

Introduction to Douglas Kolacki's "Clarence Darrow and the Murder Victim"

When we dread the rewriting of an existing order, our minds often wander to comforts that we've enjoyed for a long time. We envision the permanent transformation of factors in our daily lives that we believe to be guaranteed. At one shining moment in the history of the United States, captured in the idealizing films of Frank Capra and paintings of Norman Rockwell, the fair rule of law seemed like one such guarantee, but in "Clarence Darrow and the Murder Victim," the intrusion of ugliness—some supernatural ugliness—into the pretty picture threatens a whole new way of doing legal business. Kolacki's story places this frightening threat to traditional law and order in a place that physically embodies the very concept of rules: a courthouse.

About the Author

Douglas Kolacki began his writing career while stationed with the U.S. Navy in Naples, Italy. Since then, he has placed fiction in *Amazing Stories*, *Weird Tales*, *Liquid Imagination Online* and *The Fifth Dimension*, among other outlets. He currently haunts Providence, Rhode Island.

Clarence Darrow and the Murder Victim

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by Douglas Kolacki

Chicago 1924

The trial had been grinding on for a month—that was like half a year to a schoolboy like Billy—but now the day had come, the day he and all the boys had buzzed and chattered about while running back and forth to school or playing kick the can in the Lincoln Park back lot. Counting down the days and lying awake nights, eyes on their plaster ceilings, conjuring images of what the undead might look like. And best of all, the trial had dragged into October, so it was like two Halloweens this year: the thirty-first coming up, and now—today—the twelfth!

Nine-year-old Billy was a ball of energy with an unruly shock of brown hair. Robert, his neighbor, born exactly twenty-four hours later, had sandy hair cut close by his barber father. The boys flew out their doors with lunchboxes in hand, making not for school but the courthouse. Dashing across streets, careful to avoid the Model T's rattling by, they saw first the tall building, then the crowd at its base, a teeming swarm of humanity in suits and bonnets and straw hats. But how to get in? The coppers were there of course, and they had a bad habit of shoing kids away (“Go to school and don’t come back!”).

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But today, there were simply too many people to contend with. Billy and Robert hid their lunchboxes behind a trash can then made for the door, darting through gaps and wriggling past the newsmen with press cards stuck in their hatbands. They were boys on a mission, and there was no stopping them.

And so they ended up with a prime spot in the front, wedged between the wooden railing and a three-hundred-pound lady behind them, with a good view, the *best* view right in front of the witness stand where the victim would appear. The lady glared down her long nose at them and harrumphed, but she stopped short of reminding them they were supposed to be in school. Nobody reminded them. Who could think of boring old school on a day like this?

“Billy, look!” Robert pointed, keeping his voice hushed. “There’s Darrow.” Billy looked.

There he was, the defense lawyer, sitting at a table with the killer. The first thing Billy noticed, with surprise and satisfaction, was that Darrow had unruly hair like his own, only it was combed over the side of his head. He wore shirtsleeves and suspenders. A cigar sat on the table in front of him, not yet lit, but he had a habit of smoking them in courtrooms. Billy would not have taken this man for an “at-tor-ney,” as Pa called them.

But the killer beside Darrow in the fine suit and tie—that *was* the killer, right? For he looked every bit like an at-tor-ney himself. Not someone who had forced a nineteen-year-old woman into his car, and then... Billy shuddered, not wanting to recall what the man had done with those hands—the hands now folded matter-of-factly on the table as the accused nodded, listening to Darrow, who seemed to be telling him a lot. The man’s smooth face, his own black hair perfectly trimmed and perfectly combed, his eyes not at all worried, it all said he was only here to take care of business. Hold on—*was* he the actual crook? Maybe he was really Darrow’s assistant.

If it were me on trial, Billy thought, *I’d be scared spitless and biting my nails*. Scruffy old Charlie at school, who Billy and Robert avoided, always stalking about in the halls and getting into fights—he might kill someone, if he got mad enough. But that clean-cut guy? Naw. Couldn’t have.

Two things about this trial, however, were different. One being, the man at the table was the killer all right, because at Darrow's urging, he had admitted it. Pledged "guilty." So, the trial wasn't about that. It was about whether he should get the death penalty.

The other thing: Despite Darrow pulling out all the legal stops, the victim herself was supposed to testify today.

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The crook had pleaded guilty. There was no need, Darrow insisted, for witnesses and Exhibit-A's and all that if the culprit admitted the deed. But the judge had ruled that the victim's own statement was bound, more than anything else, to determine whether the killer should get the worst of all punishments or else spend the rest of his life in prison.

