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DOMINICK
DUNNE



JUSTICE

CRIMES, TRIALS, AND PUNISHMENTS

'First-rate, utterly engrossing, wickedly incisive'

NEW YORK TIMES

JUSTICE

Crimes, Trials, and Punishments

Dominick Dunne

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Also by Dominick Dunne

Non-Fiction

THE WAY WE LIVED THEN

FATAL CHARMS

THE MANSIONS OF LIMBO

Fiction

ANOTHER CITY, NOT MY OWN

AN INCONVENIENT WOMAN

PEOPLE LIKE US

A SEASON IN PURGATORY

THE TWO MRS GRENVILLES

THE WINNERS

For my two great editors,
BETTY PRASHKER
of Crown,
who has guided me through my books,
and
WAYNE LAWSON
of *Vanity Fair*,
who has guided me through every article,
with love and thanks

INTRODUCTION

I DIDN'T START WRITING until I was fifty years old although an observer's eye had been observing for forty of those fifty years, while trying out different areas of occupation. My career in television and movies in Hollywood had come to a permanent halt, and I had nowhere else to turn. The thought of writing had been lurking within me for some time, but I didn't actually begin until I finally removed myself from the glamorous world in which I no longer belonged to a one-room cabin in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. There I began my second career as a writer and a recorder of the social history of the time. The plot of that first book had been played out in front of me the year before I left Hollywood. The gossip of the set in which I had once moved centered around the head of Columbia Studios, David Begelman, who, rumor had it, had forged a check for ten thousand dollars in the name of Cliff Robertson, an Academy Award-winning actor. Barely a word of the scandal appeared in the Los Angeles papers. Powerful people saw

to that. The wagons closed in to protect one of their own. I was watching it firsthand as it was happening. I became obsessed with the story. As I was out of work, I had plenty of time to feed my obsession, and I gossiped about it nonstop on the telephone, trying to get the story into wider circulation. I knew all the players in it, and their wives, agents, secretaries, and mistresses.

By sheer happenstance, in the sort of coincidental meeting that is a signature of my life, a man I did not know recognized me in the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel. I was there having lunch with my agent, who was telling me I was all washed up, which I already knew. I was not remotely famous, so it was not that sort of recognition. It developed that one of my brothers had been in this man's class at Georgetown, and he recognized the family resemblance. He turned out to be a reporter from the *Washington Post*, and what he had been sent out to cover was the long-suppressed forgery story that was so gripping to me. He told me that the actress Dina Merrill, the then wife of Cliff Robertson, had gone to Kay Graham, then publisher of the *Washington Post*, and said that a cover-up of the forgery was going on. Mrs Graham sent out the reporter and a partner to check out the story. But no one would talk to them. Secretaries would not put through their calls. Doors would not open for him. They had not been able to gather anything of consequence to bear out Dina Merrill's version of the story. The enormity of the coincidence that this reporter and I should meet ultimately turned out to be a life-changing experience for me. I was like manna from heaven for him, and he was

the release I needed for the story that was bursting inside of me to be made known. The Begelman story was the epitome of everything I had grown to hate about Hollywood. In all honesty, there was also a bit of revenge in my motive, because of my failure there. I knew a great deal of the information the reporter was seeking and I willingly shared it, including all the unlisted telephone numbers he needed. I spent a week with him and his partner, driving around with them, watching two investigative reporters research and then put together a story. It was they who broke the story nationally. It was thrilling for me to know that I had played a part in it. I felt a kind of excitement within myself that I hadn't felt about the movie industry for a long time. *I could do what these guys are doing*, I thought to myself. It took a while, but that's what happened, and that's what this book is: a collection of stories about the cases and trials that I have covered for *Vanity Fair* magazine. Incidentally, the studio head who forged the check only had to attend a few sessions with a psychologist popular in the Hollywood community as punishment for his theft. He then became the head of MGM and continued to be invited to parties and to give Sunday-night screenings in the projection room at his house of all the latest films for all the best people. On the other hand, the Academy Award-winning actor whose name he forged never got a role of any consequence in Hollywood again. Years later, Begelman shot himself to death in a room at the Century Plaza Towers. His widow sent me a straw hat of his that I once admired.

A tragic event in my personal life changed me forever.

