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“Tilting Scales”

by Ramelle Kamack

As an expanse of ghastly clouds veiled the light of the afternoon, the city of Chicago neared the brink of anarchy. Even the murky sky's soft drizzle had not extinguished the burning anger of the mobbing protestors below. Amid a frenzy of picket signs and police barricades the formidable Cook County Courthouse towered over the screaming chants that demanded justice.

Inside the building, the elderly judge Warren Hayes emerged from his chambers cloaked in a black robe and entered a crowded but dreadfully silent courtroom.

"All rise!"

Lean and over six feet tall, he stepped past the court stenographer and nodded toward the bailiff. Despite the growing animosity of the public outside, and their assertions that he was a "sell-out," "house negro," and "tyrant," he emitted an air of pride. As one of the few Black judges to preside in this courthouse, and with over 25 years of experience, he surmised it a privilege for anyone to have their case heard by him—an honor even. He strode past the quivering defendant, and with a glare of omniscient grandeur, sat facing all in attendance. "You may be seated," he grumbled to a room of people who hadn't stood for his entrance to begin with.

His deep brown eyes surveyed the tense room. To the right, twelve empty seats of the jury box were still littered with ten days worth of crumpled notes and shortened pencils. The dismissed jury, composed of eight women and four men, six Blacks, four Whites, one Latino, and one man who adamantly identified himself as "multi-racial," had fulfilled their duty around noon when they returned with a verdict after only three hours of deliberating. They had left in a hurry and were allowed to use the building's east exit to avoid the news media. The court's gallery was divided into three factions: the mostly Black crowd of people who demanded fair and swift justice that never seemed to come; their rivals consisting mostly of police officers who donned their crisp uniforms in support of one of their own; and in the rear, a slew of ravenous news reporters and journalists who would devour each word that would come out of the judge's mouth. To the left, sat a seemingly indifferent counsel member, and next to her sat the defendant, Sergeant Jaret Whatley. Whatley, broad shouldered, Caucasian, and dressed in a dark gray suit that appeared to be one or two sizes too small, stared at the judge in anticipation. His buzz cut had grown out a bit and his once piercing blue eyes now seemed dull and void.

As Judge Hayes opened his mouth to deliver the sergeant's sentence, he recounted the impactful testimony given by the young victim Kevin's family and questioned himself, *How could something like this happen in this day and age? To an aspiring athlete with a scholarship? To the valedictorian of his class?* He peered into the audience and found the face of the victim's brother. Young, Black, and so full of life. Yet, full of anger and grief as well. It was just two days ago when he last took the witness stand. His testimony, along with everyone else's, was still fresh, still vivid in the judge's mind.

It was a warm summer night, the boy had said, when they entered an empty Foster Park with glowing field lights beaming on the grassy baseball diamond. Kevin Franklin stood tall at home plate and smirked while raising a wooden bat high over his shoulder. Though there were no

fans or college scouts in the bleachers, no coaches or umpires to call the game, and no staff to work the scoreboard, the competition was intense and Kevin was determined not to walk away defeated. His royal blue and gold letterman jacket was covered with stitched patches that displayed four years of athletic achievement. He was the pride of Simeon High School, destined for greatness and less than two months away from giving the commencement speech at his graduation. Despite the 17-year-old's grueling regimen—AP classes, homework, girls, studying for final exams, girls, baseball practice, tattoos, calisthenics training, and more girls—he managed to squeeze in an hour or so on this night to hang out with a few of his friends and help his brother, a sophomore, work on his two-seam fastball. Underneath his hanging dreadlocks, a bead of sweat dripped from his dark-brown forehead. He wiped an eyebrow with the back of his hand, tightened his grip on the bat, and eyed his brother, Keon, as he took the pitcher's mound.

Keon, two years younger than Kevin, but nearly equal in height and speed, gripped the baseball's inner seams with his index and middle finger like Kevin had shown him and faced his older brother from the mound. With his gloved hand, he lowered his hat's brim to rest just above his eyebrows and eyed Kevin from underneath its shadow. It was every younger brother's goal to defeat their older brother in competition if he could, no matter what sport—wrestling, wits, video games, or even tic-tac-toe. Keon was no different. Kevin would be going off to college in a few months and Keon's opportunities to strike him out at the plate (at least once, before he left) were fleeting.

