

Needle Eye by Amada Robles

The first thing he caught in the mirror-covered wall was the sight of his eyes. Despite the dimness, he could still clearly make out his own blue irises reflected back to him. But he couldn't stare into them for too long before looking away.

Walking through the hallway into the small living room, he groped around for the sectional couch, threw his jingling bundle on top of the glass table, and plopped onto the plush couch, letting his body go limp as he sunk into the cushions. In what seems like another lifetime, he would have complained about how this couch had no support, but he caught himself. Disgusted at the thought, he lamented what being back here for only a year had brought back in him – his constant griping. All coming from how the couch was *too* cushioned. He had to remind himself of just how uncomfortable that wooden chair used to be.

That chair. Sitting there in that ridiculous suit his lawyer bought him to wear during trial. The chair that didn't give off any heat, didn't hold a cotton cushion to sit in too long, and yet he still sweated. Why? He wasn't nervous. He sat there because he had to. Paul had overheard something about Sackett taking on this case for free, but there was no doubt in his mind that he was just trying to cut his teeth on something at the federal level. *Moron. He doesn't care about who was guilty or innocent in this. None of them ever do. It's about what you can make other people believe. You're skill as a manipulator of law is all that matters. Figures.* As much as he hated the guy, what he hated more was the idea of being locked in the same row of deadbeats who caused all of this.

He stared in her general direction, but blocked out all else. Hearing nothing else but the clack of her heels on the marble floor, he looked up and felt like ten thousand eyes staring back at him – and least twelve pairs of which he knew were to decide his fate. He was elevated, though, he could see most of the faces in the audience. Was that meant for intimidation or...? His muted ears flooded back to focus when he heard his name.

“Paul?”

“Yes?”

My sights set on a thin-framed woman who stared back at me through thick-framed glasses. Relatively young with an aged disposition, dark-skinned, and sharp hair and facial features, she looked like the puniest element of this whole charade. *The DA's office probably put someone PC in front of the crazed white male to please the masses.* This whole thing was ridiculous. But he played into it. It was diverting. A much needed diversion from the testimonies the day before...

“You seem distracted. Am I boring you, Mr. Woolsey?”

“Objection – relevance?” my circus ringer perked up.

“Sustained,” chimed the black-robed man behind the bench higher than Paul’s.

“It goes towards his character, Your Honor. I believe the jury would find it interesting that an innocent man who has such serious charges laid against him would blithely neglect to pay attention during the cross-examination determining his freedom.”

“Continue, Ms. Jimenez,” the judge said.

“Your Honor, I would like to reintroduced Exhibit F, time-stamped screenshots of Mr. Woolsey’s blog post,” she continued, approaching Paul while her body turned towards

the jury. “Mr. Woolsey, could you please read aloud the highlighted portion of the text dated August 14, 2013?”

“Objection – we’ve been through this, Your Honor,” Paul’s attorney rang out, “just because he wrote the blog does not make him culpable of the shootings at Reynolds last year.”

“I assure you, I have a point to make, Your Honor,” she interjects.

“As swiftly as possible, Ms. Jimenez.”

He peered around the room.

Among the more colorful items he could make out in the lack of light was a purple woven quilt, African or South American – he was sure it was just one of the quintessential foreign items that she displayed to show how traveled and cultured she was.

At the nucleus of the prominent wall in the room were two sets of diplomas captured within pristine black frames. Double undergraduate degrees from Reynolds University and a Law Diploma with Certificate of the Bar. Every picture in the room seemed to revolve around it – a smiling young woman in a white graduation gown, supposedly flanked by her parents. The next, the same woman with short black hair, suited, grinning modestly as she shook hands with a very important looking man in a suit. Another with the woman laughing, holding three nearly emaciated but smiling children in her arms.

Admittedly, he thought, it was beautiful, like a scene straight out of a catalog. Maybe that was what slightly unsettled him. It wasn’t just un-lived. It was artificial.

Approaching car lights shined on the glass framed pictures and he rocked himself off the couch. He meandered his way back toward the hallway, but halted to hide behind the

wall as he saw the light above the hallway entrance turn on and heard the door open and shut. He waited patiently, his ears piqued to the indication of movement.

Hearing shuffling across the tiled floor, he saw one shoe flung across the hallway. He peaked around the corner and saw her turned and bent over, lazily attempting to zip the other boot off with one hand and unraveling her scarf with the other.

