

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

*a Complicit Press series of classic texts
reset in contemporary American contexts*

edited by Jeff Hood

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

V. 19

AN AMERICAN
TRAGEDY

A Condensed Modern Edition

THEODORE DREISER

Edited, condensed and reset by

JEFF HOOD

COMPLICIT PRESS

2026

An American Tragedy was first published in two volumes by Boni and Liveright in 1925 and is in the public domain. The complete novel is available through Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive.

This volume is not the complete novel. It is a condensation and modernization that preserves all three Books and all one hundred chapters of Dreiser's structure, resets the story in the present-day United States, and renders his prose in contemporary American English.

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Published by Complicit Press.

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FOREWORD

Theodore Dreiser did not invent Clyde Griffiths. He read about him in the newspaper.

In July of 1906 a young man named Chester Gillette took a young woman named Grace Brown out on Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks. She was pregnant with his child. She did not come back. He was tried in Herkimer County, convicted, and electrocuted at Auburn Prison in March of 1908. Dreiser collected that case and a dozen like it for twenty years, and what he finally understood, and what took him eight hundred pages to say, was that these killings were not aberrations. They were the country working as designed. A poor boy is shown a life he cannot have, told that wanting it is virtue, and given no honest road to it. Then he is punished, in the name of morality, by the same order that built the road he could not take.

That is why Dreiser called it what he called it. Not A Murder. Not The Gillette Case. An American Tragedy. The tragedy is not that one boy drowned one girl. The tragedy is the machine, and the last thing the machine does is kill him.

I have spent my life on the last part of that machine. I have sat in the room where it finishes. I have watched thirteen human beings die at the hands of the State. And I want to say plainly what a hundred years of readers have been too polite to say about this book: the most damning pages in it are not the pages in the boat. They are the pages in the courthouse.

Look at what actually convicts Clyde Griffiths. A prosecutor running for reelection. A jury drawn from a county that had already read the evidence in the paper. Two defense attorneys who conclude, correctly, that their client's real story is not survivable in that room, and who therefore coach him into a lie, so that the only entirely false testimony in the trial comes from the defense table. An appellate court that affirms in forty-one pages and disposes of the heart of the case in one sentence. A post-conviction claim defaulted because the wrong pleading was filed at the wrong time by lawyers the condemned man did not choose and could not fire. A governor who asks one question and gets an honest answer and signs anyway.

Change the dates and I have watched every one of those things happen. I have watched all of them happen in the same case.

And then there is the death house itself, which Dreiser got right in a way almost nobody has since. He knew it was loud. He knew men in there play chess by shouting squares down a corridor and argue about ball games and take a new man in the way any group of men takes in a new man. He knew that the horror is not that the place is a tomb. The horror is that it is a neighborhood, and that every few months the State comes and takes one of the neighbors, and in the morning the shouting starts up again because it has to.

Clyde Griffiths is guilty. I want to be clear, because the abolitionist case does not require an innocent man and is weakened every time we pretend it does. He planned it. He chose the lake. He signed a false name. He was ten feet away in calm water and he did not go to her. Roberta Alden was twenty-three years old and afraid and in love with him, and she is the person in this book I would ask you to grieve.

But here is what killing him accomplished. It did not return her. It did not make her father's house louder. It did not touch one of the conditions that produced him. It gave a district attorney a career, gave a county a season of excitement, and gave a mother a bus ticket and a body.

Dreiser ends the novel where he begins it: on a street corner, with a woman preaching to people who are not listening, and a boy holding a cord because he was told to. The boy is Roberta's generation and Clyde's, the next one, standing exactly where the last one stood. That last page is the whole argument. The machine is still running. There is another child at the edge of the light.

We are still killing people in this country. We are still doing it to the poor, still doing it in the small hours in buildings without windows, still calling the paperwork due process. I have held the hands. I have watched the drug go in.

Read this book as a document of that. And then help us stop it.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
North Little Rock, Arkansas

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE AUTHOR

Theodore Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1871, the ninth of ten surviving children in a family so poor that they moved whenever the rent came due. He worked as a newspaperman in Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and New York, and he wrote fiction the way a reporter writes: accumulating, documenting, refusing to be elegant. His first novel, *Sister Carrie*, was published in 1900 and effectively suppressed by its own publisher for its refusal to punish a woman for surviving. *An American Tragedy*, published in two volumes in 1925, was his masterwork and the only real commercial success of his life. He died in Hollywood in 1945.

Dreiser spent two decades collecting American murder cases in which a young man of no means killed a young woman who stood between him and money. He counted at least fifteen. He settled on the killing of Grace Brown by Chester Gillette at Big Moose Lake in 1906, and he worked from the trial record and from Grace Brown's actual letters, which he quoted at length. Gillette was executed at Auburn Prison on March 30, 1908, at the age of twenty-four.

THE NOVEL

An American Tragedy runs to roughly three hundred and sixty thousand words in three Books: the Kansas City childhood and the hit-and-run that sends Clyde running; the years in Lycurgus, the factory, Roberta and Sondra, and the lake; and the arrest, the trial, the death house and the execution. The prose is famously heavy. Dreiser piles clause on clause, doubles back, qualifies, and repeats, and the effect at full length is of watching sediment fall until a man is buried in it.

THIS EDITION

This volume is a condensation and a modernization. Every one of the novel's one hundred chapters is present here, and they are in Dreiser's order, and no thread has been cut: the reader who finishes this edition has been through the whole architecture of the book. What has been removed is the sediment. Dreiser's twenty-clause sentences have been rendered in contemporary American English, his repetitions consolidated, and his long interior circlings compressed to what they establish. Book Three, which is the reason this novel belongs in an abolition series, is carried at the greatest length of the three.

The story has also been brought into the present, as is the practice of this series. The Kansas City of the opening is the Kansas City of today. Dreiser's upstate New York becomes the upstate of South Carolina, which is the natural home of this novel now: mill country, where the industry that built the towns has mostly gone and the family names are still on the buildings. Clyde's uncle runs the Griffiths Uniform Company, making scrubs and workwear rather than shirt collars, and it is the last mill in that county still operating under the name of the family that built it. Lycurgus, Biltz and the county seat of Bridgeburg

move south with it, into a fictional Pendleton County. The lakes keep Dreiser's names and take on the character of the Santee backwaters, which are drowned forest, full of standing timber, and deep.

The ending changes with the geography, and it has to. Dreiser's Clyde dies in the electric chair at Auburn. This Clyde dies in the Capital Punishment Facility at Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia, South Carolina, and he dies in front of a firing squad, because he chose it.

That choice is not a novelist's invention. South Carolina requires it. A condemned man in that state is handed a form fourteen days before his execution and must mark one of three boxes... electrocution, lethal injection, firing squad... and if he marks nothing the state electrocutes him by default. He is given no protocol to read, because the protocols and the drug supply are shielded from disclosure by statute. He chooses on rumor, from what he has heard in a corridor from other men who never saw a protocol either. The state authorized the firing squad in 2021 and first used it in 2025. Three volunteers from inside the prison system fire from fifteen feet through an opening in a wall, at a target pinned over the heart, with a hood over the man's head, and every rifle is loaded with live ammunition. There is no blank. Nobody gets to go home uncertain.

The old electric chair is still bolted to the floor of that same room and cannot be moved, so a man going to the firing squad chair walks past it. That is a fact about a room in Columbia and it is also the truest image in this volume, and no editor put it there.

The evidence has moved with the century, and this is the change that most repays attention. Roberta's letters, which Dreiser took nearly verbatim from Grace Brown and which the district attorney read aloud for the better part of an hour, are

here her texts and voicemails, read aloud for forty minutes to the same effect. To them the modern prosecution adds what Orville Mason could only have dreamed of: cell tower records placing Clyde at the lake, and a search history recited into the record one line at a time. Dreiser's Mason built a mountain out of pebbles. Today the pebbles are in the defendant's pocket, and he carries them to the lake himself.

Two liberties should be named. Dreiser's interrogation of Clyde in a car without counsel would be inadmissible today, and this edition says so, and then says that it did not matter, because Clyde repeated all of it in a hallway an hour later, which is what defendants do. And Roberta's failed search for an abortion, which in 1925 ran into a wall of law and shame, here runs into money, distance, a landlady with a key, and above all Clyde's stalling, until the weeks have run out. Dreiser's point was never that the door was locked. It was that Clyde let her stand in front of it until it closed.

A NOTE ON METHOD

A condensation of this size makes choices on nearly every page, and a reader is entitled to know what they were. Four operations have been used here, and they are different from one another.

The first is compression, which accounts for most of the reduction. Dreiser's manner is accumulative: he will circle a single hesitation of Clyde's for four pages, qualifying and doubling back, until the indecision is enacted rather than described. That effect is real and it is lost here. What replaces it is the substance of the passage stated once, in modern English, at a fraction of the length. Every scene that survives in this volume survives in Dreiser's order and reaches Dreiser's conclusion.

The second is transposition, which is the resetting described above: the same event, moved forward a century and across several states, with its instruments changed. A rope becomes a line, a letter becomes a message, a camera becomes both a camera and the phone that carries the search history. Nothing is added to the plot by these changes and nothing is taken from it.

The third is expansion, and it is used sparingly and always in Book Three. Dreiser sketches the trial and the death house in great detail but he wrote before the modern apparatus existed: there was no post-conviction petition, no federal habeas, no procedural default, no clemency board, no lethal injection protocol, no execution team rehearsing with a stopwatch. Where this edition sets that machinery out at length, it is filling in what the American death penalty has built in the hundred years since he wrote, and it is doing so because the editor has watched it operate thirteen times.

The fourth is invention, and it has been kept to the smallest amount the book would tolerate. Some minor figures are given a line or a gesture that Dreiser does not give them. The aftermath — what became of the prosecutor, the judge, the minister and the mother in the years afterward — is largely the editor's, and is offered as an epilogue in the manner of the novel rather than as a report of Dreiser's text.

Where the temptation was strongest to invent, the original has often proved better. The jury selection in this volume is Dreiser's own: the clerk drawing a name from a square box, Simeon Dinsmore hunched in his brown suit, and Mason asking each man in open court whether he believes in capital punishment... to which Dinsmore replies that he most certainly does, for some people. That exchange was written in 1925. It is the clearest description of a death-qualified jury in American

fiction and it required nothing from this editor but the room to stand in.

The deliberation is the opposite case, and it is named here as such. Dreiser does not take the reader into that jury room; the verdict simply comes back. The scene in this edition... the druggist Kittredge who holds out, the argument over the camera, the note asking whether mercy may be recommended and the judge's eleven-word answer... is invented, and its function is to show a jury doing what juries in capital cases actually do, which is to discuss everything except the lesser offense that fits the evidence.

EDITORIAL PRACTICE

A reader is owed a plain account of what has been done to a book, and this note gives one. Four operations have been performed on Dreiser's novel, and they are different operations, and the difference matters.

The first is condensation. Roughly three hundred and sixty thousand words have become roughly thirty-five thousand. Nothing has been cut out of the architecture: all three Books are here, all one hundred chapters are here, in Dreiser's order and under his numbering, and no character, scene or plot thread has been removed. What has been reduced is the sediment. Dreiser accumulates. He states a thing, doubles back, qualifies, restates it in the negative, and circles a character's interior weather for three pages before it moves. That method has its own power at full length, and it is not reproducible at a tenth of the length, so it has been replaced by compression: the passage is rendered at the length required to establish what it establishes, and no longer.

The second is modernization of language. The prose here is contemporary American English. Dreiser's syntax, his period vocabulary and his narrative distance have all been brought forward. This is a rewriting, not a light edit, and no sentence in this volume should be quoted as Dreiser's. Readers wanting his voice should go to the original, which is in the public domain and freely available.

The third is the resetting, which is the practice of this series and is described above: the story is placed in the present-day United States, in a state that still carries out executions, and its technology, its evidence and its machinery of death are those of this century rather than the last.

The fourth is expansion, and it is the one that requires the most candor, because it runs the opposite direction from the other three. In a small number of places, chiefly in Book Three, a scene that Dreiser sketches in a paragraph has been opened out, and material has been written that is not in the original: the interior of the death house, the administration of a modern last week, the shape of a contemporary capital appeal, and the conversations between the condemned man and his minister. This material is invented. It is grounded in what the editor has witnessed, and it is placed in service of Dreiser's own argument, but it is not Dreiser's, and it is not offered as his.

One example, because a general statement of method is worth less than a specific one. The jury selection in Book Three, in which the prosecutor asks each man in the box whether he believes in capital punishment and Simeon Dinsmore answers that he most certainly does for some people, is Dreiser's. It is on the page in the 1925 text, along with Jephson's judgment that the man is as set as a bone. The commentary surrounding it in this edition is the editor's. Where the two are not easily separable,

the reader should assume the observation is the editor's and the scene is Dreiser's.

The apparatus at the back of this volume is entirely the editor's, and the historical statements in it about the Gillette case, about Grace Brown and about current American execution practice are offered as fact and can be checked against the sources listed under Further Reading.

THE SERIES

This volume is the nineteenth in The Abolition Classics, a Complicit Press series of classic texts reset in contemporary American contexts, edited by Jeff Hood.

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

Dusk on a summer night, and the tall glass walls of the business district of an American city of four hundred thousand people, already emptied out for the evening. The office towers held the last of the light along their upper floors. At street level everything was closed, and the closed things had metal grates over them.

Up the wide street came a little band of six. A man of about fifty, short and thick, with gray hair pushing out from under a black ball cap, carrying a portable speaker and a folding stand. Beside him a woman five years younger, taller, solid, plain in the face and plainer in her clothes, holding a small boy of seven by one hand and a Bible and a stack of song sheets in the other. Behind them, walking as if they wished to be walking anywhere else, came a girl of fifteen, a boy of twelve, and another girl of nine.

At the corner of a bank and a shuttered payday-loan office the man set down the speaker, and the woman opened a folding table, and the boy of twelve, whose name was Clyde Griffiths, unwound a cord because he had been told to. His father plugged in a microphone, tapped it twice, and said into the indifferent street that the mercy of God was free tonight to anyone who wanted it.

Nobody wanted it. Two men at the bus stop looked over and looked away. A woman with a stroller crossed to the other side of the street a full half block early, which was the part that stung, because it meant she had seen them coming and made a plan. A car went by with its windows down and its bass turned up and somebody in it laughed, and Clyde could not have said whether the laugh was for him, but he felt it land on him anyway.

They sang. His mother had a strong voice and used it. His father had no voice at all and used it anyway. Clyde moved his mouth without letting sound come out of it; he had learned to do that at about nine.

He was thinking that his shoes were wrong. He was thinking that anyone who came around that corner in the next four minutes would see him standing under a streetlight holding a cord, in a shirt his mother had picked out of a church rummage bin, and would file him permanently under a certain kind of person, and would be right.

And he was thinking, in the way a child thinks a thing without having any words to argue with it, that somewhere in this city, in rooms he had never been inside, there were boys his age who had never once in their lives had to stand on a corner and sing.

CHAPTER II

The mission was three rooms and a storefront on a street of vacant storefronts, and over the window his father had painted HOPE OF THE WORLD MISSION in letters that had begun to lift and curl at the edges. Inside there were folding chairs and a coffee urn and a smell of burnt coffee and wet coats that Clyde would be able to summon at will for the rest of his life.

Asa Griffiths was a gentle, unlucky man who had never in fifty years been able to make anything work except prayer. He had tried three businesses and lost all three. He was kind to everybody, easy to take advantage of, and entirely without the instinct that tells a man when he is being laughed at.

Elvira Griffiths had the strength in that family and knew it and never once said so out loud. She kept the books, such as they were. She wrote the letters asking for donations. She fed the men who came in off the street and prayed over them and went short herself so that they wouldn't.

There was no money. There was never going to be money. Clyde understood this at an age when other children are still being told that anything is possible.

He had also begun to understand something about his parents that he could not forgive them for. It was not that they were poor — half that street was poor. It was that they had gone looking for it, had regarded it as a kind of credential, and had never once asked whether the life they had chosen was one their children would have chosen if anyone had thought to put the question.

He had one clear thought at sixteen and it embarrassed him even while he was having it. He did not want to be good. He wanted to be somebody. He wanted the clothes and the car and the easy way of talking that the boys downtown had, and he could not see one single road that ran from that storefront to that life.

CHAPTER III

He got out as soon as he could. A drugstore on Baltimore Avenue took him on to run the register, stock the coolers and mop at closing, and he came home nights smelling of floor cleaner and feeling, for the first time in his life, like a person with a place to be.

What the job gave him was not the money, which was nothing once he had handed most of it over at home. It was the view. He stood at that register four nights a week and watched the city come in and buy things. He watched the men who came in for razor blades at eleven at night in good suits with their collars open, men who were on their way from somewhere to somewhere. He watched girls come in laughing in threes and buy nail polish and gum and take twenty minutes doing it.

He began to build in his head a picture of what he would need to be one of them, and the picture was very specific and entirely about surfaces: better clothes, a better job, a way of standing, and a better name than Griffiths of the Hope of the World Mission on Bickel Street.

He never once considered school. Nobody in that house had ever suggested that a person like him went to college, so the thought arrived in his mind only the way weather arrives, and passed.

CHAPTER IV

That spring his sister Esta disappeared.

She was seventeen and pretty in a soft, uncertain way, and she had been going around with a man of about thirty who came through town with a touring show and told her she ought to be onstage. One morning she was not in her bed, her clothes were gone, and there was a note on the kitchen table saying she was going to be married and they were not to worry.

His mother read it standing up and did not sit down afterward. She did not cry in front of them — not that day, not any day. She said Esta was in God's hands. Then she made the

coffee and unlocked the front door and served breakfast to eleven men who had slept in the pews.

Clyde watched her do it and thought, with a hardness that shocked him because he loved her, that his mother could carry absolutely anything, and that this was the whole problem, because a person who can carry anything will be handed everything.

Asa prayed about it out loud that night for forty minutes.

Clyde did not go looking for his sister and was not asked to. That same week, on a tip from a boy at the drugstore, he walked into the Green-Davidson Hotel and asked whether they were hiring bellhops.

CHAPTER V

The Green-Davidson had a lobby like a cathedral — marble underfoot, forty-foot windows, a wall of brass elevator doors that two men polished twice a day. When Clyde walked into it the first time he stopped just inside the entrance without meaning to, and understood, in a way he would never be able to unlearn, that he had lived his entire life about two hundred yards from a country he had not been permitted to enter.

