

Judgment Day

My mother was the first female judicial district judge in the state of Louisiana. She was elected to fill the position vacated by my father's death. She was a big woman and wore the same black robe he did. She dedicated herself to her work, which meant to me — just twelve — that her undivided attention was rare, and when it came it seemed to be an afterthought.

Sometimes she pocketed time for me in between official duties, which was the case on the summer day in question. She proposed that I call my best friend Rosalyn and that we accompany her to downtown Covington on Saturday. She had to be in the parish courthouse for eleven, but when she was done — which shouldn't take more than an hour — we'd have lunch and shop for clothes.

It was a bright, breezy day, not even humid — a perfect day, I still remember it distinctly after more than thirty years. In the car we played twenty questions. Rosalyn would ask her questions with a carefree haphazardness, sometimes leading off with a wild guess as to the very identity of the person, place or thing. Mother closed in on the answer with the pincers of inexorable logic. I was in between, envying both Rosalyn's headlong approach and Mother's methodical one, but not capable of either.

When we got to the courthouse, Mother told us to occupy ourselves for an hour, but before we headed out Rosalyn asked if she could see Mother's chambers. She agreed — reluctantly, I could see — and we all went inside. Since it was a weekend, the place was empty. The sound of Mother's heels echoed as we walked up a flight of stairs and into a room that was almost dark. Mother snapped on the goose-necked lamp of her long desk. Rosalyn asked if she could sit on her swivel chair; we laughed at how tiny a judge she was. After spinning around in a full circle Rosalyn asked if she could see Mother in her judge's outfit. Mother obliged; she opened a closet door and removed the heavy black robe from a wooden hanger, then she went into a little washroom attached to her chambers. When she emerged she was transformed. From her neck down she was all blackness; her face, in contrast, seemed unusually white. She didn't smile, as if playing a role: Justice, in all its severity. When she spoke it was in a no-nonsense tone.

"All right, girls. I have work to do. Why don't you go across the street, get a soft drink. No root beer floats — it'll ruin your appetite. Go to the pier by the river — it should be pretty there. It's 9:40 now. I'll be done by eleven, so be waiting for me on the benches out front."

We left, but Rosalyn whispered that she wanted to explore before we went outside. At the end of the hall was a fan-shaped window overlooking Boston Street. Then we went giggling up the stairs to the third floor, peered into a room with a long table and chairs. There was a weightiness to everything.

Retracing our steps, we again passed Mother's chambers; the door was partly open. I paused and looked in. Mother was seated in the swivel chair, looking at something she held in her hands. It was the size of a sheet of paper, but shiny. Her eyes rose slowly, as if reluctant to leave what she was looking at. When she saw me at the door she immediately shuffled what she was holding onto her lap, out of sight; she did it furtively, and I had never seen her act that way before. She looked at me, and I could see the anger in her eyes.

"Well?"

"Just going out."

“Then go.”

As we sipped our soft drinks, sitting on the bench under the low-hanging branches of a huge live oak tree, Rosalyn asked what would happen in court that day.

“Remember the trial where this guy was robbing an old lady’s house, and he killed her? Well, all Mom does today is sentence him.”

“You mean to death?”

“I guess.”

I had only passingly followed the case in the newspaper — I tended to exclude the part of Mother’s life that took her from me. I remembered reading the word “bludgeon” and not knowing what it meant. And one day I heard two men in overalls talking about the case. One called the boy “trailer trash” and said that he deserved “to fry.”

Now Rosalyn’s question made me think of Mother pronouncing those very words: “I sentence you to fry.” Like sizzling bacon twisting in a pan, trying to escape the terrible heat.

What I knew of death was recent and raw. A little over a year ago I was awakened by my father’s groans. The middle of the night, an ambulance’s twirling light, men in uniforms entering our house, wheeling out a stretcher with my father strapped on it. He was in his pajamas, very pale, hair tousled like a wild man’s. Strange, I remember that his feet were bare. He was rushed away — and I never saw him again. Four days later I threw a handful of dirt onto his coffin.

I stood up quickly. Too quickly — I felt light-headed.

“What’s the matter?”

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

Rosalyn started to rise, but I stopped her.

“You stay here.”

I could have used the public restroom on the first floor. But I had lied to Rosalyn — I didn’t have to go. It was a lie I could use if Mother caught me; I could say that I was going to use the washroom in her chambers. My real purpose was to investigate her furtive movement. What had she been looking at?

