

Inked hands

Etta had always wondered why she found such comfort in disassembling a pen. She unscrewed the tip, took out the spring, then the ink chamber, the clicker and finally tipped the end cap from the barrel. She considered the pieces that were left in the navy folds of her skirt. How extraordinary it was that none of these pieces made sense without each other: exclude one, replace one with another that did not fit, or assemble them in the wrong order, and they would no longer be a working pen. They each had their exact place, value and function. Equilibrium allowed the ink to flow.

She put the pen back together.

A bell sounded, echoing through the chilly corridor. Etta stood, gathered her purse, tucked away her pen and walked to where the looming double doors gave way. Here, her fate would be decided.

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Etta was no longer a stranger to this room, but all the same, her eyes traced the intricate, magnificent details of justice. Justice. She wondered how far removed the definition of that word was from the very environment in which it was supposed to rule.

She clicked her pen.

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Etta dared not lower her gaze from that of the jury as she was led to her seat in the dock. She sat.

The opening statements were tedious and told Etta nothing new of her situation. Still – perhaps foolishly – she let herself hope. The prosecutor’s drone, however, did not let her indulge in such sentiments. She heard what she did to those four souls; when she did it, who was a witness: she became numb to the ‘cold hard’ facts. The pen disintegrated beneath her restless fingers. She waited.

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The spiel ended and Etta’s pulse throbbed in her temples. From the double doors, a small trolley forced its way into the courtroom. Her white knuckles feebly contained the pen pieces. All looked on in anticipation.

The trolley was ordinary. Plain steel. Purely functional. Unbreakable.

Wheels squeaked and squawked as it pushed through the atmosphere that had grown thick with tension. It came to a halt in front of the dock.

Etta's tears spilled onto her cheeks. Loss, despair... emptiness overcame her. Whose words – whose memories were these?

Her pen fell apart.

More pain, more lies, more gruesome details... *memories*. Her voice recounted her *memories* as they were pushed into her brain. Reality blurred.

She glimpsed her *reflection* in the shiny casing of her pen. Gleaming, emerald eyes stared back at her... where had she seen those eyes before?

"Thank you. I believe no further questioning is required."

At last, she was freed from the electrodes, but she could feel nothing. She knew nothing. What had she remembered? What had she forgotten? She looked down at her inky hands desperate to separate fact from fiction, but how could she when she could not *remember* which was which?

Etta stared with anguish into the judge's cold, gleaming, *emerald* eyes. She didn't notice the thin curl of metal that escaped her shaking, inky, fingers as she pieced together the pen. She didn't wince at the gasps of horror or the guilty verdict.

Etta pressed the end of the pen, but it didn't click.