

The Trial of the Century
Becca Stetson

Old Nassau County Courthouse, NY, January 23, 1907

“Could you state your full name and age for the jury?”

“Florence Evelyn Nesbit Thaw, twenty-one years of age.” Evelyn squirmed on the stiff wooden chair. She glanced at her husband, Harry, sitting behind the defendant’s bench. While she had once adored his smile, she could now only see the anxiousness in his eyes.

“Testifying for the defense, Mrs. Evelyn Thaw,” the attorney gestured toward the jury, sweeping his hand in a dramatic fashion. “Can you recall the events on the evening of May 7, 1901?”

Could she recall the events on the evening of May 7, 1901? It was all she could recall, the only thing on her mind any time she had closed her eyes over the last six years. She took a breath and glanced at Harry’s expectant gaze. In return for her testimony, he had promised her and her mother financial security – providing he stayed out of the state penitentiary.

West Twenty-Fourth Street, May 7, 1901

It was a sweltering evening, May 7th, especially for New York City. Evelyn stood on the stoop of Mr. White’s West Twenty-Fourth Street apartment – under the shade, so as not to mar her complexion. She waved to her mother, hand pumping even as the horses pulled the carriage down the cobblestone toward Pittsburg. As the cart passed over the hill and out of sight, Evelyn smiled to herself. It had taken weeks for Mr. White and herself to convince Mrs. Nesbit to take the weekend and visit her friends. Since they’d moved into the city, Mrs. Nesbit hadn’t taken a breath, much less an evening off from protecting her daughter. But Evelyn was finally free, if

just for a few days. She hugged her arms around her slim torso and skipped through the doorway into the penthouse apartment. Mr. White had promised her a weekend full of fun and spirits; he'd said she could have her first sip of champagne, so long as it remained their little secret. In her short life of moving from one city to the next, with her mother promising new chances and a future, Evelyn had had little leisure time. And now that she had been picked up as a chorus girl, Evelyn had even less time to herself. Broadway turned out to be much less glamour and a lot more long, strenuous hour of rehearsal. She was aching for a break.

“So, you’re saying, Mrs. Thaw, that you lived with Stanford White?” The stern attorney prodded Evelyn.

“No sir, he just watched after me that weekend, when Momma went to Pittsburg.”

“Your mother left you alone and unsupervised with a married man?”

The courtroom flashed with camera lights, men and women frantically scribbling everything in their reporter’s notebooks. Harry guarded her with a watchful eye, making sure she kept her composure.

“My mother trusted him and so did I.” Evelyn grew defensive. “He promised to take care of us.”

“What made you believe he was an honest man?”

Cheeks pink and spirits flustered, she repeated her sentiment. “He promised-”

“Yes, he promised you would be safe. You’ve made that abundantly clear.” He changed his line of questioning. “Where did you normally reside in 1901?”

“The Redbury New York. But before that, a one bedroom studio apartment on Twenty-Second Street.”

“The Redbury? That’s quite a costly residence, Mrs. Thaw. How did you afford such luxurious living quarters?”

Evelyn hesitated, unsure how she should answer. “The apartment was paid for by...by Mr. White.”

Mrs. Nesbit, who was sitting in the second row, eyed the lawyer with disdain. She pulled a handkerchief from her blouse and brought it to her face, coughing discreetly.

“I see,” the attorney said, his voice thick with skepticism. “You may continue.”

Evelyn continued through the foyer and up the grand staircase. No matter how many times she was invited to Mr. White’s home, she was always struck by the solemnity of the décor. The walls were awash with lavish paintings, depicting cherubim’s, beautiful rolling hills. and intricate forestry. Evelyn wasn’t familiar with European artwork, but she was sure each painting had to be worth more than anything she had ever owned. She skipped down the hallway to the guest quarters, where the maid had unpacked her belongings, stacking them neatly in drawers and pressing them in the closet. Rifling through her dresses, she shed her heavy outing dress and donned a simple day frock that flattered her figure. Glancing in the mirror, she pinched her cheeks and pursed her lips in a pout. She removed her long chestnut colored hair from her chignon and finger-combed her curls so they framed her face. Tilting her chin up, she posed, imagining herself as a pin-up girl, her face in every magazine. Satisfied with her appearance,

Evelyn pranced down the hallway to Mr. White's private wing. She knocked on the door to his study and entered, a grin on her face.

