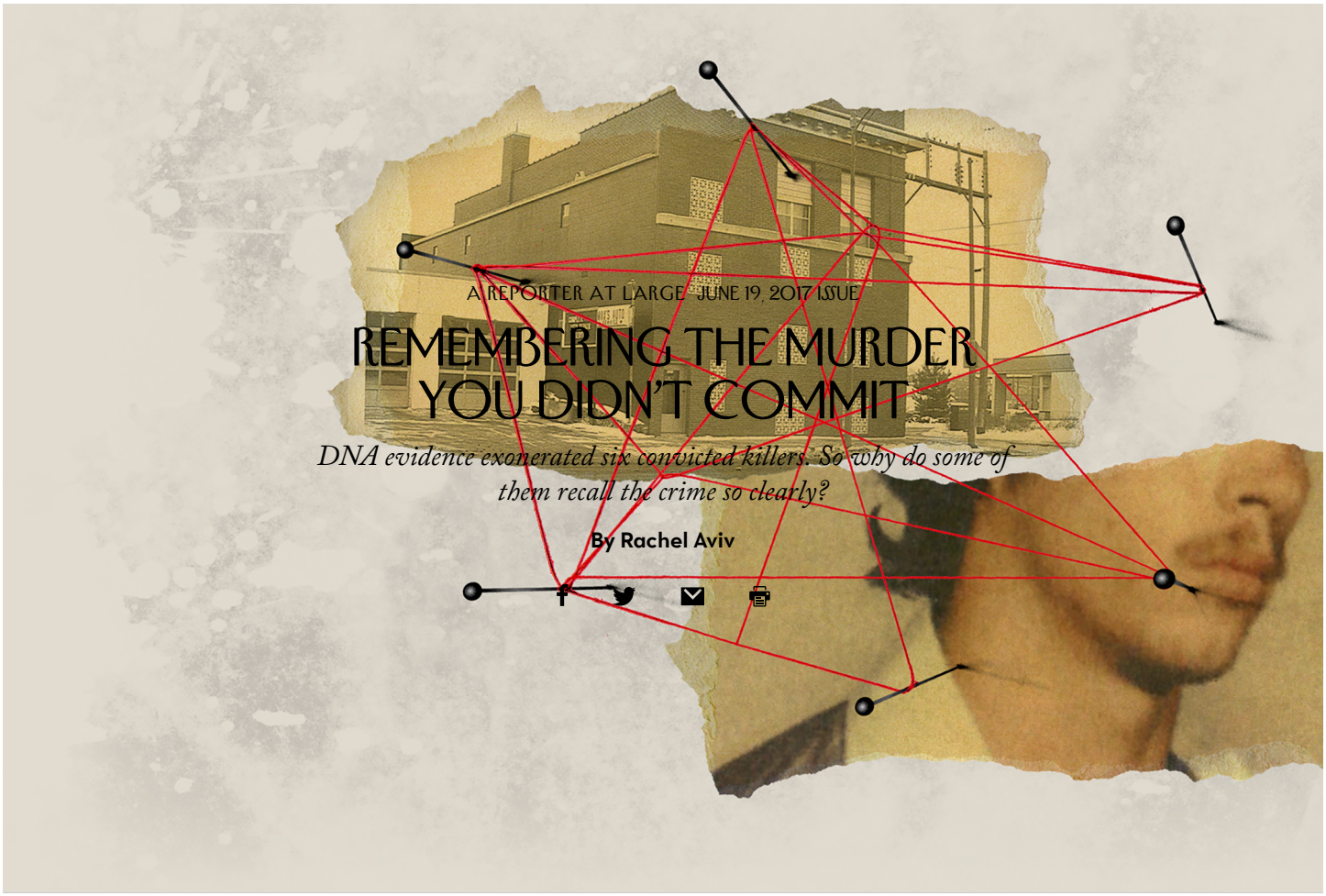

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REMEMBERING THE MURDER YOU DIDN'T COMMIT

DNA evidence exonerated six convicted killers. So why do some of them recall the crime so clearly?

By Rachel Aviv

"If you relax, memory is more likely to occur," a psychologist told the suspects. "It may occur in dreams."

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM MAIDA / COURTESY BEATRICE POLICE DEPARTMENT

When Ada JoAnn Taylor is tense, she thinks she can feel the fabric of a throw pillow in the pads of her fingers. Taylor has suffered from tactile flashbacks for three decades. She imagines herself in a small apartment in Beatrice, Nebraska. She is gripping the edges of a pillow, more tightly than she means to, and suffocating a sixty-eight-year-old widow. "I feel for her," Taylor told me recently. "She was my grandmother's age."

Taylor confessed to the woman's murder in 1989 and for two decades believed that she was guilty. She served more than nineteen years for the crime before she was pardoned. She was one of six people accused of the murder, five of whom took pleas; two had internalized their guilt so deeply that, even after being freed, they still had vivid memories of committing the crime. In no other case in the United States have false memories of guilt endured so long. The situation is a study in the

malleability of memory: an implausible notion, doubted at first, grows into a firmly held belief that reshapes one's autobiography and sense of identity.

Eli Chesen, a Nebraska psychiatrist who evaluated Taylor and her co-defendants after their release, told me, "They still believed to varying degrees that they had blood on their hands." He compared the case with the Jonestown Massacre, in 1978, when a cult leader persuaded more than nine hundred people to commit suicide in Guyana. "You have a group of people who are led to share the same delusion, at the same time, with major consequences," he said. "Their new beliefs superseded their previous life experiences, like paper covering a rock."

Taylor still worries that her family and friends are secretly thinking, You are a murderer. "You're not there, JoAnn," she tries to tell herself. "It's O.K. You are not a bad person." But the memory of holding the pillow still makes her cry.

