

JUROR NUMBER TWELVE

A medium chosen as a juror in a case many believe is cursed convinces her fellow jurors to acquit. But has her intuition failed her?

The fourth trial of Carl Hemsley, for the brutal murder of his daughter, eight-year-old Maya, began on the Monday following the Fourth of July weekend. The lawyers asked if the potential jurors had seen or heard anything about the murder already. Well of course they had. Just as they knew about the three mistrials, when the jury foreperson fell over dead of a heart attack, just as he was reading out the verdict, when, following a single day of deliberations, the old courthouse in Rawlins burned to the ground, and when the judge presiding over the third trial inexplicably failed to take his mid-day insulin injection and fell into a diabetic coma.

The consensus, in all of Piedmont County, was that the case was cursed. But on the finer points of that, folks disagreed. Some said a juror hoping to walk away alive had better acquit Carl Hemsley in a hurry. Others swore the hand of God would descend on any who failed seek an eye for an eye.

And so, the lawyers asked, were any of them just a tiny bit suspicious? Had they ever crossed themselves in a cemetery? Avoided walking under a ladder? Did they believe in spirits? In this manner the lawyers filled eleven of the twelve seats with straight-laced, naysaying nonbelievers, skeptics and doubters all.

And then there was old Mama Biggby. She shuffled to the jury box with the help of a cane and settled herself like a

nesting hen, folding a thin shawl around herself and adjusting her rings and bangles. She told them "sho 'nuff" she believed in a spirit world. In fact, if they wanted, she would whisper lost loved ones' secrets in their ears. But Mama Biggby was black, and Carl Hemsley was black, and there had been precious few brown or black faces in the courtroom that day. With a twinkle in her eye, Mama Biggby became juror number twelve.

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Mama sat at the long table in the jury room. The others had all gone to the cafeteria. She preferred her own lunch: a tuna sandwich and hard-boiled egg. They had been shy at first, electing a grudging foreperson and mumbling "my god" as they passed the autopsy photos around. They took a quick vote before breaking for lunch: nine guiltyies and three undecideds. Mama Biggby was one of the three. Someone had brutalized that little girl, slashed her skinny little body to ribbons. No doubt. But there were gaps in the evidence. What nagged them all, even the ones who thought he was guilty, was why? Why on earth would Carl Hemsley do that to his own child?

The egg suddenly wobbled, rolling fast to the edge of the table. But then it slowed, stopped, and twitched back and forth, as if rocked by an invisible hand. Mama felt the old familiar chill, like a bucket of cool air dropped down on her from above. "Yeah," she grunted. "You got my 'tention now, baby girl."

Images of Maya's lifeless body flashed before her eyes: the little gaping mouth with its uneven baby teeth, eyelashes resting on a blood-streaked cheek. "Now what you gone say?"

The egg fell, hitting the ground with a crack. Mama picked it up and peeled it, not missing a beat. "No reason to go after my lunch now, baby." The room was silent. Mama unwrapped her sandwich and took a bite. "Go on then, Maya baby. 'Spect I ain't got all day."

At first, nothing happened. Then a tiny shard of white eggshell stood on end and fluttered, as if in a breeze. Another followed, and soon they were trailing across the table, as if hauled by invisible ants. The shards swirled up over the edge of a yellow legal pad and, passing the tally of guilty votes, came to rest in a loose circle around the words "not guilty."

Mama paused in mid-bite. "Well now, ain't you direct?" But something was troubling her. "No mistakin' it?" she asked. The eggshells rose up and settled, once, twice, as if something had slammed against the table and made them jump. "S'pose I got my work cut out for me, then," Mama said, as the door opened and the others streamed in. She brushed the eggshells into the napkin and gave it a twist.

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Mama took her seat in the jury box. It hadn't been easy, but people are awfully receptive when you tell them something

only a deceased relative could know. She'd enlisted the help of half the spirit world, it seemed, to convince those nonbelievers. But she'd done it. The foreman was standing now, reading the verdict. Suddenly Mama felt a sharp pain in her chest, and that familiar cold feeling came down all around her, stronger this time. Stronger than she could ever remember. Something was wrong. This was not the flickering shadow of a little girl. This was a center-of-the-earth darkness. Something evil had worn the shape of that little girl to trick her. Mama tried to speak but her throat closed. The muted cry that escaped was taken as her assent to the verdict. She tried to stand and the twisted napkin fell from her hand, the shards of eggshell fluttering to the floor.

And it was then that she met his eyes for the first time. Carl Hemsley, having stared blankly at his lap throughout the trial, was staring straight at her. There was something in his eyes that she couldn't put words to it. The bailiff was removing his handcuffs, the judge pronouncing him a free man. And just like that, the little pieces of eggshell shot forward across the floor of the courtroom, like metal filings drawn to a magnet, and stopped at Carl Hemsley's feet. He looked up at her, smiled, and then he winked.