say that you know the defendant fairly well?”

“Yes, definitely. I watched Samuel grow up before my very own eyes.”

“How would you describe Mr. Taylor? Would you say that he was well-behaved during his childhood?”

Shifting towards the jury, Mrs. Jenkins took a moment to collect her thoughts before continuing.

“Samuel was always a very curious boy, a troublemaker if you will. He was well known for his neighborhood pranks. He once stuffed my cat Jamison into a flowerpot. Moreover,

this was after he shaved his initials into his fur. Who would do that to my baby? You see, Jamison is a tabby and has a beautiful coat of striped fur that resembles a Bengal tiger.”

I was half-expecting Mr. Miguel to object but he was too busy furiously writing in his notepad to comment. Judge Miller however cast an annoyed look at Mr. Lewis that seemed to do the trick.

“Mrs. Jenkins could you please describe to everyone the argument that you overheard four days prior to the unfortunate murder of Grace Lemmons?”

“Oh, sure. I was listening to a podcast while sitting in my backyard when I heard raised voices coming from the Taylor house. They had left one of their windows open and the lots are so closely spaced together that I could hear almost every word of their conversation. Samuel kept repeatedly yelling something along the lines of “So then just leave Grace, why are you even here anyway? Go run back to Tom since you love him so much.” I then heard Grace respond, “I just think we should maybe take a break, that’s all.” Following that, there was a loud bang and the sound of glass shattering. Samuel then stormed out of the front door, kicking his father’s car tire on his way out.”

“Just to clarify, you heard Mr. Taylor and Ms. Lemmons arguing four days prior to the murder?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I heard.”

Judge Miller sighed before calling out, “If there are no further questions from the prosecution, the defense may now cross-examine the witness.”

Mr. Miguel gathered up his mountain of notes before approaching Mrs. Jenkins, his argyle tie still slightly off center. I could tell that Mrs. Jenkins wanted to reach over and fix it herself but thankfully, she politely refrained from doing so.

“Mrs. Jenkins, you claim that Mr. Taylor stormed out the front door of the Taylor house yet you also stated that you were sitting in your backyard when this argument happened. Is this correct?”

“Well, yes I was...,” stammered Mrs. Jenkins.

“Do you have superhuman vision that we are not aware of?”

“Objection your Honor!” proclaimed Mr. Lewis with a flush creeping from his cheeks down his neck.

“On what grounds Mr. Lewis?” inquired Judge Miller.

“Badgering the witness!”

“Overruled.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Mr. Lewis sat back down after giving Mr. Miguel a piercing look. I had to give him credit; he seemed like an entirely different person. Perhaps it just took him a little while to warm up, but one thing for sure is that this cross-examination was a win for the defense. Mr. Miguel definitely succeeded in undermining Mrs. Jenkins’s validity. I wondered whether the argument actually occurred at all or if the entire thing was a figment of Mrs. Jenkins’s imagination.

The second witness that the prosecution called to the stand was another one of the Taylor family’s neighbors, this time a middle-aged man who owned a dinky auto repair shop in East Salinas. It struck me as a bit odd that so many of the defendant’s neighbors were willing to testify against him. It seemed he knew how to piss off people.

“Mr. Gomez is it true that you witnessed Mr. Taylor fleeing from the scene on the night of the murder of Ms. Lemmons?”

“I saw a hooded figure who looked very much like Samuel running away from the Taylor house that night,” Mr. Gomez replied.

The prosecuting attorney looked slightly annoyed that the witness had corrected his facts. He raised his eyebrows slightly at Mr. Gomez before proceeding.

“Now this hooded figure; could you please describe his build?”

“Well I’m assuming it was a male because the person had an athletic build with very broad shoulders. He was about six feet tall and was dressed in all black. I yelled for him to stop when I first saw him, but he paid me no attention, hopping the Taylor’s front yard fence. That’s when I ran back inside my own house to call the cops.”

My head was reeling with so many questions and I could tell that I wasn’t the only person who was a bit confused. Mrs. Vogue Magazine had been tapping her nails against the bench and I was curious to know what was going through her mind right now. This time when Mr. Miguel approached the second witness, he left his notes behind. He had straightened his tie and I noticed that he walked with a different level of confidence than I had previously seen.

“Mr. Gomez what were you doing before you heard the screams and went outside to see what was going on?”

