

I don't know about you, but I've always read Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" as a the story of a codependent same-sex relationship gone bad. (What is it between the narrator and the old man?) I'm no critic, however, so instead of a treatise, I've penned a tale of my own, asking this: What would befall the narrator if he went on trial today for the crime that Poe so expertly recounted? —J.P.C.

Telling Tales

JOHN PEYTON COOKE

Are you nervous?" the prosecutor asked me, flipping a lock of hair out of her eyes. Yesterday's papers had criticized her hairdo, and since then she'd somehow found time to get a new one. It didn't seem to me much of an improvement. Now she was staring right at me, and I had to buck myself up by remembering what my attorney told me: *The old man is gone, OK? She's your enemy now. She's the one with the evil eye. You got it, kid?*

"Yes," I said, leaning into the mike, my hands coiling and uncoiling the supple rubber cord. I had reason to be nervous. I was on trial for murder in the first degree, live and uncensored in front of the whole world on Court TV, and it was my first time on television.

"That's all right," she said soothingly. "It's all right."

"But I'm not mad," I added. I glanced over at my attorney to see if I was doing OK. He was wincing like he had heartburn.

"May I remind the court," said the prosecutor, sighing for effect—*oh, she's good, she's very clever—this case is going to make her a star*—"that the defendant has already been found competent to stand trial and that no one here is questioning either his sanity or his ability to testify on his own behalf."

"Noted," said the judge—*smarmy bastard, I'd like to stand up and slap that smirk off his face*. "Proceed."

"You've already admitted to killing the old man."

"Yes, ma'am, that's correct." I swallowed hard.

"Yet you've also stated that you loved him."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why did you love him?"

"He took me off the streets. I'd been living at the Port Authority bus terminal with a bunch of other kids, but we hardly had anything to eat. Then one day this old man comes up and asks me if I want a job taking care of him, and I says, 'Sure.' Of course I loved him. He saved my life, maybe."

"And how did you pay him back?"

"Excuse me?"

"With a knife in the back, isn't that right? Isn't that how you paid him back for all the things he did for you?"

"Objection!" my attorney shouted, standing up, just like on *Perry Mason*.

"Overruled," said the judge.

"That's not true," I said. "It wasn't a knife. It was a bed."

"Of course it was," the prosecutor said. "That was just a figure of speech. The record already shows that you admit to killing the old man. It's also true that the old man was not stabbed with a knife but crushed beneath an overturned bed."

"Proceed with the questioning," the judge directed. *Yes, exactly, let's stick to the point, Ms. Prosecutor.*

"Is this how people who love one another treat each other?" she asked. This question sounded like a trick.

"Um," I said, biting my bottom lip, looking at my lap, screwing up my eyes. My hand tightened on the microphone cord. *When in doubt*, my attorney had told me, *just cry*. I was trying now, but no tears came. I stared back up at the prosecutor, right into her eyes. "I never wanted to. He made me do it."

“How did he make you do it?”

“With . . . with—” I bit my lip again and strained to cry. The sweater my attorney had made me wear was itching and scratching at me, and it was hot in the courtroom. My vision fogged up, and when I blinked, a couple of tears eked out.

“With what?” she prompted.

“With his evil eye.”

“Let me make sure I understand you correctly. You say that it was his evil eye that made you kill him?”

I paused a long time, allowing my lip to tremble, the tears to flow a little more. “Y-yes,” I said quietly.

“Please speak into the microphone,” the judge said.

I leaned forward and bawled out, “Yes!” looking up at the room. Then I sat back against the chair, heaving with sobs—or trying to, anyway. My attorney was going to be proud of me.

“Can you tell us what you mean by his ‘evil eye?’”

“It was just the way he looked at me, most of the time.”

“How did he look at you?”

“Like he wanted to rape me.”

“Isn’t it true that you were his lover?”

“Houseboy,” I said. “He hired me to clean his house, cook his meals, and take care of him. He didn’t hire me to have sex with him. At least, that’s what I thought.”