"Why, Evelyn, I'm so glad it's you!" Mr. White said conspiratorially, crinkles forming around his eyes. "I thought you were the butler with another droll business call."

"Just little old me," she chimed.

"Has your mother departed?"

"I just saw her off, Mr. White."

"Please, I insist you call me Stanford now that we're better acquainted."

"Why, that would hardly be appropriate, Mr. White," Evelyn gasped. "My mother would not approve." *And neither would your wife.*

"Nonsense! You must consider us friends, wouldn't you, Evelyn?" Mr. White cajoled. "It would hurt my feelings if you continued to be so formal."

Evelyn rushed to answer. "Oh, of course we're friends, Mr. Wh-Stanford," she halted, tasting the unfamiliar name on her tongue. She enjoyed the way it rolled out, making her feel five years her senior. She loved spending time with Mr. White because he didn't treat her like a child, the way her mother did. He made her feel like an equal.

"Splendid! Oh, I was passing by Fifth Avenue yesterday and I saw the loveliest thing in the window and thought I just had to see you in it."

Evelyn's face lit up. "You got me a present?" Her pulse quickened. Mr. White was always bringing her gifts, things he said reminded him of her. He made her feel special, something she longed for. It was why she had dreamed of being a Broadway star. With all eyes on her, she couldn't help but feel important. Glamorous.

Mr. White pulled a white department store box from behind his large mahogany desk. He gestured toward Evelyn with his hand and she left her perch at the doorway, rushing to his desk.

“Go ahead, dear, open it.”

With the greatest of care, Evelyn removed the top of the box. She pulled away the layers of tissue paper guarding the precious garment and held it up to view it upright. The satin kimono glittered in the light, its rich daffodil colored material swaying under Evelyn’s grasp. The robe was elegantly stitched with an oriental design. The hues of thread were brilliantly dyed, weaving a tapestry of opulence.

“Oh Stanford, I can’t accept this,” Evelyn squealed. She closed her eyes and brought the rich fabric to her nose. Inhaling, she could almost taste the spices of the West Indies and the bustle of faraway ship ports.

“But you must, Evelyn! Only the best for my company.” Mr. White stretched out his hand for the kimono. “Here, let me help you into it.”

Evelyn blushed, hiding her mouth behind her fingertips. “Oh Stanford, I mustn’t.” But she held her arms outstretched nevertheless, waiting for him to wrap her shoulders in the filmy garment.

“To clarify, you let Mr. White remove your outer garments and dress you in a...” The lawyer shuffled through his notes. “Yellow satin kimono.”

Evelyn replayed the image in her mind, seeing the moment as the jury must view it. “It was all innocent.” The jurymen squinted, as if trying to picture the mahogany-haired vixen in the aforementioned yellow kimono. “I swear, there were no impure intentions.”

The attorney cleared his throat, signaling the next question. “And this all took place in Mr. White’s office?”

“Yes, well, at least that part did...” Evelyn trailed off, stuck in that night.

“And where did ‘the other part’ take place, Mrs. Thaw?”

“Well, we went had some drinks and went upstairs to this funny little room Stan-Mr. White had.”

Mr. White held the large, ornate oak door open for Evelyn and ushered her into the room. She gasped and almost dropped the crystal glass in her hand.

“I know, it’s a tad bit excessive, isn’t it?” Mr. White chuckled. “But I have quite the taste for the finer things in life.”

“Only the best...” Evelyn echoed his earlier refrain.