“I was sleeping; it was past 10:00 pm you see.”

“Were you sleeping with your glasses on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you wear your glasses to bed that night?”

“No, of course not.”

“Mr. Gomez is it true that you have a medical eye condition called Keratoconus?”

“Objection your Honor; relevance!”

“Overruled Mr. Lewis; I’m curious to see where this line of questioning is going.”

“As I was saying, is it true that you have a medical eye condition called Keratoconus?”

“Yes, I developed it during my teen years.”

“This eye condition, Keratoconus, it requires that you wear special contact lenses called RGPs, short for Rigid Gas Permeable lenses. Is this correct?”

“Yes, I’ve been wearing them to improve my vision and delay the progression of the disease.”

“Now, for those that aren’t familiar with Keratoconus it refers to the gradual progression of the cornea from a sphere to a cone shape. Generally, patients with this condition have high astigmatism meaning that they don’t exactly have the best vision. You said previously that you did not wear your glasses to bed so obviously you had to put them on before going outside the night of December 12, correct?”

“Well, I actually I wasn’t wearing my glasses that night.”

“And why might that be?”

A pause from the witness followed this question, prompting Judge Miller to remind him that he was under oath.

“I broke my glasses a few days prior and so had been wearing my contacts while I was waiting for the new glasses to arrive.”

“You don’t keep a spare pair of glasses with you Mr. Gomez?”

“I normally do but I had just recently moved to the neighborhood and seemed to misplace them during the move.”

“Just to clarify, you had no access to any corrective lenses apart from your contacts, is that correct?”

“I mean, I guess so but....”

“Did you put your contacts in before you ran outside and saw who you describe as the defendant running away from the Taylor household?”

“No, I heard screams so ran out immediately. I thought someone was hurt! What was I supposed to do?”

“You claim that the hooded figure was wearing all black and had the same build as the defendant, yet your vision was impaired that night.”

Mr. Gomez remained silent, probably to avoid looking like a bigger fool than he already did. At this point, Mr. Lewis was sweating buckets in his seat, using a large handkerchief to dab at his distressed forehead. Looks like his calm and collected appearance had decided to take a lunch break, leaving him with the more frazzled version of himself.

The last witness that the prosecution called to the stand was the sales clerk of a hardware store that Samuel had purchased a knife from a few weeks prior to the incident. She highlighted the fact that the ten-inch chef’s knife that he bought was the same brand and model of the murder weapon. Mr. Miguel had little to say to this witness, leaving the prosecuting attorney to sit back down with a hint of a smirk dancing across his thin lips.

“Defense, you may call your first witness.” Judge Miller’s voice rang out with a rejuvenated sense of authority, alluding to her peaking interest in the case.

To be honest, my curiosity was getting the better of me as well. I was starting to believe that the defendant was not guilty but the fact that he conveniently returned home at the same time as the “real killer” escaped was what was throwing me off. I was very much intrigued to hear what the defendant’s witnesses had to offer to the winding tale of events that occurred on the night of December 12.

A hefty young man with a scraggly goatee walked briskly to the witness stand, taking in several deep breaths in what appeared to be an attempt to calm his nerves. He looked to be around the same age as Samuel, give or take a few years. His youthful appearance gave him the air of a cuddly teddy bear, one who could benefit from a pat on the back.

Smiling encouragingly at the witness, Mr. Gomez inquired, “Mr. Thomas could you please state your relation to the defendant?”

“Uhh...yeah sure. My name is William Thomas and I’m a childhood friend of Sam’s. I’ve known him for as long as I can remember.”

“Would you describe Mr. Taylor as a violent individual?”

“No, definitely not. I’ve never seen him act violently with anyone before. Honestly, he’s like my brother and I know that he would never hurt a fly. This whole situation is f***** up.”

As soon as those words left his mouth, Judge Miller animatedly cleared her throat before proclaiming, “There will be no foul language. Period.”

A meek, “sorry” trickled out of William, leaving Mr. Gomez to fiddle with his origami fingers. I wondered if he was regretting his choice of witness at this point.

“You were with Mr. Taylor on this night of alleged crime, is that correct Mr. Thomas?”

“Yea, I was with him. We went to a bar over on South Main Street.”

“And around what time did you leave the bar?”

“Honestly, I don’t really remember.”

Mr. Gomez shook his head slightly at the witness, which prompted him to change his answer.

