A Jury of Peers

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Abstract

A LOUD burst of static from the police radio on the counter behind him broke the silence as Sheriff Paul Thompson pushed aside the last of the reports he had been working on. He turned in the swivel chair and adjusted the squelch knob. The radio clock registered 2:04 a.m...
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Paul glanced at his deputy who was reading the front page of The Des Moines Register. "Probably for about the eighth time today," Paul thought. The headline of the paper announced in boldface type the story claiming the deputy's attention. WOMAN SLAIN IN CHURCH. The dateline of the story was Glenview, Iowa.

"Let's call it a day, Lee," the sheriff suggested. The deputy looked up from the last paragraph on page one — the paragraph mentioning his name.

"Can you imagine something like this happening on a Sunday afternoon in Glenview — and us right in the middle of it?" Lee marvelled.

The sheriff shook his head grimly. Lee hadn't been in the church before the ambulance came. He hadn't felt the tragedy of the young woman lying unconscious on the floor, her infant son playing happily on the table above her.

"Do you think we ought to leave?" Lee continued. "What if we get a call on the killer?"

"There are roadblocks set up all over the state," the sheriff reminded him. "They have the statewide radio network at the police station and the night man has my home number," Paul finished patiently. "C'mon."

Lee grabbed his jacket off the rack as the sheriff began switching off the overhead lights. They walked out of the office. Paul locked the door and preceded Lee down the
deserted hall to the steps. Lee followed, close enough to Paul to be his shadow, had there been any light illuminating the dark stairway. Three flights later they arrived on the ground floor of the country courthouse. "See you at eight, Paul," Lee said as he crossed the street to his house.

"Night, Lee," the sheriff answered, turning up the collar of his overcoat. He stepped off the curb by the red and white sign lettered

Parking
Sheriff's Dept.

and got into the green Dodge. Despite the below zero weather, the engine responded immediately; he backed out of the diagonal space and began the drive home. The steady rumble of the tire chains matched the high tension his muscles had felt since he had been called to the murder scene.

As Paul drove the last two blocks, he scrutinized the rows of small, neat houses for any sign of unusual activity. Each house was dark, shut up tightly against the January cold. Probably more carefully locked tonight against the fear of a possible intruder.

He turned the corner by the light plant which served the two thousand people of Glenview. The usual small fire in the piles of coal beside the building seemed a little larger tonight. "Nothing to worry about," Paul noted. The piles smouldered all winter, but never got out of control.

Across the street was his own home, a large brick house attached to the county jail. Paul parked the car in the drive. At the front of the house the living room lights shone a greeting. The side door was unlocked.

"Paul?" his wife called tentatively from the front room. She walked into the hall as he entered.

"I made a list of all the calls from the newspapers and the other officers but I gave them all your office number, too."

"Thanks, I think either Lee or I handled most of them. Kids asleep?" They walked into the living room and sat down.

"I sent them to bed at nine. Until about eleven o'clock Lori came down every time the phone rang to ask when you were coming home." She wanted to ask you more about
trial by jury. She has a history test tomorrow. I think she finally got worn out from going up and down stairs.”

“I hate to have you here alone.”

“Why don’t you post a guard on our house?” she joked.

“In a way, I don’t blame Hills for wanting someone to watch their house. If Seronides does come back, he might go to his in-laws.”

“Paul, what are they doing about the baby?”

“That’s the strangest thing,” he answered. “It was a terrible shock for Hill to discover his daughter’s body. But he wouldn’t take the baby—wouldn’t even hold it. I didn’t think much about it at the time, but I’ve been trying to go at this from every angle. A young couple in their church has the baby now.”

“Hills didn’t come to the baptism, did they?” his wife asked.

“No, Reverend Freeman baptised the baby. Joe Seronides had asked for a few minutes to talk to his wife afterwards. Something about the divorce settlement. She’d called her father to pick her up.”

“But why?” Mrs Thompson began. . . . The telephone beside her rang. “Sheriff’s residence,” she said automatically. “Just a moment please.” She covered the receiver with her hand. “Sounds like Cora Blank again.”

“Hello. Yes, Cora.” A long pause. “Well, yes, there is a sort of balcony on the watertower. Now just a minute. There’s really no way anyone could get up there. Since so many kids kept climbing it a while back, the city fixed it so you’d have to have special equipment to get up there.” A longer pause. “Yes, you’re right. He might be anywhere. But we’re pretty sure he’s not around Glenview. Yes, well thank you for calling.”

Mrs. Townsend could hear the woman’s voice, louder now that she had been reassured. “Sure too bad about that young girl. Tragic thing. Tragic thing. Well, good night, sheriff.”