She stared into the small room, aghast. Mirrors paneled every wall, from floor to ceiling. The only light in the space came from a small lamp in the corner, but its reflection glittered over every surface, illuminating the room. It was furnished with a plush green velvet sofa, adorned with several small throw pillows. Next to the couch was a bar cart, topped by a champagne bottle, two crystal flutes, and an icebox. As Evelyn glanced around the extravagant room, her own reflection stared back. From one thousand different angles, she saw her own shocked face. Her cheeks, colored by the ruby liquor in her glass, were as rosy as the deep red of Mr. White’s satin house coat. Her hazel eyes were glossy, glazed over as she studied herself. The kimono suited her trim waist. She pressed the material over her front, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles.

Her legs were still clad in hose – it would be very unsuitable to go hose-less in the presence of a man.

Evelyn tore her gaze away from her own reflection to peek at Mr. White. He was studying her, his mouth stretched into a grin under his handlebar mustache. He stood tall next to Evelyn, over six feet at least. On the top of his head, his dark hair was thinning, giving way to the truth of his age. He clutched his glass in his hand and brought it to his lips, gesturing for Evelyn to do the same. Instead, Evelyn laughed and twirled, showcasing her new robe for Mr. White. Around and around she went, closing her eyes in glee. As she whirled, her stomach began to turn and she stopped, steadying herself.

“Are you not thirsty, Evelyn?” She blushed, not used to being offered expensive alcohol.

“Oh no, I am Mr. Wh-Stanford,” she said, correcting herself again. Mr. White put his glass down on the bar cart and stepped toward Evelyn. He reached out for her hand, placing it in his forceful grip and dragging her to the couch.

“Please sit, Evelyn. Let me refill that glass for you.”

Following his instruction, Evelyn sat gingerly on the edge of the couch. She caught another glimpse at herself in the mirrors – it was hard not to in such a room. Her mother would most definitely *not* approve. Though they were hardly high society, it was unbecoming of a young lady to be unchaperoned with a man, and a married man, no less. But Mrs. Nesbit liked Mr. White, or at least, what he provided for their little family of two. She spent hours upon hours working to provide Evelyn with suitable prospects as an actress, the two of them barely surviving in their one bedroom studio apartment. It was only one night, when Evelyn caught the eye of one Mr. Stanford White, prestigious architect, that their luck began to turn. It seemed he was

instantly besotted with Evelyn, the beautiful chorus girl on the Broadway stage. He was a lonely man, his wife spending most of her time with her family in upstate New York. She was a sickly woman, always suffering from one ailment or another. So the Nesbit's became his pet project, Stanford taking them under his wing. Mr. White insisted on housing the family and providing them with plenty of funding for Evelyn's career.

Mr. White handed Evelyn back her flute, fresh with new champagne. She took a sip of the liquid, wincing at the bubbles as they stung the back of her throat. Her face was hot, flush with effects of all their wine with supper earlier. She shook her head, trying to rid herself of the unwelcome fuzzy feeling and focus on Mr. White.

"Are you quite alright, dear?"

"Um, I feel a tad light-headed." Evelyn tried hard to appear older, downing the rest of her glass in one large gulp.

"Why don't you lie down on the sofa, then?" Evelyn wasn't sure that was such a clever idea, but the alarm bells in her head were drowned out by the need to lie down, to soothe her roiling stomach and calm her pounding head.

Mr. White moved to the edge of the couch, giving Evelyn room to stretch out her legs. She tried to swing her legs up onto the plush cushions, but she felt heavy, rooted to the floor. Her bottom half was lead, rigid and unmovable. Mr. White, mistaking her hesitation for wariness, probed her further.

"Here, let me assist you." He grabbed her ankles and removed her silken slippers – another gift from him – and gently placed her legs upon the sofa. He beamed once more, his lips stretched thinly against his teeth.

“Stanford, I’m really not sure about this, I think it’s best if I just retire to my quarters.”

Evelyn gulped, her throat crying out for refreshment.