“I believe we left at around 10:00 pm.”

“The defendant and Mr. Thomas did in fact leave the bar at 10:16pm on the night of Sunday December 12. Video footage from outside the bar validates this statement,” stated Mr. Gomez.

The grainy black and white image displayed on a large screen at the front of the courtroom showed Samuel and William laughing as they exited the dusty bar. The time stamp on the image did in fact read 10:16pm.

“Lalla Lounge, the bar which the defendant socialized at, is an approximately fourteen minute drive from the Taylor house. The police found Mr. Taylor at his house at 10:38pm. Assuming that the drive from the bar was in fact fourteen minutes that night, that only leaves Mr. Taylor with around eight minutes to commit the accused crime.

Given this time frame, it would have been virtually impossible for the defendant to park his car, walk into the house, find his girlfriend upstairs, and proceed to stab her.”

Although I agreed that the time frame was a little tight, I wasn’t entirely convinced that it was *virtually impossible* for the defendant to commit those acts in that period. On the contrary, you could get a lot done in eight minutes. Some things in life are truly impossible, but this was definitely not one of them. There is a big difference between unlikely and impossible.

Stretching lazily from his seat, the prosecuting attorney breezed on up to the center of the courtroom. Before beginning his line of questioning, he once again tilted his head to the jury, as if to signal that he hadn’t forgotten about us.

“Mr. Thomas, why did you and the defendant decide to go to a bar on a Sunday night? I was under the impression that Mr. Taylor had a school assignment to complete by the upcoming Monday. After all, that’s why Ms. Lemmons was waiting at his house, to help with his homework.”

“We had some down time and wanted to have a little fun. It isn’t illegal to have fun is it? Plus Sam wasn’t supposed to meet with Grace until a bit later that night; she simply arrived early at his house.”

Ignoring the comment regarding the legality of having fun, Mr. Lewis shook his head sympathetically towards the Lemmons family, almost as if to console them for having to go through this whole ordeal.

“Now, did this fun include talking to any girls at the bar?”

“I don’t think I understood the question.”

“Did you and the defendant talk to any girls that night?”

“I mean, I did, but Samuel was always faithful to Grace. Unlike Grace.”

That last bit he muttered under his breath, clearly disgusted by the idea that Samuel’s girlfriend had cheated on him.

“Does the name Alicia Owen ring a bell to you?”

A look of confusion passed across William’s face, a look that I’m sure most people in the courtroom shared. However, his expression swiftly transitioned from confusion to discomfort as the name registered in his mind.

“Mr. Thomas, do you know an individual by the name of Alice Owen?”

“Yes, she’s a friend of mine. And of Sam’s. She’s our friend.”

“I would now like to show a video of Mr. Thomas and the defendant with their friend Alice. Please pay attention to the manner in which they treat their friend.”

The emphasis that the prosecuting attorney placed on the word *friend* peaked my curiosity. It seemed to interest Mrs. Vogue Magazine as well, for she squinted slightly at the video displayed on the screen. It showed an angry Samuel approaching a petite brunette who was

twirling the umbrella from her drink in her slender hands. Just as she was about to take another sip, Samuel knocks the glass from her hand, spilling the contents onto the floor. As she reaches for a napkin to dab at her shirt, he grabs her by the wrist and yanks her to a more secluded area of the club. Samuel then proceeds to yell at the girl, shoving her roughly against the wall when she tries to dodge past him. William is pictured in the corner observing the scene. He doesn't move to disrupt the argument and is in fact seen reassuring an onlooker that everything is okay. As someone unaware of the backstory behind the argument, I found it clear that the defendant was not quite as harmless as his best mate has painted him to be.

"I think that's enough Mr. Lewis," Judge Miller called from her perch.

"No further questions your Honor."

William slumped down into his chair, probably wishing the past fifteen minutes of his life hadn't occurred. I honestly wasn't sure how to feel anymore. Was there more to the defendant than was being shared? I guess there are several layers to each person, some good and others not so much. Hopefully the next witness would be able to provide some clarity to the case.

A young African American man approached the witness stand, his muscular build clearly visible from under his suit. His face was grim yet he managed to share a polite nod to the jury panel before taking his seat. In spite of his tall stature, he seemed like the kid who would stand up to the class bully trying to snatch everyone's lunch money. It took me a minute to recognize him as Samuel Taylor; he looked so different from the individual in the Lalla Lounge video.

