

## **A Bitter Pill**

by Colin D. Smith

Joseph Yates stood, grinning, as the jury foreman declared in booming tones the verdict of his peers: “Not guilty.” The judge then turned to him.

“Mr. Joseph Yates,” she said, “You have been found not guilty of murder in the first degree. You are free to go.” She slammed her hammer down on its block and dismissed the court. Yates stood, frozen, momentarily stunned.

“Congratulations, Joe!” said a voice beside him. A nudge on his arm broke his trance.

“Oh, thanks, Mark. I really couldn’t have done it without you,” Yates said, shaking his attorney’s hand. He spoke in a quiet, subdued voice. “Can you give me a ride? Once I collect my things, that is... and change?” He was still in his orange jumpsuit. Mark Jones had been hoping to get home quickly and relax in front of the television, but Yates looked as if he could use some company. It had been a difficult trial: all the evidence seemed to point to him, and yet Mark had been able to convince the jury that the evidence was mostly circumstantial, and, in fact, could point to any number of people. Reasonable doubt won the day.

“Sure,” said Mark, concealing his reluctance. “I’ll pick you up out front. Look for the red Lexus.”

After two months, it was strange seeing Yates in a shirt and tie. He sat in the passenger seat of Mark’s car, needlessly adjusting his tie in the mirror.

“Do you think we could go for a drink?” he said, his crisp enunciation compensating for his quiet voice over the hum of the motor.

Mark sighed internally, but forced a smile. “Sure. Anywhere in particular?”

“Shay’s, just down here and on the right.” Mark did not need directions; Shay’s was popular with the local legal community. He smiled again without comment.

The bar was about half full when they entered, wisps of cigarette smoke permeating, but not dominating, the atmosphere. Yates had some money, so he offered to buy the first round. Mark did not object.

“Just a coke,” he said. “I’m driving.”

“Are you sure? You can have something stronger...” Yates smiled mischievously.

“Thanks. A coke will be fine.” *I have a six-pack waiting at home*, Mark thought. He found a small table where he sat, waiting, toying with a packet of Winston’s. He had quit a few weeks ago, but the scent in the air was tempting.

Yates found him about ten minutes later. He handed Mark his coke and then sat down with his beer, placing his wallet and a small bottle of Tylenol carefully down on the table.

“They took these when they locked me away,” he said, indicating the wallet and bottle. “A toast, I think!”

“A toast,” Mark said. “To—”

“Freedom,” Yates responded with relish. They clinked their glasses and drank. Mark sighed. The cool, sweet drink was refreshing.

“Of course, you’re all parasites,” Yates said, looking into his beer glass.

“I’m sorry?” Mark turned, sure he had misheard him.

“You—lawyers—all of you... parasites. Vermin. Cockroaches.”

“I-I—what do you mean?” Mark started to laugh along, but Yates was not laughing. He looked up at Mark. The hatred in his eyes was tangible.

“You deserve to die. All of you,” he whispered.

“You mean... agh!” Mark suddenly felt a jolt of pain in his forehead. He reached for Yates’s Tylenol.

“You don’t need that,” Yates said, taking the bottle away. “I already gave you some.”

“You gave me... Tylenol?” Mark loosened his tie. He was now sweating profusely, and feeling sick to his stomach. Yates laughed.

“They missed this, the idiots,” he smiled. “I had the murder weapon on me all the time. Nobody thought to check them.” He shook the bottle of pills. “It’s not Tylenol,” he whispered. “It’s potassium cyanide. I used it on the others, too...”

Mark did not catch the rest of what Yates said. His breath quickened. His lungs tightened. His chest cramped. By the time his body hit the floor, Joseph Yates and his car keys were gone.