

## HOW DID I GET AWAY WITH KILLING ONE OF THE BIGGEST LAWYERS IN THE STATE? IT WAS EASY

By Alice Walker

b. 1944, US American writer, author of *The Color Purple*, 1982

A short story included in her collection of short stories entitled *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981)

"My mother and father were not married. I never knew him. My mother must have loved him, though; she never talked against him when I was little. It was like he never existed. We lived on Poultry <sup>1</sup>street. Why it was called Poultry street I never knew. I guess at one time there must have been a chicken factory somewhere along there. It was right near the center of town. I could walk to the state capitol in less than ten minutes. I could see the top—it was gold—of the capitol building from the front yard. When I was a little girl I used to think it was real gold, shining up there, and then they bought an eagle <sup>2</sup> and put him on top, and when I used to walk up there I couldn't see the top of the building from the ground, it was so high, and I used to reach down and run my hand over the grass. It was like a rug<sup>3</sup>, that grass was, so springy and silky and deep. They had these big old trees, too. Oaks and magnolias<sup>4</sup>; and I thought the magnolia trees were beautiful and one night I climbed up in one of them and got a bloom <sup>5</sup>and took it home. But the air in our house blighted <sup>6</sup>it; it turned brown the minute I took it inside and the petals <sup>7</sup>dropped off.

"Mama worked in private homes. That's how she described her job, to make it sound nicer. 'I work in private homes,' she would say, and that

sounded nicer, she thought, than saying 'I'm a maid<sup>8</sup>.'

"Sometimes she made six dollars a day, working in two private homes. Most of the time she didn't make that much. By the time she paid the rent <sup>9</sup>and bought milk and bananas there wasn't anything left.

"She used to leave me alone sometimes because there was no one to keep me—and then there was an old woman up the street who looked after me for a while—and by the time she died she was more like a mother to me than Mama was. Mama was so tired every night when she came home I never hardly got the chance to talk to her. And then sometimes she would go out at night, or bring men home—but they never thought of marrying her. And they sure didn't want to be bothered <sup>10</sup>with me. I guess most of them were like my own father; had children somewhere of their own that they'd left. And then they came to my Mama who fell for them every time. And I think she may have had a couple of abortions, like some of the women did, who couldn't feed any more mouths. But she tried.

"Anyway, she was a nervous kind of woman. I think she had spells <sup>11</sup>or something because she was so tired. But I didn't understand anything then about exhaustion<sup>12</sup>, worry, lack of a proper diet<sup>13</sup>; I just thought she wanted

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<sup>1</sup> fjerkræ  
<sup>2</sup> ørn  
<sup>3</sup> tæppe  
<sup>4</sup> tulipantræer  
<sup>5</sup> blomst  
<sup>6</sup> fordærvede  
<sup>7</sup> kronblade

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<sup>8</sup> tjenestepige  
<sup>9</sup> husleje  
<sup>10</sup> belemret  
<sup>11</sup> anfald  
<sup>12</sup> udmattelse  
<sup>13</sup> mangel på ordentlig kost

to work, to be away from the house. I didn't blame <sup>14</sup>her. Where we lived people sometimes just threw pieces of furniture they didn't want over the railing. And there was broken glass and rags <sup>15</sup>everywhere. The place stunk<sup>16</sup>, especially in the summer. And children were always screaming and men were always cussing <sup>17</sup>and women were always yelling about something... It was nothing for a girl or woman to be raped<sup>18</sup>—I was raped myself, when I was twelve, and my Mama never knew and I never told anybody. For, what could they do? It was just a boy, passing through. Somebody's cousin from the North.

"One time my Mama was doing day's work at a private home and took me with her. It was like being in fairyland<sup>19</sup>. Everything was spotless and new, even before Mama started cleaning. I met the woman in the house and played with her children, I didn't even see the man, but he was in there somewhere, while I was out in the yard with the children. I was fourteen, but I guess I looked like a grown woman. Or maybe I looked fourteen. Anyway, the next day, he picked me up when I was coming from school and he said my Mama had asked him to do it. I got in the car with him... he took me to his law office<sup>20</sup>, a big office in the middle of town, and he started asking me questions about 'how do you all live?' and 'what grade are you in?' and stuff like that. And then he began to touch me, and I pulled away. But he kept touching me and I was scared ... he raped me. But afterwards he told me he hadn't forced <sup>21</sup>me, that I felt something for him, and he gave me some money. I

was crying, going down the stairs. I wanted to kill him.

"I never told Mama. I thought that would be the end of it. But about two days later, on my way from school, he stopped his car again, and I got in. This time we went to his house; nobody was there. And he made me get into his wife's bed. After we'd been doing this for about three weeks, he told me he loved me. I didn't love him, but he had begun <sup>22</sup>to look a little better to me. Really, I think, because he was so clean. He bathed a lot and never smelled even alive, to tell the truth. Or maybe it was the money he gave me, or the presents he bought. I told Mama I had a job after school baby-sitting. And she was glad that I could buy things I needed for school. But it was all from him.