“But you’re safe right here, Evelyn! Don’t you trust me?” His grin curled into a cajoling smile, and Evelyn’s senses awakened, adrenaline coursing through her body. Her mother’s voice rang in her head, warning her to stay away from danger, in all its forms. She tried to sit up, but her body would not obey. She focused on her arms, begging them to move, to raise, to twitch even, but they remained still. Her blood had turned to molasses, slowly creeping into all her appendages and rendering her motionless.

And she was tired. Oh, so tired. If she closed her eyes, just for a moment...

Evelyn stopped her tale, eyes wide as she relived that night. Her husband continued staring at her, his expression passive. His face revealed nothing, but Evelyn longed for a small smile, a sympathetic gaze, anything to reassure her racing heart. He hadn’t always been so cold and detached. Harry used to shower her with praise, smile at the sight of her entering a room. It was only when she told him of her dalliance with Mr. White that his temperament changed. No longer the loving Harry she knew, he stopped touching her and showing her affection. He became angry at the drop of a hat, brooding in his study well into the night.

“What happened next, Mrs. Thaw?”

Her face flushed and she hesitated before opening her mouth. “I’m not exactly sure, sir.”

“You’re not sure?”

Evelyn did not want the whole courtroom and possibly the whole city to know of her shame, but she had no choice. So, she told the truth. She blushed and looked out toward her

husband, brushing her lustrous curls behind her dainty ear before answering. “All I know is that I entered that room a virgin, but I did not come out as one.”

Mrs. Nesbit let out a sob. She had been weepy ever since Evelyn divulged to her the events of that sordid weekend. Evelyn knew that her mother felt it was partly her fault, that she hadn’t left her with Mr. White. But Evelyn blamed no one but herself and Mr. White.

The courtroom collectively gasped and leaned forward. The jury was captivated, waiting for Evelyn’s next answer.

“Did you consent to sexual relations with Mr. Stanford White?” The lawyer dropped the weighty question with force. The jurymen leaned forward, breathless as they waited for Evelyn’s response. Harry kept his ever-present gaze on her.

“No.”

Evelyn slowly drifted back into consciousness, her senses blinded by her throbbing head. She squinted in the dark room. Only a sliver of light passed through the heavy red silk drapes. She was *not* in the guest quarters. In fact, she hadn’t the slightest idea where she *was*. A loud snore, resembling the thrashing of heavy factory machinery, jolted her from her thoughts. She sat upright in the large bed, suddenly aware of the sleeping figure next to her. Evelyn panicked, as the puzzle pieces started falling into place: all the bubbly mixture she downed last night, Mr. White helping her into a yellow satin kimono, falling asleep in the room full of mirrors, the twisted smirk on his face before her eyes closed. Evelyn threw the feather down duvet off her body and jumped from the bed. She took in her state of undress and her panty hose crumpled up

in the corner on the floor. Her stomach stirred once more, a combination of her sickened state and her sudden realization of the events of last night.

Grabbing her kimono and her shoes, Evelyn raced out of Mr. White's bedroom and down the hall, leaving his comatose form in the bed without a word. Heart pounding, she ran into her room in the guest quarters. She sat at the vanity, splashing her face with water from the ceramic washing basin. A million thoughts raced through her head, but her mind stuck on one memory – a conversation she had while her mother had braided her hair, cramped in the small studio apartment in their early days in the city. Her brain was a broken record, skipping over the same track, over and over again.

22nd Street, Manhattan, November 15, 1900

"Evelyn, I want you to remember one thing," Mrs. Nesbit chided her, pulling her tresses into something somewhat manageable.

"What is it, Momma?"

"No matter how charming a lad is, or how much good fortune he boasts of, remember that your virtue is your most precious gift."

The fifteen-year-old squinted at the funny word, confused by her mother's statement. "What do you mean, 'my virtue?'"

Her mother sighed, struggling to find the right words to express the importance of her next sentiment to her daughter. "I mean, Evelyn, that there are things a man will want from you, things you must deny him at all costs. These *things* are special, meant only for the man who takes your hand in marriage, the man with whom you will spend the rest of your days."