Beatrice is a city of twelve and a half thousand people in southeastern Nebraska, surrounded by wheat, corn, and soy fields. Its economy relies on the state hospital for the mentally disabled, originally called the Nebraska Institute for Feeble-Minded Youth. The poet Weldon Kees, who grew up in Beatrice, wrote a series of loosely fictionalized stories about the city. In one, construction workers, digging near an Indian burial ground, have uncovered a corpse. On their boss's orders, they stay quiet and pulverize the body.

Taylor, who grew up on a cattle farm in Leicester, North Carolina, followed her boyfriend to Beatrice in 1981, when she was eighteen and pregnant with his child. Three weeks later, he left her. She enrolled at Beatrice High School and brought up her daughter, Rachel, alone. A closeted lesbian, Taylor typically wore bluejeans and men's black button-front shirts. She was known in town as a bully. A police officer described her as "some sort of Amazon." She drew attention to herself by making casually provocative statements. "I come from a very suicide-attempting home," she'd announce to strangers.

At night, she drank at the R&S, a bar in downtown Beatrice that attracted bikers and misfits. She recalled her state of mind as "wasted, moody, and easy to snap." She carried whiskey in her jacket pocket and, when she drank, she acted like a little girl, skipping and singing.

At the recommendation of child-protection services, Taylor began

seeing a psychologist named Wayne Price, who was charged with helping her become a better parent. “He told me I was like a snail,” Taylor said. “I was reaching out to be loved, but I was closing my doors.” She had been removed from her home when she was eleven, after her stepfather repeatedly molested her, and she spent her adolescence in foster care. She realized that “on the inside there is a soft person waiting to be released.”

Price gave her a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, an illness marked by instability of mood and self-image. After several months of counselling, Price noted that Taylor was “trying to be more domestic, baking, doing handiwork.” But she was still impulsive and emotional, and, in 1985, he recommended that she surrender her parental rights. Taylor trusted Price and agreed. “ ‘It takes a stronger mother’s love to let go than to hold on’ is the only way I can describe it,” she said. She gave her daughter up for adoption and moved to Los Angeles, where she supported herself by doing sex work.

A few months later, she returned to Beatrice with Joseph White, a handsome twenty-two-year-old who had been making gay pornographic films in L.A. He wanted to help Taylor fight for custody of her daughter. Neither of them grasped that the court procedure was over; she had lost all her rights.

Taylor reunited with a group of classmates from high school who were sexually unconventional, poor, and self-loathing. White, who liked to carve wood and write poetry, became friends with them, too. They started making a low-budget pornographic film. A local cop complained that they “were on the streets of Beatrice at one, two, three o’clock in the morning.” Another officer said, “They had nothing. And they didn’t know nobody.”

The Lincoln Telephone & Telegraph office, in the center of Beatrice, is a red brick structure with a white stone cornice, where some twenty “telephone girls”—women dressed in dark skirts and white blouses—used to connect twenty-five thousand phone calls a day. “Every woman in the neighborhood knows how many chickens every hen within ten miles has hatched,” the Beatrice *Democrat* wrote, shortly after the company was founded, at the turn of the twentieth century. In the fifties, after the invention of direct dialing, the building was converted into apartments, which were occupied mostly by elderly females and young single working women.

A few months after Taylor returned to Beatrice, Helen Wilson, who lived alone on the first floor, was raped and suffocated. The police found Type B blood from the intruder on Wilson's mattress, wall, and underwear, and semen in her body. A grandmother, Wilson had played bingo a few nights a week and volunteered at the nursery of the Methodist church, a half block away. The police assumed that the culprit was someone lost in a religious fervor—there were several other churches nearby—or a homosexual, because Wilson had been raped anally. A psychological profile developed by the F.B.I. concluded that the murderer was a loner who'd had psychological counselling and collected pornography, and who was "odd and wimpy."

"At this point, Murray's just my white-noise machine."

The police placed a voice-activated tape recorder inside a flowerpot at Wilson's grave site, to track suspicious mourners, and asked the owner of an adult bookstore in Beatrice for a list of known homosexuals. More than three hundred people were interviewed, including White. He had never met Wilson. "I know nothing about her but what I heard from the scuzbut on the streets," he told an officer. He was eliminated as a suspect, because his blood wasn't Type B.

Three weeks after the murder, Taylor, having finally realized that she would never be a part of her daughter's life, returned to her family, in North Carolina. She stopped drinking and worked, in vain, to repair her relationship with her mother. "I tried to forget all about Nebraska completely," she said.

The Wilson case went cold. A young hog farmer named Burdette Searcey, a former officer with the Beatrice Police Department, told Wilson's daughter, who ran a laundry where he had his clothes cleaned, that he would try to solve it. A short but bullish man who enjoyed watching crime shows on television, Searcey was unfulfilled by his work on the farm, and he began delving into the case as an unpaid private investigator. He interviewed people, he said, who "liked to roam around town, that didn't have jobs, that were vagabonds, in my opinion."

Two years after the crime, Searcey gave up farming and was hired as a deputy in the Gage County Sheriff's Office, where he stayed on the Wilson case, even though the Beatrice Police Department was in charge. He occasionally stopped Taylor's therapist, Price, on the road by flashing his emergency lights. "He wanted to bounce some ideas off of me," Price said. A former Army doctor who supervised graduate

psychology students at the University of Nebraska, in Lincoln, Price was seen as the town's expert on all things behavioral. He worked as a consulting psychologist for both the police and the sheriff's departments, and he was also a sheriff's deputy. Price asked Searcey to stop pulling him over; it was embarrassing.

Searcey brought up the Wilson case so many times that the sheriff finally told him that he was "damned tired of hearing about it." The sheriff said, "If you think you can solve it, then get it done."