Absentmindedly rubbing his head, Mr. Miguel surveyed the room before approaching Samuel.

"Mr. Taylor, can you please describe your relationship with Ms. Lemmons?"

“Yes, sir. Grace was my best friend. I know that might sound a little cheesy but I speak from my heart when I say that. We knew each other since kindergarten and started dating during our freshman year of high school. She continuously supported me, and for that, I will always be grateful. Sure, we would disagree on things sometimes but who doesn’t argue with their partner on occasion? At the end of the day, no matter what she said or did, I always knew that she had my back. I know that some of you might not believe me, or might not trust me, but please believe that I would never take another human being’s life. I admit that I am a little bit lost in my own life, but my head is on straight. I value respect, honesty, and hard work. I’ve overcome many challenges throughout the years and I would be lying if I said I got over those obstacles by myself. My girlfriend was there for me during my hardest times. You may see me as a criminal, a murderer, and honestly, that’s your opinion. But really, I’m just a kid who lost his first love way too soon.”

As Samuel spoke, I felt myself drawn to him slightly. He seemed mature beyond his years. Heck, he seemed more mature than I am! I don’t exactly know why, but he gave the impression that he was the kind of kid who was caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. In some ways he resembled my nephew, very intelligent but a little bit troubled.

“Thank you for sharing that Mr. Taylor. When you came home the night of December 12, did you notice anything out of place? Please recount the events of that night as clearly as possible.”

“After leaving Lalla Lounge, I drove back home. I parked the car behind my dad’s station wagon and then pulled the gate shut behind me. I didn’t even have a chance to lock it when I heard heavy footsteps behind me. I knew my parents weren’t home so something

seemed a bit off. The footsteps sounded too rushed. Turning around, I saw the side profile of a hooded figure charging past me. He jumped the gate and then took off. Immediately I sprang into action, chasing him down the street. The man must have been a sprinter or something because he took off like a rocket and I found myself struggling to keep up. I followed him until Wickery Lane at which point he turned left. My gut was telling me something was wrong so that's when I ran back home to check on Grace. I figured the guy must have robbed the house or something."

"You said *he* charged past you. What makes you think it was a male?"

"Oh, it was definitely a male. I didn't get a good look at his face, but the person was built like a man."

"What happened after you arrived back at your parents' house?"

"The front door was wide open so I went inside. I searched the downstairs, calling out for Grace but didn't get any response. My parents were both out of town during this time so I got an uneasy feeling in my gut knowing that Grace was alone inside. That's when I ran up the stairs, checking all the bedrooms. She was laying on the floor of my room, motioning to her chest. There was a huge knife stuck in the left side of her torso so I pulled it out. That's when I heard the sirens."

By this point, Samuel was wiping away the tears that were leaking from his eyes. My heart broke for him; I couldn't imagine what it must feel like to be in his position.

"He's a good actor," a raspy voice from behind me whispered.

Craning my neck to the side, I tried to make out who was speaking. However, all the jurors maintained stoic expressions. Mrs. Vogue Magazine huffed in annoyance but whether she was annoyed at the disruptive juror or the defendant remained unclear.

“The Prosecution may now cross-examine the witness.”

Mr. Lewis focused his disdainful expression on Samuel, no doubt relishing in the authoritative power that he held over the defendant.

“Mr. Taylor is it true that you were suspended from your high school?”

“Objection your Honor,” called out Mr. Miguel.

“On what grounds?”

“Relevance!”

“Overruled, but you are on a tight leash Mr. Lewis”

Adam looked very annoyed that Judge Miller likened him to a dog on a lead but even he knew the extent of his authority. Nodding towards the judge, he waited for Samuel to answer his previous question.

“Yes, but that was during a time when I was a completely different person.”

“For those that are unfamiliar, Mr. Taylor, can you describe the events leading up to your suspension?”

“I was just trying to make a point.”

“By brandishing a knife on school grounds? Let me remind everyone that the murder weapon that inflicted such fatal wounds on Grace Lemmons was a knife. Clearly you have some experience with knives, isn’t that right Mr. Taylor?”

“The knife wasn’t even mine. It belonged to a friend. We just made a stupid bet that I carried out. I shouldn’t have even had the knife in the first place but like I said, that was at a very difficult time in my life. I was a little rebellious but I want to clarify that no one got hurt. I did not use the knife on anyone.”

