

*Year of 1911. The trial of Jonathan Wilson, accused of rape and murder.*

“I haven’t done nothin’.”, said the unkempt black man.

Mr. Smith, a seasoned lawyer, sighed, stretching the seams of his worn-down tux until they whimpered in agony. He shook his head, unable to fathom the reasons as to how he had found himself in this situation. It was beyond the sullen lawyer why he was defending someone like *him*, Jonathan Wilson, who had his color of skin and frizzy black curls pouring down his neck.

The old courtroom was filled to its brim with a loud audience anticipating the inception of a long awaited trial. Nosy townspeople sat cramped in each other’s laps along the wide benches hewed out of brant oaks. Elders had crawled out of their comfortable beds and children left their captivating games, all intending to watch the black man being crushed under the sturdy boot of the Kansas court system.

“I haven’t done shit n’ I’m goin’ to jail.” Mr. Wilson allowed the crowd to drown out the words he uttered with a thick southern accent, having them reach solely the ears of his attorney.

“Well, I would certainly hope so, Mr. Wilson. You wouldn’t survive a day out on the streets - not after standing in front of this audience. They’d hang you from a tree and cut your black balls off.”

Mr. Wilson made his long curls swing back and forth, engaging in a slow waltz, as he shook his head in hopelessness. *Is this what God has to offer me?*, he thought. *Haven’t I done nothin’ but praise him for as long as I could bow my head?*

“All rise”, uttered an authoritarian voice and the crowd immediately fell quiet. Now, it was the thudding of their boots as they scrambled to their feet that filled the hall with noise. The clueless Mr. Wilson, who prior to his entering the courtroom had been instructed to follow his attorney’s example, stood as he saw Mr. Smith do the same.

“Superior court of the state of Kansas, County of Ness and department 15 is now in session. The honorable judge Farrell is preceding.”

The voice spoke once again as the judge, a fat white man, entered through a small door behind his desk. As the clerk made a pause, the judge perceived his announcement to be concluded.

“Thank you...” Farrell ended with a cough as he was interrupted by the clerk who simultaneously continued. They both came to a halt, confused of how to proceed; this was not taught in the backroom of the local church, where an aspiring lawyer had to suffer through short classes of law.

“Please be seated and come to order.” The clerk had made the decision to continue according to protocol. A short “Thank you” could once again be heard from the now seated judge. Mr. Wilson studied them with great interest, fascinated by their complete inability to think independently of their beloved protocol.

“Wilson”, hissed Mr. Smith. “Sit down.” The younger man hurriedly lowered himself into the hard chair, realizing he had been the last person in the room to do so.

“I call upon the case of people versus Wilson. Please present yourselves.”

As each person involved in the case took their turn to stand up and state their name, Mr. Wilson glanced around the room. He let his eyes swoop over the familiar faces behind him. Everyone he had ever known, or known of, today occupied the courtroom; friends, neighbours, acquaintances. He caught a glimpse of the baker who sold deliciously sweet pastries, sitting next to the kind postman who always happened to have a drop of his morning coffee left for the Wilson children to share.

But no longer were they smiling their polite smiles. No longer did they pretend to respect the black man shoveling snow in their streets, clad merely in his strappy sandals, during January. No longer did they feel pity for the black man plucking the weeds invading their fields under the scolding hot sun in July.

No, not today. This fateful Friday afternoon the men stared at him with rage flaring in their eyes and fists clenched at their sides. Children watched him with morbid curiosity and women glared at him with disgust. A shiver traveled down Mr. Wilson's spine, as he turned his attention toward the judge once again.

"Is the defence ready to make their opening statement?"

Judge Farrell seemed alarmingly disinterested in what took place before him. His chubby fingers tapped the table to a desultory rhythm as he looked down from his elevated chair, his eyelids seemingly heavy.

"Yes, your honor." Mr. Smith stood, but gestured as his client motioned to do the same. Mr. Wilson, disconcerted, fell back into his squeaking chair, the attorney beginning his opening statement. The black man tried to follow the complex stream of sentences tumbling out of the old man's mouth, but ended up drowning in dark waters of incomprehensible words. Instead he intently watched the judge's fingers drumming their mysterious melodies - *Tap. Tap. Tap, tap. Tap* - and listened to the crowd stirring.

Wilson's lawyer ended his opening statement and thanked the judge before sitting down. Mr. Smith had put on a show, desperately tried to induce interest in the crowd and twelve jurors, but had done so in vain. They were there to listen to one narrative of this gruesome story, and one narrative only.