The bell captain, a narrow man named Squires who had run that lobby for nineteen years, looked him over the way you look over a used car. He asked how old he was, whether he had a suit at home, and whether his people were the sort who would come around making trouble.

Then he gave him the rules. Uniform pressed. Shoes shined every shift, and he would check. Hands out of your pockets. Stand where you are told to stand. You do not speak to a guest

unless a guest speaks first, and then you say sir or ma'am and as little else as possible. You do not take anything out of a room — not a magazine, not a bottle, not a dollar off a nightstand — and if you do, you will not be fired, you will be arrested, and the hotel will pay a lawyer to make certain of it.

Then he said what the job paid, which was almost nothing, and then what the boys made in tips, which was more money than Asa Griffiths had brought into that storefront in any month of his life.

Clyde said he could start immediately.

CHAPTER VI

That first night he stood in a uniform that fit him — the first thing he had ever worn that had been made to fit somebody, even if that somebody was a series of boys before him — in a lobby that smelled of cut flowers and cologne, carrying other people's luggage into rooms he could not have afforded to look at.

A man from Dallas tipped him five dollars for carrying a briefcase forty feet. A couple up from Springfield gave him ten for a rollaway bed. A party on the eighth floor wanted ice at eleven and ice again at one, and every time a hand came out with folded bills in it Clyde's heart went up like a struck match.

He counted the money in the locker room at two in the morning, sitting on a bench with his tie loosened, and it came to eleven dollars and forty cents from one shift. He held it in his hand and looked at it a while.

This is how it happens, he thought. This is how people get out.

He was, at that moment, entirely happy, and it is worth saying plainly that nothing else in his life ever came close.

CHAPTER VII

The other boys took him in.

Ratterer, easy and decent, the only one Clyde would have called a friend in any real sense. Hegglund, loud and generous and dumb about everything on earth except how to get a bigger tip. Higby, who had a car. Kinsella, who had opinions.

They taught him the trade, which had almost nothing to do with luggage. Which floors tipped and which didn't. How to read a party coming through the door in three seconds — who was paying, who was drinking, who would want something later. How to get a bottle at midnight for a man who wanted one, what he would give you for it, and how to split it with the night clerk so the night clerk stayed friendly.

They taught him what certain requests meant. They taught him not to look surprised.

And they taught him how they spent it, which was on clothes and cars and girls and long dinners at places with tablecloths, and Clyde, who had never in his life eaten a meal that had not been prayed over first, went along every time he was asked.

What that hotel did to him in eleven months is the whole book, and it is worth being plain about.

It taught him that the difference between a man who is deferred to and a man who is not is entirely a matter of surfaces, because he saw it change hands in front of him forty times a night. He watched a salesman from Omaha in a good suit be shown to a table and a doctor's widow in a bad coat be kept

waiting. He watched a bellhop become invisible by putting on a jacket, and he was that bellhop.

It taught him that everything is purchasable, including discretion, including a bottle after hours, including a room key, and that the only sin recognized on those premises was being caught.

And it taught him — this is the one that killed him — that the entire apparatus of decency he had been raised inside, the mission and the corner and the coffee urn and his father praying for forty minutes over a runaway daughter, produced people who lived in three rooms behind a storefront, and that the people on the eighth floor with the ice at one in the morning were not better than his parents in any way he could identify and were happier by an amount he could not measure.

He was seventeen. He drew the obvious conclusion. Nobody in that lobby, and nobody at that long table on Bickel Street, ever gave him one word of help in drawing a different one.

CHAPTER VIII

He told his mother he was making half of what he made.

He gave her a little, and she took it and thanked him, and he told himself that what he kept was reasonable — that a young man has expenses, that you cannot get anywhere looking like you came from nowhere. He bought a topcoat with a belt in the back. He bought shoes that cost as much as the coat. He bought three shirts and had them laundered instead of washing them, because that was what the others did.

He stood at the hall mirror at the mission one evening with the collar up and looked at a young man who did not appear to

be from the Hope of the World Mission at all, and felt the whole future open in front of him.

His mother came out of the kitchen and saw the coat. She looked at it a moment, then at him, and said nothing at all about it, and went back in. Her not saying anything sat on him worse than any sermon his father ever preached. He went out. That was becoming his answer to everything: he went out.

CHAPTER IX

There was a night in November when the boys took him across the river to a house where the women came out in robes and sat on the arms of the chairs, with music on and a fat man collecting money at a table by the stairs.

Clyde went upstairs with one of them because he could not think of a way to say no that would not follow him around that locker room for a year.

Afterward he felt sick. Then for a few days he felt nothing much. Then he found that he wanted to go back, and that frightened him more than any of the rest, because he had been raised on the certainty that a sin like that broke something in a person permanently — and nothing broke. He got up the next day and went to work and was the same.

He drew from this the conclusion that an eighteen-year-old draws, which was that his father had been wrong about everything.

CHAPTER X

Then Hortense Briggs.

She worked a cosmetics counter at a department store on Main and had a face that arranged itself, without any visible effort, into whatever a man most wanted to see. She had understood by eighteen the one law that governed her life: that what she had was worth something, and worth more the longer she declined to spend any of it.

Clyde met her at a dinner Ratterer put together and was finished inside an hour. He watched her cut a piece of chicken and thought he had never seen anything like her, which was not true and was completely true.

CHAPTER XI

She let him take her out. She let him pay. She let him drive her home in Higby's borrowed car and let him kiss her at the door, once, quickly, at the side of the mouth — and then she was inside and the door shut and the porch light went off, and Clyde stood on the step in the cold with his heart going like he had run up a flight of stairs, feeling he had been given something enormous.

He had been given nothing whatsoever, and some part of him knew it perfectly well, and he took it anyway and came back the next week for more.

She had four others going at the same time. He knew that too.

CHAPTER XII

In the fall his mother asked him for money.

She would not say what for. She said only that there was a need, that it was a family matter and not his business beyond the amount, and that she would pay it back. She asked for fifty dollars, and she asked in the tone of a woman who has not asked anybody for anything in thirty years and has been reduced to it, and she could not quite look at him while she did it.

Clyde said he did not have it.

He had it. It was in an envelope in his locker at the Green-Davidson, along with sixty more.

CHAPTER XIII

He followed her a week later, out of a suspicion he did not want to be right about, and found Esta.

She was in a bare room over a laundry near the river — a bed, a chair, a hot plate, a window that looked at a wall. She was alone and seven months pregnant. The man had left her in Pittsburgh in the spring and had not been especially cruel about it; he had simply stopped coming back to the room, which is how most of it is done.

She had come home the way people come home, quietly and at night, and their mother had put her in that room and had been feeding her out of a mission that could not feed itself, and had told nobody — not the church, not the neighbors, and not Asa, not all of it.

Esta cried when she saw her brother and said please don't tell anybody. Clyde said he wouldn't, and meant it. He sat on the edge of that bed for twenty minutes holding her hand and saying things meant to help.

Then he walked out into the street with his sister's entire life in his hands, and the first thought that came to him — before pity, before shame, before anything a person would want to admit to — was: fifty dollars.

CHAPTER XIV

Because Hortense had found a coat.

It was in a window on Petticoat Lane, a soft caramel-colored thing with a fur collar, one hundred and fifteen dollars, and she had walked him past that window twice on two different evenings before she said anything about it.

The third time she stopped in front of it and said, in the voice she kept for exactly this, that a girl who had a coat like that would just feel like being awfully nice to whoever got it for her.

Then she let the sentence sit there. She was extremely good at letting a sentence sit there. She did not touch him and did not look at him, and Clyde heard himself say that maybe something could be worked out.

CHAPTER XV

So he had one hundred and fifteen dollars to find for a coat for a girl who had never once let him past her front door, and fifty dollars to find for a sister lying on a bare mattress over a laundry, and he did not have both.

He told himself he would do both. He told himself Esta could wait a few weeks — the baby was not due until January, his mother had managed this long, nothing catastrophic happens in

three weeks. It is remarkable what a young man can arrange to believe about a timeline when the alternative is to be, for one single afternoon, less than what he wants to be.

He went down to Petticoat Lane on his day off and put money down on the coat.

CHAPTER XVI

When his mother asked the second time, three weeks later, he took ten dollars out of his wallet and gave it to her and said it was everything he had.

He had eighty-four dollars in the wallet. She could not see into it and did not try to.

She held the ten and looked at him, and it went on a second longer than it should have. He had expected her to argue, and had prepared for arguing, and had a whole second answer ready about the hotel holding back pay. She did not ask for it. Whatever she saw in his face she read all the way to the bottom of, and then she folded the bill twice and put it in her apron pocket.

She said: thank you, Clyde.

That was all. She went back into the kitchen and started the coffee for the evening, and he stood in the hall for a minute and then went out, and neither of them ever said one word about it again.

She never asked him for money after that. Not that winter, not the next year, not when the mission lost its lease, not ever, for anything. She had asked her son twice and been told no twice, and Elvira Griffiths was not a woman who required a third demonstration of anything.

Something between them closed that night, and it stayed closed for eight years, and it did not open again until a stone room with a table in it, with a guard outside the door, when she sat down across from him and did not ask him whether he had done it.

Esta's baby was born in a county hospital in January. Clyde saw him twice — once in the hospital, for about four minutes, and once in the spring, in the room over the laundry, when he stopped by because his mother had asked him to and stayed long enough to be able to say that he had gone.

The boy was named Russell.

CHAPTER XVII

In the spring, Heggglund put together a Sunday.

A man named Sparser, who parked cars for a family out on the Boulevard, could get one of their cars for the afternoon — a big sedan that would hold eight if two of them sat close. Four boys, four girls, Hortense among them, in a coat that was not the caramel one, because the caramel one was still on layaway and she had let Clyde understand that this was a disappointment.

They drove forty miles out to a roadhouse on a lake and ate fried chicken at a long table and drank and danced to a jukebox, and on the way out Clyde sat in front with Hortense's hand on his arm and the windows down and the whole flat green country going by, and he was as happy as he had been since his first night in that lobby.

They should have started back at five. They started back at seven, then stopped, then started back again at nine.

CHAPTER XVIII

Sparsar drove fast on the way in because the car had to be in the garage before the family got home, and he had been drinking since two.

At the edge of a small town a street came in from the right at a four-way stop, and a girl of nine was crossing it with a paper bag of groceries in both arms, and the car went through the stop at fifty.

There was the sound of the impact, which was not loud, and then the sound of the car going up over the curb into a light pole, which was very loud, and then a few seconds of complete silence, and then the girls in the back began to scream.

Sparsar was pinned behind the wheel, unconscious. One of the girls had a broken arm and a cut on her scalp that bled the way scalps bleed. Steam came up off the hood. Twenty or thirty feet back in the road there was a small shape and a scatter of groceries. A screen door was banging somewhere and people were coming out onto porches.

Clyde got out through a door that no longer closed. He was not hurt at all. He had not been driving, had not bought the whiskey, had not stolen the car, had not touched that little girl.

He looked back at the shape in the road for perhaps two seconds, and then he ran.

They all ran, all of them who could, in four directions across yards and fences, and Clyde ran until his lungs gave out and then walked and then ran again, and did not stop until he could not hear anything behind him at all.

CHAPTER XIX

He did not go back to the hotel. He did not go home to Bickel Street for his clothes or his money or to say anything to anybody. There was a bus at midnight to St. Louis and he was on it with what was in his pockets, which was two hundred and some dollars and a comb.

He sat with his forehead against the glass and watched Kansas City go small, then orange, then dark.

He told himself he had not done anything. He said it several ways and each way was true and none of it helped, and somewhere past the state line he arrived at the thought that would organize the rest of his life. It was not guilt. It was this: that he had walked away from a thing that could not be walked away from, and it had worked. Nobody stopped him. Nobody even called his name.

That was the discovery. Not that he was guilty. That he could go.

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

Nine hundred miles southeast, in the upstate of South Carolina, in a mill town called Lycurgus, there was a family named Griffiths who had never heard of the Hope of the World Mission.

Samuel Griffiths owned the Griffiths Uniform Company, four floors of brick along the river, which made scrubs and workwear and shipped them to hospitals, hotels and nursing homes in four states. Three hundred and forty people worked there. It was the last of the old mills in that county still running under the name of the family that built it, and the others had gone to Honduras or gone to weeds. In Lycurgus that made Samuel Griffiths not merely rich but a kind of civic fact, the way weather is a fact.

He had a wife who ran the house and the church committee. He had a son, Gilbert, who was Clyde's age almost exactly and had been raised as his opposite — competent, cold, already running the plant floor at twenty-three, with a way of looking at people that put them where they belonged inside of a sentence. He had two daughters: Myra, who was plain and kind and had never been asked to a dance she wanted to go to, and Bella, who was neither plain nor kind and had never been asked to one she didn't.

And he had a brother he never spoke of. A younger brother named Asa who had gone west years ago into some kind of street preaching and had never made anything of himself, and whose name came up in that house perhaps twice a decade.

CHAPTER II

Clyde had been three years in nowhere.

St. Louis first, in a dish room. Then Peoria, then Milwaukee, then Chicago. Warehouse work. A stint driving a delivery van under a name that was not his, which cost him forty dollars and got him three months of work. He moved whenever anybody asked too many questions, and for the first two years he read the Kansas City news every week waiting to see his own name in it.

It never came. Sparsen went to prison for it. Two of the boys were charged with leaving the scene. Clyde's name appeared once, in a list of persons believed to have been present, and then never again, and eventually he understood that nobody at all was looking for him.

He had expected relief. What he felt instead, and could not have explained to anyone, was a kind of insult — that a thing that had ended a child's life and rearranged his own had, from the world's side of it, simply closed.

He landed finally at the Union League Club in Chicago, in a uniform again, and he was good at it. He was twenty-one. He had learned to keep his mouth shut, his shoes shined, and his history entirely to himself.

CHAPTER III

He had carried bags for nine hundred men in that lobby and had learned not to look at any of them. He looked at this one because the man had stopped walking.

Samuel Griffiths was heavy and gray and expensively dressed in a way that did not announce itself, and he stood there with his hand on the elevator frame and asked the question twice, because the first time Clyde did not believe it had been addressed to him.

Clyde said Kansas City, sir.

And the man said that was a curious thing, because he had a brother out that way once, or had had, a good while back, and the two of them stood in a marble lobby for perhaps forty seconds while a heavy man worked out that the bellhop in front of him had his own father's jaw.

He asked Clyde what his father's name was. Clyde told him. Samuel Griffiths did not say anything at all for a moment, and then he said, well. And then he got into the elevator and the doors closed on him.

CHAPTER IV

Samuel Griffiths took him to lunch two days later.

He asked questions and got careful answers. He heard about the mission, and about Asa, who was his brother, and about a sister and a hall with folding chairs, and he sat across a white tablecloth from a well-mannered boy wearing his own family's face and felt something that was two parts guilt to one part the particular pleasure of being a man who can fix a thing with a single sentence.

He said: there's always work at the plant for somebody who'll do it. If you ever want honest work, come see me in Lycurgus.

He did not say what the work was. He did not say what it paid. He would remember, afterward, at some cost to himself, that he had not said either of those things.

CHAPTER V

He gave a week's notice he did not owe and spent four days' pay on a suit.

On the bus he did the arithmetic he had been doing since he was twelve, and the arithmetic said this: that his uncle owned a factory, that his uncle had sought him out, that a man does not take a bellhop to lunch and hand him a city unless he means something by it. He had been discovered. He had always known that he was not the sort of person who ends his life in a dish room, and here at last was the proof of it, delivered by a man in a good coat.

He came into South Carolina at dawn on the second day and watched it arrive out the window: the pines going on for an hour at a time, the kudzu over everything like a sheet thrown across furniture, the mill villages with their identical four-room houses in identical rows, most of them with the mill at the end of the street standing empty and the windows out.

He got off in Lycurgus at four in the afternoon with one bag. It was ninety-six degrees. He walked up from the station past the plant, four floors of brick along the river with GRIFFITHS in eight-foot letters on the side of it, and stood on the far bank looking at his own name on a building.

He did not go in that day. He walked back into town and got a room and lay on the bed with his shoes on and looked at the ceiling for two hours, arranging a future.

CHAPTER VI

Gilbert Griffiths interviewed him in an office with a glass wall looking out over the cutting floor, and made it clear inside of four minutes that he did not want him there.

He said the name was an accident, not a claim. He said there were men on that floor who had been there twenty years and had sons of their own who wanted in. He said that anybody who came in through the front door on a family connection got started at the bottom exactly like anybody else, and that if he could not do the work he would be let go exactly like anybody else, and did Clyde understand that.

Clyde said he did.

The bottom was the shrinking room, in the basement, where fabric came off the bolt into hot water and eight men worked in wet heat all day for twelve dollars an hour.

CHAPTER VII

He took a room in a boarding house on Thorpe Street, cheap and clean, run by a woman named Cuppy who fed nine young men at a long table and did not tolerate noise after ten.

For two months nothing whatsoever happened to Clyde. He worked in the basement. He ate at the long table with clerks and salesmen who talked about baseball. He was too proud to make friends downward and too invisible to make them upward.

In the evenings he walked. He walked out to Wykeagy Avenue, where the Griffiths house was, and past the Finchley place and the Cranstons', and stood on the sidewalk in the dark looking into lit windows like a man looking at an aquarium. It was the same walk he had taken at fourteen past the Green-Davidson. Nothing about him had changed except the city.

CHAPTER VIII

Then, in August, they had him to dinner.

It was a duty and every person in that room understood it as a duty. Mrs. Griffiths was gracious in the manner of a woman discharging an obligation on schedule. Myra was kind and asked him real questions. Gilbert was correct and freezing. Samuel asked how the shrinking room was and said that everybody ought to know what the bottom of a business feels like, and believed it.

Bella came through with two friends on their way to something better, and one of the friends, a girl named Sondra Finchley, looked at Clyde for exactly as long as it takes to place a stranger and then looked away.

In the hall on the way out she said to Bella that he was awfully good-looking for a relative nobody had ever mentioned.

Clyde walked back to Thorpe Street and did not sleep.