In 1982, my only daughter, Dominique, was murdered by a former boyfriend, John Sweeney, who stalked her and strangled her. I had never attended a trial until that of the man who murdered my daughter. In fact, I had been a feather in the breeze until that cataclysmic event – here, there, everywhere, never sure of who I was or what I was supposed to be. What I witnessed in that courtroom enraged me and redirected me. The lies that are tolerated shocked me, as did the show-business aspect that has taken over the justice system. My daughter's killer was 'costumed' like a sacristan in a Catholic seminary. For a prop, he carried a Bible, which he read throughout the trial in a pious fashion. He was presented as a blue-collar boy who had fallen in love with a Beverly Hills society girl. How I hated his lawyer. I learned in that courtroom that the rights of the victim do not equate with the rights of the defendant. Anything can be said about the dead, and much was, but the killer's grave past offenses as a beater of women were kept from the jury. The testimony of another of his victims, who had been hospitalized as a result of his acts of violence, was, inexplicably, ruled inadmissible. The trial was a travesty. There has been a television documentary about it. The judge had a personal animosity toward the prosecutor. How I hated that judge. The jury fell for the Bible-reading act, and John Sweeney, who has subsequently changed his name, received a sentence of six years, which was automatically reduced to three. He was released from prison after two and a half. How I hated him, even as I knew that hate is not a state in which to linger. My rage needed a release from the persistent plan

in my mind to hire someone to kill him, an obsession I had for months, which is not an uncommon reaction for the parent of a murdered child. But, unlike the killer, I would have ended up in prison for life. Instead, I wrote about the murder – not just about the facts of the story but about the emotional upheaval and permanent scars my wife, my sons, and I suffered during that terrible period. The first magazine article I ever wrote is the story of that trial. It appeared in *Vanity Fair* in March 1984. The affirmative reaction to the article, titled ‘Justice’, made me realize the power of the written word. It was read in some law schools to show just how badly a trial could go. I was proud of that. For the first time in my life, I felt that I was in step with my destiny. I became fascinated by trials. I attended a great many of the high profile trials of the last decade and a half, including the senatorial impeachment trial of President Clinton. I became repelled by the kind of defense attorney who would do anything – anything – to win an acquittal for a guilty person. ‘They’re just doing their job, Dominick,’ other reporters would say to me, but I could never bring myself around to that way of thinking.

Somewhere along the line, most likely because I had had the experience myself, I began to get personally involved in the trials I was covering. During the Claus von Bülow trial in Providence, Rhode Island, I spent the night at Clarendon Court, the magnificent Newport estate of the comatose Sunny von Bülow, as the guest of her children Princess Ala von Auersperg and Prince Alexander von Auersperg. A friend of Sunny’s who was a friend of

mine had arranged the introductions. Ala and Alex showed me the bedroom where whatever happened between Claus and their mother happened, leading to the perpetual coma in which she remains twenty years later. Her Porthault sheets were still on the bed. Her Christmas presents from that year had never been unwrapped. I felt guilty for experiencing such excitement at the intimacy of the encounter. At that moment, I entered the story and became a part of it. 'Bad journalism,' journalists say. 'So what,' I say back. Things happen to me, and I let them happen and then write about them later. At a subsequent time in the von Bülow trial, during an Easter Sunday lunch party at Sunny von Bülow's grand Fifth Avenue apartment in New York, I sat on Sunny's bed with Claus's mistress, Andrea Reynolds, while she showed me that her jewels were equal to Sunny's. We ate off Sunny's beautiful dishes and drank from her glasses. The lobster salad was served by a Chinese butler in white gloves. It was surreal. I always say to myself, 'I can't believe I'm here watching what I'm watching.' The next day we were back in court in Providence, where von Bülow was on trial for attempted murder.

Trials can get boring, but the lives of the people involved in the trials are never boring to me. I had been friends with the Los Angeles socialites Alfred and Betsy Bloomingdale. After Alfred's death, I covered the trial of the madman who killed Vicki Morgan, Alfred's mistress, by beating her to death with a baseball bat. I became friendly with O. J. Simpson's sisters, fine ladies both, while writing each month that I believed Simpson was guilty. I was the first one to report that the young and handsome

Lyle Menendez wore a wig, an unknown fact until then that was passed on to me by Lyle's wig maker, who sought me out. From her debutante days in the '50s, I knew Lisa Dean Moseley, the du Pont heiress whose husband was on trial in Las Vegas for the murder-for-hire death of a drug-addicted prostitute with whom his stepson was in love. I was two years behind Michael Skakel's father at boarding school, and I had attended his aunt Ethel's wedding to Robert Kennedy in 1950.