That was hard for Billy to imagine. It would be like having to stay at school all day, every day, and sleeping there at night. Sleeping on his desk, he supposed. And never getting to go home? At all? And none of Ma's homemade apple or pumpkin pies, unless she brought some when visiting. And no lamb chops, or chicken dinners for Christmas, unless...? He guessed he would have to eat whatever they wanted to feed him. What if they only ever fed him vegetables? Uch—Billy made a face. *That* life didn't sound too good at all.

"Not to worry," Billy's father had said at the breakfast table, face buried in the newspaper. "Life in prison means he does a few years, living pretty well in there with everything his father sends him" (Billy had also heard the crook's parents were quite rich) "and then he gets paroled after—oh—ten years or so."

But first, Darrow and his clean-cut client had to get past today. Doctors and psychiatrists had taken their turns, and now only the victim and her story remained—yes, it was "admissible" even in her present state, Pa had announced from behind his newspaper—and the judge had reserved this entire day for her.

Billy fidgeted, trying not to bounce on his feet, until the black-robed judge

came out—"All rise" bawled a man in a uniform with a badge—sat down at his high bench, and went through some rigamarole. *Jeepers! Are you going to bring her out?* Robert, crouched at his side, scowled.

And then a hush fell over the courtroom. Darrow, and his client who Billy still had trouble believing was a killer, watched the door. The judge was giving some sort of stern warning against "undue displays of emotion," all of which seemed to Billy perfectly normal reactions to a dead person showing up. Anyone screaming or raising a fuss would be removed from the courtroom. The judge did not explain how the grim-faced man in the uniform would squeeze through the crowd to get to them, unless they were at the front. What if they were in the middle, or all the way in back? By the time he reached them, they would probably be done screaming, so Billy didn't really see the point. But he barely heard the judge anyway; his attention was fixed on the door, along with Robert's and everyone else's.

A small, fidgety man with a pencil mustache, who Billy guessed was some sort of court clerk, scrambled from the room. After what seemed like an hour, though it was really only a minute, the door reopened more slowly, its hinges even creaking like in a haunted house. Other than that, the courtroom was dead quiet.

Now the clean-cut man looked worried. In fact, his face was white—Darrow placed a hand on his shoulder. Billy held his breath, goosebumps rising on his skin.

There was a sound of dragging footsteps. Billy caught a whiff of rotten air, like when a possum had died under the house. He held his breath, leaning forward, and nothing existed but that doorway. His heart was pounding hard enough to break his ribs. *Here she comes!*

And there she was.

A gasp went up from everyone. One woman even shrieked. Billy, however, was too enthralled to notice. Unlike the crook, the victim looked just like she was supposed to. Her skin had dried to a waxy yellow, the outlines of cheekbones and eye sockets showing plain beneath tightly stretched skin, her dull, filmed-over eyes sunken back in their two dark wells. Her bared teeth were all there, two rows of glorious white in the midst of all that rot,

her lips shrunken back. Her nose was gone, only the two holes like on a skull. Most of her hair remained, yellow and sweeping down her head. Her rib cage showed even through the white knee-length dress she wore. The same dress she was buried in? Billy wondered. Or did someone... change her clothes? She shuffled on bony legs, her taut skin not quite covering everything—she had been dead how long now? Her right leg, her left arm had holes in them, like how Uncle George's pants got holes in the knees because he'd worn them too many times. It would have really scared Billy if he saw those sorts of holes on a living person. But with these dead ones, well, they weren't even alive anymore, so anything went.

A man in a white coat like a doctor, and a policeman in a crisp new uniform, walked on either side of the witness, helping her along (*They're holding her hands? Ewww!*). She shuffled, feet never lifting off the floor, into the courtroom. Billy hugged the post, eyes fixed to this dead person who wasn't supposed to be walking, but here she was.

Billy stole a glance at the clean-cut man. Like Darrow, he kept his face deadpanned, but it was even whiter now, and sweat glistened on his cheek. Billy would have given his two front teeth to know what he was thinking right then. Probably, *I never should have left her mouth in such good shape. How was I supposed to know she would actually show up here? What's the matter with her? Doesn't she know she's supposed to be in the ground? Heck! I should have—*

She had reached the witness stand, her carrion reek very noticeable on top of everyone's body odor packed into this small place—Billy began to wish someone would open a window—when Darrow stood up.