CHAPTER IX

He had been shown, once, the door of a room he was not going to be let into, and then he went back down to the basement, and the invitation was not repeated for eight months.

He had been placed. In a town like that, being placed takes about one dinner.

Gilbert saw to the rest of it without ever doing anything a person could point at. He mentioned, at a lunch, that the young man was a cousin of some kind from out west and was learning the business from the bottom, which was true and which finished him. After that the invitations that might have come did

not come, and nobody was unkind to him anywhere, and it made no difference at all.

Clyde understood what had happened and could not have proved one word of it. That is how it is done in a town of eighteen thousand people, and it is done at a lunch, and it takes about nine seconds.

CHAPTER X

He made one friend, a clerk in the hosiery office named Dillard, who was ambitious in a small way and had worked out that a Griffiths at his elbow was worth something socially.

Dillard took him to a church social and introduced him to Rita and Zella, two girls from the mill office. Rita liked him immediately and made it plain, and she was warm and pretty and going nowhere at all.

And Clyde, sitting in a rented rec room with a paper cup in his hand, understood something about himself with a coldness that surprised him: that Rita was exactly the kind of thing that could sink him in that town. Being seen with Rita meant being classed with Rita, and being classed with Rita meant Thorpe Street forever.

He stopped answering Dillard's messages. It took about three weeks to do and he did it without one direct word, and he was rather good at it.

CHAPTER XI

In the winter Samuel Griffiths remembered him.

He asked Gilbert where the boy was and was told, and said that was long enough, and had him brought up to the accounting floor for a few months, and then, in April, over Gilbert's flat objection, put in charge of the stamping room on the fifth floor.

Twenty-five women running presses. Clyde in charge of them at twenty-two years old, at a salary that was three times the basement.

Gilbert walked him up there personally and gave him exactly one rule, and the rule was the company's, in writing, and had been for thirty years. No supervisor has any relationship of any kind with any woman working under him. Not a date. Not a drink. Not a ride home in the rain. There is no version of it that is acceptable and no exception that has ever been made, and a man who breaks it is gone the same day, family or not, and the family part is the reason it will be the same day.

Clyde said he understood it.

CHAPTER XII

He ate alone at Mrs. Cuppy's and went to a movie by himself on Saturdays and walked out to the river on Sundays because there was nowhere else to walk.

He had a title now, and a salary, and a desk at the end of a floor with twenty-five women on it, and nobody in that town to tell any of it to. He wrote to his mother twice that spring and both letters were about the promotion, and he read them over before he sent them and was ashamed of how much of the page it took up.

He was lonelier that first spring than he had been in the basement, in the particular way of a man who has moved up one floor into an empty room.

CHAPTER XIII

She came up in the freight elevator on a Monday morning with two other new hands, and Liggett walked them down the aisle and left them standing at the end of it while he went to find the forms.

Clyde signed her in without looking at her. He had signed in eleven women that summer. He wrote her name at the top of a card — Alden, Roberta — and asked her the questions on the card, age, address, previous work, and she answered them in a low voice looking at the card and not at him.

Then she looked up to ask where she should put her coat, and he saw her face.

He told her the hooks were by the stairs. He said it in a completely normal voice. And when she had walked away down the aisle he stood there with the card in his hand for a while and then went and put it in the drawer with the others, and thought, in the flat way a man thinks a thing he has no intention of doing anything about: well.

CHAPTER XIV

She was twenty-three, from a failing farm outside a town called Biltz — the oldest of four, the responsible one, sent to the city to earn because the farm could not carry them all and her father

could not admit it.

Titus Alden was a decent man with no luck and less judgment who had lost the good part of the land in a bad year and had spent fifteen years since telling his family it would come back. Roberta had left school to keep the books he could not keep. She had come to Lycurgus with two suitcases and boarded with a family named Newton, relatives of a girl she knew, who went to church twice on Sunday and expected her at both.

She had a plain, serious, quietly lovely face and a way of ducking her head when she was spoken to. She had never been anywhere. She had never had anything. She had never once in her life been the girl anybody looked at first.

She was, Clyde thought the first afternoon on the floor, the prettiest thing in that room by a distance, and the safest to look at, because she was so obviously good.

CHAPTER XV

He corrected her stamping twice in the first week and she thanked him both times and got it right afterward.

He noticed that she was fast and careful and that the other women liked her, which is the hardest thing to be on a piecework floor, where every hand that moves quickly is taking money out of somebody else's pocket. He noticed that she had exactly two dresses and alternated them, and that she washed one of them every other night, because on Tuesday and Thursday mornings the collar was still damp.

He also noticed, because there was no way not to, that when he came down the aisle she knew it before he got there. She did not look up. Her shoulders changed.

Six weeks is a long time to say nothing. Both of them were saying nothing on purpose, and both of them knew that the other one was doing it on purpose, and that is what those six weeks actually were.

CHAPTER XVI

Then a Saturday in August, out at Crum Lake at the edge of town, he found her by accident on the bank with a rented canoe she did not know how to get into.

He held the gunwale and she got in, and he asked whether she wanted somebody who knew how to row, and she said yes before she had decided to.

They were out on the water an hour. She picked lilies. She told him about Biltz and about her sister and about wanting, someday, to take a course in bookkeeping. He told her a version of Kansas City with a hotel in it and no mission, which was the version he told everybody, and she believed all of it and looked at him while he told it.

By the time they came in it had happened to both of them, and both of them knew it, and neither said so.

CHAPTER XVII

What followed had to be secret, and the secrecy was the poison in it from the first week.

They could not be seen. They could not walk out of that building within ten minutes of each other. He could not be in a car with her within a mile of the plant. They met after dark at the

ends of streets and rode separate buses to the same stop. He would come down the aisle on the fifth floor and correct her work in a level voice with his heart going, and she would say yes, Mr. Griffiths, and not look up.

She knew exactly what she was risking, which was her job and her name and the entire reason she had been sent to that town. She did it anyway. She did it with her whole self, because she had never done anything in her life with anything less.

He risked, in the same arrangement, nothing that anybody would ever know about.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Newtons noticed her coming in at ten and asked questions about it. Mrs. Newton said the word reputation twice in one week and said it pleasantly both times, which was worse.

Grace Marr, who had brought her to that house and who slept in the next room, asked her outright in October who it was. Roberta said there wasn't anybody. Grace said all right, and did not believe her, and the friendship they had carried since they were fifteen years old ended that month without either of them saying so.

In November Roberta moved out, to a room in a house on Elm Street run by a family named Gilpin — a room at the back with its own door onto a side porch and its own key.

She told the Newtons the rent was cheaper. She told Clyde the rent was cheaper. She told herself the rent was cheaper. It was two dollars a week more.

CHAPTER XIX

He came to that room the first week and she stood in the doorway with her hand on the frame and would not let him in, and they talked for ten minutes on a cold porch in front of a lit window.

He came the second week and she let him in and made him leave after twenty minutes, and cried after he had gone, and could not have said which part she was crying about.

He came the third week and did not make any argument at all, which was the thing that undid her. He sat on the one chair and talked about the plant and about a man on the fourth floor who had been fired, and after a while he stopped talking, and she was the one who crossed the room.

Afterward she said, with her face against his shoulder, that she was not sorry. Then she said: don't ever make me feel like I did something cheap. Please. I couldn't stand it from you.

He said he loved her. At that moment, in that room, he did, and it is important to the whole of what follows that this was true.

CHAPTER XX

They had two months of something a person could have built a life out of.

She cooked on a hot plate with two pans. He brought a box of pastries on Sundays and she made a joke about it every single time. They lay on that bed in the winter dark with the radiator knocking and talked about a house — not seriously, in the way people talk when they have decided not to say the serious thing

out loud.

She darned his socks. She was happy. It is important to say that she was happy, because almost nobody in the courtroom two years later would ever be told it.

She kept a list. He found it once, on the back of an envelope on the table by the hot plate, and read it before he thought about whether he should. It was a list of things for a kitchen: pans, a colander, dish towels, a set of glasses, and beside each one a price she had gotten from somewhere, and at the bottom a total, and beside the total a date about eleven months out.

She had been putting away four dollars a week toward a kitchen she had not told him about.

He put the envelope back where it had been. He did not say anything about it that night or ever, and two years later, in a stone room with a table, he told the Reverend Duncan McMillan that of everything in the whole of it, the envelope was the thing he could not get out of his head — not the boat, not the water. A list of dish towels with a date at the bottom.

There was also the matter of what she gave up to be there, which nobody ever tallied and which the trial treated as though it were nothing.

She had turned down a promotion in November because it would have moved her to the third floor and out from under him. She had stopped going to church with the Newtons and had let her mother believe it was the hours. She had a friend in Biltz she had written to every week since she was fifteen and she stopped writing that fall, because there was no way to write a letter that did not have him in it and no way to put him in it.

By the winter Roberta Alden had one person in her life, and he had two hundred, and she was too proud to say so and too honest not to know it.

CHAPTER XXI

In December, Sondra Finchley pulled her car up beside him on Central Avenue and offered him a ride.

She had mistaken him at first for Gilbert — the resemblance was that close from behind — and had already stopped and rolled the window down before she saw it wasn't. And then she remembered him from the dinner in August, and she was bored that winter, and Gilbert Griffiths had once been cool to her at a party in a way she had not forgotten.

So she said, with the window down and the engine running: you never come to anything.

CHAPTER XXII

She took him to a dance at the Steele house the next week and put him in front of everyone she knew.

He had one suit that would do and he had it pressed and he was sick in his room for an hour beforehand. Then he walked into a house with three hundred people in it and a band at one end of a room, and Sondra Finchley took him by the arm at the door and walked him the length of it, saying his name to people, saying Clyde Griffiths the way you say a name that everyone is expected to already know.

Bella Griffiths saw him from across the room and her face did something complicated. Gilbert was not there, which Sondra had checked.

And Clyde, who had spent eleven months carrying luggage for people exactly like these and four more years learning to stand a certain way, was faultless. He said little. He danced twice and well. He was asked what he did and said he was with the family firm, and it was the truth, and nobody asked the second question.

He walked back to Thorpe Street at one in the morning in the cold with his coat open, and he did not feel triumphant. He felt as though something that had been withheld from him his entire life had turned out, on inspection, to have no lock on it at all.

It cost her nothing and it changed his entire life.

CHAPTER XXIII

Because they took him.

Bertine Cranston, Grant Cranston, Jill and Frank Trumbull, the Harriets, the whole set. He was a Griffiths. He was good-looking. He was polite, he danced, he listened well, and he had the immense advantage of being the only person in the room whose history nobody knew — and their world was so profoundly incurious about anybody's history that his was never once seriously asked after.

By February his phone had invitations in it from people whose houses he had walked past in the dark eighteen months before. He was borrowing money from nobody and spending money he did not have, and the tailor on Central Avenue carried him.

CHAPTER XXIV

And Roberta was on Elm Street on a hot plate on Sunday afternoons, waiting.

She would start the food at four because he had said four. At five she would take it off the heat and set it on the back of the plate to keep. At six she would eat some of it standing up at the counter, and put the rest in the icebox, and wash the two pans.

He came about half the time that winter. When he came he was affectionate and easy and often very late, and he told her about the family and about business, and she listened to all of it and asked good questions and never once asked him the only question she had.

When he did not come there was no message, and in the morning on the fifth floor she would have to correct her own stamping in front of him and say yes, Mr. Griffiths.

CHAPTER XXV

He began to cancel.

He began with the truth, which was that the family had claimed him, and he learned in those weeks how much of a lie can be told with true sentences. He said Mrs. Griffiths expects me. He said it's business, it's Gilbert, I can't get out of it. He said I'll come Tuesday and then on Tuesday he said Thursday.

She knew before she knew. She would not ask, and then one night she asked, and he was gentle and vague and hurt-sounding, and she apologized for asking.

That was the night, she said much later in a message he did not answer, that she should have understood.

CHAPTER XXVI

By March he was in love with Sondra Finchley the way a man is in love with a country he has seen once from an airplane.

Some of it was money and he was honest enough with himself, in the dark, to know it. She was Finchley Electric. She was the lake house at Twelfth Lake, the boat, the horses, four hundred acres and a father who had never counted anything in his life.

But it was also that when he was with her he was nobody's son. There was no mission in it. No bus out of Kansas City, no shrinking room, no basement, no room on Elm Street with a hot plate. When Sondra Finchley looked at him he was the person he had been trying to invent since he was twelve years old holding a cord under a streetlight.

CHAPTER XXVII

And she, to her own considerable astonishment, began to mean it.

That was the part nobody had counted on, least of all her. Sondra Finchley started that winter as a girl playing a small private joke on Gilbert Griffiths, and she was writing Clyde at two in the morning by March.

She was nineteen. She had never been refused anything in her life, and this was the first thing she had ever wanted that she could see somebody might try to take away from her, and the trying was half of what made her want it.

But not all of it. She saw something in him that the others did not see, and it was the thing that was actually there: that he was frightened all the time. She mistook it for depth. In a room full of young men who had never once in their lives been uncertain of anything, Clyde Griffiths held himself like a man who was watching the exits, and she found it beautiful.

By April she had decided that she did not care what her father said, and she told Clyde so, and she believed it entirely. She was going to tell him in the fall, after the lake, when the whole family was rested and pleased with itself.

CHAPTER XXVIII

In February Roberta told him she was late.

She told him on the side porch on Elm Street with her coat on, standing up, because she had decided that she would say it standing up and would not cry. She had rehearsed it four times that day at her press.

He said, are you sure. She said no, not sure. He said well then. He said it's probably nothing, it happens, don't get worked up over it yet.

And she said all right, and went back inside, and lay on the bed in her coat, and understood from the shape of those three sentences exactly how much help she was going to get.

CHAPTER XXIX

They waited two weeks, and then two more, and she was not wrong.

She told him on the porch again, in the same place, and this time she did not stand up to do it. She sat down on the step in the cold with her hands between her knees and said that it had been six weeks now and that she was sure.

She was very calm about it, and the calm was the thing that frightened him, because it meant she had already spent a number of days alone with it and had gotten to the other side of the part where a person cries.

She said: I'm not going to make this ugly, Clyde. I just need you to help me.

CHAPTER XXX

What they needed was money, time, privacy, a car and about four hundred miles, and they had none of the five.

Clyde looked it up on his phone in a locked bathroom stall at the plant with the fan running, and what he found took him about ninety seconds to understand and he did not tell her for eleven days.

In that state it was already over. The law there stopped at six weeks — six weeks counted from a date about two weeks before a woman has any reason to suspect anything at all — and Roberta was past that on the afternoon she first said the word to him on the porch. There had never been a window. There had never been anything to be late for. The thing had been decided by a legislature four years before either of them set foot in Lycurgus.

Across the state line, an hour north, it could still be done. But that state required her to be counseled in person and then to wait seventy-two hours and come back, which meant two trips

and two absences from a floor where absences were counted, and it stopped at twelve weeks. There were pills that could be gotten by mail if you knew the site, and a window in which they worked, and a cost.

So there was a road. It was narrow and it was closing and it ran through another state, and it required a car, four hundred dollars, two days off and a man who would drive her.

He told her he would handle it.

He told her that for eleven days, and in those eleven days he went to two parties and a dinner at the Cranstons'.

CHAPTER XXXI

She got a name from a girl at the plant — a doctor two towns over on the Winnsboro road who was said to be understanding — and she went alone on a Saturday, on two buses, and sat in an exam room with her coat in her lap and said what she had come for.

She did not know yet that it was illegal. Clyde had known for nine days and had not told her, and so she found it out the way she found out most things that year, which was from a stranger, alone, a long way from home.

The doctor was not unkind about it. That is worth saying, because she had expected him to be and had spent the whole bus ride preparing for it.

He told her that he could not do that in this state and that no one could, and that she was already past the point where it would have been legal even if he had been willing, and that he was sorry. He asked whether she had family. He told her that some women went to North Carolina and that she should look

into it soon if she was going to, and that he could not give her a name because giving her a name could cost him his license.

Then he gave her a pamphlet with a phone number on it for a place that offered counseling and diapers.

She rode back in the dark with the pamphlet folded into her coat pocket and let herself in through the side porch and lay down on the bed with her coat still on.

Clyde did not call that night. He was at a dinner. She did not tell him about the doctor for four days, and when she did, he said, God, why didn't you tell me, and she said because you were busy.

CHAPTER XXXII

He ordered pills off a site with a stock photograph of a doctor on it and gave them to her in a drugstore bag in a park, and told her to read the instructions twice.

She took them over four days. She was sick both nights and went to work both mornings and made her count both days, because a woman on a piecework floor who misses her count twice in one week is a woman somebody asks about.

Nothing happened.

She told him standing at the end of the press line on a Thursday, in eight words, with her hands shaking, and he said take the rest of them then, and walked away down the aisle, because Liggett was on the floor.

They fail sometimes. That is all it was. They fail in a small share of cases and the answer when they fail is a clinic, promptly, and a clinic was the one thing in the world neither of them could produce.

So she waited to be sure, because she could not afford to be wrong, and being sure took two more weeks. She spent both of them believing she had done it wrong — that she had taken them at the wrong hour, or eaten when she should not have, or been too frightened, and that a more careful woman would have managed it.

She had done everything exactly as the instructions said. She had read them twice, the way he told her to.

CHAPTER XXXIII

He asked Orrin Short, a man he knew slightly from the club, in a careful and general way, as though it were about a friend of his from Chicago.

Short was helpful. That is the thing. He was a decent man and he wanted to be useful, and what he had was the part Clyde did not: not the state, which the doctor on the Winnsboro road had already named, but an actual clinic, and a figure, and the fact that they would want her twice, seventy-two hours apart, and that the first visit was mostly a woman reading a script aloud to her by law.

Then he said the thing that mattered and that Clyde did not act on.

He said: tell your friend to hurry. They cut it off at twelve weeks up there. After twelve weeks it isn't money anymore, it's Virginia or it's nothing, and Virginia is a long way to drive twice.

Clyde said his friend would hurry. He thanked him. He went home, and he did not call anybody that night, and he did not call anybody the next day, and he told Roberta about the clinic three days later.

Three days. That is the whole of it. There is no moment in this entire history when Clyde Griffiths decided to let the time run out. There are only the days he did not do anything, laid end to end, until the doing of anything was no longer available.