He wrapped his forearm around her neck, hinging pressure on her throat with the other arm behind her head. In her panic, the rubber heel of her boot scraped against the tiled floor intermittently with soft slides of her exposed sock.

She flailed her arms reaching back attempting to scratch her attacker's face in vain. The scrape and slide slowed to a halt and she whimpered as she sunk to the floor. He checked her pulse and made sure she was breathing.

Easily lifting her by her shoulders, he hit the barrier separating the hall and living room, where carpeted floors made the dragging more difficult.

He flipped her on her front and pulled her arms to lift her up and hoist her over his shoulder. With his free hand, he dragged a tall wooden chair from the island in the middle of the kitchen.

Paul watched her for about an hour.

He heard a rhythmic buzzing emanating from the hallway. When he put his hand in her leather purse to retrieve the vibrating phone, he saw the caller ID display the caller.

"Carl is calling".

Paul slowly turned and made his way back to his seat in front of the unconscious Eleanora, all the while holding the buzzing phone in his hand. When the phone stilled, another banner appeared, strewn across the top.

“Carl Voicemail (1)”.

He squinted at her while he activated the voicemail to listen to the subdued but noticeably strained voice.. “So, yknow, it *kinda irks me* that you aren’t picking up your phone right now, especially since I just spoke to the DA’s secretary and she said that you called off the protection detail after the trial. Yeah – not your finest moment. Nora!” A frustrated sigh then a pause. “Please answer...if not, I’m coming over. I don’t care if you see that as overbearing or not! Call me, okay?”

Paul sat in a steel cage of sorts. The glass looked out among the others matching his orange jumpsuit before the door opened. A surly man entered as well as a woman in glasses and a very serious looking bun.

The polished prosecuting attorney went on about how if Paul confessed to charges of conspiracy to commit terrorism or something like that, he would give him life instead of the death penalty. But he could care less about the suit sitting in front of him, he continued glancing at the serious bun woman standing behind him.

What, she doesn’t get a chair?

She was stone. She only moved when the attorney motioned behind with his hand so she could give him the folders in her hands. And she didn’t stare at Paul to intimidate him, or study his features; her eyes were firm but not threatening.

He couldn’t tell if she was an intern of some sort or a lawyer just like the man seated before him. *He probably wouldn’t treat her any differently. Boy’s Club crap.*

He saw her stir. Finally. She slowly regained consciousness, animating her eyes to focus and moving her arms.

He saw that moment of fear. She saw him.

Paul guessed he saw her attempt at saying his name, only foiled by the tape adhering her lips together. Her duct tape adherence to the chair frightened her. Her eyes darted back up to see Paul sitting on the couch armrest, staring back calmly. When the woman struggled against her restraints, the taller-than-normal chair begins to fall back – she instinctively leaned forward to regain balance.

Her eyes remained shut until she crashed back with all four chairs legs on the floor, and her shoulders slumped in relief.

The chair was wood, whose arms curved from the back of the chair down to attach to the seat plank. She struggled against her bonds, with her arms, legs, and mouth taped.

Paul reached forward to slowly remove the tape from her mouth. When he had opened a corner, he was slightly surprised at her silence. She didn't scream and her previous hyperventilations slowed to a paced exhale.

Silence abounded in the moonlit living room before Paul spoke.

“You had a protection detail, right?”

“Yes.”

“Why aren't they here now?”

“Would that have stopped you?”

“We really only have time for my questions. You've had my day in court, Ms. Jimenez, I think it's time you've answered mine.”

“Do you have somewhere to be?”

He peered at her with a creased intent. His message to her in this was clear: *I know you're trying to stall. Just answer the question.*

She sighed and glanced away as she spoke.

"I hated it. As soon as the trial was done, I figured I didn't see a reason to spend any more taxpayer dollars on guards. Especially not for me."

"If we're going by that logic," he said, "why spend taxpayer dollars on the trial at all?"

"We don't spend taxpayer dollars on holding a trial in court," she said with her quizzical look.

"Sure you do! The twelve people you chose – the jury of my 'peers' – they missed work days, had to hire babysitters, cancelled vacations – all so that they could sit in a cold room listened to people babble on and on – when they could've been making money or trying to better their lives – because you decided I was guilty of *something*. And they were the only ones who could *possibly* steer that ship, right?"

"It's a summons. They're fulfilling a civic duty."

"They're paying to lose money."

"Maybe that's worth it to some people, have you ever considered that?" she shot back. "The believe in the system is what keeps the engine running."

