

Vilomah

The railing between the bench and the defendant's table is not enough of a barrier. She wishes she had sat in the back. She wishes she had not come at all.

Five months. It has been five months since what Petra now dismissively and bitterly refers to as 'The Incident.' Despite the time passed, the memory remains vivid. Whenever she's alone, whenever it's a little too quiet, she swears that she can still hear it.

Avoiding Rocko entirely is difficult. Their lives are entwined — photos of him remain around the house and his clothes still line the closet neatly beside her own. She doesn't know how to throw them out, to abandon her love for him. She doesn't know that she can. Even now, as he glances back every so often, it takes every ounce of self-control she has to avoid eye contact.

When he turns away, Petra allows herself to look. She remembers a conversation they had nearly a year ago.

Rocko had shook her until she woke and whispered in her ear.

"Do you think we're special?"

"What?"

"Are we, as humans, special? Higher creatures created in God's image? Or are we just animals, subject to the same instincts and urges as any other animal?"

"Shut up, it's three in the morning."

The conversation had ended there. He never brought it up again.

The judge enters and everyone rises to their feet. Petra's eyes continue to linger on the back of her now distracted husband. Rocko's character is brought into question, and she wishes that someone — that *she* — had thought to question his character before.

Petra had always thought him to be kind and gentle. He took a job at an environmental conservation group, volunteered every Sunday with her, and insisted on adopting rather than having biological children.

"We want kids, they want parents. How can we ignore that, Petra? That's not what a good parent would do."

When she became pregnant, they had been halfway through the adoption process. They agreed to push back their plans until their child was at least three, so not to overwhelm them or the child they would be bringing into their home.

They laughed together. They played games together. They had set up a nursery in their spare room and prepared the basement for their next kid after deciding they would adopt someone older. Those were always the kids that had the most trouble finding homes, Rocko had explained.

Two months into the pregnancy, Rocko insisted they both change their diets; they needed to be healthy for the baby, they needed to eat a more natural diet. He focused on the Paleo diet, and while he was prepared to explain why it was a good idea, Petra thought he was

one of the most intelligent people she had ever known and had agreed with him immediately. It took longer for him to convince her to eat the placenta, though.

When she had become too pregnant to do much of anything but obsess over collecting plants, he helped her learn about and pick out different species. It was while they were out buying seeds that they had decided on the name Heather for the baby.

When he had become fascinated with wildlife documentaries and that was all they watched for three weeks straight, she happily watched right along with him. In the week before she gave birth, he convinced her to leave their doctor in favor of a midwife and a natural birth.

Everything had been going smoothly, up until she had gone into labor. It was difficult, long, and when the baby finally came, everything was silent except Petra's crying and groaning. Heather's umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck. Petra only caught a glimpse of her purple face and limp body before she lost consciousness.

If she had just stayed awake and if she wasn't so weak, so exhausted, could she have stopped it? It wouldn't change him if she had, and it wouldn't bring their daughter back, but she could at least still have her husband the way she knew him to be.

The judge directs his attention to the jury, and Rocko takes that moment to glance back at Petra. Their eyes meet and her chest tightens as the image, the sounds, come rushing to her mind.

She had woken up to screaming. Disoriented and fatigued, Petra had pulled herself up and hurried as fast as she could to the other room. The midwife pushed past her, fear on her face, as she ran down the hallway.

Petra didn't see anything at first. She just heard the wet, chewing sounds coming from the far corner of the room. She hadn't been sure what she had been expecting to see, but it certainly wasn't Rocko sitting, hunched over their wrinkled, bloodied infant as he bit into her side. Petra was frozen, silent as she listened to the tiny bones crunch under the pressure of his gnawing.

The decision is made, and the jury rises. His fate was decided before the jury had even sat down, before the trial had ever been scheduled. He is not sentenced, but instead is committed to a psychiatric hospital. Petra turns away, watching the jury as they file out of the room to avoid Rocko's sad, pleading gaze. Despite herself, she spares him one backward glance, but he is no longer watching her, but looking forward as he is led away.

Two seats down, Rocko's mother mutters a prayer under her breath. Petra wonders if Heaven will still take him, or if he had ever even been a candidate.