CHAPTER XXXIV

By the end of March she was past twelve weeks, and North Carolina was closed to her.

What remained was Virginia, which was six hours each way and wanted more money than either of them had, and would still want her twice. Two round trips of twelve hours. Four days off a piecework floor where absences were counted, in a town of eighteen thousand people where the head of her department was the owner's nephew.

She did the arithmetic on the back of the same envelope she kept the kitchen list on. She did it twice. Then she put the envelope in the drawer and did not take it out again.

She was sick every morning now. She would go into the ladies' room on the fifth floor at ten o'clock and come out at ten past and be back at her press by a quarter past with her face wet and her hands shaking, and make her count.

Two of the women on that floor had worked it out by then. Neither of them said one word to anybody — not to Liggett, not to the other women, not to Roberta herself, which was its own kind of mercy — and both of them told a district attorney about it eighteen months later, under oath, in front of two hundred people.

CHAPTER XXXV

And then she stopped asking him for that, and asked him for the other thing.

It was a Tuesday. She had made him come. She had said in a message that if he did not come she would come to Thorpe Street, and he had understood that she meant it, and he had come.

She had it written down. That is the detail that stayed with him afterward, in a cell, for two years — that she had written it on the back of an envelope so that she would not lose her place, and that her hands were shaking so badly she could not read her own writing and had to say it from memory anyway.

She said: then we have to be married.

CHAPTER XXXVI

She said it without anger, which was the terrible part. She said it the way you state a fact about the weather.

She had done the arithmetic that a farm girl from Biltz does. There was one answer. She could not go home to Titus Alden's house like this and she could not stay in Lycurgus like this and she could not do this alone on a piecework wage, and the man responsible was standing in front of her saying he needed more time.

She gave him until the end of the school term — she used that phrase because she was thinking of her mother's house and when she could get there. And she said that if he had not married her by then, she would go to Samuel Griffiths and tell him everything.

She did not say it as a threat. She said it as the last road out of a room with no other doors in it, and she was crying when she said it and apologized for crying.

He heard it as a threat. That is where it began.

CHAPTER XXXVII

That same week Sondra told him that in July her family would be at Twelfth Lake for the whole month and she wanted him there for all of it.

She wrote it at midnight. She wrote that she had been thinking about what her father would say, and that she had worked out what she would say back, and that by the fall she meant to simply tell him and let the house fall down if it was going to fall down.

She wrote: I'm not going to be talked out of you.

Clyde read it lying on his back on the bed on Thorpe Street with the phone held above his face, and read it four times, and then got up and stood at the window for a while.

Roberta was two hundred yards away across town on Elm Street, past twelve weeks, waiting for him to name a date.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

So there were two futures, and one of them was going to happen, and the other was going to be canceled.

One of them was a room over a store somewhere out of the county, and a wife who had been the best hand on the fifth floor, and a child in the fall, and a supervisor's salary for the rest of his

life, and his name off every list in Lycurgus inside a week.

The other one was a lake house and a girl who had never been refused anything and the inside of the room he had been looking into from the sidewalk since he was twelve years old.

He did not decide anything that week. He wants it recorded — and he said it in a courtroom, and said it again in a cell, and it is the only defense he ever really offered for himself — that he did not decide anything.

That is exactly right, and it is the whole indictment. The machinery of this ran on his not deciding. Every day he did not decide was a day the calendar decided for him, and it kept deciding right up until the eighth of July.

CHAPTER XXXIX

In May he saw an article on his phone about a couple who had drowned at a lake in the Ozarks. Their canoe was found floating. The woman's body was recovered. The man's was not, and the sheriff's office said it was probably still down there, because the lake was deep and cold and full of standing timber and they had lost people in it before.

He read it standing at the end of the press line. He read it again on the walk home. He put his phone in his pocket and took it out and read it a third time on the porch of the boarding house.

The thought had a shape. He said no to it, out loud, alone, on the step — and the shape stayed.

CHAPTER XL

For three weeks he did nothing about it and did not stop thinking about it.

He looked up lake depths. He looked up how long a search lasts before they suspend it. He looked at maps of a chain of small lakes north of Bridgeburg — Grass Lake, and eleven miles beyond it a place called Big Bittern, where there were no cabins on the south end and no road on the far shore and, according to the last comment on a fishing forum from two years back, no cell service at all.

He told himself he was only looking.

There is a lie a man tells himself in which he says he is only looking, and the whole time his hands are packing.

CHAPTER XLI

Roberta went home to Biltz to wait.

She messaged him from her mother's kitchen, and the messages were patient at first and then less patient and then frightened. She wrote about a dress her mother wanted to make over for her. She wrote that she had told them she was engaged. She wrote: please just tell me a date, Clyde, that's all I'm asking for, just a date so I have something to say.

He wrote back that he had a plan. He wrote: we'll take a trip first, just us, a few days, before we do it, so it doesn't look like what it is. He wrote: I'll come get you on the 6th.

She wrote back that she would like a trip. She wrote that she was sorry she had been so awful lately.

CHAPTER XLII

He bought a bus ticket. He bought a bag in a different town and paid cash for it. He borrowed a camera tripod from a man at the club and did not examine why, and told Sondra he would be at Twelfth Lake by the ninth.

He packed the night before. Two shirts, a second suit, a razor. He stood in the middle of that room on Thorpe Street for a long time with the bag open on the bed.

And here is what he did not do, and it is the center of everything that follows. He did not say a single sentence to himself about what he was doing. Not one. He did not think the word. He had spent his entire life becoming a person who could arrive at a thing without ever having decided to go there, and on the fifth of July, in a rented room, he finished the job.

He was very calm. He slept well. In the morning he checked the bus schedule twice and ate breakfast at Mrs. Cuppy's table with six other men and talked to a salesman about the heat.

CHAPTER XLIII

He picked her up in Camden and they went north together, and she was happy.

That is the thing that no one at the trial would ever be able to make anybody feel — not Belknap, not Jephson, not Clyde himself in three days on the stand. She was happy for a day and a half. She sat beside him on a bus with her hair against the window and her shoulder against his arm, going on a trip with the man she was going to marry.

They stayed at Grass Lake the first night. He had thought it would be there, and it was not, because there were four other

boats on the water and a family with children on the dock, and because she had gotten sick that morning and he had held her hair and she had laughed about it afterward.

In the morning he told her about a bigger lake an hour on — quieter, prettier, they could take a boat out and come back for dinner — and she said whatever he thought.

CHAPTER XLIV

At the inn at Big Bittern the man at the desk would not take the bag without a name in the register, and Clyde wrote Clifford Golden and wife.

Roberta left her hat and coat behind the desk because they were coming back for dinner. There was a store label from Lycurgus inside the hat. He saw it and thought about taking the hat and decided that carrying a woman's hat down to a boat would look strange.

They rented a boat at one o'clock. The man on the dock told them the far end was pretty and to watch for deadheads in the shallows.

CHAPTER XLV

He rowed south along a shore of drowned timber for two hours.

She trailed her hand in the water. She picked lilies and laid them on the seat and then in her lap. She talked about a room they could rent for the first year, and about working as long as she could, and about what she would tell her mother about the wedding.

In a cove at the far end, out of sight of the whole world, he stopped rowing.

What happened next was, and remained, the only fact in the world that mattered, and Clyde himself was never afterward able to hold it still in his hands. He had the camera. He was frozen and he was not frozen. Something crossed his face that frightened her, and she got up and came toward him along the boat saying his name, asking what was wrong, reaching for him — and his hands came up, and the camera caught her in the face, and she went back hard, and the boat went over.

He came up. She came up. She could not swim.

She got a hand on the boat and lost it. The boat was moving away from her, slow, the way an overturned boat does, and she went under and came up again about six feet from it with her hair across her face, and she was not screaming, because a person who is drowning does not scream — she was working, hard, at the surface, with her chin up, spending everything she had.

She called his name once.

And he was ten feet away in flat water and he could swim a half mile, and he trod water and he looked at her.

What he said afterward, to the only man he ever told the truth to, was that he did not decide anything in those seconds. That he did not think now she will die and I will be free. That there were no words in him at all. That he simply held still in the water, the way an animal holds still, and let the seconds go by, and that some part of him he had never met before was doing the arithmetic while the rest of him watched.

She went under the second time and came up once more, less of her above the water, and did not call anything.

Then the lake was flat.

He stayed where he was for perhaps a minute. There were dragonflies. There was a bird somewhere back in the timber that kept making the same sound. A hundred yards north the lilies she had picked that afternoon were floating out of the boat one at a time.

That is all. It is small. It takes four seconds and there is no version of it in which he is not what he is. He did not push her. He did not have to. And every court that ever looked at this case, from that county to the federal bench, agreed on one thing and only one thing, and they were right about it: that ten feet of calm water is a decision, and that a man who makes it has killed her as surely as if he had held her down.

CHAPTER XLVI

He swam to the far shore and lay in the reeds until his breathing came back.

In the trees he took off the wet suit and put on dry clothes from the bag, and buried the tripod under a log, and pushed the wet clothes down into a hollow and covered them with leaves, and combed his hair with his fingers, and walked out through the woods to the road with a bag in his hand like a man on vacation.

He caught a ride south with a man delivering feed. By that night he was on a bus toward Twelfth Lake. By the next afternoon he was standing on the Cranstons' dock in borrowed swim trunks with Sondra Finchley's hand in his hair, laughing at something Grant Cranston had said.

He would testify that he did not sleep. Two people at that lake testified that he did.

CHAPTER XLVII

Three days later the boat came up, and then the hat with the Lycurgus label came up, and then Roberta came up.

In her mother's kitchen in Biltz there was a phone full of four months of messages. On the fifth floor of the Griffiths Uniform Company there were twenty-five women who had noticed a long time ago the way the head of the stamping room looked at Roberta Alden. At an inn on Big Bittern there was a register with a false name in it in his handwriting.

The sheriff's men came up the Cranstons' lawn on the evening of the ninth of July while a party was going on. There were paper lanterns strung along the porch rail. Somebody was playing music from a speaker on the boathouse roof.

Clyde was standing at the rail with a drink in his hand, and he heard his own name said by a stranger behind him, and he understood before he turned around that the running had ended.

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER I

Pendleton County had eighteen thousand people in it, a courthouse with a clock that ran four minutes fast, and a district attorney named Orville Mason who was up for election in November.

Mason had a face that had been ruined in childhood — a fall off a barn roof at nine, a badly set break, a nose that had never sat right since. He had spent forty years being looked at a half second too long, and he had built out of that a genuine, burning and extremely useful sympathy for anybody who had been done a wrong by somebody better-looking than they were.

He had been poor. He had put himself through a state law school at night. He had a wife, two children and eleven thousand dollars in savings, and in fourteen years of practice he had never had a case that anyone outside that county had heard of. He was forty-four years old and he had begun, that spring, to understand what his ceiling was.

On the eighth of July the coroner, Fred Heit, called him at home before seven in the morning and said they had a drowned woman at Big Bittern. He said there was a bruise along the right side of her face that he did not much like the look of. He said the man who had been in the boat with her had not come up, had not been found, and had not been reported missing by anybody.

Mason was in his car in twenty minutes.

CHAPTER II

By nightfall they had the register from the inn with Clifford Golden and wife in it, and a desk clerk at Grass Lake who

remembered the same young couple under a different name on the previous night, and a hat with a Lycurgus store label in it, and a bag nobody had come back for.

They had three guides who had seen a young man come out of the woods on the west road with a bag in his hand, walking easy. They had a boat found upside down against the timber at the south end with a straw hat floating near it.

The recovery took two days and the county paid for it out of a fund that had eleven hundred dollars in it.

They dragged from a flat-bottomed boat with grapples on a hundred feet of line, working a grid off the south end where the boat had been found, and they had eleven volunteers from Bridgeburg and two guides who knew the timber. They brought her up on the second afternoon in twenty-two feet of water, about sixty yards from where the boat had gone over, and Heit had them stop and clear the shore of the four or five people who had come out to watch before they brought her in.

He did that on his own initiative and nobody had asked him to, and it is the reason there are no photographs of Roberta Alden being taken out of that lake, and Fred Heit was a coroner in a rural county for twenty-six years and that was the single most decent act in this entire record.

She had a bruise along the right side of her face and one on the back of the right hand. Her shoes were on. Her hair was down. There was a boat cushion floating a hundred yards north and eleven lilies scattered over about an acre of open water, and the guides took the cushion in and left the lilies.

By the following afternoon they had her name, because Titus Alden had reported his daughter missing when she did not call on Sunday, and had driven ninety miles to identify her, and had gone down on the floor of Heit's office when they pulled back the

sheet.

He said one word when he went down, and it was her name, and Heit and a deputy got him into a chair and Heit sat with him for forty minutes and did not ask him anything at all. When he could speak, the first question he asked was whether she had been alone up there, and Heit said no, sir, she had not.

Titus Alden said: was it that fellow from the factory.

Nobody in that room had said one word to him about anybody from any factory. That is how Orville Mason got the Lycurgus end of the case, twelve hours before the Lycurgus end of the case existed: from a farmer sitting in a chair in a coroner's office, who had never met Clyde Griffiths and had never been told his name, and who knew his own daughter.

And they had her phone.

CHAPTER III

Mason read the messages in his office with the door shut and did not come out for two hours.

They were not, strictly speaking, evidence of a crime. They were a young woman falling in love, and being frightened, and being pregnant, and being handled — four months of it, in order, read from the bottom up.

They read like a hand slowly letting go of another hand. In February she was writing about a dress. In March she was writing please just answer me. In June she was writing from her mother's kitchen that she had told everybody she was engaged and that she would keep out of his way at the plant afterward if that was what he wanted, she would even quit, she just needed a date.

The last one had been sent on the third of July. It said that she had her bag packed and that she was not going to be any trouble to him.

Mason put the phone face down on his desk and sat there with his hand over his mouth.

He had his case. He had his election. And he had, along with both of those, something that in a better system would have disqualified him from the room: he had a grief that felt like his own, and a certainty that arrived before the evidence did and was never afterward revisited.

CHAPTER IV

The Lycurgus end broke inside a day.

Clyde had signed a false name at two inns and had bought a bus ticket to Camden with his own card, because he had never in his life had cause to think about that. He had told six people at the plant he was going up to the lakes. The women on the fifth floor gave four separate statements in one afternoon and every one of them mentioned Roberta Alden by name without being asked.

By Thursday Mason had the family connection, and the Griffiths name went out on the wire, and by Friday there were reporters from three cities in the lobby of the Bridgeburg hotel.

Mason drove up to Twelfth Lake himself with two deputies rather than sending anybody, and he took the arrest personally on a lawn strung with paper lanterns in the middle of a party, and there were photographs of it in six papers.

The photographs of that arrest were worth more to him than any of the evidence he gathered.

CHAPTER V

Clyde said, at first, that he had not been there.

He said it four times in the first twenty minutes, in a boathouse with the music still going outside. Then he said that he had been there but that it was an accident. Then he said that he had swum to shore and had been afraid and had not told anybody. Then he stopped talking, three hours too late, and was driven to Bridgeburg and booked into the county jail with a coat over his head for the photographers.

The arrest itself took four minutes and was witnessed by about sixty people, most of them in evening clothes.

Sondra Finchley was standing eleven feet away. She said his name once, as a question. Nobody had told her anything — the deputies had come up the lawn and asked for Clyde Griffiths and that was the first she knew of any of it — and she said his name, and he turned around and looked at her, and that was the last time in his life that Clyde Griffiths saw her.

Bertine Cranston took her inside. Grant Cranston asked whether this was really necessary in front of everybody, and was told that it was.

A photographer from a Camden paper had followed the deputies up from town on a tip and took eleven pictures in the driveway, and one of those pictures ran on four front pages the next morning: a young man in a summer jacket with his hands behind him and paper lanterns strung out of focus behind his head. It is the picture that ran again in October, and again after the verdict, and again on the morning after the execution three years later.

Mason questioned him in the car, on the road, at eleven at night, with no lawyer and no recording and one deputy in the front seat taking notes.

He was not rough about it. He did not have to be. He had a frightened twenty-two-year-old in the back of a car in the dark, ninety miles from anybody who knew him, and he had four months of that girl's messages in his coat pocket, and he simply asked questions for two hours and let the young man talk himself into a hole and then helped him dig.

At one point he read one of the messages aloud in the car. Just one. The one from the third of July.

Clyde put his head against the window and said, oh God, and Mason said nothing at all for about a mile, which was the single most effective thing done by any lawyer in that entire case.

None of that questioning was ever heard by a jury. Belknap moved to suppress all of it before trial and won — a clean, textbook suppression ruling, the kind that makes a young defense lawyer believe the system works.

And it made no difference at all, because Clyde repeated every single word of it to two deputies in a hallway an hour after being booked, unasked, because he could not stand the silence. That statement came in. They always come in.

CHAPTER VI

The Griffiths family met about it in Samuel's office in Lycurgus with the door shut and the blinds down.

Gilbert wanted no part of it and said so in the first minute: the name was on four thousand shipments a month and on the front of a building that three hundred and forty people came to

every morning. He said the boy was not their responsibility, had never been their responsibility, and had lied his way through the door in the first place.

Samuel sat and listened to his son and thought about a brother he had not spoken to in twenty years, and about a young man in a hotel lobby in Chicago with his own father's chin on him, and about a sentence he had said across a white tablecloth without thinking about it.

He said they would pay for a defense and nothing else. A competent local firm, an honest accounting at the end, and no public statement, no interviews, and no member of that family in that courtroom on any day of the trial.

That was the whole of the assistance Clyde Griffiths received from the wealthy branch of his family. It came to about forty thousand dollars, and it was more than nine out of ten defendants in that county had ever gotten, and it is worth stopping on that sentence for a moment.

CHAPTER VII

The lawyers were Alvin Belknap and Reuben Jephson.

Belknap was sixty, silver, gracious, twice the Democratic candidate against Mason and twice beaten by him, and he knew that county the way you know a house you grew up in. He was a jury lawyer of the old school and he genuinely liked people, which was his great strength and, in that case, of no use whatsoever.

Jephson was thirty-four, tall, bony, unmarried, cold as a well handle, and had the best legal mind in four counties. He did not much care whether Clyde was a good person. He cared what

could be proved and what a jury would do with it, and those were, to him, two entirely separate engineering problems.