“Regardless, you do admit to being suspended from your high school for brandishing a knife on school grounds, is that correct?”

“Well, when you put it that way, I suppose so.”

With a grin of satisfaction, Mr. Lewis once again smirked at Mr. Miguel who appeared to be stunned by this news. It was manifest that he was not aware of this prior incident in Samuel’s past. Things didn’t seem to be looking that great for the defendant after all.

“How many drinks on average, on a daily basis, would you say you consume Mr. Taylor?”

At this question, the defense attorney threw his hands up in the air in exasperation.

“Tight leash Mr. Lewis, tight leash,” reminded Judge Miller

“Alright, alright. I just wanted to emphasize that Mr. Taylor was inebriated on the night of December 12. In fact, when police found him, he had a BAC of 0.072. Therefore, not only does the defendant have a violent history but he was also under the influence of alcohol when the crime was committed. And I’m sure I don’t need to remind everyone that sometimes, while under the influence, we do things we regret.”

While I definitely agreed with Mr. Adams about doing dumb things while drunk, I don’t think that murdering someone makes that list. At least, it sure as hell doesn’t make my list. It almost seemed like he was trying to connect nonexistent dots in order to prove an invalid point. Sort of like what my husband does when things don’t always work out as he plans. Speaking of, I wondered what he would make of this case. I always valued his insight regarding the crazy mess that is my life.

“I have one last question for you Mr. Taylor. When authorities arrived at the scene, you weren’t crying at all. In fact, you were quite calm and collected for someone who had just witnessed his girlfriend pass.”

“What exactly is the question that you are asking me?”

“How were you feeling when you allegedly tried to save your girlfriend by pulling out the knife?”

“I didn’t *allegedly* try to save her. I legitimately tried to. And the reason why I wasn’t crying was because I was in shock. How would you react if you lost your girlfriend right before your very eyes?”

“In so much shock that you didn’t dial 911?”

“Like I said before, I was only in the house for about two minutes before the cops arrived. And I left my phone in the car so I couldn’t access it.”

“Surely you have a home phone right?”

Before the defendant could answer, Judge Miller cut the prosecuting attorney’s line of questioning to a halt.

“I think that’s enough for now Mr. Lewis,” she stated.

The final witness that the defense called up was a broad shouldered woman who identified herself as Mrs. Taylor, mother to the defendant. She spoke very highly of her son, emphasizing how he was always kind to others. During this time, she kept shooting apologetic looks to the Lemmons family, her hands trembling under the heavy emotion that she was experiencing. As a fellow parent, I’m sure she was quite aware of the pain that they were going through. To Mr. Miguel’s apparent satisfaction, Mr. Lewis wasn’t able to get much out of the witness. I had to wonder why she was even called to the stand in the first place though. It made more sense to me to have Samuel be the last one to speak on his behalf.

“Both the prosecution and defense have rested their cases. The attorneys will now provide their final arguments,” proclaimed Judge Miller.

Mr. Lewis rose smartly to his feet, nodding to the Judge as he stated, “Thank you, your Honor. Members of the jury, today you have heard testimony about the murder of Grace Lemmons on the night of Sunday December 12. I would now like to remind you of some important information that you should keep in mind while making your decision. Firstly, the defendant was heard arguing with the victim four days prior to the incident. Secondly, one of his own neighbors saw him fleeing the scene on the night of the murder. Lastly, the defendant purchased a chef’s knife, of the same brand and model of the murder weapon, a mere five days before the unfortunate death of the victim. Given this information, please find the defendant guilty of the first-degree murder of Grace Lemmons.

While maintaining her hawk-like gaze, Judge Miller then stated, “Defense you may proceed with your closing argument.”

“Yes, thank you your Honor. Just to wrap things up here, I too have some important information that I would like you all to consider when making your decision. As I pointed out previously, the prosecution’s witnesses have not provided concrete evidence to find Mr. Taylor guilty. In fact, several of their statements don’t quite add up. Given the very limited time frame, it would have been virtually impossible for the defendant to commit this crime. Please find our client Samuel Taylor, not guilty. Thank you.”

