

Making Amends

It's not so difficult to believe a murderer. Particularly when the man lives behind steel bars so strong a giant couldn't bust him free. When Ms. Dayok, our Civics teacher, challenged us to take a stand, Mr. Marcello's innocence was the one thing I'd believed for seven years. Practically since I was old enough to know anything at all.

"He'll see you now." The guard looked me up and down, my older sister's drivers license in his over-sized palm. "Ginny?"

"Family name." I avoided his glare, aware that a fourteen-year-old wouldn't be permitted to visit a convicted murderer without someone's permission.

The plastic red seat where the guard motioned for me to sit sagged under my modest weight. Ghostly fingerprints covered the reinforced glass between those inside and those out. I already knew what Mr. Marcello looked like before he sat down. His face had graced our town's newspaper and even *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. Gruesome tales spread like wildfire. When he settled in I noticed that in seven years the man's skin had lightened to a pasty yellow-beige. His posture implied concern with the dedicated curve of his shoulders. He imperceptibly nodded as he breathed. It reminded me of the vultures out in the desert, always in subtle motion, waiting for death.

"I don't know you," he exhaled, clearing his throat as he spoke.

His eyebrows were uneven and pitch black. It looked like they'd been shaved off and drawn back on wrong. Sloppy.

"No, sir." It was the first time I'd ever called a man sir.

"Curiosity? Come to see Aberdeen's most famous killer?" I didn't expect him to be so interested in my motives. No one had ever written a solitary word about me.

“School project.” I avoided his silvery eyes, unsure what I might see in them. “We have to prove somebody wrong.”

“So you’ve decided to take on an entire town?” The uneven eyebrows raised and fell just as suddenly. The guard interrupted to drop my sister’s license in front of me. The two men nodded at one another, and I was baffled. Here sat the most hated man in town, and yet the security guard practically patted him on the back.

“I’m a celebrity. I thought you knew.” Mr. Marcello often read peoples’ minds, he’d later tell me. It was a talent he’d acquired during the trial. He knew precisely how many jury men and women believed his guilt and how many went along for the ride.

“Tell me why you haven’t appealed.” It was more of a command than a question. I did know this man. He’d worked downtown in the bakery that changed its name with the times and owners. He’d worn a white apron made whiter with flour. Mr. Marcello’s bare hands had touched one thing or another that ended up in all of our stomachs. Couldn’t he have poisoned us then?

“Town’s made up its mind. You heard the witnesses, I’m sure. It’s like a big jigsaw puzzle and together, it spells G-U-I-L-T-Y.” His voice raised in a country twang as he chanted the letters.

“And my only accomplice,” he looked away. “Well she’s dead.”

Mr. Marcello patted himself down, rubbing his chest and shaking his head. His voice quieted.

“I still forget, even now, my wallet’s not there. Her picture’s in my cell though.”

“They had to put her down. Your dog killed a boy.” No one liked to say the victim’s name. It brought shivers and images more unsettling than a crowd cheering a murderer’s one-way march into a building he’d never leave. “You trained her to kill, and in other states they would have put you down too.” Honesty elicits honesty. I didn’t know how else to put it.

Mr. Marcello surprised me and chuckled.

“I couldn’t train Grace to sit. She didn’t fetch. Poor girl had arthritis in all her joints and whined for me to carry her out to do her business. She couldn’t have killed that boy more than you could have.” His finger aimed right at me, and I noticed the nails bit down to the quick. They say he howled when they put the rope around her neck and dragged her away.

“Grace,” I began, but before I could finish he jumped out of his chair and slammed his face against the glass, the black bristles of his chin tiny black insects crawling across the barrier.

“You think,” he yelled, “I’d cry over a killer?” He sat back down and used his sleeve to clean off the salty dampness. “Why would I train a dog to kill a child? And what dog would be heartless enough to do it?” He narrowed his eyes and scanned my sister’s license. “How much do you know about dogs, Ginny?”

“Neighbors heard you yelling kill. Three of them testified.” I flipped my license over. Belief or no, Mr. Marcello scared me.

“Grace chased down leaves. I always laughed and told her to kill ‘em. I also told her to piss and give kisses, but no one mentioned that at the trial. You didn’t answer my question. You got a dog?”

“No. We have three cats.” His hands were gripping his side of the desk. Despite the barrier I could feel the entire table trembling.

“Cats aren’t reliable. They choose when to love you. You walk into a house and there are no signs that a cat lives there. A dog mimics its owner. It tries to be like you and lives in your house and makes it its own. You have a dog’s respect from the moment it catches your scent.”

“The dead boy’s mother said she saw you watching her all the time from your window. Therese said you’d watch her and the boy in the backyard. She was scared and wouldn’t smile.”

“If I killed everybody in Aberdeen that didn’t smile back at me, I’d be wanted by the FBI.”

“The blood they found on Grace?” My hands were quaking too, and ice cold.

“She was trying to help. She knew the boy was in trouble and ran over. She tried to help.” He gently tapped on the glass, forcing me to ignore my blue fingers. “I tried to help.”

“Then why didn’t anyone believe you?”

“The town needed something big. What a story, Ginny. A maniacal man and his femme fatale Doberman. It was on the newswire in minutes. Did you know that NBC called for me once?”

“You could fight this, you know.”

“What’s the point? Grace is gone and the town has its prisoner. The witnesses won’t recant. The year of the trial, house sales went up 23%. Isn’t that strange? People wanted to live in a town with killer dogs? Four new companies moved in and others grew leaps and bounds. People remembered our role in the Civil War. Appreciated our sprawling countryside. What a shame it would be for the town to admit it lied. Besides, it’s given me time to play my guitar and write songs. They even let me bake on occasion. Under supervision...”

“Could I hear a song?” I interrupted him.

“Do your project on someone else Ginny. No one’s interested in hearing anything true about me.”

“Just one,” I pleaded. He’d sing me more later on that year. I urged him to record the songs and send them away, but Mr. Marcello told me he wasn’t one for rocking the boat.

“I walked into the woods to find you a rose,” he began.

I remembered the way he snuck cookies to kids in the bakery. He always had something hidden in his pocket. If not, he’d rush in the back and come out with small balls of dough. They were salty and sweet all in one bite.

“You followed me in and lost your way.”

We had a dog once, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him. My brother dragged the dog around the neighborhood, taunting her to scare cats and rip apart squirrels. Cruelty was his specialty. The night Mr. Marcello was arrested, my brother returned with the dog covered in blood, both baring their teeth in empty smiles.

"I forgive you for following but I never knew..."

Our father hosed the dog down and took it away in the sedan. My brother went too, while Aberdeen turned inside out villanizing Mr. Marcello. When my father returned, he said our brother and the dog were sick but they'd be back. Only my brother made it. We weren't to tell a soul what my brother or the dog had done, or else we'd be the town freak show. We'd be the ones on the news.

"It was the last time you'd have anything to say."

Ms. Dayok gave me an A for my project on the new factories' damage to the environment. She told me it was a brave little piece, and I might find my way into journalism if I had an inclination for telling the truth.