

A Trial

The woman was in a courtroom. She knew it was a courtroom because there was a judge sat in front of her with shining blonde curls tumbling down from under their hat. The curls were too curly, and the judge too serious to buy a wig for any reason other than necessity. The wig was fraying slightly at the edges, and flat in one direction while curly in the other, giving the appearance of having been taken out of a drawer but a few moments before.

The woman knew she was in a courtroom because the judge was sat facing her, behind a grand wooden table (tables could be grand) with a hammer and a stern face. The woman knew she was in a courtroom because she could hear people behind her on hard flat wooden benches. Enough people that she couldn't distinguish individual threads of conversation from the contrapuntal sentences that brushed past her, interweaving. She knew she was in a courtroom because the floors were wooden but the pillars were marble, doric (as though to give the illusion of purpose), neo-classical, reaching, reaching, to tickle the ceiling, grandiose. But she was sure that if she knocked on one, it would ring hollow.

The judge peered over their glasses and snapped, slicing her attention in half and addressing both halves at once.

The plaintiff was announced. He was asked to give a statement. Why give it away, she thought. She'd stave the question till later. A man rose from his chair, the sound of its collision with the unpolished floorboards got lost in her ear canal. The man was smartly dressed in plain clothes he had steamed in the shower. He rounded the table he had been sat behind and made his way across the floor in front of her. He made careful eye contact with the bottom of the table in front of him and the sparkling tips of the judge's shoes.

The man climbed a few wooden steps until he was behind a podium and a microphone.

"Will you please state your name?"

"Alex Sullivan."

"Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

The whole truth? How can one possibly know the whole truth? The woman tried to imagine where she would start. Perhaps with the animal kingdoms. With species and who was related to whom. That seemed like a good place to begin. She reached up to her face to move her glasses on her nose and found they weren't there.

“I swear.”

“Alex, please go ahead now.”

Alex said he didn’t notice at first. That we were good together, that we cared about each other so deeply that even now, it pained him to know what the defendant would be feeling through all this. He said it was wonderful for the longest of times. He said our lives were just a series of places we talked. He said we went dancing, for dinner, we read each other’s work, we gave each other a desire to try different things. He said we understood each other’s body language when in social situations. He said we understood each other’s body language when alone. He said we were alone a lot. He said she started to work more, she started to resent him being at home, she started to resent him when he wasn’t at home.

He made a flat reference to Monica Lewinsky which didn’t seem to be able to hold itself upright. It fell on the floor. He said that he hated himself before he hated her, and that he needed a concrete answer to be able to change, to move.

Alex shuffled. He then shuffled back off the podium and towards the empty chair he had previously occupied.

“Would the defendant like to make a statement?”

The woman’s insides turned themselves out before she knew why. Over the sound of reconfiguring organs, she held her breath long enough to realise it was because all eyes had focused on her. It was as though, for every person in the room, the natural focus of their eye lenses was her; they had been shaped with this moment in mind. It was as though they had all been waiting for the judge’s permission to explicitly give her their gazes. She seemed to absorb all other movements, amplifying her own – they took up all the space and sound in the room. She shifted her leg, hooking her foot behind the chair leg. She remembered she had just moved her leg away from the chair leg, so moved it back out in front of her. She pushed her thumb further inside her fist. Her knee wobbled and her eyebrow twitched and her shoulders shifted and her hand moved to her knee to stop the wobbling or the tapping or the jumping and she looked at the judge who looked at her. She looked at the man next to her and he rose, and the man did not look at her. The man looked at the judge. She looked at the judge. The man rose and started to speak. He spoke about the woman, the defendant, and innocence. He said she was innocent of Alex’s claims. He said the plaintiff had a lens of spite, through which he saw arguments as abuse.

The first witness was called. The woman watched the first witness rise to stand. The first witness' plumage engulfed everything up to their neck. The feathers grasping at her neck tumbled down from there, a cascade. The woman was sure that the feathers continued all the way down, past her shoulders, knees, feet and floor. The woman, mesmerised, left her chair, to follow the feathers. A hand descended on her shoulder, arresting her freedom of movement, and telling her to be seated. She did as instructed. Upon turning her head, she understood that the hand belonged to the man sat beside her. He was looking concerned, at her, such that his bushy brows met in a wrinkle in the middle. He mumbled something in her direction, then sharply shifted his gaze away from her. The woman did likewise.