Again with that word: *impossible*! It may have been very unlikely that Samuel murdered Grace in such a short period, but I still think that the defense attorney could have used a more appropriate term. At this point, I was experiencing mixed emotions. I didn’t quite know what to make of the situation. On one hand, I truly believed that Samuel was innocent, yet at the same time, there was a little voice in my head telling me otherwise. It’s incredibly difficult to simply look at someone and determine whether they are capable of such a heinous act like murder. Even

given the provided information, some of the other jury members still appeared to be a bit confused. I was glad that I wasn't the only one who had not made up my mind right away.

Judge Miller closed out this chapter of the trial by stating, "Members of the jury, you have heard all the testimony regarding this case. It is now up to you to decide what facts the evidence proves."

CHAPTER THREE: JURY DELIBERATION

Looking up at the ceiling of the private room in which we were sitting, I observed how one of the lights was slightly dimmer than the rest. Despite more pressing concerns, this small detail kept irritating me. Returning my attention back to the chaos that was currently the jury deliberation room, my insides began curdling at the ignorance and downright racist garbage that was coming out of the mouth of the raspy voiced juror. He had been going on for the last ten minutes about how convinced he was that the defendant was guilty, listing inaccurate facts detailing how blackness correlates with violent crimes. I had the urge to smack him over the head but instead took a deep breath in, reminding myself that there were more effective ways of teaching this fool a lesson.

“Excuse me sir but just to clarify, African Americans are the greatest racial minority subject to racially subjective profiling both in the courthouse and on the street. It looks to me like that’s exactly what you are doing right now to the defendant; profiling him. I don’t suppose you know him personally?”

Much to my surprise, Mrs. Vogue Magazine nodded her head in agreement with me. I probably should have just bitten my tongue but I couldn’t help but jump in. My husband, an ethnic studies professor at the local community college, was constantly educating me about ethnic discrimination in the judicial system, so now felt like the perfect time to sprinkle some of the bits that I had learned from him into the conversation. Well, it had started as a relatively polite conversation between the twelve of us, but over time had progressed into more of a heated debate regarding the innocence of the defendant. About three quarters of the room was dead set that the defendant was guilty but the rest of us weren’t entirely convinced just yet.

“From the minute that he started talking I just felt this strange sensation in the pit of my stomach. Almost as if he was looking straight into my soul. Like he knew he did it, yet he also knew that he was going to get away with it.”

“He’s not going to get away with it, I can tell you that much,” another voice chimed in.

“Don’t you think we are making premature decisions here? Let’s try to work this through logically. What do we know for sure to be true?”

I was relieved that Mrs. Vogue Magazine had enough sense to spark a more factually based debate.

“According to witness testimony from the defendant’s neighbor, we know that he was arguing with the victim before the actual murder happened.”

“We also know that he was seen running away from the scene of the crime. Why would you run away if you aren’t guilty?”

“True, but technically he was running after the actual murderer, right?”

“So he says, but I don’t know that I believe his story to be completely honest.”

“You’re saying that he killed his girlfriend and then just like that, decided to take off before the cops arrived? But then when he heard the sirens he turned back around to pretend like he just found her like that?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

I then interrupted with my own question, “How reliable do you think the witness testimony from the prosecution’s side is? Do we believe that the defendant’s neighbors were telling the whole truth? I think that the defense attorney did a fair job of diminishing their validity.

I mean come on; Mrs. Jenkins could have just imagined that whole argument between

Samuel and Grace. She was far more concerned about her cat than anything else really. And what about Mr. Gomez?"

"Don't even get me started on Mr. Miguel, that guy was a complete joke. You're telling me you think he was good at his job?" another voice interjected.

"No, I didn't say that at all. Let's focus on the defendant right now."

"Suppose Samuel did murder the victim; what was his motive?"

"His girlfriend cheated on him so he took matters into his own hands."

"Not necessarily", I added. "Grace went to the Taylor household to help Samuel with his schoolwork. Why would they be working on homework together if Samuel were still upset about Grace's infidelity? That doesn't make sense to me. This doesn't seem like a crime of passion or revenge. In fact, he was quite emotional in the courtroom."

"I'm telling you, the kid is a good actor. He knows how to sell it."

Yet again that same raspy voice. I was starting to really hate listening to him speak.

"Anyway..."

I was aware that I sounded a bit annoyed but wanted to keep the discussion on track. Being foreperson was more tiring than I had imagined it to be.