“Momma-”

“Now Evelyn, I’m serious. Promise me you won’t ruin our family name. You may have your good looks, but you have to use your brains too.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. It was clear she had inherited her flair for the dramatic from her mother.

“Don’t speak to your mother like that! Promise me!” Her mother’s voice turned shrill, piercing Evelyn’s eardrums.

Evelyn recoiled from her mother, detaching her braids from her mother’s hands. Seeing the shock on her face, Mrs. Nesbit softened her features. “Now, come on. I didn’t mean to scold. I just want what’s best for you.” She took Evelyn into her arms, gently squeezing her. “Do you understand?”

“I promise.”

I promise.

Evelyn looked at her taut face in the mirror. Her delicate features seemed to mock her, laughing at her foolishness in the harsh morning light. She had never understood the importance of her mother’s warning. It had been a flippant nod of the head, a “Yes, Mother.”

I promise.

Feeling the tickle in her stomach, Evelyn sprung out of her seat, feet pounding as she headed for the powder room. She was ruined. No one would want to marry her now. Tainted goods.

I promise.

She was going to be sick. She hurled herself into the toilet, the contents of her stomach retching into the cool, porcelain cover. How was she ever going to explain this to her mother? She felt so foolish. She has been so caught up in the glitter of spending time with Mr. White that she hadn't stopped to ponder the genteelness of his intentions.

I promise.

She rested her chin on the seat, a single burning tear streaming down her cheek. Hot shame stung her insides. She was just as much a floozy as a common whore.

I promise.

“So, you testify, Mrs. Thaw, that the defendant, your husband Harry Thaw, was acting on your behalf when he shot and murdered Stanford White?”

Evelyn flinched at the word murder, but kept her composure nonetheless. “When I confessed the soiled truth of my, er, deflowering to my husband,” Evelyn glanced awkwardly around the courtroom, swallowing before she continued, “He was overcome with jealousy and rage. I swear, he was overtaken by his emotions,” Evelyn repeated the words of the doctor, hoping to elicit sympathy from the jury. A tear fell down her face, Evelyn thinking of the promise she made to help Harry stay out of jail, at the risk of losing financial security for her mother and herself. “It was a crime of passion, surely the jury can understand that? My husband was fighting for my honor.” The jury remained untouched, but a glance from the doe eyed beauty had them whispering to each other, their faces full of sympathy.

“The defense rests.”

The judge banged his gavel, calling the day's session to an end. Evelyn sighed, her chest heaving with relief. She had done her part to keep Harry out of jail, now it was up to the jury.

"All rise, for the honorable Judge Carter." The courtroom buzzed in anticipation, eagerly awaiting the final deliberations of the jurymen. The trial had gone on for months, and the press was eager to garner a sensational headline. Evelyn sat with the rest of the Thaws in the second row clutching an olive colored handkerchief between her white knuckles, behind her husband and the defense. The judge entered from his chambers and quickly proceeded, motioning for the court to sit. He turned to the jury and gestured for the foreman to speak.

"Your honor, we find the defendant," the court leaned forward, desperate to catch every word, "Not guilty."

A collective release of tension came from the second row – the Thaw's had succeeded in upholding their societal image. The bailiff stepped out from his post, keys jangling as he rid Harry of his handcuffs. Harry stretched out his hands, tenderly assessing the angry red marks they had left. He grinned with the youthfulness of a young man, pleased to no longer be a prisoner. Evelyn, however, felt no such relief. With her husband's release, she was once more a bird in a gilded cage, trapped under his tyrannical reign. He quickly found her in the buzz of the county building, his fingers clenching tightly around her left arm.

"You did lovely, pet," he whispered in her ear, a gleam in his eye.

Evelyn recoiled at his touch, but the press was documenting her every move, so she forced a smile across her face. "That's it, right? I'm free," she queried between clenched teeth.

"Oh darling," Harry smiled. "You'll never be free."