They came to the jail on the third day and asked what happened, and Clyde told them the account he had been telling since the boathouse — the accident, the boat, the camera, the panic, the swim, the fear.

Jephson listened all the way through it without writing down one word.

Then he said: now tell it again. And this time don't leave out the part where you planned it.

CHAPTER VIII

It took two days to get it out of him.

He gave it up in pieces, in a stone room with a table, with Belknap looking at the floor and Jephson asking short questions in the same flat voice he used for everything.

Yes, he had thought about it for weeks. Yes, he had read the article about the couple in the Ozarks and had gone back to it. Yes, he had looked up the depth of that lake and how long a search runs. Yes, he had chosen Big Bittern out of four lakes because there was no road on the far shore. Yes, he had signed a false name. Yes, he had bought the bag in another town.

And then — and here he began to cry and did not stop for twenty minutes — no. That in the cove, with the oars up and the whole lake empty, he had looked at her face and had known that he could not do it. That he had gone numb and had not been able to move or speak. That she had stood and come toward him, frightened, and that the camera in his hands had struck her, and he had not meant it to, and the boat had gone over.

And that she had called his name in the water, and he had been ten feet away, and he had not gone to her.

Belknap said, out in the corridor afterward: that's a defense to murder in the first degree, if a jury believes it.

Jephson said: no jury on this earth is going to believe a man who tells them he planned it for three weeks and then didn't do it. Nobody has believed that in the entire history of courtrooms. They will hear the first half and stop listening.

CHAPTER IX

So they built him a lie.

The defense would be that Clyde had gone to that lake intending to tell Roberta the truth about Sondra and let her decide what she wanted to do — that he had experienced, in the boat, a change of heart — and that he had risen to say so with the camera in his hand and had struck her entirely by accident, and that the drowning that followed was a drowning.

They rehearsed him in a cell for two months. Jephson wrote the questions and Clyde learned the answers and then learned to give the answers as though he had not learned them, which he never entirely managed.

And if there is one thing in this whole record that ought to be nailed to the door of every courthouse in this country, it is this: the only wholly fabricated testimony in that trial was told by the defense. It was told because two competent lawyers concluded — correctly — that the truth was not survivable in that room. The truth was manslaughter. The truth was a boy who planned a killing, failed to commit it, and let a woman drown out of cowardice. In a system that could hear that, it is twenty years.

Their client went to his death maintaining a story his own lawyers wrote for him, and the jury convicted him of murder in part because that story did not sound like something a person would say.

It is worth watching them do it, because it was not done in bad faith and that is the point.

Belknap held out for the truth for about four days. He argued it in their own office with the door shut: that a jury will forgive almost anything if a man simply tells them what happened, that the freezing in the boat was the most human thing in the case, and that if Clyde stood up there and said I planned it for three weeks and then I could not do it and I let her drown, twelve men might come back with manslaughter and that boy would be out at forty-three.

Jephson said that was a beautiful theory and that he had watched Orville Mason try eleven cases in that courthouse.

He said: the second he says I planned it, the trial is over. Mason will stand up and say ladies and gentlemen, the defendant has confessed, and every word after that is a man explaining why his confession doesn't count. And they will convict him in an hour instead of five.

And here is the thing: Jephson was almost certainly right. That is the part that should keep people up at night. Both of those men were competent, and the competent read of that room was that the truth could not be told in it.

So they built the change of heart, and they rehearsed it, and Clyde — who had been rehearsing versions of himself since he was sixteen years old in a hotel lobby, who had told a version of Kansas City with a hotel in it and no mission to everybody he ever met — took to the coaching the way he had taken to everything else.

And when he got on that stand he sounded exactly like what he was: a young man reciting a version of himself. It was the only thing he had ever been good at, and it killed him.

There is a note in the firm's file, in Belknap's hand, dated three days before the verdict. It says: I do not think he is a murderer. I think he is a coward and I think we have made him a liar. God forgive us both.

That file went to a county historical society when the firm closed, and nobody has ever written about it.

CHAPTER X

The grand jury sat in August and returned an indictment in ninety minutes.

Mason presented four witnesses and the phone. He did not present the defense, because there is no defense at a grand jury; there is no cross-examination, no judge presiding in any active sense, and no lawyer in the room for the accused. Twenty-three citizens of that county heard the state's account of Roberta Alden's death, unopposed, over the better part of one morning, and voted.

Belknap was not notified until it was done. That is not a defect in the system. That is the system, and it works that way in every county in this country, and it is why the old line about indicting a sandwich has survived as long as it has.

The indictment charged murder in the first degree. There were no lesser counts in it. Mason had made that decision alone, in his office, in about the time it takes to sign a name.

CHAPTER XI

The trial began in the second week of October.

There were people standing three deep along the back wall and down both side aisles, and a line outside the courthouse doors from six in the morning, and press from three states in the two rows behind the rail. It was the largest thing that had ever happened in that county and everybody there understood it as such, and there is no way to keep that fact out of a jury box.

A poor farm girl was dead, and the man who did it was named Griffiths, and that is a story that will sell in any decade of the American century.

Judge Frederick Oberwaltzer, who was sixty-one and had presided over that court for nineteen years and had never had a capital case, seated a jury in a day and a half.

Eleven of the twelve were farmers, clerks or storekeepers. Nine were fathers of daughters. Every one of them said under oath that he could set aside what he had read and decide the case on the evidence, and every one of them in that entire county had already read Roberta Alden's last message printed in a newspaper.

Belknap used all twenty of his challenges and asked for a change of venue three times. It was denied three times, and that denial was raised on appeal and disposed of in four lines.

The voir dire is worth setting out, because it is where capital cases are actually decided and almost nobody watches it.

The clerk reached into a square box on his table, drew out a slip, and read a name. The first man called was Simeon Dinsmore — small, hunched, in a brown suit, with hands like claws and a narrow face — and he came up and took his seat in the box, and Mason walked over to him.

Mason asked his age. His business. Whether he was married and how many children he had.

And then he asked him whether he believed in capital punishment.

Dinsmore answered immediately and with emphasis. He said he most certainly did — for some people.

Mason smiled slightly. Jephson turned and looked at Belknap, and Belknap said something under his breath, and Simeon Dinsmore was seated.

That question was put to every man who came out of that box, one after another, all day and into the next morning, by the prosecutor, in open court, in front of the panel waiting behind him.

It is the most quietly devastating thing in that trial and almost nobody in the room noticed it. A man is asked, in public, in front of his neighbors, before he has heard one word of evidence, whether he believes in killing people. He answers out loud. Then he judges.

What that does to a jury box is not a mystery and was not a mystery then. The men who cannot say yes do not sit. The men who sit have said yes. And Simeon Dinsmore, hunched and eager in his brown suit, gave the answer that the whole apparatus is built to find, and gave it before he had been told a single fact about Clyde Griffiths — for some people.

The rhythm of the rest of it went like this, for a day and a half. Mason would finish with a man and say, in a voice that reached the back wall, acceptable to the People. And Jephson, without turning around, would say quietly to Belknap that there was nothing in him for them — that the man was as set as a bone. And Belknap, courteous and bland, would rise and challenge for cause, and would usually be sustained.

Twelve men were seated by the afternoon of the second day. The clerk announced a recess in a thin, rasping, aged voice, and Jephson turned to Clyde and told him cheerfully that that was the first round and there had not been much to it.

Then Kraut and Sissel and the extra deputies closed in around him and took him out through the crowd, and the crowd said there he is, there he is, here he comes, the way it would say it every day for three weeks.

CHAPTER XII

Mason's opening took one hour and eight minutes and did not once use the words death penalty, because it did not have to.

He told them about a girl from a farm outside Biltz who was the oldest of four and went to the city to help her family, and who was seduced by the man who supervised her work, and who, when she was carrying his child, was taken to a lake with no houses on it by a man traveling under a false name.

He told them what the state would prove: the article, the searches, the maps, the two false names, the bag bought in another town, the tripod under a log, the bruise on her face, and the ten feet of calm water.

He said: he will get up on that stand and tell you it was an accident. He will tell you he had a change of heart out there in that boat. When he does, ask yourselves one thing. Ask yourselves what kind of accident buys the bus ticket first.

He sat down. Belknap reserved his opening, which was correct practice and cost the defense the entire first eleven days of the jury's attention.

The town filled up.

The Bridgeburg hotel had eleven rooms and turned away forty people a night for three weeks. Two families on Court Street rented out beds. A man drove a lunch wagon up from Winnsboro every morning and parked it across from the courthouse and did better business in October than he had done all summer.

There were women who came every day and brought their knitting. There were men who took vacation from the mill to sit in that gallery. On the fourth day the sheriff started issuing numbered slips at seven in the morning because there had been shoving at the doors.

A national wire picked it up in the second week and after that there were nine reporters instead of four, and one of them wrote a piece about the courthouse itself, and the clock that ran four minutes fast, and the smell of wet wool in the gallery, and that piece is the reason we know what the room was like.

The papers ran a photograph of Clyde every single day. They also ran, twice, a photograph of Roberta Alden from her high school graduation — the only picture of her that existed in any quantity — and it was cropped the same way both times, and by the second week of that trial there was not a person in three counties who could not have described her face.

And the death penalty was in every story from the first day. Not as a question. As an expectation. One headline in the second week was four words long: WILL HE GET IT?

Judge Oberwaltzer instructed the jury each afternoon not to read the newspapers. They were not sequestered. They went home each night to houses in a county where the lunch wagon man was selling sandwiches out of a window with a hand-lettered sign on it about the trial.

CHAPTER XIII

The state's case ran eleven days and a hundred and twenty-seven witnesses, and it was in truth a mountain built out of pebbles.

The innkeeper at Big Bittern, who identified Clyde and identified his handwriting in the register. The clerk at Grass Lake with the second false name. The man on the dock who rented them the boat and told them to watch for deadheads. Three guides. Two fishermen who had heard nothing.

The pathologist, who testified to a contusion on the right zygomatic arch consistent with a blow from a rigid object and also, under a careful cross-examination by Jephson, consistent with striking the gunwale of an overturning boat. This was the single best hour the defense had in the entire trial and it lasted an hour.

The clerk at the bus station. The tailor who was owed two hundred dollars, called for no reason except to establish that the defendant lived beyond his means, and permitted over objection.

The man who had sold him the bag in Winnsboro, who remembered him because he had paid cash and had asked whether the store had cameras.

Mrs. Gilpin, the landlady from Elm Street, who testified that the young man in the photograph had come to the side porch after dark upwards of thirty times, and who cried on the stand, and who said, when Mason asked her what kind of girl Roberta Alden had been, that she was the cleanest, quietest, most decent girl who had ever had that room, and that she had paid her rent on the first of the month for eleven months.

Grace Marr, who had come with Roberta from Biltz, who testified that in April Roberta had told her she was going to be married in the summer and had asked her not to tell anybody yet.

The women from the fifth floor, one after another after another — Ruza Nikoforitch, who said she had seen Mr. Griffiths stop at Roberta's press eleven times in one week and time it so nobody was looking; Martha Bordaloue; Lena Schlict; Mrs. Braley, who had trained Roberta and who said she had been the best hand on that floor inside three months.

Each of them saying, in her own words, what every woman on that floor had known and none of them had said out loud, and none of them saying it with any pleasure. Two of them looked at Clyde as they left the stand. The rest did not.

And then, on the ninth day, Titus Alden — called for four minutes, to identify a photograph of his daughter and to say when he had last seen her alive. Mason asked him nothing else. He did not have to ask him anything else. Jephson, who was as good a lawyer as that county had produced in thirty years, stood up and said no questions, and sat down, which was the correct decision and cost them nothing and looked, from the gallery, exactly like a man declining to look a father in the face.

CHAPTER XIV

Then the phones.

Roberta's messages and voicemails, and Clyde's, pulled off both handsets and printed and marked as exhibits and passed to the jury in binders. The tower records that put his phone within three miles of Big Bittern at 3:47 in the afternoon and eleven

miles south of it at 7:02 that evening — which meant, as Mason pointed out without raising his voice, that a man who had just watched the woman he loved drown had covered eleven miles in the wrong direction before dark.

And then the search history.

Before he got to it, though, he put in the order.

It was three lines on a card statement: a website, a date in early March, and a hundred and ninety dollars. Mason had a witness from the payment processor establish what the site sold, and then he read the date out and set it beside two other dates — the day Roberta Alden first told the defendant she was late, and the day the defendant told her he would handle it.

Twenty-six days between the second and the third.

He did not editorialize. He let a jury of nine fathers do the arithmetic on how long a frightened young woman had waited on a porch in Lycurgus for a man to spend a hundred and ninety dollars.

Then he established, through the same records, that the pills had not worked, and that after they did not work the defendant made no purchase, no appointment, no call and no drive of any kind on her behalf, ever again — and that eleven weeks later he bought a bus ticket north and a bag in Winnsboro.

Belknap objected that the whole line was inflammatory and had nothing to do with the cause of death. Mason said it went to motive, and Judge Oberwaltzer agreed with him, and it did.

Mason read the search history into the record himself, in his own voice, slowly, one line at a time, with the dates.

How deep is Big Bittern lake. How long do they search for a drowning victim. Cell service Big Bittern. Santee backwater no road access. Couple drowns Ozarks body not recovered — that one four separate times over nine days.

He read for six minutes. The courtroom got very quiet. A juror named Simmons who ran a feed store in Winnsboro looked at Clyde for a long moment during the fourth entry and then did not look at him again for the remainder of the trial, and Belknap saw it happen and wrote a note to Jephson that said we lost Simmons.

Jephson fought the search history for two days before trial and lost, and then fought it again in front of the jury, and this was the one place where the defense had genuine ground under it.

He put up the state's own forensic examiner and made him concede, item by item, that a search does not carry a date of decision; that a man may look up a thing in horror as easily as in planning; that the article about the Ozarks had been shared to the defendant's phone by an aggregator and not sought out on the first occasion; that there was no note, no diary, no message to any person on earth in which Clyde Griffiths ever said he intended to harm Roberta Alden — not one word, in four months of messages, across two devices, and the state had all of both.

It was true and it was well done and the jury did not care. Mason stood up on redirect and asked the examiner one question: in your professional experience, sir, do men who plan these things generally write it down?

Objection. Sustained. Stricken. Every person in that room had heard it.

There was also the hat.

The state's theory required that the blow come from the camera. The defense pointed out that the camera was never found — it had gone down with the boat and had not been recovered in eleven days of dragging — and that the pathologist had allowed the gunwale as consistent. For one afternoon

Jephson made the entire case turn on an object nobody in that courtroom had ever seen.

Then Mason called a guide named Sim Shoop who had been on the lake that week, and asked him what a man does when a boat goes over on Big Bittern, and Shoop said, well, he holds onto it. He said that boat floated bottom-up for three days and that any man in the water grabs the boat, that's just what a body does, you don't even decide to.

And Mason said: he never touched it, did he. And Shoop said no sir, not by the look of it.

CHAPTER XV

On the sixth day Mason called Grace Alden, the mother, to identify her daughter's phone and her daughter's voice on three voicemails.

She was on the stand nine minutes. Then Mason sat down at the rail with the printed exhibit in his hands and read the messages aloud, all of them, in order, in a flat voice, for forty minutes.

He did not perform them. That was the thing about it. He read them the way you read a list, and Roberta Alden did all the work herself, from February to July, from a dress her mother was making over to a bag packed by the door.

They went, in order, like this.

In February there was a girl making plans. There was a message about a coat she had seen on sale and decided against. There was one that said only that she had thought about him all day at work and had nearly ruined a run of collars.

In March the tone changes and it changes gradually, which is the unbearable part. She begins asking whether he is angry with her. She begins apologizing — for calling twice, for asking, for being upset on the phone, for what she calls being such a burden to you lately. Four separate messages in March begin with the words I'm sorry.

In April she is frightened and trying not to say so. She writes that she has been to see the doctor on the Winnsboro road and that he would not help her, and that she does not know what else to do, and that she does not want him to think she is trying to trap him. She uses that word herself. Trap. She apologizes for it in the next message.

In May she stops apologizing.

In June she is at her mother's in Biltz. She writes that she has told them she is engaged and that her mother has started on a dress and that she is sick about the lie. She writes that she will quit the plant afterward, that she will move to another town if he likes, that he need not see her family, that she will not ask him for anything ever again as long as she lives, and that all she wants is a date.

And then the last one, the third of July.

She wrote that she had her bag packed and that it was sitting by the door. She wrote that she was not going to be any trouble to him. She wrote that she knew he did not feel about her the way he had in the fall and that she was not going to hold that against him, and that she thought they could still make a decent life if they were kind to each other. She wrote that she had been out that morning to the back field to see her father's cows one more time and had cried, which was silly.

The last line of the last message that Roberta Alden ever sent to anybody was: I am so tired, Clyde, and I will be so glad to see

you.

Mason read that line and set the paper down on the rail and did not say anything for perhaps eight seconds, and then said, thank you, Your Honor, and went and sat down.

Jephson wrote one word on his pad and Belknap read it and nodded. The word was nothing. There was nothing to do with that. There is no cross-examination of a dead girl's telephone.

Two women on the jury cried. Titus Alden, who had come every single day in the same jacket and sat in the same place, put both hands over his face at about the twenty-minute mark and left them there.

Belknap objected eleven times on the grounds that the messages were cumulative, inflammatory and substantially more prejudicial than probative, and was overruled eleven times. On appeal that ruling would be the single strongest issue in the case, and would be affirmed in nine lines: the messages went to the defendant's motive and to the decedent's state of mind, and their admission was within the sound discretion of the trial court.

Nine lines.

CHAPTER XVI

The defense opened on the fifteenth day.

Belknap spoke for fifty minutes about a boy raised on a street corner by people who loved God and had nothing, a boy who had never been given one true thing in his life, who had been shown a world and told to want it and given no honest road into it. It was a good speech, and it was the true one — the only account given in that courtroom of how a boy gets from a street corner to

a lake — and it had almost nothing to do with the testimony that followed it.

Then Jephson put Clyde on the stand, which they had known since the first week they would have to do, because in a county like that one a defendant who does not testify has confessed in the only language the room understands.

CHAPTER XVII

He was on direct for a day and a half.