"Don't let him intimate you!"

"He's crowding the plate!" Their two friends "Q" and Timothy called out to Keon from the bleachers behind the chain-link fence and backstop.

Kevin lowered his bat and turned to them. "I thought you guys said you don't pick sides in our rivalry." He nodded to the notebooks and index cards on their laps and added, "Besides, aren't you supposed to be studying for History finals? Don't come asking me for—

WAM! Just then, the hard ball flew past home plate and struck the wooden backstop.

Kevin turned toward the mound.

"That's strike one!" Keon said while grinning.

Kevin's forehead furrowed. "That doesn't count. I lowered my bat and had my head turned."

"That counts!" *Q* shouted while standing. "He didn't call timeout, Keon... Strike One!" he growled in ballpark fashion to everyone's laughter.

"So you're umpire now?" said Kevin facetiously.

Q shrugged his shoulders while laughing. "Don't worry 'bout *me*. Keep *your* eye on the ball."

"Come on," Timothy beckoned *Q* to sit down, then shuffled his history class index cards. "Let's go over Greek philosophy."

"Yeah," Kevin added while tossing the ball back to Keon. He raised the bat once more and faced the mound. He eyed his younger brother carefully and watched his pitching mechanics. Keon raised his front leg, kicked, lunged, and hurled his arm forward. The ball zipped from his hand and sped toward the plate. Kevin watched as the ball appeared in slow motion... Good velocity... Excellent rotation ... Decent ark...

WAM! It whirled past a second time without him even attempting a swing. "Strike Two!" *Q* cheered mockingly.

"Pay attention." Timothy elbowed him.

Kevin reached down, snatched the ball as it rolled near his shoe, and tossed it back to Keon in time to catch a slight smirk on his face. "Play ball," Kevin mumbled under his breath. He raised the bat, bent his knees, and grounded his lead foot in the dirt. Behind him, Timothy and *Q* quizzed each other.

"Aristotle, Plato, Alexander the Great, Socrates ... List the order of succession," Timothy said.

Q looked puzzled then began, "Okay... um, Socrates, Plato, Alexander ... "

Meanwhile, Keon reached back and pitched the ball with all his might. It soared through the air. Strike three was only milliseconds away. The ball whirled and sank near the plate then--

BAM! Kevin's bat whipped and pummeled the ball deep into the air high over Keon's head. It flew, and flew, and flew, until it landed with a few short hops and stopped 300 feet away.

Kevin grinned, then turned to his two friends. He peered through the chain-link fence, met their wide eyes, and then answered, "Aristotle *then* Alexander."

As the night sky darkened, the streetlight's orangish glow cast long stretching shadows behind the four boys as they trekked along the sidewalk and headed home. Keon dragged a few paces behind the others with the bat and ball in hand and sulking in the near victory that was snatched from him. After another block, Kevin glanced over his shoulder, slowed, and strode alongside him. Keon's eyes were cast on the sidewalk.

"You're getting better y'know," Kevin said. Keon sighed and grumbled, "Yeah, yeah."

"I'm serious... Think of it this way; you're only a sophomore and can still out-pitch varsity seniors and juniors. Just give it some time." He took the bat from Keon's hand, swung at an imaginary pitch and admitted, "You're better now than I was as a sophomore."

The remark brought a smile to his younger brother who quickly challenged, "I'm faster than you are too."

"You're crazy!"

The two of them glanced down the block toward their house then back to one another. Keon elbowed his older brother and dashed forward. He raced past *Q* and Timothy. Kevin sprinted after him and yelled, "That's not fair. You got a head start!"

Timothy and Q joined the race and quickly struggled to keep up. And so the four boys raced down Halsted Avenue, in the bloom of youth, while bursting in laughter, and oblivious. Oblivious to the bright headlights that zoomed directly toward them.

Sergeant Whatley gripped the steering wheel of the unmarked patrol vehicle and turned down a murky street while scouring the vicinity for the suspected assailants. A District Five veteran for over thirteen years, he'd seen it all, from homicides and robberies to domestic abuse and drug busts. As of late, he'd seen the city of Chicago plummet from bad to worse as the murder rate increased for the fifth year in a row. It had been only four minutes since his partner, Officer Guerro, received the call from dispatch reporting an assault and armed robbery of a mother on her way home from work. He cruised at a steady pace as his eyes darted back and forth.