On the day before the verdict at the O. J. Simpson trial, I stepped into an elevator in which the only other passenger was Simpson's son from his first marriage, Jason. He had been unfriendly and hostile for the nine months of the trial, and we had never spoken, but he spoke to me that day in the elevator. 'How was Norman Lear's dinner?' he asked me, referring to a celebrity dinner party I had attended a few evenings before at the home of the creator of *All in the Family*. 'How did you know I was at Norman Lear's dinner?' I asked, startled. He told me he had been the catering service chef in the kitchen while I had held court in the dining room discussing his father in a very derogatory manner. I thought, *My God, what are the odds that this could happen?* But things like that happen to me quite often. A young man appeared out of nowhere to hand me a secret report by a private detective agency hired by the father of Michael Skakel that led directly to the indictment and trial of Skakel for the murder of fifteen-year-old Martha Moxley twenty-five years earlier. After billionaire banker Edmund Safra was asphyxiated in his Monte Carlo penthouse on December 3, 1998, I had

a chance encounter at the 21 Club in New York with a famous couple in the financial world that led me to the inner sanctum of Safra's mysterious life and even more mysterious death. While I was trying to make an early, unobtrusive exit from a New York party, a butler, helping me on with my coat, whispered to me, 'I have something to tell you.' He was talking about the case I was writing about. Another time, I was staying at the Brazilian Court in Palm Beach during the William Kennedy Smith trial. The telephone rang late at night, after I had gone to sleep. It was the woman who had brought the rape charge against Smith, Patricia Bowman, who became known as the girl behind the blue dot on television. 'I saw you in court today,' she said. She invited me to meet with her in her home. I got the only print interview she ever gave.

In my everyday life over the last fifty years, it has been my curious lot to move among the rich and famous and powerful, always as an outsider, always listening, watching, remembering. In many of the stories in this book, I have social relationships with the person on trial, or the victim, or their families and friends. I walk a very fine line. There are those I meet who despise me. The Kennedys. The Skakels. Claus von Bülow. O. J. Simpson, on and on. The list is long. At the William Kennedy Smith rape trial in Palm Beach, I sat right across the aisle from four of the female members of the Kennedy family, all of whom I knew. We never spoke. At the trial of the Menendez brothers in Los Angeles for the murder of their parents, I became the enemy of their defense attorney,

Leslie Abramson. Jose Menendez, the Hollywood corporate chief who was shotgunned to death by his two sons in their Beverly Hills mansion, was a tough and unlikable man, as well as an overdemanding father, but the lies told about him at the trial, reducing him to the lowest kind of pervert, revolted me. I am told by a reliable source who visits Lyle and Erik Menendez in the separate prisons where they are serving life without the possibility of parole, that the brothers, who never discuss the murders, regret that they participated in the defaming of their father. I long to visit them in prison myself one day to see if they will tell me what really happened that night. At the O. J. Simpson trial, at which I had a permanent seat courtesy of Judge Lance Ito, I received hate mail and death threats, and was booed by the crowds outside the courtroom because of my outspoken belief in Simpson's guilt. After the hearings for the Skakel-Moxley case in Stamford, Connecticut, Robert Kennedy, Jr, lashed out at me in print, but I lashed back pretty good. I have seen New York hostesses change place cards at the last minute, because the person I am seated next to doesn't want to sit next to me, because of a story I am working on. I never mind, really. It goes with the territory. Somehow, it always turns out there is a connection. Besides, I can always use it in one of my novels.

It is one of the curiosities of my life that its greatest tragedy turned me to an area of my writing career that is so rewarding to me. It's so wonderful to be able to say, 'I love my life,' and I do. When my daughter was about to be taken off the life-support system at Cedars-Sinai

Medical Center, we went in as a family and talked to her. Then we each went in alone to say good-bye to her privately. They had cut her beautiful hair off. She would have hated that. I kissed her on her bald head, and I said, 'Give me your talent.' She did. I believe with all my heart that she has guided me to the paths of justice.

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