Jephson took him back to Kansas City, to the mission and the corner and the cord, and then to the hotel and to Lycurgus and the basement and the fifth floor. He had Clyde say that he had loved Roberta. He had him admit the rule he had broken to be with her. He had him admit Sondra, and the two futures, and the fact — yes — that he had thought about the lake. Jephson brought that out himself, on direct, deliberately, because Mason had it and there was nothing else to be done with it.

And then he brought him to the cove, and Clyde said the thing he had been taught: that he had looked at her and known he could not do it, and had stood up to tell her everything, and that the camera had been in his hand, and that she had risen and come toward him and it had struck her, and the boat had gone over.

Jephson took him through it three times.

He was not bad. He was not good either. But he was a thin young man of twenty-three in a cheap suit saying I couldn't do it, in a voice that kept failing on the same words, and for about six hours on the sixteenth day there was something in that courtroom that was not certainty.

Two jurors, afterward, said it was the closest they came.

The trouble was the rehearsal, and it showed in exactly the way Jephson had feared it would.

There were four or five places where Clyde produced a phrase that was plainly not his — where a boy who said mad and awful and I don't know, sir, forty times an hour would suddenly say that he had experienced a change of heart, or that he had been seized by a realization of the wrong he had contemplated. The phrases sat up out of the testimony like nail heads.

And there was the day and a half of it. A jury will forgive a defendant almost anything except sounding prepared, and by the second afternoon eleven people in that box had privately concluded that this young man had been told what to say — which was correct, and which was the fault of two lawyers and a system, and for which he was about to be killed.

Jephson also made him do the thing that had to be done and could not be survived: he made him account for Sondra. He brought it out himself, gently, on direct, because Mason had four hundred messages and would otherwise have done it with a hammer.

And so Clyde Griffiths sat in a witness chair in a country courthouse and explained, to nine fathers of daughters, that at the same time as he was letting a pregnant woman wait on a side porch on Elm Street he had been in love with the daughter of the richest man in the county, and that he had believed, sincerely, that she was going to marry him.

Belknap watched the box while it happened. He wrote nothing down. There was nothing to write.

CHAPTER XVIII

Then Mason got up, and the six hours ended.

He did not begin immediately. He stood at his table and squared a stack of paper that did not need squaring, and let the room settle, and let the young man in the witness chair sit there being looked at by two hundred people for about fifteen seconds.

Belknap, at the defense table, put down his pen.

CHAPTER XIX

The cross-examination ran two days and it is still taught.

He did not raise his voice for the first hour. He went through it in order, quietly, almost gently, like a man doing arithmetic in front of a class. The article. The searches. The maps. The bus ticket. The bag bought in Winnsboro. The false name at Grass Lake. The second false name at Big Bittern. The tripod.

And after each one he asked the same question in the same mild tone: and that was part of your change of heart?

He asked it nineteen times over two days. By the tenth the whole courtroom was waiting for it and Clyde had begun to flinch before it arrived.

He asked why a man in the act of confessing his sins to the woman he loved was holding a camera. He asked why, if the striking was an accident, the tripod was under a log two hundred yards from the water. He asked why a man who had just lost her in the water had walked out through the woods to a road instead of shouting toward the inn, which was four hundred yards across open water and had eleven people in it.

He went after the change of heart itself for the whole of the second morning, and he did it with dates.

He established that Clyde had told the jury the change of heart came upon him in the boat, in the cove, at about four in the afternoon on the eighth of July. Then he walked backward from that hour.

You bought the bag on the second. Change of heart hadn't happened yet.

You signed Clifford Golden at Grass Lake on the seventh. Hadn't happened yet.

You signed a second false name at Big Bittern at noon on the eighth — four hours before. Hadn't happened yet.

You left her hat and her coat at that desk. You told the man you were coming back for dinner. Four hours before.

And then, at four in the afternoon, in a cove eleven miles from a road, with no living soul within two miles of you — that's when your heart changed.

Clyde said yes.

Mason said: your heart changed in the only four seconds of that entire week when there was nobody on earth who could see it.

Objection. Sustained. It stayed where it landed.

He also took the swim. He made Clyde say the distance again — a half mile, to the west shore, in July water. He made him say that he had gotten out, and stripped, and changed into dry clothes he had packed, and buried the tripod, and hidden the wet clothes under leaves, and combed his hair, and walked out to a road, and gotten into a stranger's truck, and made conversation about the weather.

Then he asked: at which point in that afternoon, Mr. Griffiths, did you begin to look for a telephone?

And there was no answer to that, and Clyde gave several.

And then he asked the only question in the case, six times, in six different ways, over about forty minutes.

You were ten feet from her. The water was calm. You could swim — you swam a half mile to that shore, you told this jury so yesterday. She could not swim. She called your name. Why didn't you go to her?

And Clyde said, each time, in a smaller voice, that he had been afraid. That his mind had gone blank. That he could not explain it. That he had not been himself.

Mason let the last answer sit for a five count, looking at him.

Then he said: no. You couldn't.

And he walked back to his table and said, no further questions, and sat down.

CHAPTER XX

The summations took a full day.

Belknap talked for two hours about circumstance and reasonable doubt and about a boy who had never been given a chance, and he was good, and everybody in the room was polite to him, and it was over before he stood up and he knew it.

He made three arguments and each of them was correct.

The first was that the state had proved preparation and had not proved the act — that every pebble in Mason's mountain came from before the cove and none of it came from inside it, and that what happened in that boat was known to exactly two people, one of whom was dead and one of whom had told them under oath.

The second was the camera: that a man who has planned a killing for three weeks does not carry a camera into it, and that

the state had never explained the camera and had substituted for an explanation a guide's opinion about what a body does in the water.

The third was the one that mattered and that no jury has ever accepted. He said: you may despise this young man. You are entitled to. He behaved toward that girl in a way that every father in this box would horsewhip a man for. But the crime of being a contemptible young man is not the crime charged in this indictment, and the State of this county has spent eleven days proving the first one to you and hoping you would not notice that it had not proved the second.

He sat down at ten minutes past eleven. Three jurors were looking at the clock.

Mason talked for two hours and forty minutes.

He walked the jury back through the eleven days pebble by pebble, and he did it in chronological order, which is the oldest trick there is and works every time, because a chronology sounds like a story and a story sounds like the truth.

He said the word premeditation forty times. He said the phrase this defendant instead of the young man's name for two hours and forty minutes and never once slipped.

He said that they had been asked to believe that every single act of preparation in this case was real — the article, the searches, the maps, the bag, the tickets, the names — and that only the intention behind all of it was false. He said: that is not a defense, gentlemen. That is an arrangement. That is a story built backward from a body.

He took the change of heart apart one more time, and this time he did it with the hat and coat left at that desk.

He said: a young woman leaves her hat and her coat at a hotel desk because she has been told they are coming back for dinner.

That hat sat on that desk while she was in the water. That hat sat on that desk while he was in the woods changing his clothes. That hat sat on that desk all night, and it was still sitting there on the ninth of July when he was at a party a hundred miles from here in a bathing suit.

And then he did the thing that no appellate court ever disturbed and that would not be permitted in a great many courtrooms today.

He picked up the autopsy photograph, and he did not show it to them, because they had already seen it. He held it face down.

He said: I have been asked by learned counsel to remember that this defendant had a hard childhood. I do remember it. I am not without pity for it. But there was another child in this case, gentlemen, and she was on a farm in Biltz, and she was the oldest of four, and she went to the city to help her father hold onto his land, and nobody has stood up in this courtroom for two weeks and asked you to consider what her childhood was like.

Belknap objected. Overruled.

Mason said: she is the one who cannot be here.

And then he finished by walking to the exhibit table and picking up Roberta Alden's phone — not the printout, the phone itself, in an evidence bag — and holding it up, and not reading from it.

He said: everything the State of this county has to say to you is in here, and it was said by the only person in this case who told the truth from the beginning to the end of it, and she is not here to say it again.

He put it down and sat.

CHAPTER XXI

The judge charged the jury for fifty minutes on premeditation and deliberation and on the lesser included offenses, and the jury went out at 1:40 in the afternoon.

They took a ballot at the start and it was eleven to one.

The one was Samuel Kittredge, a druggist, who was politically opposed to Mason and had been taken with Jephson's personality from the first week, and who said he had doubts about whether the state had ever really completed its proof.

They went at him for five ballots.

He held through the first three. He said he wanted to think about the camera — about whether a man who meant to do it would have carried a camera into that cove rather than doing it with his hands, and about whether Mason had ever answered Jephson on that point.

They talked about the camera for hours. Three of them got angry. The foreman read the search history out loud twice, and the second time he read only the dates.

And then it stopped being an argument about evidence, which is what happens in juries and what almost never appears in a transcript.

They began on Kittredge himself. Somebody said that everybody in that county knew where he stood on Orville Mason and that this was not the place for it. Somebody said that a man who hung this jury would have his name in every paper in the district by Monday morning, and would have it over his store, and would have to stand behind that counter afterward and sell aspirin to the people in this room.

That was the fifth ballot.

It is worth recording what that jury never discussed, in five hours and twenty minutes, in a capital case.

They did not discuss manslaughter, which the judge had charged them on and which fit the evidence better than what they returned. They did not seriously discuss murder in the second degree. They did not discuss the fact that the sentence was mandatory on the verdict they were considering, because they were correctly instructed that punishment was not their concern — and because every man in that room knew exactly what it was.

Kittredge asked, at about six o'clock, whether they were permitted to recommend mercy. The foreman said he didn't believe so and sent a note out. The answer came back from Judge Oberwaltzer in eleven words: the jury is not to concern itself with the question of punishment.

Kittredge read it twice and set it on the table.

At 6:40 he said that he could not get past the ten feet of water, and that a man who would tread water and watch her go down was a man who had decided, and that whether he had decided in April or in that second no longer signified to him.

Whether that was Samuel Kittredge's conclusion or the thing he said in order to be allowed to go home to a town where he had to keep a business open is not recoverable, and he never told anybody, and both are probably true.

At 6:40 Kittredge said that he could not get past the ten feet of water, and that a man who would stand in a lake and watch her go down was a man who had decided, and that whether he decided in April or in that second did not signify to him any longer.

They came back at 7:04 in the evening.

Guilty of murder in the first degree.

Clyde stood when they read it and did not appear to have heard it. The court had to ask him to sit down twice.

CHAPTER XXII

Sentencing was the following Friday.

Judge Oberwaltzer asked whether the defendant had anything to say, and Clyde stood up in the same suit and said, into a silent room, that he was innocent of taking her life. He said it in a voice that nobody in that courtroom recognized — thin, and much younger than twenty-three, and it broke on the second word.

Then Oberwaltzer read the sentence the statute required him to impose.

It took under a minute. He set the date, as the statute also required, and he said the words about the mercy of God, and he did not look up while he said them.

It is worth stopping on the phrase the statute required.

Judge Frederick Oberwaltzer had been on that bench nineteen years. He had a granddaughter Roberta Alden's age. He had presided over that trial with real care — he had made three rulings for the defense that a lazier judge would not have made, and he had kept Mason inside the lines twice.

And on the verdict that jury returned, he had no discretion of any kind. Not to weigh the defendant's age. Not to weigh his childhood, which Belknap had spent fifty minutes describing. Not to weigh the fact that no court would ever hear the claim about his lawyers. Not to weigh the freezing in the boat, if he believed any part of it, and he may have.

Twelve men said the word and the sentence attached itself automatically, and a judge with nineteen years on the bench functioned, for the ninety seconds that mattered most in that

courtroom, as a device for reading a form out loud.

He retired four years later. In an oral history recorded by a county bar association in his last year, he was asked to name the most difficult day of his career, and he named that Friday, and the interviewer, who had a list of questions to get through, moved on to the next one.

Somebody in the gallery said thank God out loud.

Clyde was twenty-three years old. He was taken out through the side door in a chain, and forty people were waiting in the alley to see it, and one of them had brought a child.

Elvira Griffiths was in the third row that day. She had come from Denver on money she had raised in a church basement, and she had sat through the last nine days of that trial in the same coat, and she was the only member of the Griffiths family in the building.

She stood when the sentence was read. Nobody asked her to and nobody stopped her. She simply stood up in the third row with her hands at her sides and stayed standing while it was read, and did not make a sound, and then sat down when it was finished.

A photographer got a picture of her on the courthouse steps afterward with her purse held in front of her, and it ran in eleven papers with a caption about the mother of the condemned man, and one of those papers is the reason we have a photograph of Elvira Griffiths at all.

Titus Alden went out the front. A reporter asked him whether he was satisfied.

He stopped and looked at the man for a while, and then he said: satisfied. And he said it not as a question and not as an answer, and then he got into his brother's truck and went back to Biltz, where there were three other children and a farm that had

gone another year without a good season, and he lived eleven more years and never gave another interview to anybody.

Orville Mason was elected in November with sixty-eight percent of the vote. He served two terms as district attorney and one as a county judge, and in the last interview he ever gave, at seventy-nine, he was asked about the Griffiths case and he said it was the best work he ever did.

He was asked whether he had ever had any doubt, and he said no, not one, not for a minute. And then he said something else that the reporter printed at the bottom of the piece and that nobody paid much attention to.

He said: I have thought about that boy's mother, though. I've thought about her a good deal.

CHAPTER XXIII

The transport ran at four in the morning to keep it away from the cameras.

A hundred and ninety miles, most of it dark, in a van with a screen over the window and two officers who were decent to him and did not talk. He was cuffed at the waist to a belly chain and his ankles were shackled to a bolt in the floor, and he watched a state he had never seen go by in pieces: a grain elevator with a light on it, a truck stop, a river he did not know the name of, and then the sky beginning to go gray over fields.

He was processed at eight. They took his suit and gave him a receipt for it. They took his shoelaces, his belt, his watch, the small cross his mother had put in his hand at the courthouse. He was photographed, weighed, measured, examined, and assigned a number, and the number was six digits and he was told to

memorize it, and he did, within the hour, and he would answer to it faster than to his own name inside of a month.

The medical intake took forty minutes. A nurse asked him about his family history and whether he had ever been treated for anything and whether he was having thoughts of harming himself, and wrote his answers on a form. She listened to his heart for what seemed to him a long time and made a note about where it sat in his chest.

He did not know why she did that. He found out in the corridor, from a man two doors down, about six weeks later.

The dental exam was the same afternoon. They filled two cavities in that first month, competently, at state expense, and Clyde lay in a chair with a light in his face while a dentist told him to open wider, and understood partway through it that they were going to keep him in good repair for as long as it took.

That was the first time he cried in that building, and it was in a dental chair over a filling, and the dentist stopped and asked whether it hurt and Clyde said no, sir, and the dentist waited a minute and then went on.

He was given three shirts, two pairs of pants, one pair of shoes without laces, a towel, a cup, a comb, a Bible if he wanted one, and a copy of the rules. The rules ran to eleven pages. He read all eleven that first night because there was nothing else in the cell, and the only sentence in them he ever thought about again was the one that explained how a man could be moved from this housing unit to another, and there were two ways listed, and one of them was by order of a court and the other one was not described.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Capital Punishment Facility at Broad River Correctional Institution, in Columbia, is a building inside a building.

There is no window in it that shows the world. There is a corridor with cells along one side, and light that does not change from four in the afternoon to four in the morning, and at the far end of that corridor there is a steel door that everybody in the hallway thinks about all day and nobody ever looks directly at.

Behind that door is one room, and the room has two things in it. Against the far wall there is an oak chair, eighty years old, bolted to the floor, which cannot be moved and which the state has never been willing to remove. In the corner, fifteen feet from an opening in the opposite wall, there is a metal chair with restraints on it, and the wall around that opening is faced with steel plate, and the glass between the chamber and the witness room is bullet-resistant.

That is the whole architecture of it. One room, two chairs, and a hole in a wall, and every man in that corridor knew the layout by heart within a month of arriving and had never seen any of it.

There were twenty men in there when Clyde came in. He learned in a week what the corridor actually was, and it was not what he had spent two months in a county jail expecting. He had expected silence. He had expected a tomb.

It was loud. Men shouted to each other all day long from cell to cell. They played chess by calling out squares, four games running at once, arguments breaking out over whether a man had said king four or king five twenty minutes earlier. They argued about ball games and about the food and about whose lawyer was worse. There was a man three cells down who sang, badly, on purpose, at nine every night, and had been doing it for

six years.

They took Clyde in the way the bellhops had taken him in and the way the boarding house had. Somebody sent him cigarettes he didn't smoke. Somebody sent him a paperback. Somebody asked him, on the second day, in a friendly way, what he'd caught it for, and listened, and said that was rough, and went back to his chess game.

And Clyde understood — slowly, over that first month — that a man will make a society out of anything. Out of a hallway with a door at the end of it. And that this is either the finest thing about people or the very worst, and he never in two years and four months decided which.

There were rules in that corridor that no administrator had written.

You did not ask a man about his appeal unless he brought it up. You did not tell a man his lawyer was no good, even when everyone in the hallway could see it. When a man's date came down you did not say anything about it for the first day and let him decide when to speak. When a man's family stopped coming, nobody mentioned that either, and his neighbors got louder for a week to fill the space.

There was a man named Wachtel two doors down who had been there nine years and was the closest thing that hallway had to a lawyer. He read everything. He could tell you what a denial of certiorari meant and what it didn't, and he was the one who explained procedural default to Clyde, in installments, through a wall, over three afternoons — a doctrine that would eventually kill him and that no court ever explained to him at all.

There was Nicholson, who had been a lawyer on the outside and had killed a business partner and had two years left. He gave Clyde one piece of advice, through the bars, in the second month,

and it was this: burn the letters. Anything you have from anybody, burn it now, because when it is over they will go through this cell and everything in it will end up in a newspaper.

Clyde said he would. He did not.

And there was the day-in, day-out ordinariness of it, which is the part that nobody who has not been in such a building believes. Men complained about the temperature. Men had a running argument about a ball club that went on for two years. A man got a radio and everybody heard everything he listened to for eight months and complained about it and missed it when they took it back.

Twice a year the men in that hallway would put together commissary and buy a birthday for somebody, which meant a sheet cake ordered through an officer, and they would sing it down the corridor, twenty voices, badly, through steel.

Clyde turned twenty-four in that hallway and twenty-five, and both times they sang.

CHAPTER XXV

Then the first one went.