"See anything?" Guerro asked.

Whatley peered into the deep shadows that paved the obscured crevices of homes and parked cars. "No, " he said dryly when, suddenly, his eyes locked on something. Fifty feet ahead, four African American males were fleeing in the opposite direction on foot.

"That's gotta be them," Whatley livened up. "They've spotted us. That's why they're running."

Guerro squinted and uttered, "Nah, can't be. Dispatch reported *two* adult male suspects, not four. Besides, those look like kids, teenagers."

"Kids wearing hats, jackets, and hoodies, look like men in the dark," Whatley snarled. "Besides, one of them is carrying a weapon. He's got a bat!" The suspects dashed past the cruising car and fled in the opposite direction.

"No, you don't," Whatley barked while turning the wheel. He did a U-turn and the car screeched as he pressed the gas pedal. The car swerved and the engine roared. The robbers were gaining distance and getting away. The car zoomed forward and moved closer.

"Slow down," Guerro warned. "Hit the siren."

"Shut up! I'm gonna cut 'em off at the corner."

The car lunged ahead as the four robbers weaved down the sidewalk. The corner was less than twenty feet away. Time to *act fast*. The car's hood was parallel to the sprinting Black kids when Whatley cut the wheel.

"Watch it! Watch it! Look out!" Guerro shrieked.

The car veered to the right before the screeching sound of its tires pierced through the quiet neighborhood.

Keon was in the lead, but Kevin was gaining. Home was less than a quarter of a block away and Keon was not about to lose twice in one night. He hurdled a toppled trashcan and sprinted towards the street corner. Kevin was quick on his heels. The two brothers were neck-

and-neck when a growling car engine sounded from behind them. Two bright headlights were the last thing they saw before--

WAM!

Kevin flew on top of the hood as his bat shattered the car windshield, sending shards of glass into the faces of the officers. Razor sharp edges of glass struck Guerro's eyes.

"Aah!!!" he yelled while taking cover.

Sergeant Whatley unholstered his nine-millimeter and aimed it toward the shattered glass. He wiped pieces of glass away from his cheeks and eyebrows. When the suspect rose, he reached his hand toward the bat.

"Freeze! Don't touch that weapon!!!" Whatley ordered.

Timothy and *Q* dashed toward their injured and dazed friend. Keon reached for his older brother just before the deafening sound of gunshots rang in their ears. *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!* Kevin's body plummeted off the car's hood and landed on the pavement with a thud. His bloody hand was still clutching his favorite bat--the bat his varsity coach had gifted to the team's best player.

The deputy district attorney chose to try the sergeant on the minimum and department-friendly third degree murder charge, as opposed to the public's cry for the stiffer first degree or second degree charges. This happened after the D.A. heard the corroborating testimony of the three witnesses, including the deceased victim's younger brother, and despite the sergeant's partner, Officer Guerra's, testimony that at the time he was blinded by glass and had not visually witnessed the details that led to the shooting. The jury convicted former police Sergeant Jaret Whatley as charged, and it was now up to Judge Hayes to deliver a sentence. Scrutinized by the public for his leniency toward cases of officer misconduct and his bureaucratic tyranny over people of color--especially considering that he himself was Black--Judge Hayes diverted his gaze from the many black and brown faces in attendance. As the authority of this courtroom, he mustn't submit to their desires or perceptions of justice but must rely on his own thinking. After all, he felt that there was no evidence or testimony to prove that Whatley acted with malice or a racist agenda. Still, he hadn't allowed the court to hear the sergeant's history of misconduct and civilian complaints; he deemed them irrelevant since they had nothing to do with the case. He now eyed Sergeant Whatley while contemplating an appropriate length of sentence.

He opened his mouth and spoke in a sturdy and confident tone, "Sergeant--" He cleared his throat then began again, "*Mr.* Whatley, you've been found guilty of third-degree murder." Whatley gulped and quivered as the judge continued to speak, "and the court sentences you to a term of ten years in the state penitentiary."

Whatley exhaled and the courtroom erupted in mayhem.

"Ten years!?" a young Black man exclaimed, "If that was one of us you would've gave us fifty years to life!"

