



VITRIOL

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There it is. There it is again. The only bar of soap dunked in the sink.

How repulsive.

(Then again, what soap washes out guilt?)

Sir? There's only ten minutes left for the hearing.

Sir?

The courtroom is dark. I wonder why everyone is late. Papers, papers – oh they're here. Why do I worry? I'm prepared to lose.

(I need to lose.)

There is a child sitting in the jury. Brows furrowed; he meticulously peels the webs from between the slices.

Maybe they're selling them outside the court. I should get some for home.

"Are they sour?"

He nods. "Would you like some?"

(No.)

I see his shoes. Mismatched. I saw them last month on the benches. Too small to know what's exactly wrong beyond the fact that he had thrown fistfuls of dirt into a grave.

(Apparently a five-year-old is a good candidate for the picture below a red headline.)

Do you miss your father? Someone had pushed a camera to his face after the hearing was over.

My father's working overtime. He'll be back soon.

"Do you know where my father is?"

I feel the guilt seep back into my hands. What do I tell him? A five-year-old won't know manslaughter from murder, much less the evil I've dipped my fingers into.

Maybe I'll–

"Did you kill him?"

Sir?

"The court is in session. We call case–"

There are people on the pews now. Faces I don't know, and a bereaved family. Mismatched shoes on the floor, and I'm the defendant. The three teenagers beside me look like death, eyes swollen with apathy.

Guilty.

"Will the defendant–"

The people are gone.

"Am I dead? Drugged?"

The child pulls out a gavel from out of seemingly thin air.

"Dead, no. But it's never too early to start your trial."

It is all sorts of impossible.

"I did not kill your father, kid."

"Why do you keep washing your hands?"

Nerves aren't welcome in my line of work. Yet my hands are scaly from the vitriol of cheap soap and isopropyl alcohol.

You can't be less guilty than the ones you're defending.

"I'm not guilty."

The people are back. The widow, the teenagers, the jury.

"The defendants plead not guilty–"

The people are gone.

"The defendant pleads not guilty! A trial is fair in this court, and we will... you will present your defence."

It is dizzying, the mirage of faces gnawing at my eyes. I'm the mortar, I'm the pestle, folding the guilt smaller and smaller still until it fits into a single bullet hole.

The widow is back.

"1st January 2016. A body was found near the lake, with a single wound. Time of death could be estimated to be 12 hours prior. No witnesses, and the sound covered by the fireworks from the party next door. The accused, three teenagers, were last seen in the vicinity before midnight. Eyes high off of some resemblance of store-bought freedom. The victim, a father of one, left this apartment at 11, having forgotten his kid's birthday, hoping to find a cake."

Guilt is itchy at best, chronic at worst.

I heard about the case before seeing the file. Passed around till the price rose. Until someone insatiable took up and waded through the wake of their morality.

(I took it to lose.)

There was a text on my phone. Before the first hearing. A picture of my son's school. From an unknown number.

"I can see the blood on your hands, sir. Why did my father die?"

Fists balled up in my robe, there's a man begging me to save him. He is alive. His eyes are not.

Why did I die?

When you pull the trigger, is it the bullet that kills?

Is it the finger?

Is it who that finger belongs to?

Or is it the shroud that protects them?

Criminals come in all forms. The worst come in the guise of goodness, with promises of justice. The lock-pickers; the sweet numbers, lack of circumstantial evidence, and the grind of mechanisms as the lock breaks.

I'm sorry.

I must've fallen asleep on the chair again. My palms are hurting.

Is he resting in peace?

"Sir? Ma'am called. You had to pick up a cake?"

Oh.

I reach home safely with a cake. I wonder how many do.

Sarah Wasifa sees life as a math equation: problematic, perhaps with a solution, and maybe sometimes with a sign to tear off a page and start over again. Help her find 'y' at sarah-wf77@gmail.com