In March, 1989, Searcey drafted an arrest warrant for Taylor and White, based on information that he had collected as a private investigator. He'd heard from a seventeen-year-old whom a Beatrice cop described as a "maybe retard" that they had bragged about committing the murder. In a memo, Searcey wrote that "White was a homosexual" and "a very strange young man," and that Taylor, in the days after the crime, was reported by friends to have been "very nervous."

When Price learned of the arrest warrant, he was disappointed in Taylor. "It was frustrating as a therapist to see your work going down the tube," he said in a deposition.

Searcey, Price, and the sheriff took a private plane to Alabama, to interrogate and arrest White, who had returned to his home town, Holly Pond. "Are you homosexual?" they asked him. "Have you ever been homosexual?" "Were you homosexual when you was in Beatrice, Nebraska?" White told them that he had been bisexual for a while. The notion that he was involved in the murder was "pure, deep bullshit," White said.

The next day, the three men flew to North Carolina and arrested Taylor. Searcey generally spoke with his suspects for a few hours, telling them about the crime, and didn't record the conversation until they were ready to confess. A video of Taylor's interrogation begins with her giggling at something the cops have said. Her long black hair is parted down the middle, and she wears large glasses. She has already taken responsibility for the crime—she says that White pressured her into it—but struggles to recall the details and, like a deferential student, asks for help. "I'm still drawing blank," she says. Searcey suggests that she doesn't want to remember. "I block a lot of bad things out, I always have," she agrees. "I have problems—there's a lot in my childhood I can't remember."

Taylor and White were brought back to Beatrice, where Taylor requested a private counselling session with Price. He was often called to the jail to help defendants in emotional distress, and he took pride in the county's willingness to rely on psychological advice. "If you relax, memory is more likely to occur," he would tell them. "It may occur in dreams. It may occur in bits and pieces." He described the mind as a physical space, like a basement, where memories are stored and retrieved. In 1890, in "The Principles of Psychology," William James wrote, "We make search in our memory for a forgotten idea, just as we rummage our house for a lost object." But James's image of memories as discrete packets, deposited in a physical space, is obsolete. If memory is like a house, it is one that is constantly under construction. As the cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus put it, "Memory is born anew every day." We piece together fragments of recollection, shaped by beliefs and impressions, and unwittingly embellish and invent our own pasts.

Taylor told a second psychologist who evaluated her, "In my head and in my heart, I know I wasn't there." But after several interviews she gave up on the idea of her innocence. As Searcey outlined her role in the crime—"Kind of let that build and think about it if you can," he urged her—she assembled a narrative. "I can put myself in her place, because I have been through the sexual abuse, and that's what makes it rough on me," she said. When she recounted Wilson's rape, she always cried.

At first, she told Searcey that the rape had occurred in a white, single-story house with a porch, much like the house that she had lived in as a young child. But, she said, "everybody kept telling me that it was an apartment. Then it dawned on me that it wasn't a house." During the rape, she could hear herself screaming, "Stop, don't, it hurts, leave her be." She heard White say, "JoAnn, you know you deserve it," but it sounded like her stepfather's voice. She told Searcey, "I don't know if it's the connection between the past rape and what I'm seeing at the time, but that's what runs—what I hear. I hear it as clear as a bell."

After seeing photographs of the crime scene, Taylor developed a new theory: she was Wilson's protector. She said that she had picked up a pillow from the couch and held it over Wilson's face. It was an act of compassion. "I know with my rape my father's face has haunted me all my life," she said. "I didn't want her to see the face that would haunt her." But she was so agitated that she pressed too hard. She said, "I did not realize I was killing her."

"Day 37: I've finally earned the E. coli's trust." Ralph Stevens, a cop with the

who participated in the early stages of the investigation, thought that Taylor was delusional. "She made up stories," he said. "She was out of reality." When Stevens gave the sheriff his opinion, he was told that he was "muddying the waters," according to court records. The police department was removed from the investigation shortly thereafter. The chief of police said, "I thought they had the wrong people."

In Taylor's first confession, she casually referred to "another boy" who had been in Helen Wilson's apartment, but her description of his appearance dissolved into nothing: he was "not real slender, not real bulky," with hair "not black but not quite real blond." Searcey showed her a lineup of six photographs, and, with guidance, she picked out a high-school classmate, Tom Winslow, whom Searcey considered bisexual. (In a memo, Searcey wrote that Winslow and White had had "sexual confrontations with each other.")

Winslow, who was twenty-three, had dainty, feminine features, curly blond hair, and big hands, which he waved in the air when he talked. He had been bullied in school. Like Taylor, he had once seen Price for therapy. Winslow had attempted suicide, and Price gave him a diagnosis of depression, writing that he "does seem to obsess about not hurting others. He focuses on the discomfort of others and tries to make everyone feel better."

By the time the video recording of Winslow's interview begins, he has already accepted blame. He says that he was pressured to accompany the two others to Wilson's apartment and then fled when he heard Wilson scream. Like Taylor, he recalls details that fit with his self-conception, describing the crime as part of an unfortunate pattern in his life. "I have to make friends or I'll get insecure," he tells Searcey. "I'll get scared, because I feel like I can't make any friends, so I'll do anything."

He says that he worked at the Beatrice Good Samaritan Center with Jan, Wilson's granddaughter, and that he'd felt burdened by guilt. "Do you know how it was at work . . . when Jan was crying on my shoulder and not to tell her?" he says. "Do you know how low that makes me feel, because I've held it for this long?"

When Searcey asked the Beatrice Community Hospital for records of a blood transfusion Winslow had once had, he learned that Winslow's blood type didn't match the residue in the apartment, either. The state

serologist was surprised that none of the three suspects had Type B blood. She asked the county attorney, "How many people you going to have on this thing?" He told her, "I don't think we've come to the end yet."