Paul suddenly rose out of his chair, raising his hands in feigned surprise.

"Hold on. Is that not exactly the point that I was trying to make? You read my blogs, right? You *poured* over them, and can you or can you not agree that the flip side of that coin is fucked up?"

"I agree."

He reeled. He really wasn't expecting that.

"What do you mean?"

"What do *you* mean?"

Another lingering silence ensued.

"Fiction," he retorted. "Money is *fiction*, is it not?" She glanced away as she had already heard this all before.

She still doesn't get it, he thought. If she really took something like this to heart, she would be just as angry as I am.

"The belief in the American dollar is the basis of all that happened – do you agree or do you not?"

"I do."

"So you support what I wrote?"

"No I don't."

This was a new development for him. Frustration was evident as he clinched his fists in annoyance. "So you agree with what I believe, but you don't support it."

"I agree that what you say has basis, but the way you disseminated that opinion was ill-advised. And I think you know that, Paul."

He wagged his finger to halt her. "No no no no no! Are you telling me that you put me on trial for writing stuff you agree with?"

"I put you on trial for killing three people!"

"I thought it was for the thousands that died at Reynolds."

"Why does this matter, anyway?" she began raising her voice. "You were acquitted! You should be out there celebrating – writing some....scathing comment about how poorly

constructed the court system is! At least it won't be broadcast from an armed radio station in Smack-dab-middle Pennsylvania!"

"They took my words and perverted them."

"Were you angry enough to set charges on the relay station to explode in the middle of the night?"

"YES."

This time she reeled. Her mouth hung slightly open.

"Did you care that people might have – and eventually did – perish from that bombing?"

"Some of them were those militants at the compound. I didn't lose any sleep over those murderers."

"Over what they were *saying*? Why does it matter what waves of words they were shooting over a radio frequency if they were just that – words?"

In that moment, his brain-sight was aligned. He let the silence linger in the air for a good long while. Paul recalled the events of the past several weeks in that chilled courtroom. Sitting in that chair tuning everything out. But he concentrated. He focused his mind's energy on ascertaining the things that did stick. *The blogs. All she kept recalling to the court were those blogs. Over and over again.*

"Why are you here, Paul?" she lowered her voice. "Why am I here – taped to this chair? What are you trying to get out of me right now?"

"You're not like the other lawyers," he mumbled back. "You didn't seem...into all of it to...gain some kind of experience in Federal Court. You'd been working there forever – that's what my idiot lawyer was saying" He turned back to her, remembering echoes of

gunfire and screams. “You had two federal prosecuting attorneys killed because they were trying to put me behind bars for what? For speaking my mind.” He felt his face tighten.

“Why would you take that on if *now* you’re telling me you don’t exactly disagree with what I’ve been saying this whole time...?”

“I was trying...to make a point.”

“What. Point.”

“It’s your words, Mr. Woolsey. They affect people.” He soon noticed his heart beating out of his chest. To get a hold of himself, he pulled to a seating position back on the couches armrest. “People won’t get it until we make them understand.” She shook her hung head. “Political correctness doesn’t make you say this and don’t say that. That’s not the point. The point is to make people aware of what they’re saying regardless of their view of that is, what people perceive of it – it actually has an effect on them, changes the context of what your saying *while* you’re saying it.” She looked back at Paul, now sitting at the edge of the armrest. “What you said in your blogs – they may not have killed people, and they don’t make you responsible for the ones that did the killing. But...” he saw her struggling for the words with her look of quieted anguish, “your power of oratory could be used to affect change, be cited as a turning point, to re-stitch our perspective on how we view gun violence and the economy and yet – all you’ve ended up being is another angry man with a keyboard and internet connection. One among the *ocean* of angry men.”

His jaw clenched as his silence made her grow uncomfortable.

“You used me...as an *example*?”

“People won’t wake up, won’t truly...*realize*...without one. The bloodshed would continue and no change would come from it.”

“Alright,” she hissed as he got up from the couch. “Let’s look at it from another perspective.” She squirmed as she perceived his threatening approach. He used the toe of his boot to lift the footrest bar in the middle of the front two chair legs and thrust it back. As she tipped back, though she stiffened her body to the blow, she still hit her head when she crashed to the carpeted floor. He saw disorientation and didn’t care.

“Hey, hey stay with me while we do this,” he smacked her face a little bit to wake her up. Her hyperventilating returned as she trembled with him standing over her. He knelt right over her horizontal position to meet face-to-face, eye-to-eye.