“Your honor. May I submit the near-certain likelihood of the witness's brain not functioning at full capacity. “

The judge gave him a annoyed look. “Mr. Darrow. The witness here has been examined by two neurologists concerning that very matter, as you very well know.”

“Your honor, that was three days ago. A body's normally formidable resistance to bacteria ceases entirely at death, after which the body rapidly decomposes, including the brain. The rate for even a single day must be taken into account.”

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Someone near Billy groaned. Darrow also knew—and there was no way not to know, because the papers had ransacked this case for every last detail to splash onto the front page day by day—the victim had been packed in ice at a nearby meat-packing plant, lots of ice brought in every day “at great expense,” according to Dad. Could we just stop with these motions and whatnot and let the witness *talk*? Billy was aching to hear what her undead voice sounded like.

But he knew why, as everyone did. Darrow hated the death penalty, whatever the crime was. The very idea put him on the warpath. It had something to do with when Darrow was a boy, Billy’s Dad had said: Darrow’s father watched a man hang, and it made him sick, sicker than anything, and he told his son all the gory details. Darrow would move heaven and earth, try every last trick and then invent new ones, argue on and on forever, split a thousand and one hairs to get the criminal out of it, so Billy had heard.

“I have here today,” said Darrow, “a pathologist who is prepared to testify that at this point in the brain’s decomposition—even if preserved in ice—it has deteriorated beyond where the witness can accurately recall details or give reliable testimony. “

Oh, for Pete’s sake! Billy clutched the post tighter, and Robert blew out a snort.

And then the victim caught Billy’s eye.

She stood in front of the witness stand, the doctor still holding onto her arm, the policeman now a few steps off to her right. She looked straight at the clean-cut man with eyes glaring like lightning from the dark well of their sockets. Her fingers, bony twigs, flexed and unflexed. The killer didn’t see her looking, her flexing. He watched Darrow’s performance instead.

The judge heaved a sigh, took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. Billy could guess what he was thinking. *I set aside the whole day for this witness, and now...*

The victim kept her gaze on the defendant. He still did not notice her. Her fingers flexed and her lips, already parted, peeled back even more to bare her teeth in full view.

“I also must submit to the court,” Darrow went on, “that with the abun-

dance of testimony already on the record, the extraction of this unfortunate young woman from the sanctity of her final resting place was a cruel and unnecessary gimmick—”

She sprang.

Billy jolted. Everyone cried out, and some women screamed. The woman had moved slowly before, as if she would fall apart if she tried to do anything normally. But now all her strength and speed returned in a single burst of fury, lunging at the clean-cut man who gave her his attention at last, his eyes and mouth springing wide. She hit him like a whirlwind, clawing with her hands, biting with her teeth. Billy covered his eyes and then parted his hands to look again. Absently he was aware of Robert grabbing his arm and holding on. People jostled, shouted as the snapping teeth bit something important in the struggling defendant’s neck, and real blood spurted out.

Billy went dizzy and light in the head. He was sure he would lose his breakfast. He managed to hold onto it, although he did hear someone else puke and smelled the sour stuff along with everyone’s body odor. The policeman fell on the victim who still bit the crook’s neck like a vampire, the floor around them a mess of crimson. Blood sprayed, drops sprinkling the floor within reach of Billy, the woman behind him bellowing “Oh! Oh! Oh!” in a high trilling voice like an opera soprano.

Oh, crud! Billy held to the post with white-knuckled hands.

In moments, it was over.

A hush fell. Hardly anyone, however, had left the room—in fact no one at all, so far as Billy could tell, except of course the reporters. He had broken out in a sweat and his stomach swam. Robert looked dazed and green. Ambulance men arrived—someone must have called them—and bent over the tattered fellow now sprawled on the floor, motionless as an animal mauled and fed upon by lions. It was plain to see there was no more need for anyone to testify, to argue, or for the judge to decide if the killer should get the death penalty or not. They covered him with a sheet, brought in a stretcher, and carried him out.

I never saw anyone killed before, Billy thought over and over as Robert trembled beside him. *I never saw anyone die before*. He was sure he would see

it again in his dreams. He wanted to get home to Ma and Pa. He wished he had not come.

As for the woman responsible for the unauthorized execution, the policeman and the uniformed court guard held onto her arms. She wore handcuffs on her bony wrists, but there was no need for them. She had spent herself, and now she sat quietly on the floor with her legs drawn up to her chest, chin resting on her knees, splattered with her murderer's blood, her sides ever so slightly expanding and contracting with the faint wheeze of her breaths.

