

DIALOGUE

Joan Reilly

"State your name please."

"Emily Louise Knickenbocher."

The prosecutor advanced to the witness stand, glared at the trembling girl, and enunciated distinctly each syllable of his next question. "Do you, Miss Knickenbocher, deny any knowledge of a hit-and-run accident on the evening of March 20, 1968?"

"Yes, I do. My father previously testified that I was baking him a birthday cake that evening. I did not go out of our house in town."

"What type of car do you drive?"

"A Chevrolet, a beige Super Sport model."

"Beige? Are you sure you don't mean blue? Think."

The astonished girl with a side glance to the jury braided the silk scarf hanging around her neck. She squirmed and murmured, "I am rattled. Of course it was painted blue last September."

"What shade of blue?"

"I believe the manufacturer called it Lake Tahoe Blue."

"Please study the color chart. Would you say your car is this shade?"

"I believe that is the one."

The prosecutor returned to his table. With his back to the bench he adjusted his tie as if to stall for melodrama. Spinning to face the jury, he spit out a condemnation.

"Do you remember, I repeat, driving on the evening of March 20, 1968?"

"No, no. I did not drive, and I did not loan my car to anyone else."

"Do you drink?"

"Occasionally."

"What was the occasion March 20, 1968?"

"My father's birthday."

"You baked a cake for his birthday, did you not?"

"Yes—devil's food with yellow frosting, his favorite."

"Never mind confusing us with trivia. Were you drunk on the evening in question?"

“No.”

“How do you explain, Miss Knickenbocher, if you did not drive and you did not drink, why police discovered the next morning an abandoned car registered to you and answering the description you gave the jury? The car contained two empty pints of bourbon concealed under the front seat, and the keys were in the ignition.”

“Well—” Flashbulbs in the press gallery snapped.

“This is no time, I can assure you, to hedge. I’ll see you convicted of perjury and shipped to the ugly State Women’s Prison.”

Emily stared at the jury, then at the judge. Her eyes darted to her father, who was straining to hear her reply from the edge of his chair.

“You despise your father, don’t you?”

She closed her eyes for five seconds and dropped her chin. Barely visible was the nod of sad admission.

“Isn’t it right that you despised him since he broke your engagement to one Ralph Stuart of Johnson City?”

This time the agreement was a series of sobs shaking her shoulders and causing her head to convulse.

“I submit to this court that you were not baking a cake. You got into your car to go to the bakery, and on the way you saw Ralph with another date at the movies. Is this much correct? Remember, you are under oath.”

“Yes, those facts are circumstances.”

“You were deeply distressed, and anger towards your father mounted inside you. You executed a U-turn and headed for the liquor store. I have the clerk of the store willing to testify you purchased the bourbon and drank swigs in his parking lot. Blinded by the anger and the liquor, you went for a lonely drive on the desolate Smith Valley Road. The mist of dusk developed into a pea-soup fog; driving was hazardous. You could not see the farmer in the dark overalls when he walked the road. You plowed him down. I have a paint sample that. . .”

Emily interrupted his presentation with an anguished cry. Her auburn hair fell into her face, and her make-up dripped from her cheeks. She rocked and moaned.

“I did. I did. I did it. I could not see. God knows, have mercy for me since I could not see. I remember his eyes. The recognition in his eyes as he crunched the hood of my car has haunted me. The panic forced his eyes wide open, and his head landed inches from mine. He hit the windshield. I killed him. I killed him. Oh, my God, Ralph!”