Debra Shelden, Helen Wilson's grandniece, was friends with Taylor's crowd, though she was more reserved than many of them. Shelden, who was thirty, had been sexually abused as a child by her stepfather. Now she was married and had a child. Her name was on a list of possible suspects, friends of White and Winslow, compiled by the county attorney. A Beatrice cop said that Shelden "maybe hung out with these people because, you know, maybe it brought a little importance to herself." Another officer wrote that she "may not do too well on an I.Q. test primarily because of deprivation as to cultural background." She seemed to lack a point of view; someone else's perspective looked just as compelling as her own. A psychologist wrote, "She is essentially incapable of defending an independent opinion."

In Shelden's first interview with Searcey, she seemed more concerned with masking her intellectual disability than with implicating herself. She answered most of his questions with vague and succinct phrases, avoiding verbal risks. She told Searcey that she had helped the three others gain entrance to the apartment, but, when she saw what was happening, she tried to intervene. White pushed her away.

"Do you recall how he pushed you?" Searcey asked.

"He shoved."

"And how did he shove you?"

"He shoved me with his hands."

"Do you know what happened to you when he shoved you?"

"Um, all I know I fell."

"Do you know where fell?"

"Um, I think I fell on the floor."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

Shelden's blood wasn't Type B, either. Searcey pressed her to reveal whether a fifth person had been in the apartment. Her court-appointed lawyer, Paul Korslund, who later became the mayor of Beatrice and then a judge for the First District Court in Nebraska, asked Price if he would meet with her. Korslund assumed that she had been so traumatized by the murder that she had forgotten what had happened. When Shelden heard descriptions of the rape, she covered her ears.

Like Taylor and Winslow, Shelden was predisposed to trust Price. A decade before, the child-welfare office had become worried about her parenting skills. Price was appointed to help her become "more effective in her interactions with others and with society." She, too, had agreed to surrender her parental rights. Shelden was passive and compliant; a fellow-inmate at the Gage County jail described her as a "Cabbage Patch doll come to life."

After her meeting with Price, Shelden had a dream: her husband's friend James Dean had been in the apartment, too. "I was blocking it, I guess," she told Searcey. "I wasn't thinking enough to push it all out."

James Dean was arrested the next day. It was his twenty-fifth birthday, and he and a team of construction workers had just finished demolishing houses in Lincoln, fifty miles from Beatrice. He was booked into the Gage County jail. A guard wrote that he was "pacing, crying, talking to himself," waving his arms and exclaiming, "I've been arrested on something I know nothing about."

The sheriff's staff called Price and asked him to come to the jail to help Dean calm down. In a long session with Price, seventeen days after his arrest, Dean began crying and said that, as a child, he had been beaten by his father and his brother-in-law. Price proposed to Dean that these childhood experiences had created a fear of violence, which caused him to repress his memories of the crime. Price relied on the theory that some events are so traumatic that they are retrieved only through flashbacks and dreams, a notion that became so fashionable in the nineteen-eighties and nineties that it led to one of the most shameful episodes in the history of psychotherapy: patients, eager to please their therapists, engaged in "memory work," which produced claims of convoluted forms of abuse, like infant incest and satanic ritual rape—memories they later disavowed.

Although at first Dean denied that he was involved, Price wrote that by the end of the session Dean "was doubting the veracity of his own statements."

The six suspects had all been brought up in small white towns, where they considered police officers their guardians.

After the meeting, Dean took naps to see if he could get "visions of things." He tried to "let my mind wander into the case." He soon gained emotional clarity. Dean realized that Joseph White, whom he used to see at the R&S bar, reminded him of his brother-in-law. "They could be brothers in the asshole nature," he said. When he thought about the crime, what came to mind was "my ex-brother-in-law, the way he treated me." It wouldn't surprise him that he'd been pressured by White to do something immoral. He said his brother-in-law had also forced him to do things that made him uncomfortable, like steal tires.

Six days after Dean's session with Price, he confessed to Searcey that he had been an accomplice to Wilson's murder. "I feel that I remembered it in my sleep," he said. "I had a memory loss, which just kind of just—I didn't have no idea about none of this stuff." He seemed fascinated by his new understanding of his own mental processes.

The metaphors we use to describe our minds evolve with technology: Aristotle compared the mind to a wax tablet; Freud called it a "mystic writing-pad," a device like an Etch A Sketch, which had recently come on the market; in the nineteen-twenties, the British psychologist Tom Hatherley Pear compared it to a gramophone; a few decades later, the American neuroscientist Georges Ungar said that it worked like a telephone switchboard. Dean described it as a videotape, a metaphor appropriate for the eighties. He told his lawyer that his memories of the crime were fragmented because "all of a sudden the movie breaks. Boom!" He snapped his fingers. "You missed the section of the movie. Tie the movie back together. By the time you got it tied together, I already missed a half-hour segment of it."

Dean's blood wasn't Type B, either. The deputies urged him to try to recall whether a sixth friend had been in the room. "I got an idea but I can't say. You know, I don't want to put a wrong name in there and get you guys in trouble," he said. "I'll put in the missing pieces as it comes back to me."

Five weeks after his arrest, Dean dreamed that a sixth person was standing in Wilson's apartment. At first, he wasn't sure if it was a man

or a woman. Then, in another dream, he got a chance to rewind the scene. Based on "difference in the way the body structures are," he said, he "detected that it was a female." He took a closer look and recognized the face: Kathy Gonzalez. She had lived in the apartment above Helen Wilson's. The next day, Gonzalez, a twenty-nine-year-old cook at a fish restaurant, was arrested.

Gonzalez had Type B blood. Two days after her arrest, Price visited her in jail to try to jog her memory about the crime. "I can tell you, you're fully sane," he told her in a recorded interview. "You know right from wrong. You're in good shape there. You're basically a healthy person."

"Then why don't I remember?" she said.

"If I had seen what took place, I would have blanked it, too," Price said.