Billy, and everyone, looked to the judge. Amazingly he had not banged his gavel or called for order at any time during the uproar. He was white in the face, stunned as everyone.

A new voice broke the silence: the copper quietly informed the woman she was under arrest.

Darrow perked up. Until now he had stood rigid, gaping from the defense table as his client's life bled out before him. Scarlet drops sprinkled his shirt. Running a hand over his head, he cleared his throat and straightened his posture.

"Your honor... as the accused—the young woman now accused, I mean—requires counsel, I wish to—to volunteer my services."

A gray-haired man and a long-faced bespectacled woman, both draped in black, waved to him from among the spectators. He took a moment to notice, but when he did, he nodded back. Billy, like everyone, knew who they were: the victim's mother and father. God only knew how they had felt when seeing their daughter the way she was now.

"May I request... a week... to prepare my case. Yes, she committed the crime as we have all seen, but... having been rescued from death itself, she cannot... possibly... suffer the injustice of condemnation to it, to death, for a second time. I..." He swallowed. "I mentioned I had brought a pathologist. I am confident that upon examination of the accused, he can confirm that—that her brain is impaired, as I have explained before. Impaired."

Billy, listening, almost forgot his nausea. Looking around, he saw the same gape of amazement on every face.

Billy tapped on Robert's shoulder, jerked his head toward the door. His

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friend's face relaxed into relief, as if he had been waiting for an excuse to leave. The two started off, weaving back through the forest of legs. Better get home. Billy wanted that right now more than anything else in the world.

Introduction to Douglas Ford's "Why I'm Running the Spookshow Now"

The usurpation of one order by another can be violent and horrific, but it can also result in positive change. Even if the result makes those means worthwhile, it doesn't make those means any less of a terror to behold. The rise of the new order may, in fact, be so ghastly that it is burned forever into our minds. Consider, for instance, the brutal overthrow of a dictator, torn apart by the hands of a furious mob, or the even more extraordinary event of this story, about the passing regime of a neglectful and exploitative manager at the helm of a traveling magic show.

About the Author

Douglas Ford's (he/him) short fiction has appeared in a variety of anthologies, magazines, and podcasts, as well as three collections, *Ape in the Ring and Other Tales of the Macabre and Uncanny*, *The Infection Party and Other Stories of Dis-Ease*, and *Let's Cut Up Dad! and Other Stories of Transgressive Madness*. His longer works include *The Beasts of Vissaria County*, *Little Lugosi (A Love Story)*, *The Trick*, and *Who Dies First*, and the upcoming *The Bloody Bucket*. He lives on the west coast of Florida.

Why I'm Running the Spookshow Now

by Douglas Ford

The spookshow was dying. As an institution, I mean. I almost said “art,” but nothing Cal Edwards ever did could properly count as an art. He sure wanted to revive it, though, so he gassed up the vehicles and took us on the road to Florida.

Not to Gibsonton, where we spent the off-months with the carnies and freaks, but to Cassadega, an even stranger place on account of the psychics and mystics who settled there in the 1800s. My mother warned me about Cassadega people when she tried to teach me how to use the cards to tell fortunes. She said those Cassadega people didn't hustle like the rest of us. No sir, they actually believed they could talk to the dead and forge deals with the devil. They founded a whole town to prove it.

I reminded Cal of the town's reputation. No sense of running the spookshow down there, not in front of people who believed they could perform the tricks not only better but for real. A ghost on a wire wouldn't impress them. But Cal waved me off. Said he didn't want to go there to perform. He wanted to recruit someone. An actual witch.

Never mind that I'd wanted that job for years. I needed a break from my usual role, the girl who got chased around the stage by the Frankenstein monster. We usually ended the spookshow with some lightning effects and the monster coming to life. He would lumber after me, his arms grabbing at

my clothes and hair. Depending on the dimensions of the theater, I might even run into the audience, where I would have to evade the eager paws of overly enthusiastic men. On more than one occasion, one of them managed to tear my blouse so that by the time I made it back to the stage, I had one tit hanging out, with the whole theater clapping and cheering in a way that made me feel fearful and ashamed.

We still ended the routine the usual way, me running to Cal, who would urge me to escape by climbing into a big box. With me hidden inside, the monster pretended to become frustrated and confused. Once he shambled off the stage, my head, arms, and legs would appear through strategically placed holes in the box. Cal would pretend he couldn't find the latch to free me, so he would pick up a saw and declare his intention to cut me out. You can probably guess where that went. Only unlike traditional magic shows, we used fake blood. Lots of it. I made some good faces during the sawing, too.