“If you’re talking so much about the power of words, how about this: I looked up the stats. Thirty college student with guns and vitriol took over 90% of the food that was held in the Ag center that is Reynolds State University. Three months later, most of them are dead now. No. *All* dead. You’re people will find them stinking tomorrow morning.” At this, her eyes widened in terror. “The people who deserved to die did. The ones who didn’t are out of this world for good, and are survived by those who know *just how far* that destructive force can go, and are scared and deterred away from it. Violence is at an all time low in Central Pennsylvania. Wouldn’t you agree that more good ended up coming out of that than harm?”

Tears poured out of her eyes, dripping out onto the carpet below. She hissed back.

“Tell that to Sofia Cole.”

Paul was tiptoeing down a large dank hallway, tiled floors with fluorescent lights overhead. Flipping over a stapler in his hand, he came upon a uniformed figure at the

corner with his back to the wall, 6 feet tall. He quickly rushed over to him and held the stapler to the back of his head, claspng the stapler so as to sound its spring-loaded action.

“Think,” he whispered. “I can put this bullet in you head faster than you can turn that rifle on me, you understand? But I won’t do that if you give me the rifle *right now*.”

The uniform maintained a steady breathing.

He gave the rifle over to Paul, seething eyes glancing out from under a camouflage cap.

I can’t believe a few punk kids started this whole thing.

In anger, Paul knocks him on the head, rendering him unconscious.

Taking a knife, flashlight, and radio off of his body, he proceeds down the hall. At the T-intersection of the hallway, he hears automatic fire to his right in the distance and proceeds to the left.

The commands on the radio ring out. “Foots soldiers on the perimeter! Get out of here and avoid the east hallways! They’re coming in from the east entrance!”

He backtracked reluctantly toward the sound of people rushing by, screaming, blending in and out with the gunfire and radio calls.

When he turned the corner, he suddenly came face-to-face with three figures.

Drawing his weapon, he should have shot first. But instead, he examined each one, expecting another delinquent dressed like the punk he knocked out earlier. The figure pointing a double barrel shotgun at him confirmed this. With barrels pointed at each other, Paul was ready and willing to pull the trigger until he looked at the two others behind him.

A girl, though probably no older than 20 and an equally aged guy, both covered in soot, stood cowering. Blood stained the guy's shirt from visible lacerations on his chest that visible through the white t-shirt. He had his stiffened right arm pulled over his chest while the girl held herself up with her arm clutching his neck and shoulder – beaten, bleeding, streaks of former tears striped down her cheeks.

And a camouflage jacket covering up for her lack of pants.

“Get out of the way.” The figure in front spoke out.

“And take a chance of you shooting me in the back? Yeah. No.”

The figure's voice trembled. “I'm taking her out of here. I need to get her out of here.”

His grip loosened as he came to know. Under the gun holder's hat, he saw frightened tearing eyes. Two terrified people stood behind him. Not people. Kids.

They're just kids.

The kid in front noticed Paul's sympathetic stare towards the girl.

A loud explosion rattled the walls and dust powdered in a cloud around the four of them.

“I can't take her out of here by myself. Can you help us?”

This is a trick. But...he's only got one shot, and his hand is shaking.

From a threatening position holding it at the kid's chest one second, the next moment, Paul presented the hilt to him.

“You're in front of me at all times, you understand?”

The kid sniffled and wiped tears away, nodding all the while.

“I’ll carry her.” Paul approached the girl abruptly, and she yelped and reeled away from his hand, cowering closer to the guy holding her up.

He slowly faced his palm up in front of her.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

He stood over her in the splintered wooden chair, her arms splayed while still mostly forcibly adhered to the chair’s arms.

Before he could think of anything to retort with, lights shined through the curtained window.

There he is.

“I guess that means we’re done here.” He quickly rose from his kneeling position and darted to the hallway, flattening himself against the wall next to the door about to open.

The doorknob rattled violently. Before he heard her voice resound from the living room.

“Carl!” she grunted and struggled in the distance. “I’m in here!”

The door crashed open, Paul’s hands softened the blow he would have maintained to his face from the slamming door. His gaze followed a blonde bear of a man rushing through.

“NORA! Nora, where are you?!?”

Paul quietly slipped out of the front door while he heard whimpering and voices fading behind him. He strolled out and towards the road slowly, not turning back to look.