Price reminded Gonzalez of Mr. Rogers: he wore bluejeans and sneakers and had a pleasant, forgiving demeanor. But his theory of memory didn't make sense to her. She vividly remembered the worst thing that had happened to her as a child: she had been molested by an uncle. "I've done my share of little sins, but we're talking about killing an old person," she told Price. "I mean, why would I block this out? I mean, it had to be pretty bad."

"It's bad," Price said. He wondered if she had any trouble sleeping, a sign that perhaps she was haunted by the memories.

"I've never had difficulty," she told him. "Sleeping's always been my favorite thing to do."

He assured her that her memories of the crime would surface. "You'll have lots of time to sit and think," he said. "You'll be safe and well treated—time to relax."

"O.K.," she said. "But in the meantime my life has just went down the tubes."

"It's O.K. to cry," Price told her. "Sometimes crying lets some of the pressure off, too. You laugh, you can talk, you can cry."

"I'd rather laugh," she said.

At the Gage County jail, Gonzalez confronted Shelden and Taylor, asking them why they thought she had participated in the crime. Shelden laughed and said, "I don't know—I just remember you." Taylor told her, "I don't actually remember you being there."

As the six suspects awaited trial, they were ideal inmates. They had all been brought up in small white towns, where they considered police officers their guardians. Five of them had grown up in broken homes, bonding with family members who abused them—a survival strategy that they applied in this new context. Like many young people who are insecure and confused, they had an inchoate sense that they were guilty of something; they just needed to be told what it was. Don't many of us wake up in the morning with a vague feeling of shame, thinking, What sin did I commit? Searcey's description of the crime gave that feeling form.

The defendants were deferential to the sheriff, Jerry DeWitt, whose living quarters were attached to the jail. They referred to themselves as Jerry's Kids. Gonzalez observed that Shelden would greet all the deputies and jailers. "She wanted to be real close to all of them," she said. "It didn't matter which one it was; I think that she just wanted to be loved." Gonzalez noticed a similar longing in Taylor: "I think she thought any scrap of love is better than none." Taylor and Shelden talked through the bars of their cells every day about their lost daughters.

Dean wrote forty-three notes to the sheriff's staff that concluded with the phrase "please thank you." "Thanks for all the good meals," he wrote the sheriff and his wife. He was consumed by a compulsion to be helpful. He continued to dream about the crime, recalling so many details that he gave eight different statements. "Please come talk to me," he wrote to Searcey three months after his arrest, "before I forget what I have remembered so we can get it on tape." At the end of one interview, when Searcey asked if there was anything that Dean would like to add, he laughed and told the interrogators to "delete my mistakes."

He felt so guilty about his role in the crime that he planned to write Wilson's family to express his remorse. "It was killing him to think about it in his cell," the sheriff wrote. At a deposition, Dean pointed to a wall and said, "I wouldn't care if they stood me against that and shot me for what I did."

"Now that I've seen this, I don't think I can ever

enjoy popping bubble wrap again."

In Taylor's telling, her confessions represented a kind of rebirth. She was confronting her past by proxy, recalling the details of another woman's rape. "I took the barrier down," she said. "I have been very truthful with everybody because I finally opened up." Taylor described the sheriff and his deputies as "nurturing," like friends. She saw Price as her champion and emotional guide, and felt swept up by the collective endeavor to bring a rapist to justice. "I can handle my memory now," she said in a deposition, adding that she finally felt like a "complete person." She described the "new JoAnn" as "easy going, soft, gets along with people."

Debra Shelden was the first to plead guilty. "I was there at the scene, and I should be properly punished," she told the judge. James Dean followed, saying that in dreams he'd remembered more than eighty per cent of the crime. A few months later, Taylor pleaded guilty, too. She cried as she described Helen Wilson's assault, whispering, "Come on, Jo, you can do it, you've got to." (A psychologist assessed Taylor's competence to stand trial and found her sane, though he noted that she "reflexively feels guilty for everything.")

Tom Winslow gave a series of conflicting statements before concluding that he was not involved. He and Kathy Gonzalez pleaded no contest, saying that they had no memory of Wilson's murder. They were afraid that if they went to trial they would face the electric chair, a prospect that the sheriff and his deputies had told them was likely. Gonzalez, who described herself as "polished trailer trash," said, "They managed to get a bunch of people that really didn't have important lives. We weren't very well educated. We weren't really conducting our lives in a Christian manner for the most part. And they just got rid of us." She added, "None of us were innocent; we were all broken in one way, shape, or form."

Joseph White was the only suspect who tried to prove that he was innocent. He requested DNA testing, but his motion was denied. At his trial, for rape and murder, the only evidence against him was his co-defendants' confessions. By then, he had become the object of their projections. He was the evil stepfather, the abusive brother-in-law, the bully—the monster in all their lives.

When Taylor testified, White's attorney, Toney Redman, asked her, "Can you actually separate today what you remember from the night this happened and what was suggested to you to help you remember what happened that night?"

"No," she replied. "It would almost be impossible to separate."

"Tell me what parts you actually remember that you didn't have to have suggested to you," he asked.

"Oh, God."

"Is there anything?"

"Not that I can remember right offhand," she said. "I know there is somewhere along the line, but I can't remember."

Dean and Shelden testified, too, and Redman was puzzled to see that their accounts of White's actions, which had once been wildly disparate, had begun to cohere. "There was a thread to their story, a consensus," he said. "It was like they had become weirdly bonded to an idea. They didn't have a firm commitment to anything in life—they drifted from here to there—and all of a sudden here is something solid they can believe in." By the end of the trial, Redman, too, assumed that White was guilty.

The guilty verdict was announced after the jury had deliberated for five hours. White's mother said later that her son "just kind of slumped, like, I can't believe this." He was sentenced to life in prison.

JoAnn Taylor was sent to the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women, to serve a sentence of forty years. A psychiatrist at the prison wrote that she suffered from "flashback and re-experiences of her crime." She felt as if she were capable of more evil than she'd realized. The psychiatrist wrote, "She is fearful of losing control of her mind."