"This went on for two years. He wouldn't let me get pregnant, he said, and I didn't. I would just lay up there in his wife's bed and work out algebra problems <sup>23</sup>or think about what new thing I was going to buy. But one day, when I got home, Mama was there ahead of me, and she saw me get out of his car. I knew when he was driving off that I was going to get it.

"Mama asked me didn't I know he was a white man? Didn't I know he was a married man with two children? Didn't I have good sense? And do you know what I told her? I told her he loved me. Mama was crying and praying at the same time by then. The neighbors heard both of us screaming and crying, because Mama beat me almost to death with the cord <sup>24</sup>from the electric iron. She just hacked it off the iron, still on the ironing board. She beat me till she couldn't raise her arm. And then she had one of her fits<sup>25</sup>, just twitching <sup>26</sup>and sweating and trying to

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<sup>14</sup> bebrejde

<sup>15</sup> pjalter

<sup>16</sup> stink, stank, stunk

<sup>17</sup> = cursing, bandede

<sup>18</sup> voldtaget

<sup>19</sup> eventyrland

<sup>20</sup> advokatkontor

<sup>21</sup> tvunget

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<sup>22</sup> begin, began, begun

<sup>23</sup> regnestykker

<sup>24</sup> ledningen

<sup>25</sup> anfald

<sup>26</sup> bevægende sig rykvis, krampagtigt

claw herself into the floor. This scared me more than the beating. That night she told me something I hadn't paid much attention to before. She said: 'On top of everything else, that man's daddy goes on the t.v. every night and says folks like us ain't<sup>27</sup> even human.' It was his daddy who had stood in the schoolhouse door saying it would be over his dead body before any black children would come into a white school.

"But do you think that stopped me? No. I would look at his daddy on t.v. ranting<sup>28</sup> and raving<sup>29</sup> about how integration was a communist plot<sup>30</sup>, and I would just think of how different his son Bubba was from his daddy! Do you understand what I'm saying. I thought he *loved* me. That meant something to me. What did I know about 'equal rights'? What did I care about 'integration'? I was sixteen! I wanted somebody to tell me I was pretty, and he was telling me that all the time. I even thought it was brave<sup>31</sup> of him to go with me. History? What did I know about History?

"I began to hate Mama. We argued about Bubba all the time, for months. And I still slipped<sup>32</sup> out to meet him, because Mama had to work. I told him how she beat me, and about how much she despised<sup>33</sup> him — he was really pissed off that any black person could despise him — about how she had these spells<sup>34</sup>... Well, the day I became seventeen, the day of my seventeenth birthday, I signed papers in his law office, and I had my mother committed<sup>35</sup> to an insane asylum.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>27</sup> aren't

<sup>28</sup> skvaldrede op

<sup>29</sup> snakke følelsesladet

<sup>30</sup> kommunist-komplot

<sup>31</sup> modigt

<sup>32</sup> sneg

<sup>33</sup> afskyede

<sup>34</sup> anfald

<sup>35</sup> indlagt

<sup>36</sup> sindssygeanstalt

"After Mama had been in Carthage Insane Asylum for three months, she managed somehow to get a lawyer. An old slick-headed<sup>37</sup> man who smoked great big black cigars. People laughed at him because he didn't even have a law office, but he was the only lawyer that would touch the case, because Bubba's daddy was such a big deal<sup>38</sup>. And we all gathered<sup>39</sup> in the judge's chambers<sup>40</sup> — because he wasn't about to let this case get out. Can you imagine, if it had? And Mama's old lawyer told the judge how Bubba's daddy had tried to buy him off<sup>41</sup>. And Bubba got up and swore<sup>42</sup> he'd never touched me. And then I got up and said Mama was insane<sup>43</sup>. And do you know what? By that time it was true. Mama *was* insane. She had no mind left at all. They had given her shock treatments<sup>44</sup> or something ... God knows what else they gave her. But she was as vacant as an empty eye socket<sup>45</sup>. She just sat sort of hunched<sup>46</sup> over, and her hair was white.

"And after all this, Bubba wanted us to keep going together. Mama was just an obstacle<sup>47</sup> that he felt he had removed. But I just suddenly — in a way I don't even pretend to understand — woke up. It was like everything up to then had been some kind of dream. And I told him I wanted to get Mama out. But he wouldn't do it; he just kept trying to make me go with him. And sometimes — out of habit, I guess — I did. My body did what it was being paid to do. And Mama died. And I killed Bubba.

<sup>37</sup> sleskefjæset

<sup>38</sup> stor kanon

<sup>39</sup> forsamledes

<sup>40</sup> dommerens kontor

<sup>41</sup> bestikke ham

<sup>42</sup> sværgede

<sup>43</sup> sindssyg

<sup>44</sup> elektrochock-behandling

<sup>45</sup> "Hun var fuldstændig tom i bøtten"

<sup>46</sup> skrutrygget

<sup>47</sup> forhindring