“But you and he did have sex on a number of occasions, didn’t you?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “But he made me.”

“How did he make you?”

“With his evil eye,” I said.

The prosecutor sighed in exasperation. She hated those two words, I could tell. “Did he ever threaten you?”

“Not at first,” I said. “Not directly.”

“You stated on the record that every time you and the old man had sex, it was rape, that you told him you didn’t want to do it. Perhaps you’d care to share with the court just how this

so-called evil eye could force you to have nonconsensual sex with him?”

“Well, he would just look at you, and you’d have no choice but to do what he wanted,” I said.

“Do you expect us to believe this was some kind of hypnosis?”

“No,” I said, laughing a little. My hand let go of the microphone cord. “But I knew that if I didn’t do what he wanted, he would throw me back out on the street and I’d probably starve to death or something. So when he looked at me like that, I’d tell him I didn’t want to—”

“How did you tell him?”

“I’d say, ‘No, please don’t. I don’t want to have sex with you. Please don’t hurt me.’ Stuff like that.”

“And what would he do?”

“Oh, he’d just stare at me with that evil eye, and then he’d start touching me, and I’d say, ‘No, please don’t touch me, I don’t want you to touch me like that, please stop,’ but he’d just keep on staring at me, and I knew I was going to lose my job if I didn’t do whatever he wanted.”

“How often did this happen?”

“Every day,” I said. “Sometimes twice a day.”

“And you claim that every time you and the old man had sex, it was rape, and that you never gave your consent?”

I smiled. She was getting it right. I leaned forward and spoke very clearly and distinctly into the microphone: “Yes, ma’am, that’s absolutely the truth.”

“And how long were you employed by the old man?”

“Two years, ma’am.”

“So, then, it is your testimony that the old man raped you at least once a day for two years?”

“Yes.”

“That would be at least seven hundred times.”

“If you say so.” I shrugged.

“And you expect us to believe that?”

“Objection!” shouted my attorney.

“Sustained,” droned the judge.

“And yet you never once went to the police or told anyone about this, this constant rape situation?” the prosecutor asked.

“The cops wouldn’t have believed me, and I don’t have any friends or family, really. Besides, I would have lost my job, and it was a pretty good gig.”

“The old man had money, did he?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But you’ve stated on the record that you didn’t kill him for the money, is that correct?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Yet the old man had named you as sole beneficiary in his will, which meant you stood to inherit over eight hundred thousand dollars as well as the brownstone on West 79th Street here in Manhattan, just off the park—the place the two of you shared. Is that correct?”

“I didn’t know nothing about that.”

“You have also stated that it was not a, shall we say, crime of passion, but that you killed him only because of this so-called evil eye. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” I swallowed hard and tried to express concern in my face by squeezing my eyebrows together and raising them up. I clamped my lips together and nodded my head up and down.

“Would you care to explain to us how the old man’s ‘evil eye’ could have caused you to kill him?”

“Sure,” I said. *Now we’re getting to the nitty-gritty.* My attorney sat up suddenly in his seat as if he’d just woken up from a nice nap. He clasped his fingers together on the desk and gave me the signal by scratching a supposed itch on the back of his hand.

I glanced over at the Court TV camera and noted that the red light was still on. Everyone was sitting at home all tensed

up, waiting to hear the real story, waiting for the good part—the violence, the blood, the kill, the enchilada.

“He’d had enough of me,” I explained, breaking into a sob. “He didn’t want me anymore. He had this rigid standard of what he liked in a boy. He’d hired me when I was eighteen, and I’d just turned twenty. I was too old for him. He’d used me up and was ready to throw me away. He’d already started going back out—when he felt up to it—and roaming around the Port Authority, looking for new blood. I know. I followed him.”

“And how did this make you feel?”

“Mad,” I said, then hurried to correct myself. “Not *crazy* mad or nothing, because I’m *not mad*, you know, just *angry* mad.”