After four years in prison, Taylor wrote to the judge who had sentenced her: "Sir, I'm very sorry for the mistake I made in my life in 1985. I cannot bring Mrs. Wilson back but I pray everyday that you and others can find it to forgive me." She also wrote to Wilson's granddaughter, apologizing for causing her pain. Joy Bartling, a friend in prison, said that, when Taylor didn't receive a reply, she kept asking, "How come they won't forgive me?" Bartling told her, "You have to forgive yourself." Bartling assured her, "You didn't have any intention to suffocate her. You were protecting her from seeing what was going on."

Taylor's lawyer, Lyle Koenig, stayed in touch with her for ten years. "At

no point in time did she ever say, 'I did not do this,' " he said. Koenig told me that if he were to represent her again, he would not do anything differently. Her family assumed that she was guilty, too. Her brother Henry told her, "You are doing what you have to do to pay your debt to society."

Shelden never protested her punishment, either. Her guilt became a central fact of her identity, and she excelled at being a prisoner. After being granted trusty status, she was allowed outside the prison walls to weed the grounds. "When they pulled that gate open, I couldn't move," she told me. "I was too scared to go out."

Dean was sentenced to ten years, but a year after his confession he began to wonder if he really was guilty. Away from the presence of Searcey, he said, "It came to me, you know—what did I do? I wasn't involved in this thing." He scanned a few law books to see if he could undo his guilty plea and concluded that he was "sunk dead in the water." He tried to comfort himself with the thought that maybe he was repenting for a different crime: he had gone over the speed limit in his car; sometimes he had spun his tires. He said, "I got it through my head that I was being punished for the things that I hadn't been caught for."

White was less acquiescent. At the Nebraska State Penitentiary, he worked in the wood shop, saving all the money he earned to hire a new lawyer. In 2001, Nebraska passed a statute allowing convicted felons to seek DNA testing, and he filed a motion to request it.

White tried to persuade Winslow, who had been sentenced to fifty years, to petition for DNA testing, too. For more than a decade, Winslow was regularly raped in prison. "I just shut down," he told me. "I was just trying to maintain." He was grateful for small acts of benevolence: when the warden allowed him to attend his father's funeral, he marvelled that the guards let him stay a little more than an hour.

"Gentlemen, may I suggest peashooters at two paces, rather than peashooters at ten paces?"

FEBRUARY 3, 2014

Winslow's attorney, Jerry Soucie, said that Winslow was reluctant to have his DNA tested. During his time in prison, he had reconciled himself to the idea that maybe he had participated in the crime after all, and just didn't remember. "He had kind of accepted his fate," Soucie told me. "He felt that maybe the

government was right, and he had done something horrible." Soucie said that Winslow, like many people who falsely confess, had "greater anxiety confronting authority than dealing with whatever punishment that authority imposes."

The DNA tests were completed in August, 2008, and they excluded both White and Winslow as the source of the semen at the crime scene. When James Dean's DNA was examined, the results showed that he could not have been the source, either. All the DNA from both the blood and the semen had come from an unknown male.

The Nebraska attorney general's office assembled a task force to follow up on the leads in the original case files. After two months, it found a match for the DNA: Bruce Allen Smith, a juvenile delinquent whose grandmother had lived in the building. The probability that he was not the lone source of the semen and blood in the apartment was nine hundred and fifty-one quintillion to one. Smith had died of AIDS, in Oklahoma, seven years after the crime.

Soucie told Winslow the news. "What I got from him was that he was afraid to be innocent," Soucie said. "It meant he'd spent nineteen years rationalizing." When Soucie visited Taylor in prison and told her that the evidence exonerated her, she said, "O.K., who the hell are you, and why are you playing with me? You're full of shit."

In early 2009, an assistant attorney general announced that the six people were innocent "not beyond a reasonable doubt but beyond all doubt." It was the largest DNA exoneration involving false confessions in the history of the American judicial system. Taylor, White, and Winslow were promptly released. (Dean, Gonzalez, and Shelden were already out of prison, having been freed after five years.) The attorney general's office encouraged them to file applications to be pardoned.

Shelden, who lived with her husband in a van in Lincoln, resisted the idea. "I had bad memories of the whole thing, and I didn't want to push it," she told me. But her friends at a soup kitchen where she ate every day encouraged her to apply. In her pardon application, however, Shelden wrote, "I was present and observed Joseph White and Thomas Winslow on top of Helen Wilson." She added, "To my knowledge, Mr. Smith was not present at the time I was in the apartment."

All six pardons were granted. After Taylor's release, she moved to a halfway house in Omaha and struggled to convince herself that she had

never met Mrs. Wilson, as she had come to refer to her. Her friend from prison, Joy Bartling, said that Taylor asked her, "If I didn't put the pillow on her head, why do I keep having these thoughts and visions?"

Joseph White sued the county for conducting an investigation so reckless that it violated his civil rights. But in 2012, shortly after filing the suit, he died in an accident in an Alabama coal refinery, where he was working. The five other defendants continued his lawsuit. "Part of the reason we pushed through the emotions was because of Joe White," Winslow told me. "He gives us the extra strength. He was stronger than us all the way around."

The case went to trial last June, in Lincoln. Before it began, Shelden's lawyers asked her when she had last seen Joseph White. "The night of the murder," she responded. They decided that when she took the witness stand it would be best to avoid questions about the past. One of the lawyers, Maren Chaloupka, said, "I didn't want to be the next person to contaminate her memory."

Eli Chesen, the Nebraska psychiatrist, told the jury that Taylor, Dean, and Shelden suffered from Stockholm syndrome. In forty years of practice, it was the first time he'd seen the condition. He described it as "a brutal kind of bonding, psychological bonding, to someone who has total control over you." He called Price the "Rosetta stone" in the case: "Price implanted his own belief system into his captive/patient," he wrote in a report. (Through his lawyer, Price declined to speak with me.)

