

Prison populations continued to bloom until, finally, something changed. Today, misdemeanors are treated as capital crimes. The justice system has advanced to accommodate. The gallery and all twelve members of the jury attend trials by conference call. Rulings are swift. The death penalty is finally humane, perfect: a small, green pill that kills instantly when it touches the tongue.

Aaron Guthra is accused of violating the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, a crime for which he can be put to death. He won't be present for his trial—at least in person. Instead, the prosecution and defense, alone in a room, decide his fate.

---

The courtroom is empty save for the two attorneys and fourteen cameras. The camera embedded in the north wall feeds directly to the presiding electronic judge, the camera in the south wall records a live feed for the gallery. When Slim faces the jury—twelve black lenses spread out over the east wall—he thinks of rolling dice. Double sixes are good luck.

Slim begins his closing argument, “Over the course of several hours, you have been shown how Mr. Guthra used university resources to download hundreds of academic journal articles, with the intent to illegally distribute them online—”

“Objection!” Slim flinches at the boom of his opposition’s voice.

“The prosecution’s case is built on circumstantial evidence and speculation. All charges held against my client are alleged at best,” Everett says in that whiny, nasal drone Slim hates so much.

Slim listens to the judge think, its computer banks clicking and whirring behind the north wall.

“*Objection overruled,*” echoes a tinny voice over a loudspeaker.

Everett removes a wrinkled handkerchief from his jacket pocket, and dabs at his forehead. He looks at Slim and says nothing.

“Allow me to continue,” says Slim.

“Over the last several hours, you have been shown how it was well within Mr. Guthra’s means to download hundreds of articles to, allegedly, distribute illegally over the internet.”

Slim had been hoping for an opportunity to work the jury uninterrupted, but Everett has been trying Slim’s patience since the start of the match. The two of them may well have been perfect opposites. Slim is lithe where Everett is stout, narrow-faced where Everett is apple-cheeked, calm where Everett is excited. Most of all, however, Slim is a practiced orator whereas Everett is not.

“What we have is this: an unattended, public-access, university library computer is found downloading hundreds upon hundreds of articles using university credentials. And, it just so happens that Guthra—a known ‘hactivist’ and proponent for total, digital open-access—is found at the same library on the

same day. On top of this, we have received multiple testimonies from Guthra's colleagues confirming he frequented the same library and made use of the same public-access computers. All of this establishes a pattern of behavior parallel to the nature of the crime committed. I leave the rest in your capable hands."

Slim bows at the cameras lining the east wall and clasps his hands. He retreats to lean against the west wall, while Everett dabs at his forehead again and moves to take Slim's place.

"My—" Everett pauses to cough into his handkerchief, before returning it to his sweaty forehead. "My opponent is well prepared. He has spent this trial establishing a motive, placing my client at the scene of the crime, but..." Everett pauses to bring his fist up to his lips, "but he can't prove anything. The prosecution is relying on an entirely emotional argument."

"Objection, your honour. I don't see how this ad hominem is supposed to get us anywhere closer to the truth of the matter," Slim addresses the north wall, casually.

"I am not using ad hominem!" Everett responds, while the judge still whirs and clicks.

"You can't speak out of turn before the judge makes its decision," Slim says.

"This is a courtroom! We deal in truths—I won't let you interrupt me to tell a lie," Replies Everett.

*"Objection sustained."*

Slim pushes off the west wall and faces Everett. "The judge doesn't lie and neither do I."

Everett flaps his handkerchief at Slim and grits his teeth before, suddenly, pausing to take a deep breath. He turns back to the cameras along the east wall.

"The prosecution is trying to appeal to that feeling in you—that feeling that says 'let's get this guy'. He wants to see someone punished, regardless of their innocence. He wants to make an example, despite the reasonable doubt that my client could've actually committed the crime—"

"There is nothing reasonable about doubt!" Slim shouts. "Criminals thrive on doubt. Doubt is what lets guilty men escape just punishment," Slim says, turning to face the jury wall.

The judge whirs and clicks behind the north wall, struggling to keep pace with the conversation.

"What happens if we do let Guthra go? Even if he were innocent, what does that say to other criminals? That as long as there's a reasonable doubt and a lenient jury, they can get away with anything?"

"Objection!" Everett shouts, but Slim doesn't stop speaking.

"What if next time it's not someone downloading articles, but an assault? A murder? My opponent is right—we can set an example! We can draw a line in the sand—the buck stops here."

"Objection!" Everett shouts again. Slim hears a furious whirring from behind the wall.

“He’s guilty! He’s guilty! You know he’s guilty!”

---

After the trial ends and Guthra is declared guilty, Slim catches up to Everett in the hall outside the courtroom. Everett is standing with his shoulders slumped, staring at his shoes.

“You know I looked you up before the trial. I mean, I always look up who I’m going up against.” Slim says.

Everett continues to stare at his shoes.

“I knew it would be easy. You’ve never won a case, it says. I didn’t think I’d get mad like that, though.”

Slim waits for Everett to say something before filling the silence. “Alright, be like that, Never-Everett, never won a case. I just don’t get why you do it. Guys like you... defense attorneys. Miserable work.”

“Because everybody deserves a chance, Slim,” Everett turns to look at Slim with red eyes. He’s been crying. “I thought even you knew that. And now a man is dead.”

Everett turns away from Slim and walks down the hall. Slim listens to his footsteps grow quieter before disappearing out sight and out of mind—forever.