The woman now became aware of the first witness talking. She wondered if the first witness had begun talking, because the first witness seemed to already be mid-sentence. The woman squinted towards the talking, as though trying to find the right aperture that would drown out the static and leave the words behind, only she was having a hard time identifying the differences between the two. In fact, she seemed as though she was picking the words out one by one, stringing them on her washing line, and then attempting to posthumously determine their order. She identified the following: "good man," "hard worker," "understanding." The woman traced a line from the first witness' eyes to Alex's, greeting his from across the stretch of hardwood floor between them. The woman picked at the skin on her fingers. She stopped when she realised her fingers were bleeding.

The woman wondered if she was guilty. She was guilty of many things, she thought. Of allowing her attention to slip through her toes, and leave her standing still, inside nothing but her thoughts drifting through the courtroom. She thought about losing her thoughts. She lost them a lot. Usually, she would try to chase after, yell at, or subtly coerce them into getting close enough for her to grab at their tail feathers. But, even if she got that far, the feathers would come loose in her hand. Today she didn't chase them – she didn't have time. Today she needed to stay still. She wondered why moving quickly stopped her from thinking. She thought that, as a species, we should be able to separate instinct from intellect. She wondered what a species was, whether we were biologically defined as different from the next species, and how much the word itself determined our species' difference from the next.

Then the first witness was gone, and the second was called.

The room sharpened as the second witness arrived at the stand. The woman's attention was focused. The second witness was gone quickly. As the witness talked, her volume built, and the higher ends of her voice became increasingly pointy. She addressed the plaintiff as she layered

insults on top of each other, each one forgotten when outdone by the next. The speech climaxed at the words, “lying, cheating son of a bitch.” Then she was hurried away.

“Accept playing this document in court?”

“Document one has been accepted.”

“Please play the recording.”

“I’m sorry, Alex is not available right now. Please leave your message after the tone.”

“Beeeeeeeeeeep.”

The woman heard herself, she sounded distressed. She is talking on the phone, yelling. She’s addressing an invisible person (though this version of her is also invisible she supposed). She is yelling that you can never look after yourself, never mind another person. She is saying you need to stop believing that you can change, that you’re going to improve, that you’re going to get somewhere, anywhere, that you want to go. Your dreams are imaginary, and they always have been. You need to get over yourself, start thinking about the people around you and what they need. You don’t care about anyone but yourself.

A short clicck reverberates around the room.

The woman hears the clack of smart shiny shoes as someone walks across the floor to collect the speaker.

“Permission to admit document two to the courtroom?”

“Permission granted.”

“Texts sent from the phone of the plaintiff to that of the defendant.”

“On the 28th of February, 2024, the plaintiff wrote, ‘You’re right. I’m sorry. I never should have opposed you. I’ll remove my appeal tomorrow.’”

“The plaintiff would like to admit a new witness.”

“Accepted.”

The new witness did not look at the woman. The new witness said that the woman had hit Alex. She said Alex had called the new witness in distress, not knowing what to do, that he had come home at night and she had hit him. Their son had been watching TV in the next room.

The woman's lungs tightened, as though the air had been vacuumed out, as though someone else needed it and had forgotten that she did too. The woman sensed herself rise. She spoke, and felt each syllable roll off her tongue, in a vain attempt to catch its predecessor. She said she was guilty of what the recording accused her of, but that he had not been responsible either, that he still hadn't apologised.

She was sat down. She was lifted to her feet. The judge left. She sat down again. She stayed sat down and ignored the muttering directed toward her by the man sat next to her. The judge entered the room. Chairs scratched the floor. The room hurried to its feet. The judge hit the hammer.

“Silence.”

“After having reviewed the materials presented to the court, I have determined that the defendant will serve a sentence of three months of community service. She will, however, receive full custody. Thank you for your time.”