Beatrice has only a few psychologists, and Price was given a nearly occult kind of authority, as if he were the only person who had access to the mysteries of the human mind. It is not uncommon for law-enforcement officials, even judges, to suspend common sense in the presence of a scientific expert, whose superior training lends his personal opinions the weight of truth. Price, who is still a reserve deputy with the sheriff's office, was widely admired in Beatrice. Taylor's lawyer at the civil trial, Jeffry Patterson, told me, "He's a very nice guy. I just liked him personally. He was a fairly straight shooter." Chesen, who had a therapy practice in the same building as Price, said that patients described him as charismatic. Taylor's original defense attorney considered him a friend.

In his dual role as psychologist and deputy, Price was so focussed on unravelling the crime that he seemed to lose sight of the vulnerabilities

of his former patients. Research shows that the people most susceptible to false memories have a tendency toward dissociation, a coping mechanism reported by victims of sexual violence: they learn to detach from the moment, to feel as if they were not fully there. Taylor, who still refers to the theory of repression that Price taught her, told me, "My memory problems began when I was raped." She said that her confidence in her memory deteriorated further when her mother refused to acknowledge that the abuse had occurred. During the civil trial, even as Taylor listened to all the evidence exonerating her, she occasionally became so distressed that she thought, I'm a bad person. I had to have done it.

MARCH 14, 2016

Fictitious memories do not only afflict those who have been traumatized; people with stable backgrounds also struggle to distinguish between experiences that they had themselves and those they absorbed through someone else's stories. Studies show that people will come to believe that they were in an accident at a family wedding, were attacked by an animal, or had tea with Prince Charles, if they are told that family members saw it happen. The more often the stories are told, the more likely the memories are to be implanted. A 2015 study in *Psychological Science* found that seventy per cent of people, when subjected to highly suggestive and repetitive interviews, would come to believe that they had committed a crime. They developed what the authors called "rich false memories," detailed and multisensory, of having perpetrated a theft or an assault. The authors wrote that "imagined memory elements regarding what something *could* have been like can turn into elements of what it *would* have been like, which can become elements of what it *was* like." In the past thirty years, roughly a hundred men and women in the United States have confessed to crimes for which they have later been exonerated by DNA evidence.

The attorneys for the county argued that the six should get no more than three hundred thousand dollars each in damages, and suggested that it was Winslow's fault that he had been repeatedly raped while he was serving his sentence. "Don't get me wrong, I don't think anybody should be abused like that in prison," one of the attorneys said. "But you saw him testify here. You saw his video. Mr. Winslow is effeminate in nature."

How should a town atone for its negligence? The jury determined that Gage County, along with Price and Searcey, owed the Beatrice Six, as they have come to be known, more than thirty million dollars, four times the county's annual tax revenue. The county

appealed, but is now considering bankruptcy, which would be considered a first for any such community in Nebraska. Last winter, at a town meeting at Valentino's Primavera Room, a restaurant three blocks from Helen Wilson's apartment, forty people, all white, most of them graying men, tried to strategize. One man suggested civil disobedience: refuse to pay property taxes. "Show you got a backbone and stand up straight!" he shouted. Others suggested ending funding for pre-K education, cutting government jobs, taxing groceries, ceasing road maintenance, or quadrupling property taxes for farmers, a proposal that residents said would make them move away.

At a state judiciary-committee meeting in March, delegates from the county argued that the state should pay the judgment. Ernie Chambers, a state senator, disagreed, saying that taxpayers in Gage County should pay a price for electing incompetent and heartless leaders. "You made your bed," he said. "Lie in it." Chambers recommended that the county put a lien on the courthouse and sell the sheriff's cars.

Helen Wilson's grandson, Bob Housman, runs Jan's Cleaners, in downtown Beatrice, where Searcey used to have his uniform dry-cleaned. Housman, a sixty-three-year-old with a reddish beard, said that he would consider leaving town if the judgment caused him to pay higher taxes. He dismissed Bruce Allen Smith's role in his grandmother's death. "I don't feel the connection," he told me. "I never did, though he probably was there at one point or another."

"Do you feel that there were seven people there?" I asked him.

"I don't *feel*," he said. "I know."

His theory was that the six broke into the apartment and murdered Wilson around midnight. "I still have nightmares about it," he said. They could have left the door open, allowing Smith to walk into the apartment in the early morning and rape her dead body, leaving his DNA. Housman and his wife clean the uniforms and suits of many people who hold public office in the county, and he said that nearly all of them still think the six are guilty.

The county sheriff, Millard Gustafson, who took over the department in 2007, told me, "The DNA doesn't get rid of the other half of the case. The six had to know something about it, or had to have been there—that's the sense that the public has." A quote from Ecclesiastes hung from a wooden tablet outside his office: "When the sentence for a

crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong."

Roy and Gregory Lauby, brothers whom I met at a popular restaurant, Country Cookin' Cafe, told me that they didn't know anyone who felt anger toward the officials who put the Beatrice six in prison. The brothers thought that the six were innocent, but they were wary of accusing county officials of doing anything wrong. Greg, a former farmer, noted that even the Beatrice *Daily Sun* seemed to avoid getting into details of the trial. (The paper's slogan used to be "If you didn't see it in the *Sun* it didn't happen.")

Roy, a plumber, suggested that the delusion that had gripped Taylor, Shelden, and Dean now held sway over the town. "We were brainwashed by our elected officials just like the six were brainwashed," he said.

Kathy Gonzalez, who now lives ninety miles from Beatrice and works as a cashier at a grocery store, said she regrets that she didn't leave Nebraska after she was released. When she meets people who live in or near Beatrice, she hears the same sentiment: "You guys managed to get away with this."