"What do we know that can lead us to believe that the defendant is not guilty?"

Several moments of silence followed my question making it apparent that Samuel was quickly running out of luck.

"You can't judge a book by its cover," replied Mrs. Vogue Magazine.

The man with the raspy voice quickly countered with, "Great, thank you for those profound words sweetheart."

She shot him a piercing look that he returned with a cheesy wink.

“I’m just saying innocent until proven guilty right? We have yet to *prove* him guilty of anything.”

“But did you see the way that he acted with the girl at the bar? I could easily picture him stabbing his girlfriend with no mercy.”

“Yeah, I agree with you. In addition, he already has experience with knives. Not to mention that he essentially bought the murder weapon just a few days prior, indicating that he had been planning to kill Grace. I feel like that’s a huge detail that we are ignoring.”

“Perhaps but someone could have easily just seen the knife in the kitchen and then grabbed it on their way up to the bedroom.”

“Right, but that’s provided that there was actually someone else in the house that murdered Grace. We don’t know for sure whether another individual even ran from the house as the defendant previously stated. In fact, we don’t have that many hardcore facts to go off of.”

“Regardless, we still need to come to a unanimous decision.”

“The key of course being unanimous.”

A shapely brunette with wide green eyes who had remained relatively quiet up until this point finally said, “This case hits close to home for me. A few years ago, three gang members killed my niece because she didn’t pay one of them back for the drugs that she bought from him. They cornered her in the CVS back parking lot and shot her right through her head. She was only sixteen.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“They were black.”

“Pardon?”

“The guys that killed my niece were all black. My point is that the defendant grew up in a shabby part of town and clearly lacks any sense of discipline. He was suspended from his school for brandishing a knife and is violent towards women. Also, I hate to say this point blank but he is black. Even the people that he hangs out with are unprofessional, cursing in the courtroom! Heaven forbid he is released and does the same thing to another girl.”

I literally thought my ears were failing me. Did this woman seriously just profile the defendant based on his skin tone even after I just told off the raspy-voiced man for doing the same thing earlier?

“While I agree with most of what you said, I think it’s incredibly inappropriate to bring race and/or ethnicity into this case.”

“I disagree; I think that the race of the defendant is instrumental in understanding the details of what happened the night of December 12.”

“Why? Please explain to me why. Clearly I am missing something that the rest of you are in on.”

By this point, the hairs on the back of my neck were standing straight up.

“Surely using a person’s race as a proxy for increased likelihood of criminal misconduct is wrong!”

“All I’m saying is that he fits the profile.”

“The profile of what? Of a murderer?”

Silence once again followed my question, this time even more frustrating than before. To be completely honest, all this debate was making my head spin. I still wasn’t sure if the defendant was guilty. I was so engrossed in all the racially charged misconceptions that some of the juror were tossing around that I had lost track of my goal as jury foreperson. We needed to come to a

decision and judging by the atmosphere in the room, Mrs. Vogue Magazine and I were the only two people who needed convincing. As a fellow ethnic minority, I felt a strange sort of connection with the defendant. I kept refusing to believe that he could commit such a horrible crime. Deciding I needed to distance myself emotionally from him, I mentally recounted the evidence from court.

Samuel was a troubled and misunderstood kid. He had anger management issues as evident from the video at Lalla Lounge and was experienced with knives. Not that it requires a whole lot of experience to stab someone, but still. Supposedly, he got in a fight with his girlfriend a few days before her death and according to his neighbors; he wasn't the most likeable kid on the planet. To top it off, he *was* drunk on the night of the incident and from personal experience; I was cognizant that sometimes we do dumb things while inebriated. After reanalyzing the evidence, I started to feel like maybe I had placed too much faith in the defendant. Everyone else seemed convinced that he had in fact murdered his girlfriend. Although the motive to me was still unclear, I figured I should just accept that some people are simply evil at heart.

Tuning back into the conversation around me, I overheard Mrs. Vogue Magazine saying, "I just don't want to send an innocent man to prison. But if you guys are convinced that he is guilty of his convicted crime, then I guess there isn't much left to say."

With these last words, she then turned to face me, as if to hear my final opinion. The other members of the jury joined her, waiting to hear what I had to say.

"Does everyone here agree that the defendant Samuel Taylor is guilty of the first-degree murder of Grace Lemmons?"