“Tragic thing, tragic thing” echoed through Paul’s head as he got ready for bed and tried to sleep. The murder scene ran through his mind again and again.
The dark, heavy furniture of the Pastor's study. The bright blanket around the baby, the bloodstained blonde hair of the dying girl, her head resting on a dark brown cushion from a nearby chair. The cushion—he'd warned them not to move anything.

"Warren, did you put that under her head?" he'd asked her father. The grief-striken man's answer was unintelligible at first.

"That murderer, that dirty Greek. I told her . . . ."

"The cushion, Warren, was it there when you got here?"

"He . . . he must have put it there." The siren of the arriving ambulance interrupted the conversation.

Paul finished noting the details. She obviously hadn't fallen that way after the first bullet wound in her side. There was blood on the carpet near the desk. First there. It must have been just before he moved her that Seronides put the gun at the back of her head and pulled the trigger . . . just like you'd kill a dog.

"Tragic thing. Tragic thing," tumbled through his mind. Paul thought he was just falling off to sleep when the alarm went off.

Another day, more checking on Seronides, tracing every path until he could find one leading to the killer.

Paul arrived at the office just before eight. Lee was already there surveying the morning paper's version of their progress.

KILLER STILL AT LARGE was the headline.

"Hell of a way to run a newspaper," Paul said, as he walked in and saw it. "They've tried and convicted Seronides before we've even caught him."

"Don't you think he did it?" Lee asked eagerly. "After all, the minister's son says he saw Seronides leave the study after hearing what he first thought was the sound of a car backfiring," Lee declared positively.

"Yes, I am reasonably sure that Seronides shot her," Paul answered wearily. "I would certainly be wasting a lot of time checking if I didn't think so."

Paul's tone invited no further speculation. Lee tried another approach.
"You know the report of the stolen car here that we—uh you—had broadcast on the state police radio? Well, there was a call from a patrol car in southern Iowa saying he'd seen a car of that description cross into Missouri and was radioing Missouri patrol to check."

Paul was suddenly irritated. He would give a lot to be actively involved. "Missouri patrol! Why couldn’t he go himself? Hasn’t he heard of the hot-pursuit law?" Paul stormed. "I suppose he had an eight o’clock meeting with another patrolman at some roadside cafe," he finished sarcastically.

Paul went to the file cabinet and pulled out the new manila folder marked "Seronides." The first material was dated last November. His eyes scanned the brief report. Warren Hill had asked him to try to trace his daughter, her husband, and their infant son. Hill was upset because they were driving from California to Iowa in a very old car. Paul had notified authorities in western states, but his unsuccessful efforts had only increased the anger of Hill. Three days later Paul had heard that Seronides had arrived in Glenview. The next news was the filing for divorce and the girl's job in her father's office.

Paul walked to his desk and picked up the telephone receiver and dialed the operator. "Long distance, please."

"One moment please," the flat voice replied.

Paul sat down in the chair then restlessly moved to sit on the side of the desk. He wished he could be doing something, but there was little point in searching the area further. He glanced out the window.


"Oh . . . yes. I want to talk to the Dean of Students at Iowa State University in Ames."

"Do you have that number, sir."

"No," he barked. "But I presume you have a telephone directory, ma’am," he emphasized the last word.

"I thought you already alerted the Ames police," Lee ventured.
“Yes, I did that Sunday. But Seronides was in school there for a while and I want to check into his record.”

“Your call is ready, sir.”

“Hello. This is Paul Thompson, sheriff of Sioux County. I wonder if I could get some information on Joseph Seronides. He was a student at Iowa State for a while last year.”

“I thought we might be hearing from the authorities.” The deep voice was brisk, super-efficient. “Just one moment please. Yes, Joseph Seronides, born in Greece in 1941, but immigrated to New York with his parents in 1944. We have grade reports on him. He was in Science and Humanities undeclared. He received a 2.41 his first quarter here. His second. . . .”

Paul interrupted. “I’m looking for information that might tell us where he might go. You see we haven’t been able to trace much of his background.”

“It’s ironic you should ask that same question. I have a note in this file saying that Warren Hill asked for the same information last spring.”

Paul moved back to the chair for easier access to his note pad.

“If you want some general information, his I.Q. was recorded at 145. That’s an excellent score, you know. His parents are no longer living. There is no one listed as next of kin in his records. From his registration card I note that he was married some time after the beginning of winter quarter last year. That’s about all I can tell you.”

“Well, thank you very much,” Paul responded. “You’ve been helpful. Good-bye.”

Lee cleared his throat hesitantly. “Almost forgot to tell you. Ben Gifford called from the police station. He’s had an off-duty man outside Hill’s. He wants to know if he should leave him there all day, too.”