And just as expected, the crowd fell silent as the prosecutor was asked to present his case. The sound of a dropped needle reaching the floor of that room would have equaled the sound of a meteor crashing into another.

"Thank you, your honor", the hawk-nosed state's attorney said, a smile dancing on his lips. He knew the jury was his and that subsequently, so was the victory in this trial. Now, he simply had to decide what was to be done about the meagre black defendant.

"I also want to issue an immense thank you to our invaluable jurors. This trial is resting on your shoulders, and I cannot imagine that it is a light weight to carry."

*Flattery.* Mr. Wilson marveled at the display, but was profusely disgusted.

"As you all are well aware of, we are gathered here today to rid our streets of yet another... monster. Yet another person who thinks he has a right to take what he wants, do what he pleases. Yet another *black man* who believes that we do not know his true nature. But let me enlighten you, Mr. Wilson-", he stood leaning over the defendant, like a willow reaching out over a stream. "Let me inform you - we know the true nature of people like you. *We all know you.*"

The malevolence trickled from every pore of the lawyer and caused a sudden wave of nausea to overtake Mr. Wilson. On the blue tuxedo of the state's attorney, stains of sweat bloomed; the court was warmer than a hot summer's day. He leaned over his target a little while longer, to make a point. Mr. Wilson stared at his own fingers, intertwined on the table's shining surface, not realizing his unwillingness to meet the eyes of his opponent made him even more guilty in the opinion of the attending.

The state's attorney harshly let out a breath before walking away from the defence. He had obtained the reaction he desired.

"Mr. Wilson, on the 24th of March 1910, intercepted fifteen-year-old Sarah Good in an alleyway only a three minute walk from her home." He was addressing the jury now. "There, he sexually assaulted her and, when he was satisfied, shot her once in the head; execution-style."

The crowd was hair-raisingly quiet. Mr. Wilson felt hatred radiate from them and reaching his back, not unlike the feeling of standing much too close to a raging fire. He shot an eye toward the jury on his right, consisting exclusively of older white men. Immediately, he regretted doing so, as he was met with the accusatory stares of twelve men about to sign his death sentence.

“This black man thought - thinks - that he had the right to rape one of ours...”, the prosecutor was practically foaming at the mouth. Mr. Smith interrupted.

“Objection, your honor.”

He had stood up, and was now glared upon by everyone in the room.

“The races of my client and the victim are irrelevant”, he said.

The judge looked amused, he knew very well that they were not. In fact, even the uneducated Mr. Wilson himself knew that if anything in this case was relevant - it was the race of the accused. Mr. Smith also knew this, as well as the fact that this battle had been lost long before it started. Nevertheless he understood that he had to at leastwise pretend to put up a fight.

The judge turned to the prosecution once again, to hear his standpoint.

“I believe the blackness of the defendant speaks to his character.” Agreeing mumblings could be heard from the audience. The jurors nodded.

“I’ll allow it”, said the judge. “Proceed.”

As Mr. Smith sat down and the prosecutor continued his dramatic retelling of the case, Mr. Wilson thought closer about what his attorney had warned him. An acquittal would mean his freedom. But at what cost? He would hardly have time to take one step outside the courthouse before a mob of spiteful townsfolk would arrive with the noose. On the other hand, a verdict of guilty would be a direct ticket to the electric chair.

Regardless of what the outcome of this trial would be, Mr. Wilson knew one thing for certain: his doom was inevitable. The jury knew this as well as the defendant and his attorney, and they would much like to take the law into their own hands.

Mr. Wilson’s only chance of deliverance was at this point to rely on his attorney being able to convince the jury and audience of his innocence during the hearing of witness testimony.

“Does the prosecution call any witnesses?” The state’s attorney had finished, and now the judge moved on to examination of witnesses.

“No, your honor.” The prosecutor knew that if he did not call upon anyone to witness, neither could the defence. And the latter needed this episode of the trial to save the defendant, the former did not need it to ensure the harshest penalty being dispensed.

“Well then, the jury may withdraw to deliberate”, the judge proclaimed. “We will take fifteen minutes.” The courtroom erupted in babblement as tens of people excitedly began their speculations. Mr. Smith fatuously shuffled his papers. But then suddenly -

“Order”, uttered the judge. “Order.” The white-haired old man banged a sturdy club against his table three times, each bang leaving the crowd less clamorous than before. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* Confusion prevailed.

“It has come to my attention that the jury did not need to deliberate.” He cleared his throat. “Please designate your verdict.”

A member of the jury clad in a white shirt, finer than anything Mr. Wilson had ever owned, stood and with murderous intent ensured the lynching of yet another black man; he dismissed the case and granted Mr. Wilson his freedom.