Burdette Searcey retired from the sheriff's department last November. He helps out at his wife's store, the Flower Shop, delivering bouquets. The store is a domestic jungle: peonies planted in Greek Revival columns and porcelain trucks; floral arrangements interspersed with miniature footballs; pastel wooden birds, wreaths, and birdhouses; garden statues in the form of angels; and framed inspirational quotes like "Live well laugh often love much."

When I introduced myself, Searcey apologized for not being able to sit down for an interview. A warm, energetic man, he didn't enjoy turning down a conversation. "Being on the *good* side of this, we don't talk," he said. But he was either too polite or too stubborn not to. "We've got a-hundred-per-cent backing from the public in Beatrice," he told me. "I am loved by my people in this community."

He became so animated that his wife, who was taking orders on the phone, told him to step away. We moved to the front of the store, where, pacing, he repeatedly set off the door's motion sensor. He had a habit of introducing concepts whose reality he doubted by using scare quotes: there was Bruce Smith, the "*quote* DNA donor," and the

prospect, if the county's appeal of the judgment failed, that he would "*quote* lose" the case.

"Let's not try to advertise anything that didn't happen, because if I advertise good enough I might get you to buy," he told me. "I might." He repeated, "I might."

He said that there were two separate cases: the murder of Wilson by the six and, hours later, a rape by Bruce Smith. The proof, he said, was that after Wilson had gone to sleep a full pot of coffee was brewed in her kitchen, and he remembers that there were several dirty cups near the sink (crime-scene photographs show only one). Helen Wilson always put her dirty dishes away, and why would Bruce Smith make more than one cup of coffee? The six must have brewed the coffee and drunk it. He said, "I'll go to my deathbed on that."

"Polly want to abandon speaking of herself in the third person."

SEPTEMBER 5, 2011

Debra Shelden keeps her mother's ashes in her basement. She wants to spread them beside her father's grave, at the Beatrice Cemetery, as her mother requested, but Shelden is afraid to return to Beatrice. She thinks she was told that if she set foot in Beatrice she'd be prosecuted again, but she can't remember who said this or when it happened. "How does it feel to not be able to trust your own mind?" her lawyer Chaloupka asked at the civil trial. "It's not very good," she replied.

This spring, Shelden, Chaloupka, and I had dinner at Imperial Palace, a Chinese restaurant in Lincoln, near Shelden's house. She was genial and chipper, giggling whenever anyone else laughed. I had met with Searcey earlier in the day, and I told her his theory about the coffee. "I don't remember where any of the coffeepots or anything was," she said. "I stayed in one of the other rooms. I just stood in front of the door." Chaloupka gently touched her arm, and Shelden paused. She became flustered and looked as if she were trying to jog the memories with her hands, sketching the answers in the air. "I don't remember what I did at the crime," she told me, "because I wasn't there, apparently."

She often appended her description of the crime with the phrase "according to my statement," as if she had been reduced to the status of a character in someone else's story, and would defer to the original text. She held her palms up, side by side. "Once things came out of my mouth, it was like a big book," she told me. "It just opened up—all the

pages."

After the civil trial, JoAnn Taylor moved back to North Carolina. Her attraction to Nebraska was always tied to her daughter, Rachel. Following Taylor's exoneration, they had a reunion before drifting apart. Taylor sensed that Rachel, raised middle class, disapproved of her. She was sure that Rachel's husband did, too. "In his mind and in his attitude, I'll always be a murderer," she told me.

I met Taylor at her church, Christian Life of Hendersonville, where she had come for a free dinner. Her hair was cut short and dyed black and burgundy. Taylor carries a knife in her purse and projects a sense of authority. It is easily punctured. After a few minutes of small talk, she said that if I told her enough times that my shirt was green—it was gray—she would probably believe it. "I will eventually say, 'Oh, yeah, it is green.' I am going to accept that. It's going to start clicking."

The next day, we met at the public library, and she wore a green blouse herself—a flouncy, patterned one that she told me represented a new, gentler way of being in the world. For decades, she'd abstained from color, frills, anything that seemed too feminine. "I am a work in progress on soft," she said. She was still preoccupied by a goal she had set for herself thirty-five years earlier, when she saw Price for counselling. She longed to be the kind of person who was confident enough in her own sense of goodness that she would know definitively that she could never commit murder.

Our conversation was repeatedly interrupted by alerts from a real-estate Web site. New houses in Hendersonville had just come on the market or been repriced. Taylor was desperate for a place of her own and, if the settlement money ever comes through, she plans to buy a small house. For the past few weeks, she had been living with a family from church, sleeping in their seven-year-old daughter's bedroom.

Her only regular income was disability benefits. When she applied for them, a caseworker paused while reading her application. One of the medical conditions listed was Stockholm syndrome. "You've got Patty Hearst disease?" the caseworker asked. "How'd that come about?"

"I was the captive," Taylor explained, "and the sheriff was my captor. Duh."

Mrs. Wilson is a daily presence in her life. "I can feel it in my hands,"

Taylor told me. She closed her eyes and lifted her palms. “The touch and the weight of the pillow. It still gives me chills.”

I asked her why it was the pillow, of all images, that lingered. She closed her eyes again, and said that when her stepfather raped her he used to cover her face with a pillow—a detail that I’d never seen her mention in hundreds of pages of psychological records, depositions, and testimony. After years of transposing details of her rape onto Wilson’s, she seemed to be overlaying her own childhood with the final moments of Wilson’s life. “Once you are assaulted,” she said, and trailed off, crying. “I don’t know why I felt I had to protect her. I don’t know if, subconsciously, it was me protecting me.” She quickly checked Facebook on her phone, a tic that seemed to steady her. “I don’t have to be that abused little girl anymore,” she said. ♦

Rachel Aviv joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2013.

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