I saw people shuffling through double doors, into the main courtroom. I darted up the stairs, two steps at a time, then moved, with the stealthiness of a thief, down the hall to Mother’s chambers. The door was partially open. I peered in; it was silent, empty, though the goose-necked lamp still glowed. I slipped inside, hurried to her desk. There was nothing on top; I opened the middle drawer, and there it was. The moment I touched the shiny backing I knew that they were photographs, two of them. I turned them over. I was looking into the face of an old woman. The side of her head was caved in. The gray hair was matted flat, darkened by dried blood; some trailed down her neck. One of her eyes bulged out of the socket and gazed off to the side. The other eye stared at me. Her mouth was open, displaying a toothless void.

My hands trembled as I turned to the next photo. It was of the whole body. The nightgown was high up her thighs. There was something else, not blood, darkening the area between her legs. The flesh of her thighs was loose and crinkly-looking. Her arms were flung apart. In miniature, the same face stared up at me from the tile floor. Next to the head lay a baseball bat.

I put the photos back in the drawer, face down as I had found them. I got up, slipped through the door without touching it, went down the stairs one step at a time, holding onto the railing. There was no one standing outside the courtroom now; the doors were closed. I moved to those doors, opened one without making a sound. People stood at the back of the room. In the crowd I could be unseen. I heard a man speaking, and when he was done another man's voice said a few words, then there was silence. I found spaces between bodies and worked my way to the front.

I crouched beside a row of seats, where I could see Mother, high on her dais. A man was standing before her, speaking, and I saw a woman typing, her fingers flying. Mother was going through some papers; she wore her half-glasses, the ones with no frames on the bottom. The man got done talking and joined a group of people at a table on Mother's left. In the rows behind this table were maybe a dozen people, sitting close to one another, almost huddled together. Some of the women dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs, some of the men looked steadily across the room at the boy. The family of the old woman, I thought.

On my mother's right a boy in prison coveralls sat at a table. His hands and feet were in shackles. His skin was freckled, he had light-brown hair and a slight build. Beside him, but separated by a space, was a big man who slumped in his chair, his legs crossed at the ankles. He wore a suit and tie. His dark hair turned to gray at the long sideburns. Something was in his mouth, sidling from side to side. A toothpick.

Standing behind them, their backs to the wall, were two uniformed guards.

After Mother shifted through some papers she looked at the boy. She told him to rise; he did, slowly. She asked him if he had anything to say before sentencing.

Looking at the floor, he mumbled something.

"Speak up," said Mother.

The boy's head came up sharply, as if responding to Mother's tone.

"It was her who come at me with the bat."

There was a stir from the relatives. Voices spoke, one of the men started to rise, another stopped him by grabbing his upper arm. Mother rapped her gavel twice. Silence again.

Mother stared at the boy with distaste. His chin was back on his chest, his eyes on the floor.

It was then that I realized what it was I found missing in this scene. Something simple. In the seats behind the boy there was no one. The only person near him was the man with the toothpick — surely his lawyer — and even he had separated himself from his client. There was no family, not even a mother.

My mother spoke. "So, if I understand your thinking, you believe that the victim was at fault. You break into this seventy-eight-year old woman's house, she hears something, gets a bat and goes out to —"

The boy looked behind him and mumbled something to his lawyer, who responded in no way to the words.

"Share it with us — what you just said to your counsel," demanded Mother.

Again, the boy's head came up, again the flare of defiance. What had happened that night in the kitchen was no mystery.

“I asked him do I have to listen to a lecture.”

Mother shook her head wearily. “No. No, I only need to carry out my final duty in this case.” She took up a paper and began to read from it, in a monotone. I caught some phrases — “power endowed in me by,” “on or about the date of,” “to die by electrocution.” Ending with: “May God have mercy on your soul.”

Silence.

When the boy spoke his voice was dull and expressionless. But I heard every word.

“It don’t matter. You gonna die too, lady, and you may go worse than me.” He turned and his pale eyes swept over the people in the courtroom. “The same goes for all you bastards.”

I heard voices, the two guards moved from the wall, the shifting bodies in front of me obscured my view; a rapping began, a bang, bang, bang following me as I turned and walked out of the courtroom.

I emerged into the surprising sun. Rosalyn sat on the bench. Waiting, in her innocence.

The rest of the day we did the things we had planned, shopping and lunch, but I remember nothing of that. My only memory is of Rosalyn asking me, over and over, what was the matter with the two of us.

“What’s the *matter*?” Her voice almost pleading.