After one of the wardrobe incidents, I threatened to stop performing these antics, sending Cal into a panic.

"You can't. That'll put an end to us and the whole spookshow game. It's dying for real. And it's all Lewis's fault."

He meant Herschell Gordon Lewis, the huckster who released *Blood Feast* into the drive-ins that year. All that gore in full color on the silver screen meant trouble for us, unless we could find ways of making our show more lurid.

"How about more creative instead?" I asked. Then I told him my witch idea.

"Let me think about it."

Well, he did, and what does the bastard do but take us to Cassadega so he could find us a *real* witch? Not only that, but he insisted on meeting the witch by himself and told the rest of us to go and enjoy the sights. "Get your palms read or something," he said. "Consider it a day off."

That only worsened my mood. I decided to get back at him by stealing some of his beer and setting off for a walk that led me to the local cemetery. Not the most scenic place in the world or even Florida thanks to all the weeds,

but quiet enough for a person to sit and think. If the spookshow was dying, then I needed to explore my options, especially with my thirtieth birthday only months away. I didn't want to give Cal the best years of my life and have nothing to show for it.

I found a good place to do my thinking, a large bench in the heart of the cemetery. Not the most comfortable resting place, but better than a hole in the ground. And quiet.

It didn't remain that way for long. Before I could crack open the first beer, a figure came into view. I found myself looking upon an angular face topped by a slouch hat and a stooped body covered by a coat that looked too warm for the Florida weather. *Oh good, a vagrant*, I thought.

"You have another one of those?" this individual asked, pointing toward the bottle in my hand.

It so happened I did. He opened it and saluted me before emptying half of it in one chug. As he wiped his lips, he seemed to stand a little taller. I made a mental note that beer can cure a stooped back.

"Got to love Cassadega," he said. "About a hundred reasons people come to visit it. What's yours?"

I waved off the question, telling him he didn't owe me for the beer. The bench where I sat could have accommodated us both, and I wondered if I should show him my knife in case he got any ideas.

My expression evidently conveyed the message. "Relax," he said. "That's no ordinary seat. That's the 'Devil's Chair,' or so they say. Anyone so bold as to have seat on it earns a visit from the Lord of Flies, who might grant a wish. Or so it goes. Hence my reason for asking what brings you here."

I heard something new in the person's voice. Leaning close, I detected feminine features and realized that the face belonged to a woman wearing man's clothes. That made me relax a little.

"You know what a spookshow is, don't you?" I asked.

"Why, certainly. An American tradition. Get the suckers to open their wallets, show them a good time with ghosts and magic. Live on stage."

I nodded. "Plus music and magic tricks. All leading to a monster getting loose to chase a girl around the stage. And now we're looking for a witch."

The woman cackled at the audacity of this premise. "So, you've come to Cassadega to find a witch."

"A real one. Cal thinks authenticity will keep us viable."

"To do what? Cast spells? Raise the dead?"

"All that. Hopefully enough to distract the men from grabassing and tugging at my titties."

"No woman should endure that."

"No ma'am," I said, and a funny thing happened. I never overshare my troubles, but right then I did. The words poured out of me, all my frustrations. I even sniffled some, maybe on account of all the pollen growing under that Florida sun. I didn't need comforting, but I accepted it anyway, letting her climb on that Devil's Chair alongside me where she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and rocked me like my mother never did.

I must've fallen asleep because I awoke with Cal calling my name. "God-dammit, Belle, we've been looking for you."

I sat up and looked around. I saw no trace of the woman except for that old coat. She left it behind, with me all tangled up inside of it. I supposed she didn't want it anymore.

Cal kicked over a beer bottle. "Drinking my stash again?"

I grumbled. "Just one."

"I count two bottles here."

I started to say that I didn't drink them both. Or did I? Now I couldn't really say for sure, though the coat offered some hard evidence that I didn't hallucinate my visitor.

"And you're in the Devil's Chair," Cal said.

That got my attention. "You know about that?"

"Everyone here does. The Devil show up and grant you a wish?"

I hopped down and tucked the coat under my arm. "Appears I wished for some winter wear," I said, half-joking. A bit worn, but solid workmanship, and only partly eaten by moths. I decided to keep it. "How did the witch thing go?"

"As for that," he said before his voice trailed off. He held something under his arm. A box.