“I understand,” she said in that soothing voice again. She reminded me now of the court shrink who’d talked to me on other occasions. Her eyes kept drilling into me, like vulture’s eyes, like the old man’s eye. “Go on, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Thank you.” I wiped the sweat from my brow and took a sip of water from the tiny glass before me, careful not to spill it on the microphone. Wouldn’t want it to short out right in the middle of my big moment on nationwide TV.

“If you’d like to take a break—”

“No, ma’am,” I said, “I’d really like to finish.”

“Go ahead.”

“Where was I?” She had interrupted my train of thought, and I’d forgotten where I was in my tale.

“You kept following the old man to the bus terminal.”

“Yes, thank you. Anyway, now whenever he looked at me, I knew what he was thinking. He wanted to kill me.”

“How did you know the old man wanted to kill you?”

“He said so.”

“What were his exact words, do you remember?”

“Well, you see, he knew that what he done to me was

wrong . . . molesting me like that every day, making me do whatever he wanted, humiliating me like that . . . but he was what they call ‘in the closet,’ and he didn’t want anyone to know what he done to me. So sometimes he would just give me the evil eye and say something like, ‘If you ever tell anybody about this, so help me I’ll kill you.’”

“Did you take these supposed threats seriously?”

“Of course,” I said. “I was frightened for my safety.”

“So on the night in question, it has been your testimony that you thought the old man was about to kill you, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“What made you think that?”

“He’d told me I was fired and I should pack up my bags and leave the next morning. He was hiring someone new, someone younger, smoother. He said he was tired of me.”

“And you interpreted that to mean that he wanted to kill you?”

“Objection, your honor!” said my attorney. “Prosecution is leading the witness.”

“Sustained,” the judge said. “Prosecutor, please rephrase your question.”

“What specifically did he say to you that made you think he wanted to kill you?”

I leaned into the microphone, and my fingers began stroking the black insulation. “He told me I was being let go and if I ever told anyone about him, he was going to kill me.”

“Was there any witness to this statement?”

“No.”

“So you had been fired. Did this make you upset?”

“Not really. But I was upset that he wanted to kill me.”

“You’ve testified already that you and the old man went to bed that night at around the same time. But you couldn’t sleep. Would you please tell the court what happened after that?”

“He came into my room.”

“Who came into your room?”

“The old man came into my room, and I woke up, but I still pretended to be asleep. I made it look like my eyes were still closed, but I could see him standing there in the moonlight, staring at me with his evil eye. And I got scared.”

“Was he threatening you?”

“Yes, with his eye.”

“Was he holding anything in his hands?”

“No. Then he left, but I knew he would be back.”

“Why did you think that?”

“He was just looking in to make sure I was asleep. Then he was going to come back and kill me.”

“Go on. Guide us through. Tell us what happened.”

“I was a wreck. *I thought, I've got to do something, or I'm going to die!* And I knew that I'd better act fast, or he'd be back with an ax or something. So I got up and walked very carefully to his bedroom. Oh, you should have seen how cautious I was! I opened his door carefully—inch by inch—and stepped lightly so I wouldn't wake him up.”

“I thought you said he had just visited your room and was just about to kill you,” said the prosecutor.

“Let me finish!” I snapped. This would be good, I thought, and would show how much strain I was under, would make the members of the jury all the more sympathetic. *If you win their hearts*, my attorney had said, *we can get this thing knocked down to second-degree—hell, kid, maybe even manslaughter.*

“Go on,” said the prosecutor, resigned. Her eyes dimmed a little. I was in control now, before all the world.

“The old man always kept his room very dark, so I'd brought a flashlight. I needed to make sure he was really there in bed, you see, and not hiding behind the door. So I flicked it on, but the switch made a loud *click!* and he sprang awake, saying, ‘Who's there?’ I shut it off and left him staring around the darkness. I stood still, not making a peep. I stood

like that for an hour, and the old man stayed sitting up in bed, listening, and wouldn't go back to sleep. It was so quiet, I could hear his heart beating, like a watch ticking. Finally, I decided I'd better get it over with before he killed me, so I switched the flashlight back on, and the light landed right on his evil eye!"