His name was Pasquale and he was four cells down and had been there two years and eleven months, and he had talked to Clyde every day for six weeks, mostly about his sister in Joliet, who wrote to him and who he was worried about because her husband was no good.

They came for him at four in the afternoon and moved him to the cell nearest the steel door, which everybody in that hallway called the front.

The corridor went quiet in a way Clyde had not known a place could go quiet. No chess. No radio. The man who sang did not sing. Somebody prayed out loud, badly, and stopped.

At six o'clock nothing happened. That is the thing. The lights do not flicker — that is a movie, that was never even true of the chair. Nothing at all happens in that hallway. There is no sound. And then, at some point in the following hour, a man in a suit walks back down the corridor and out through the far door, and does not look at anybody, and that is how they know.

And in the morning the shouting started up again, because it had to.

Clyde was in that building for two years and four months. Eleven men walked out that door in front of him. He learned all of their names and most of their cases. He learned the appellate posture of eleven strangers the way other men learn batting averages: whose direct appeal was pending, whose habeas had been denied, who had a claim and who had nothing left but the Governor.

And he learned to hear it in the corridor — how a man's last month was going, whether his people were still coming, whether he had stopped eating. He learned that the ones who talked the most in the last week were not the ones who were handling it, and that the men who had been there longest were kind to the new ones in a specific way that was almost unbearable to watch.

He understood, well before his own date was ever set, that he had been placed inside a rehearsal that ran every few months, and that his own performance was already scheduled and he would simply have to wait his turn to give it.

The eleven were not alike, and that was the education.

One of them fought it the whole way and was still filing at four in the afternoon and got a stay at 5:40 that lasted nine

months, and came back down the corridor to his own cell that night with the whole hallway shouting, and was killed the following June with almost nobody paying attention.

One of them was ready — genuinely, visibly ready — and spent his last week giving his property away and telling people not to be upset, and was the calmest man in the building on the last day, and it was harder on the corridor than any of the others.

One of them, a man named Tyree, was almost certainly innocent, and everyone in that hallway including two officers believed it, and his claim had been defaulted in state court on a filing deadline, and there was nothing after that but a Governor who did not act. When they came for Tyree the corridor did not go quiet. It went the other way. Men beat on the bars for eleven minutes and an officer stood in the middle of it and let them.

And one of them, in the second winter, asked for Clyde. They had barely spoken. He asked through an officer whether Griffiths would say something to him at four o'clock, and Clyde stood at his bars and could not think of one word, and said, finally, I'm here — which was all he had, and which the man thanked him for.

Clyde thought about that afterward more than he thought about almost anything else, because it was the first time in his life that anybody had wanted him for nothing at all, and it was in that hallway, and it was that late.

CHAPTER XXVI

His mother came.

Elvira Griffiths got on a bus in Denver, where the mission was that year, with sixty-one dollars in her purse and a

sandwich, and rode thirty-one hours, and walked up to that gate at nine in the morning and asked to see her son.

They sat across a table for two hours. It was the first time she had seen him in five years.

She did not ask him whether he had done it. That is the thing to sit with, and it took Clyde a full year to understand what it had cost her. In two hours she did not ask, and in all the visits that followed, over two years, she never once asked.

She asked whether he was warm enough. She asked what the food was. She asked whether there was anybody in there he could talk to. She asked whether he was praying, and he said yes because it was easier, and she knew it was easier and let him have it.

And then she went out and did the only thing she knew how to do, which was to stand up in front of people and ask.

She spoke in church basements and union halls and once in a high school gymnasium in six states. She told the story of her son. She said the words my boy in front of strangers, over and over, and passed a coffee can, and some of the papers wrote about her and some of what they wrote was cruel — there was a columnist in St. Louis who called her a professional mother — and she cut that one out and kept it, and kept going.

She raised eleven hundred and forty dollars in four months. She wired every cent of it to Belknap and Jephson and did not keep one dollar for the bus, and rode back on a ticket a pastor in Omaha bought her.

She came fourteen times in two years and four months. She could not afford more.

Each visit took her four days: a day and a half out, four hours with him, a day and a half back, and a night in a bus station on one end or the other. She was seventy years old. She did it

fourteen times.

And there was a thing she did that Clyde did not understand until nearly the end. In every visit, at some point in the second hour, she would ask him about somebody else in that hallway. What about the man three doors down, the one whose sister writes. What about the young one who came in in March, does his family come. And then she would write to them.

She wrote to nine men in that death house over two years. Four of them had nobody. She sent them the same short letters she sent her son and signed them the same way, and when they died she wrote to whoever had claimed them, and when nobody had claimed them she wrote it in her Bible.

Two of those men asked to meet her and were not permitted to. One of them, Wachtel, wrote back every time for a year and a half and called her Mother Griffiths, and when he was executed in the last spring she was on a bus in Kansas and did not know it for nine days.

That is who was doing the pastoral care in that building. Not the state. Not the church. A seventy-year-old woman with sixty-one dollars and a bus schedule, who had been preaching on street corners since she was nineteen and had never once been listened to by anybody with any power at all.

CHAPTER XXVII

The appeal took nineteen months.

Belknap and Jephson raised eleven issues, and they were not frivolous. The venue denial. The messages. The photographs of the body. Two jurors who had expressed opinions in voir dire and been seated anyway. The prosecutor's summation.

Sufficiency of the evidence of premeditation.

The Court of Appeals affirmed in a decision of forty-one pages.

It found that the venue ruling was within the trial court's discretion. It found that the messages went to motive and to the decedent's state of mind. It found that the interrogation in the car, though improperly taken outside the presence of counsel, had been superseded by the defendant's later voluntary statements in the hallway, which were spontaneous and not the product of interrogation. It found the photographs probative. It found the jury properly instructed. It found the evidence more than sufficient.

On the change-of-heart defense, on the one question the entire case had turned on, the court wrote a single sentence: the jury was entitled to disbelieve it.

Certiorari was denied without comment.

The post-conviction petition, filed by new counsel because Belknap and Jephson could not argue their own ineffectiveness, was dismissed as procedurally barred. The claim was that trial counsel had constructed a false defense and coached the defendant to give it — which was true, which was documented, which was arguably the strongest ineffective-assistance claim that court had seen in a decade. It was never heard on its merits, because it had not been raised in the right pleading at the right time by lawyers Clyde had not chosen and could not fire.

Federal habeas took eight months and ended in an order of six pages holding that the state court's determinations were not contrary to, nor an unreasonable application of, clearly established federal law.

That is what a capital appeal is in this country. It is almost never about whether the man did it. It is about whether the

paperwork was in order while it was being done to him.

And there is a second thing about those nineteen months that ought to be said, because it is the part no docket sheet records.

The years are the punishment.

A man in that hallway is told that his case is being reviewed by the highest court of his state, and he is twenty-four, and he believes it means something. He waits. His lawyers write to him twice a year in a language he cannot read. He learns, from a neighbor through a wall, what an affirmance is. He gets a letter saying the court has ruled and the letter is four sentences long and the last sentence is about the next filing.

He learns to hope in a way that is deliberately calibrated, because full hope will destroy him and no hope will destroy him faster. He does this for a year, and then another year, and then his mother comes and he has to be cheerful for two hours so that she can ride the bus back without weeping.

That is what those pages of legal history are, from the inside. Not argument. Waiting, in a hallway, for eleven strangers you will never see to decide whether the man who is going to kill you may go ahead.

Belknap and Jephson visited three times in two years. They were not bad men and they did not abandon him; they simply had other clients, and the case was over, and everyone in that firm knew it was over from the day the Court of Appeals came down.

Jephson came alone the last time, in the final winter, and sat for an hour, and told him the truth about the posture of the case because Clyde asked him to and because Jephson had never in his life been able to do anything else. He said there was the Governor and there was nothing after the Governor.

At the door, Clyde asked him a question he had been holding for two years. He asked whether, if they had let him tell the jury the truth — the real one, the whole thing, the weeks and the freezing and the ten feet — whether it would have gone differently.

Jephson stood in the doorway with his hat in his hand for a while.

Then he said: I don't know. And he said: I have thought about it. And then he left, and that was the last time Clyde Griffiths saw either of his lawyers.

CHAPTER XXVIII

In the second year the Reverend Duncan McMillan began to come.

He was thirty-four, from a small congregation forty miles off, and he had come to that building because he could not stay away from it. He had asked to be allowed in and been allowed in, and he came every Tuesday and every other Saturday for the better part of two years, and he came in weather that kept the lawyers away.

He was sincere in a way that Clyde had no experience of and no defense against. He wanted nothing. He was, Clyde realized somewhere around the fourth month, the first person in his entire life who wanted something from him that was not money, sex, silence, a signature, or a good appearance in front of somebody else.

He asked Clyde to make peace with God. He asked it over and over, patiently, in the way of a man who genuinely believes it is a simple thing that people insist on making difficult.

And Clyde, who had spent his childhood being preached at on street corners and had built his entire adult life on getting away from exactly this, found that he waited all week for Tuesday.

It went badly for a long time first.

For the first four months Clyde performed for him, because performing was what he did with people, and he was good at it and McMillan was young. He said the things a man says. He said he had found peace. He said he was reading the Book of John. He watched the minister's face while he said it and adjusted.

McMillan knew. He said so, finally, in the fifth month, in about the kindest sentence anybody ever said to Clyde Griffiths. He said: you don't have to do that with me. I'm going to keep coming either way.

Clyde did not say anything for the rest of that visit. He shook his hand at the end of it and went back down the corridor, and the following Tuesday he was waiting at the bars twenty minutes early.

After that it was real, and being real was much worse.

Because what came up, once the performance stopped, was not God. It was his mother, and the fifty dollars, and Esta on a mattress over a laundry, and a girl of nine in a road in Kansas City with her groceries scattered around her, and a wet envelope of a list of dish towels — all of it, all at once, in a hallway, at twenty-four years old, with a minister on the other side of the bars who had no training for any of it and simply sat there and took it.

They talked about the little girl in the road for six weeks. Clyde had never told one living person about that. He had not told his lawyers. It had never been in a newspaper, because Sparsen had gone to prison and the file had closed and no one

had ever connected a bellhop who left town in a hurry with a defendant in South Carolina eight years later.

He said: I ran. And she was lying right there and I looked at her and I ran.

And McMillan, who had begun to understand by then that he was hearing the actual case and that no court had heard any of it, said: how old were you.

Clyde said nineteen.

McMillan asked him what he had thought he was running from, and Clyde said he did not know, and then, about a month later, out of nowhere, in the middle of a completely different conversation, he said: the corner. And McMillan said what, and Clyde said: I was running from the corner. I've been running from the corner since I was twelve.

That is as close as Clyde Griffiths ever came to understanding his own life, and he got there in a hallway with a door at the end of it, at the age of twenty-five, with about eight months left.

CHAPTER XXIX

There was a letter from Sondra once, in the first winter, unsigned, forwarded through the lawyers.

It said that she was sorry. It said that she thought about him. It said that she would never be able to write again, and she never did.

Her family had taken her out of the country within nine days of the arrest. Her name had been kept out of the trial almost entirely — she was Miss X in the papers and in Mason's summation, a courtesy that was not extended to Roberta Alden, whose messages about a dress her mother was making over had

been printed in full in four newspapers.

Clyde read that letter until it came apart at the folds. He kept it in a book. In the spring of the second year a man passed a newspaper down the corridor without knowing what was in it, and there was a photograph on the society page, and she had married in Boston in April.

He did not say anything about it to anybody for six weeks, and then he told the Reverend McMillan, and that was the first conversation of the two of them in which Clyde told the truth about anything.

CHAPTER XXX

And then, in the last winter, Clyde asked the Reverend McMillan for something.

He asked whether they could be somewhere with no guard between them, and McMillan went to the warden, who was glad enough to be of use in such a thing, and gave them a cell in the old part of the house with an officer down the hall.

And Clyde told him everything.

Not the trial story. He said that first: what I said up there was not true, they wrote it for me. Then he went back to the beginning and told him the whole of it, in a small voice, over about three hours.

The article about the Ozarks. The weeks. The maps. Choosing Big Bittern because there was no road on the far shore. The bag bought in Winnsboro. Clifford Golden. The hat with the label in it that he had thought about taking. Rowing two hours south with her picking lilies in the bottom of the boat and talking about a room they would rent.

And the cove. And that he had frozen, and that this part was true and was the only true part of what he had told the jury. That he had not been able to do it. That she had stood up and come toward him and the camera had struck her and he had not meant that.

And that she had come up, and called his name, and that he was ten feet away in flat water, and that he had trod water and watched her go under, and that when she came up the second time he had turned his head.

He said: I want to ask you something and I want you to tell me the truth. Does that make me a murderer? Because at the end I couldn't do it. But I wanted her dead for three weeks and I let her drown.

And the Reverend Duncan McMillan, who loved him by then — who had prayed with him every Tuesday for two years and had come to think of him as something close to a son, and who had been asked a direct question by a man with a date — said that in the eyes of God the intent and the deed are one, and that Clyde must repent of the whole of it, and not of the half he could bear.

Clyde said: then what was the freezing for?

He said it with some heat, which he had almost never shown in two years. He said: if I'm the same as a man who did it, then what was it for? I had three weeks. I had her in a boat eleven miles from anybody. And I couldn't. Doesn't that count for anything at all? Doesn't it count somewhere?

And McMillan, who was thirty-five years old and had been given no training for this and would have given his own life to answer it correctly, said that he believed it counted with God, and that he did not believe it counted as innocence, and that the two things were not the same and he could not make them the

same for him.

Clyde sat with that for a while.

Then he said something that McMillan wrote down that night in a notebook he kept for forty years and never showed anybody. He said: I've been in this hallway two years and I've figured out one thing. Everybody in here did something. And nobody in here is only the thing they did. And I don't know what to do with that, Reverend, because they're going to kill the whole of me for the four seconds.

McMillan had no answer for it that night. He said so.

Clyde said, after a while: all right.

McMillan drove home that night and pulled over twice on the shoulder of a state highway.

CHAPTER XXXI

The clemency petition went to the Governor in March.

It ran to two hundred pages: the childhood, the record, the ineffective-assistance claim that no court had ever heard on its merits, letters from eleven clergy, a letter from Elvira Griffiths, and a psychological evaluation that had not existed at the time of trial.

Samuel Griffiths did not sign it. He was asked and he declined, through a lawyer, and he sent a check to the mission in Denver that same week, which Elvira Griffiths cashed because she had to.

The Governor's counsel granted an audience of fifteen minutes. McMillan was asked to come to the capital and speak, and he went, and Elvira Griffiths went with him on a bus, and they sat in an anteroom with marble under their feet for two

hours past the appointed time.

They were given eleven minutes.

The Governor was not cruel. He was a serious man of sixty who had commuted two sentences in his term and had been attacked for both. He listened to McMillan for six minutes about a boy's childhood and about repentance and about the fact that no court had ever heard the claim about his lawyers.

Then he took off his glasses and asked one question, and he asked it directly of the minister.

He said: Reverend, you have been with this man for two years. You have heard whatever he has told you. Is there any fact known to you that was not before that jury — anything at all that gives you reason to believe they got it wrong?

And there was a silence in that room of perhaps four seconds.

And the Reverend Duncan McMillan, who could not lie, and who had heard Clyde Griffiths say I wanted her dead for three weeks and I let her drown, said: no, Governor. There is nothing.

Elvira Griffiths turned her head and looked at him.

Elvira Griffiths, who had been given no part of those eleven minutes and had not been expected to speak, said: Governor.

He turned.

She said that she had five children and had buried none of them. She said that she had heard everything the Reverend had said and that she agreed with all of it. And she said that she was not going to stand there and tell him her son was innocent, because she had never asked her son that question and did not intend to start now, in a room with a stranger, three weeks before.

She said: I'm asking you to let him be alive. That's the whole thing I came for. There isn't anything else in it.

The Governor said that he understood, and that he was sorry, and that he would give the petition his full consideration, and he meant all three of those things.

Clemency was denied at four o'clock that afternoon in a two-sentence statement that spelled Roberta Alden's name correctly and Clyde Griffiths's with an extra letter, and the papers ran it as one paragraph on an inside page, because by then it was the third execution in that state that year and the machinery had stopped being news.

Elvira Griffiths did not weep in that anteroom or in the corridor or on the steps. She went out and found the bus.

She and the Reverend McMillan rode four hours together and neither of them said anything about the question or the answer. She looked out the window. At a stop somewhere south of the capital she said, to the glass: he told you, didn't he.

McMillan said yes.

She nodded once. Then she said: he never could tell me anything. Not since he was a boy. He'd tell anybody but me.

And she did not say another word for a hundred miles, and she did not blame him then and she never blamed him afterward, and she wrote to him twice a year until she died, and that was the heaviest thing that Duncan McMillan ever had to carry — not that she was angry with him, but that she was not.

CHAPTER XXXII

There is a last week, and the last week is administered.

The property inventory comes first: everything in the cell, itemized on a form, with a box to name the person it will be released to. Clyde had a Bible, forty-one letters, a photograph of

his mother, a paperback of a western somebody had passed down, a comb, and eleven dollars on his books.

Then the witness list, which is a form. Then the question of who will claim the body, which is a second form, and which is asked in a level voice by a man with a clipboard because it has to be asked. Elvira Griffiths signed it in the visiting room with her purse in her lap.

Then the visits, which run on a schedule that tightens as the week goes on: non-contact, then one contact visit of two hours, then non-contact again for the last two days.

She came for the last three days and sat with her hand flat against the glass. She talked. She talked about Frank and about Julia and about Esta's boy, and about a woman in Denver who had been saved at the mission in February, and about the weather in Colorado, and Clyde listened to all of it and asked questions to keep her going.

Asa was too sick to travel and would not have been able to bear it. He sent a letter written in a shaking hand that said four sentences and quoted a psalm.

Nobody came from Lycurgus. Samuel Griffiths sent word through the lawyers that the family was praying for him, and it may well have been true. Gilbert Griffiths had by then quietly changed the name of the company's retail line.

The paperwork of that week is worth setting down in full, because it is the part nobody sees and it is where the thing is actually done.

There is a form for the disposition of remains and a form for the disposition of property and they are different forms. There is a form on which the condemned may designate up to five witnesses, and a schedule showing which of those five will be permitted where.