A unanimous yes echoed in the air, making reality set in hard. We were about to sentence this kid to a very grueling future. I only hoped that we had made the right decision.

EPILOGUE

“Aisha, did you check the mail already?”

My husband’s husky voice brought me out from my stupor. The warm July sun was unbelievably intoxicating against my skin, making me want to take a nap right here on our rickety front porch. James and I were watching the children across the street kick around a battered soccer ball, their screams of excitement ringing like church bells. I could just barely make out the smell of fresh blueberry scones from our neighbor Mr. Chandra. Whenever things at work got stressful, he always pulled out his trusty apron and set about baking up a storm. Thankfully, he always baked excessively and ended up sharing with the rest of the neighbors.

“No, I haven’t,” I replied.

I was just thinking to myself that nothing could make this day any better when James returned with a handful of envelopes and the newspaper. While flipping through the junk mail, he abruptly paused after seeing the front cover of the newspaper.

“What is it?” I asked in confusion.

Wordlessly, he handed me the paper. The headline read, *Wrongful Conviction of California Native Revealed Three Years after Trial*. Under the title was a gritty picture of Samuel Taylor on the day of his trial. From the corner, his weeping mother was clearly visible, bringing me right back to that emotional day.

As Judge Miller read out the defendant’s sentence, the courtroom erupted into a volcano of chaos. Several people cheered and even stood up to start clapping. Mrs. Lemmons slumped against her husband in relief, her chest heaving up and down with the overwhelming amount of emotion that she was experiencing. Samuel hung his head in defeat while his mother sobbed uncontrollably. “He’s innocent! He’s innocent!” She kept repeating those words, almost as if to

reassure herself that this was all just a sick joke. As painful as it was for me to watch, I remember sitting in the bath that night for several hours, wondering if I had just ruined an innocent man's life. I guess I did.

Shaking his head in disbelief, James sat down cross-legged next to me. Suddenly the sun no longer felt inviting but rather felt like an iron on my flesh. The children's screams sounded rather ghoulish to my ears. I felt like they were yelling at me to fix what I had messed up.

"It's a little too late for that now," I thought.

A vibrant butterfly drifted lazily past, pausing to settle on our peeling fence post. Its wings glistened in the sunlight and I couldn't help but wish I could be that butterfly. If not forever, just for today. I wanted the ability to fly away from my life, to gain some perspective from a different height. It then occurred to me that perhaps I was already that butterfly and I just wasn't aware. Perhaps we are all butterflies. Clay butterflies. Each of us as individuals is capable of transforming our mindset, capable of undergoing a subtle metamorphosis. Samuel Taylor had twelve jurors or twelve clay butterflies that decided his fate. In this case, the phrase, "don't judge a book by its cover" really comes into play.

Butterflies begin their lives as caterpillars but then undergo an incredible journey during which they transform into beautiful winged creatures; completely different from who they started out as, yet still retaining a part of their original identity. When I first walked into the courtroom, I felt like I already knew everything there was to know about Mrs. Vogue Magazine. I had preconceived notions about both her personality and identity, yet was later surprised by how different she was from what I had originally thought. Similarly, the man with the raspy voice from the trial had firmly believed that Samuel Taylor was a vicious murderer, but it turned out that in reality, he could not have been more wrong. Whether he later transformed into a stunning butterfly

or remained the dingy caterpillar, burdened by his prejudiced attitudes, remains a bit of a mystery. It can be quite easy to become blinded by ignorance but it is how we respond to and evolve from such lack of insight that shapes us into who we are today. We are capable of changing how we perceive others in order to maintain an open mindset that allows us to respect each individual equally.

However, we aren't simply ordinary butterflies. We are composed of clay in the sense that our perceptions are shaped by the physical appearance, behavior, and attitudes of those around us. Is it possible for us to look *at* a fellow human being instead of simply *through* them? In addition, it is relatively straightforward for us to break through our previous judgements and mold the clay that is our foundation. The only difference is that the force that drives this molding stems not from direct physical contact, but rather from the heat of our words. Incredibly powerful tools, our words provide us with the capability to educate and drive change in the way that we see others.

Rejuvenated from its short rest, the butterfly soared up past the winding branches of an elm tree. Perhaps it was just my imagination but I could have sworn it raised one of its wings as if to say farewell.

“Farewell,” I whispered, more to myself than to anyone in particular.