“I’m going to Hill’s now. If Ben calls again, tell him I’ll check with him later. Call me there if you get a report on the car.”

Paul picked up the gray top coat he’d thrown over the corner of his desk and left the office. He looked at his watch.
11:30 already. School children, dressed warmly for the January cold, were starting home for lunch. Hill's house was only a few blocks from the elementary school. Paul drove slowly.

He pulled up in front of the house and returned the wave of the guard parked across the street.

"Did you talk to Ben?" the policeman called.
"I'm going to check on it now."
"Thanks, Paul."

Paul crossed the terrace to the sidewalk in front of Hill's. Two small figures were pacing stiffly back and forth on the walk.

"What are you boys doing?" the sheriff inquired.
"Guarding," the littler one replied solemnly.

Paul tried not to laugh. "The rest of the town must wonder about Hill's fear, too. At least tension isn't so high," he thought.

"Thank you, boys," he replied. "But we've got a man doing that. Your mothers are expecting you home for lunch. Better get going."

As they ran off the front door slowly opened.
"Come in quickly," Mr. Hill greeted him. "I'm glad you're here."

The short time since his daughter's death had etched deeply the lines of sorrow in his face. His voice carried a curious mixture of grief and bitterness as he continued. "I forgot to warn you about Seronides' knife when you catch him."

"Knife, Warren? The murder weapon was a gun."
"He'll have a knife. They all carry them."
"What do you mean?" Paul demanded.
"All of them, those dirty Greeks. Wasn't good enough to marry my daughter. She knew it; didn't even tell us about the marriage for two months. He threatened my life, you know."

"What about the guard; do you want a man to stay outside the house, then?"

Hill seemed not to hear. "When I got her to come here and talked sense into her head about the divorce . . . even
then he wouldn’t stay away. Tried to get a job around here, just wanted to be near her and the baby, so he said. He would have stayed around here, too, if I hadn’t seen to it that he couldn’t get a job.”

Hill’s fists were tightly clenched, his knuckles white as he finished.

His head jerked nervously as the telephone rang. “Go ahead, answer it,” he said. “Isn’t anyone I want to talk to.”

Paul picked up the receiver. “Hello.”

“Paul? This is Lee,” the excited voice raced on. “Missouri police just called. Found Seronides in a motel. He…”

“Did they have any trouble taking him into custody?” Paul asked.

“He was dead,” Lee answered. “Suicide. Shot himself right through the head.”

“I’ll be right there,” Paul said.

“They got him, didn’t they?” Hill said quickly. “No question now; he’ll hang for this. He’ll know his place now. Can’t do something like this to me.”

“He was dead,” Paul said sharply. “I’ve got to get back to the office.”

“No,” Hill gasped. “No.” The expression in the father’s eyes repelled Paul. He brushed past him and out the door.

The policeman had left, Paul noted as he strode to his car. Lee must have radioed him.

As he got into the car, his head began to throb painfully. “I’ll drive home and get a couple of aspirins before I get back to the office,” he thought. Paul braked the car to a stop as two small boys crossed in front of him, headed back to school. The two “guards.” He smiled and waved in recognition. The sheriff drove on, the diminishing tension marking his awareness of the new situation. “Those kids represent a lot more than childish imagination,” he realized. “This is just the beginning of the kind of justice Warren knows best.”

He glanced out the side window as he neared home. The coal pile smouldered as it had every winter since he could remember. His weariness made those first times seem long ago. Pattern of things didn’t change much in Glenview.
Things like that, big and little, got to be a part of a routine. He stopped the car in his driveway and hurried into the house.

“Paul, I heard about Seronides on the news,” his wife said. “You know, somehow his suicide seems a tragic thing.”

“You and I aren’t the only ones who feel that way,” he told her. “This has all happened pretty fast and it’s all over for Seronides.” He paused. “But I think the murderer of those two people has already been tried and convicted. Any jury would have given Seronides the death sentence. Now the guilty man has already been sentenced to life.”

Paul walked into the living room and sat down. Lori was putting on her coat.

“I’ll give you a ride to school, Lori, as soon as I get some aspirin,” Paul said. “How was the history test?”

“She asked us mostly multiple choice, but the essay was over the jury system. I knew all about that from your good explanation.”

“I learned a lot about it today,” Paul said quietly.

“You did? Want to hear what I put?” she asked eagerly.

“Sure do,” he answered. Lori began her explanation of the legal system of justice.

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**Mallards**

*by Morgan Hewitt*

Child Development, Sr.

Mallards lie low
(When we walk off)
With their blue-green
Watersilk.
Elusive with the
Cloud and sun,
Fugitive,
They watch
And whisper us
To pass.