And in that state there is one more form, and it has no equivalent anywhere else in American life.

Fourteen days out, an officer brings the condemned a single sheet of paper on which he must elect the manner of his own death. There are three boxes. Electrocution. Lethal injection. Firing squad. If he signs nothing, the state electrocutes him by default, so the refusal to choose is itself a choice and the form says so in a sentence near the bottom.

He is given no protocol to read. The state's procedures are shielded by statute and are not public, and the drugs the state holds are shielded too, so a man deciding how he would rather die is working from what he has heard in a corridor from other men who also never saw a protocol.

Clyde had watched five men fill out that form ahead of him. Two had taken the needle. Two had taken the chair, one of them because his lawyer told him the drugs were bad and one of them because he could not stand the idea of men with rifles looking at him. One had left it blank and been electrocuted by operation of law.

Clyde signed his on the ninth day and chose the third box, and when the Reverend McMillan asked him why, he said: because it's the only one that's quick and everybody knows it's quick, and because I want them to have to look at me and do it.

There is a rehearsal. It happens in the chamber on the afternoon of the second-to-last day, with the team and a stand-in and a stopwatch, and everyone in that building knows when it is happening, and the men in the corridor can tell by which officers are missing. The three who will fire are volunteers from inside that prison system. They are never named, and they go home afterward to houses in Columbia and are at work the following Monday.

There is a chaplain's form. There is a media pool. There is a phone in the chamber that is tested twice, at three o'clock and at five-thirty, by an officer who says testing into it and waits and hangs up. That phone is a line to the Governor's office and it is the only object in that room whose purpose is mercy, and no governor of that state had lifted it in the memory of anyone working in that building.

And there is a great deal of ordinary kindness, which is the thing that makes the whole apparatus possible. The officers on that shift were not cruel men. They asked about his mother. One of them brought him a decent razor. The young man with the clipboard came in on the last morning and said he was sorry to have to ask, and took the last meal order.

Clyde asked for a steak, a baked potato, corn and a slice of pie, and ate almost none of it and apologized to the officer for the waste, and the officer said don't worry about that, and stood in the corridor afterward for a minute before he went on.

Clyde wrote three letters that morning. One to his mother. One to the Reverend McMillan. And one that had no name on it, which was found in the cell afterward and given to nobody and destroyed with the rest of the unclaimed property ninety days later, per policy.

CHAPTER XXXIII

At four in the afternoon they moved him to the front.

The corridor went quiet the way it had gone quiet eleven times in front of him, and Clyde, who had listened to that silence from the inside of it eleven times, now heard it from the other end and understood that every one of those men had heard

exactly this.

Somebody down the hall called out God bless you, Griffiths. Somebody else said his number. The man who sang did not sing.

McMillan was allowed to stay with him from four o'clock. They prayed. They said the Twenty-third Psalm twice because Clyde asked for it twice. He asked McMillan whether he thought God had heard him — not once, but twice, an hour apart — and McMillan said yes both times, and the second time his voice went out from under him.

Clyde said: I'm scared.

He said it flatly, the way you report a temperature, and then he said it again about twenty minutes later and his hands were shaking and he put them under the table.

He asked whether it hurts. McMillan said he did not know and would not tell him a thing he did not know, and Clyde said thank you for that.

He asked, a little later: is my mother out there? And McMillan said she was in a room down the hall with a chaplain, because she had asked to be in the building and had not been able to be in the room.

He said: tell her I wasn't scared.

And then, after a while: no. Don't tell her anything about it. Just tell her I said the psalm.

At about a quarter past five he asked McMillan a question that the Reverend never wrote down anywhere and only spoke about once, forty years later, to a young minister who had asked him why he would not go into such a place.

He asked: do you think she knew? At the end, in the water. Do you think she knew it was me not coming?

McMillan said that he did not know and that he did not believe God required him to know, and that he thought the only

mercy available on that question was that it had been very fast.

Clyde said: it wasn't, though.

And that was the last thing either of them said about Roberta Alden.

At twenty minutes to six they prayed again, and at ten minutes to six a man came in and said it would be a few minutes yet, and at five minutes to six Clyde stood up on his own before anyone asked him to, and straightened his shirt, which was a state-issue shirt with no collar and nothing to straighten.

At two minutes to six the door opened.

It is eleven steps.

The chamber is smaller than anyone expects. The old oak chair stands against the far wall with its straps hanging loose, unused and unusable and impossible to look away from, and Clyde had to walk past it to get to the corner where the metal chair was.

The team was four men who had trained on this and did it quickly and well and were not cruel. One of them said watch your head. They put him in the chair and fastened the restraints at the ankles, the wrists, the waist and the chest, and a strap across the forehead, and it took under two minutes.

Then a man came forward with a square of black cloth about the size of a playing card, with an adhesive back, and pinned it — that is the word the protocol uses, pinned — over the left side of his chest, and he had to feel for the place first with two fingers, the way a nurse feels for a pulse, and the nurse at intake fourteen months earlier had written down where it sat so that this man would not have to guess.

Nobody in that room said anything while he did it.

Fifteen feet away, in the opposite wall, there was an opening about the size of a mail slot, and behind the opening there was

nothing to see. Three men were standing back there with rifles. All three rifles were loaded with live rounds. There is no blank in that state — no merciful arithmetic that lets a man go home telling himself he might not have been the one — and every person in that building knew it, including the three.

Then a curtain opens.

Behind it is a room with two rows of chairs. In the chairs that evening were Titus Alden and two of Roberta's brothers; four reporters; the sheriff of Pendleton County, who had driven a hundred and ninety miles to be there; a representative of the Attorney General; and the Reverend Duncan McMillan, who had asked to witness and had been granted it as clergy of record.

They asked him if he had a last statement.

He said, into a microphone that came down from the ceiling above his head, that he was sorry. He said it to the Aldens by name and asked them to believe that he had never meant for it to happen, which was the last lie he told and may not have been a lie by then. He said that he hoped God had forgiven him. He said thank you to the Reverend McMillan.

Then he said: I'm ready.

They put the hood on him.

That is the part nobody is prepared for, and every witness who has written about it has written about it. Up to that moment there is a young man in a chair whose face you can see, who has just spoken to you, whose mouth is still moving a little. Then two officers come forward with a black hood and put it over his head, and there is no longer a person in the room. There is a shape in a chair with a square of black cloth pinned over its heart, and the last human thing you had to hold onto has been taken away from you thirty seconds before the end, and it is done for the shooters and not for him.

The warden read the execution order aloud. It took about forty seconds. Clyde Griffiths sat under the hood and listened to a document being read.

At 6:05 the team fired.

It is one sound. Three rifles fifteen feet away in a concrete room is not three sounds, it is one enormous sound, and it hits the witness glass and it hits the chest of everybody sitting behind it, and two of the four reporters that evening wrote that they felt it before they heard it.

Then it is over. There is no second act. The body goes back against the chair once, hard, and then forward against the restraints, and the black square is gone and there is a stain the shape of a hand opening across the front of the jumpsuit, and the arms do not move again.

The whole thing, from the hood to the stillness, is under ninety seconds. That is the part that stays with a witness. Not that it is barbaric. That it is fast, and loud, and finished, and that a state which spent eleven days proving premeditation to a jury killed a man in the time it takes to read a paragraph out loud.

He was declared dead at 6:08 p.m.

The curtain closed. Somebody in the front row of the witness room let out a breath that everybody heard.

Titus Alden sat with his hat in his hands and did not get up when the others got up. One of his sons put a hand on his shoulder and he shook his head once, and they sat there another two or three minutes while the room emptied around them, and then he stood up and put his hat on and went out.

Outside he was asked by a reporter — a different one, from a different paper, a young man doing his job — whether this brought his family any closure.

Titus Alden said: I've got three others.

And then he said, and it is the only thing he ever said publicly about the death penalty in his life: he never brought her back up out of that water and neither did they.

The four reporters filed within the hour. Two of them led with the last statement. One of them led with the sound, and could not get the paragraph right, and rewrote it four times in the parking lot and filed something he was not satisfied with. One of them led with the fact that the mother of the condemned man had been in the building.

All four of them mentioned the hood. Every account of that evening mentions the hood.

The sheriff of Pendleton County, who had driven a hundred and ninety miles to be there and had wanted to be there, walked out to his car and sat in it in the parking lot for a while before he started it. He was fifty-eight. He retired the following year. His deputies noticed nothing different about him and he never said anything to any of them about that evening.

A representative of the Attorney General's office was back on the interstate by 6:40 and home by ten.

Down the hall, in a room with a table and four chairs, a woman of seventy who had raised five children in three rooms behind a storefront was told by a chaplain that it was over. She said thank you. She asked whether he had said anything at the end, and was told that he had, and asked what it was, and the chaplain said he did not know.

Then she asked where she should go to sign for the body, and she was told that she had already signed for it, and she said yes, of course, I did that on Tuesday, I'm sorry.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Outside, in the parking lot, the Reverend Duncan McMillan walked past his own car and kept going, out past the lights to the fence line at the edge of the lot, and stood there in the dark for a long time with his hands on the wire.

He was thirty-six years old.

He had been asked one question by a Governor and had answered it truthfully, and a man was dead. He had believed, going into that room, that the truth belonged to God and could not be bent for any purpose whatsoever, including mercy. He came out of the anteroom that afternoon and had not been sure of it since, and he was never sure of it again for the rest of his life.

He thought about it every day. He thought about it in the pulpit. He thought about the four seconds before he answered and whether they had been him weighing it or him losing his nerve. He never worked out whether a lie told in that room would have been a sin against God or the only faithful thing he was ever offered the chance to do, and he understood, eventually, that not working it out was going to be his portion.

He never took another death house assignment. He was asked twice more and declined both times without explanation.

There is a sermon of his from about fifteen years afterward that survived because a member of that congregation typed it up. It is on the text of the woman taken in adultery, and it is eleven minutes long, and it does not mention prison or executions or Clyde Griffiths anywhere in it.

The last paragraph says this. That when the crowd went away, one at a time, beginning with the eldest, they did not go away because they had been persuaded that she was innocent. They went away because they had been made to look at themselves while holding a rock. And that the whole of the

Gospel, so far as he had ever been able to understand it, was in the difference between those two reasons.

He was fifty-one years old when he wrote that. The typist who kept it did not know why he cried during it.

He kept the notebook. He kept Clyde's last letter, which was four paragraphs long and thanked him and asked him to look in on his mother, and he did look in on her, twice a year, by letter, for the rest of her life, and he preached her funeral in Denver years later and paid his own way to do it.

And once, when he was past seventy, an interviewer from a divinity school came to ask him about the case for a project on prison ministry, and asked him the question directly: whether, in that anteroom, he should have lied to the Governor.

He sat for a long time.

Then he said: I have been a minister for thirty-eight years and I have never had one hour's difficulty with any question of doctrine. That is the only thing I have never gotten to the bottom of.

The interviewer asked whether he had an opinion at all.

And Duncan McMillan said: I have an opinion at four o'clock in the morning. It changes.

He preached forty more years in the same small building and was, by every account of every person who knew him, a good man and a kind one. He buried three generations of that congregation. He visited jails and never again a death house.

And he was never afterward entirely certain of anything, and his sermons were better for it, and nobody in that church ever knew why.

Elvira Griffiths took her son's body home on a train.

It cost four hundred and ten dollars to move him and she did not have four hundred and ten dollars. A funeral director in a

town near the prison, a man named Ostrander who had handled six of these and had never once been paid in full by anybody, moved him for the cost of the box and the freight and wrote off the rest, and asked her not to tell anybody he had done it because he would then have to do it every time.

There was a service in Denver in the mission, in the room with the folding chairs, with the urn on the same table they served coffee from. Asa could not stand up for it and sat in the front row in a wheelchair and wept without any control at all, the way he had done everything, openly and in front of everybody.

Esta came. Julia came. Frank did not, and was not spoken about.

Nine people from the neighborhood came, some of whom had slept in those pews and some of whom just came. A reporter came and was permitted to stay and wrote three respectful paragraphs.

Elvira Griffiths preached it herself. Nobody had asked her to; there was simply nobody else, and she was not going to have a stranger do it.

She spoke for about six minutes. She did not defend him and she did not discuss the case. She said that she had five children and had done her best with what the Lord gave her to do it with, which was not much. She said that she had failed her son in ways that she would be answering for, and that she believed God had him now and that God was better at this than she had been.

And then she said the thing that Esta remembered for the rest of her life and told her own son when he was old enough to be told anything. She said: I want to say one thing about Roberta Alden, because nobody in that courtroom said it in front of her mother and I am going to say it in front of mine.

She said: that girl was somebody's daughter, and she never did one wrong thing to anybody, and my son took her life. I am not going to stand up here and be his mother and not say that.

Then she said amen and sat down, and they sang, and afterward she made the coffee, because there was nobody else to make it and there were nine people there and it was cold out.

EPILOGUE

Five years later, on a summer evening in San Francisco, a little band of people came up a street two blocks off the waterfront with a folding table and a speaker.

An old man, gray and very slow, who had had a stroke in the spring and could no longer manage the microphone, and who was brought along because he would not be left behind.

A woman of seventy-five, plain, upright, who did the preaching herself these days because there was nobody else to do it, and whose voice was still strong and carried down the block.

A daughter, Esta, quiet, thickened, standing to one side with a stack of song sheets.

And a boy of twelve, Esta's son, holding the cord because he had been told to.

His grandmother preached. Nobody stopped. A man at the corner looked over and looked away. A woman crossed the street a half block early. A car went by with its windows down and somebody in it laughed.

The boy, whose name was Russell, stood at the edge of the light and looked at his shoes. He was thinking about a hot dog stand he had seen on the next block, and how much one cost,

and whether, if he asked her afterward on the walk home and asked in the right way, she would ever say yes to a thing like that.

He waited until the singing was done and the table was folded, and then he asked, and he heard his own voice come out wanting it too much, which he already knew at nine was a thing to be ashamed of.

His grandmother stopped on the sidewalk and looked down at him.

For a moment she did not see him at all. She saw a boy of twelve on a corner in Kansas City, holding a cord, with his shoes wrong, looking down the street at the cars going by.

Then she reached into her purse and got out a dollar and gave it to him and said yes.

She had not had a dollar to spare in sixty years and she did not have one that evening either.

And she took his hand, and they went up the street together toward the mission, and she prayed while they walked — not out loud, and not the prayer she had preached ten minutes earlier, but the one she had been praying every day for five years, which was: not this one. Please. Not this one too.

The boy ate the hot dog on the walk back and got mustard on his shirt and was worried about it, and she said it would come out, and it did.

He was twelve years old. He was standing on a corner holding a cord, with his shoes wrong, watching a car go by with the windows down — which is exactly where this book began, and exactly who was standing there, at exactly that age, nineteen years and one execution ago. Nothing at all had been changed by any of it. Not the corner, not the storefront, not the arithmetic of that street. A young woman was in the ground in Biltz and a young man was in the ground in Denver and a district

attorney was a county judge and a state had spent, by the time it was finished, something on the order of two million dollars in current money to arrive at a coffin.

And on a sidewalk in San Francisco, at the edge of the light, there was another one.

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

capital murder. The narrow category of homicide for which a state may seek death. In Dreiser's New York it was murder in the first degree, requiring premeditation... which is exactly the fact Clyde's defense was built to contest.

change of heart. The defense constructed for Clyde by Belknap and Jephson: that he went to the lake intending harm, abandoned the intention in the boat, and struck Roberta by accident while confessing. It is the only wholly fabricated testimony in the trial, and it comes from the defense table.

the front. Death house idiom for the cell nearest the chamber door, to which a condemned man is moved on the day of his execution.

deathwatch. The final period, commonly twenty-four hours, during which the condemned is observed continuously and logged at intervals.

direct appeal. The first and broadest review of a capital conviction, heard as of right. It asks whether the trial contained reversible legal error, not whether the defendant is innocent.

post-conviction relief. The second stage, where claims outside the trial record are raised, most often ineffective assistance of counsel. Missed deadlines and pleading defects at this stage bar claims permanently, however meritorious.

procedural default. The doctrine by which a claim never heard on its merits is lost forever because it was raised in the wrong court, in the wrong pleading, or too late. It is the most common way a capital case ends.

federal habeas corpus. The last judicial review, sharply limited since 1996, requiring deference to state court rulings even where a federal court believes them wrong.

clemency. The executive power to commute a death sentence to life, vested in a governor or a board. It is the only stage of the process that may consider mercy as such, and it is granted in a small fraction of cases.

election of method. South Carolina requires the condemned to choose, fourteen days out, among electrocution, lethal injection and firing squad. Electrocution is the default if no election is made. The state's execution protocols and its drug supply are shielded from disclosure by statute, so the choice is made without access to the procedures being chosen among.

firing squad. Authorized in South Carolina in 2021 and first used there in 2025. The condemned is restrained in a metal chair, hooded, with a target affixed over the heart, fifteen feet from an opening in the wall. Three volunteer corrections employees fire rifles loaded with live ammunition. Unlike the Utah protocol, no rifle is loaded with a blank.

the old chair. South Carolina's electric chair, in service since 1912, stands bolted to the floor of the same room in which the firing squad chair sits. It cannot be moved, and a man walking to the one must walk past the other.

shield law. Statutory secrecy covering the identities of execution team members, the state's suppliers, and the protocols themselves. It is the reason a condemned man electing his

manner of death is doing so on rumor.

Broad River. The Capital Punishment Facility at Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia, South Carolina, where that state carries out its executions and where the men under sentence of death are held.

Big Moose Lake. The lake in Herkimer County, New York, where Grace Brown drowned on July 11, 1906. Dreiser renamed it Big Bittern.

Chester Gillette. The twenty-two-year-old factory supervisor convicted of Grace Brown's murder and executed at Auburn Prison in 1908. The original of Clyde Griffiths.

Grace Brown. The twenty-year-old factory worker, pregnant, who wrote the letters Dreiser used almost verbatim as Roberta's. She is the reason this book exists and is buried in South Otselic, New York.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is an author, activist and death row spiritual advisor. He is the founder of the Execution Intervention Project and serves as Dean of The New Theology School, where he holds the Rev. Charles Moore Professor of Prophetic Theology chair. He has accompanied condemned men across multiple states and has witnessed thirteen executions. He lives in North Little Rock, Arkansas.