I paused, waiting for her to ask another question, but she just stood there staring at me. I assumed that she wanted me to continue. My attorney had told me not to talk so much and not to talk unless asked a question, but I couldn't stop myself now.

"It was him or me," I said, "so I came at him, dragged him out of bed, and pulled the bed over on top of him. His heart kept beating for a while. I could hear it, but it was muffled by the bed. Then it stopped. He was dead, and so was his eye."

"And you are claiming that it was self-defense, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You state that the old man was about to kill you, and that you had no other choice, is that your testimony?"

"Yes, that's it." I smiled eagerly at her. She was getting it right, finally.

But suddenly she came forward, placing either hand on the witness stand, and stared down at me with those eyes of hers. She was blocking the TV cameras. Her eyes were intimidating, and instinctively I shrunk down in my seat, remembering how the old man had used his eyes to make me do his bidding.

The old man is gone, OK? She's your enemy now. She's the one with the evil eye. You got it, kid?

"Yes," I mumbled. I peered over the prosecutor's shoulder to get a glimpse of my attorney. He gave me an encouraging nod that said to me, *don't give up now, give her all you've got.*

"Then tell me *why*," the prosecutor screamed at me, "why, if this was an act of self-defense, you would go to the

trouble of *dismembering* the corpse, *cutting off the head and limbs*, tearing up the flooring, and *hiding* the bloody body parts under the *planks*? I'd like to hear you try to explain that!"

"There was no blood on the body," I corrected her. "The tub caught it all."

"I thought you said the *evil eye* was *dead*. It couldn't have told you to cut him up, could it? It couldn't have told you to hide the body, could it? Because it was dead! The old man was dead! You *murdered* him in *cold blood* and then tried to cover it up. And you almost got away with it, didn't you? Except that you *admitted* it to the police! You tore up the floor yourself and told them the *whole thing!*"

"Objection, your honor," said the attorney. "I would remind the court that the defendant recanted his confession, which was made under duress and is not part of the evidence in this trial."

"Sustained," said the judge. "Strike the prosecutor's comments from the record. And I would warn you against making further references to matters this court has deemed irrelevant."

Oh, this made her mad! She was standing there over me like some bird of prey eyeing her kill. She wanted to get me. She was my enemy, all right. My attorney knew all along.

"The fact is," said the prosecutor, breathing heavily now and staring right into my eyes. She was so close, I could hear her little bird heart beating. "The fact of the matter is, the old man was perfectly harmless. Our medical experts have testified that there is no evidence you were ever forced to have sex, and the court psychiatrist has testified that you do not fit the psychological profile of someone who has been raped even once, let alone seven hundred times. The fact of the matter is, you stood to inherit nearly a million dollars in cold, hard cash, plus a choice piece of Manhattan real estate—you, who until you met the old man had been sleeping in the

dingy corridors of a rat-infested bus terminal! The fact of the matter is, you murdered the old man in a horrible, violent act that was cold and premeditated. The fact of the matter is, you acted to hide all evidence that any murder had even taken place. *And you came this close to getting away with it. Isn't that right?"*

This last bit she whispered at me, but I'm sure it was picked up on the microphone and carried over the cable lines to the living rooms of millions of housewives and unemployed people. She was holding her fingers together, demonstrating that I had come within a hair's breadth of success. And she was right.

If I didn't act fast, I was going to let my attorney down, and I couldn't do that—not after everything he'd done for me.

Before the prosecutor knew what was happening, I was yanking the mike out of its holder, looping the cord around her neck, and pulling her head down into the witness box. I tightened the cord with a quick yank. Her new hairdo fell in her face. The judge was pounding his gavel and calling for the deputies. The prosecutor looked up at me, and her evil eyes bulged out of her sockets. Her heart beat faster and faster and then, suddenly, stopped.

As the deputies dragged me from the stand, I glanced over at my attorney. The camera and all eyes in the courtroom were trained on me, so he was in no danger of being seen.

His eyes had gone misty, and his smile had gone greedy, and he very discreetly gave me a big fat thumbs-up.