"Order!" Judge Hayes slammed his gavel repeatedly. It sounded over the roaring audience, and the bailiff rushed to calm the courtroom.

One of Whatley's fellow officers called to him, "You'll be out in six, Bud. Don't worry."

The noisy crowd lowered to a murmur as Judge Hayes continued, "Mr. Whatley, you have a right to appeal from this sentence. If you wish to appeal it, and you are unable to hire a lawyer, the appellate court will appoint a lawyer to represent you on appeal free of charge. Do you have any questions?"

Whatley dabbed his sweaty forehead with a napkin. "No, Your Honor. Thank you."

Another man stood and said, "Where's the justice?!"

The court erupted again as Judge Hayes spoke over them, "With that, the defendant is remanded to the custody of the sheriff to be transferred forthwith to the department of corrections to serve his term. Good luck to you."

With the slam of the gavel, Keon's heart dropped, as did Q's and Timothy's. Whatley was handcuffed and rushed toward a side door. Kevin's surviving family and friends shouted obscenities toward the disgraced former sergeant and stomped away in wailing disbelief and outrage. The judge's platform was left empty as he escaped swiftly and without anyone's notice.

It was evening when Judge Haley lugged his briefcase and strode through the murky courthouse tunnel, wearing a brown tweed suit. With his black robe removed, his daunting stature appeared to have withered to a thin and weak frame that hung below two scrawny shoulders. Nevertheless, those shoulders bore the weight of civic service, responsibility, and yes, dignity. After all, *justice was served*, as they say. He paced through the tunnel that led to the building's east exit--less conspicuous and quieter than the main exit. His Buick sedan wasn't parked far from it, and he yearned for a quick retreat. He whistled a jazzy tune, twisted the brass knob, and stepped through the door frame when--

"Judge Hayes! Judge Hayes!"

The door shut behind him and a hoard of flashing media cameras, shouting news reporters, and frantic paparazzi swarmed him. He raised a hand to shield himself from the blinding flashes when a woman's voice rose, "Judge Hayes, do you think the trial was fair?"

"No comment."

"Judge Hayes! Judge Hayes!"

He stepped through the mayhem and was brought to a stagger when someone yelled, "Judge Hayes, how does it feel to disgrace your own community?"

"No comment! Move!" He shoved through two cameras and was pushed backward. "Please," he begged the relentless mob. He was shoved again and stumbled.

"Judge Hayes! Judge Hayes! What about the reported threats from the public?" a reporter asked.

"Are you concerned about your safety?" said another.

"Judge Hayes, what about the evening news report of your own grandson, Brandon Hayes, being the latest victim of injustice and racial profiling? Have you had a chance to contact the coroner's office yet?"

Brandon? Coroners??? His voice shook, "That's a lie. You don't know what you're talking about."

He reached in his pants pocket, pulled out his phone, and eyed the screen... *16 missed calls, 2 voicemails, 30 texts*. The last text was from his wife. He opened it: *They killed our grandbaby!*

"No," he gasped, "It ... It can't be."

Just then, a flashing camera seared his retinas and he swayed through the pushing frenzy. "Please! Please!" he whimpered once more. "I just found out that I lost my grandson... please!"

His tearful pleas went unheard, and his once commanding voice sank. It sank below the shouting mob and drowned in the relentless calls of the calloused reporters. He was lost amidst the ravenous mouths of the news media. Their fangs needn't yield to the whims of bias, prejudice, leniency, or even compassion. Fake news, real news, good news, bad news--it was judged all the same and its reports must be given swiftly and distributed, *equally*...After all, is that not the essence of what true justice is... equality and fairness?

About the Author

At the age of 21, Ramelle Kamack went to jail for his role in a gang-related shooting. During his incarceration, he earned college degrees in Business, American Studies, and Social and Behavioral Sciences. He uses his education to confront the role that entertainment has on systemic racism, sexism, and criminal thinking. Considering the story forms of entertainment, a catalyst was always the same among racially divided neighborhoods and crime-ridden communities - they lacked diversity, relativity, and morality in what they fed their minds. "As a writer, if I wanted to use my craft to make a difference in the community, I chose to tell them a different type of story." Seeking to inspire change in the entertainment industry but confined behind bars, he releases his message through his writing.