Introduction

The horror of death row is that you die a little each day. The waiting kills you. You live in a cage – and when you wake up, you mark off another day and you tell yourself that you are now one day closer to death.

Seventy-year-old Sam Cayhall is on Mississippi's death row for a terrible crime he committed many years ago. Sam hates lawyers and wants to handle the final stages of the legal process himself. His date with the gas chamber is suddenly frighteningly close, and time seems to be running out for him. Then a young lawyer, Adam Hall, arrives and tries to persuade Sam that he needs his help. Adam brings with him a secret which may make the old man change his mind.

Sample pages

John Grisham, the author of this book, was born on February 8, 1955 in Jonesboro, Arkansas. His father was a building worker and the family was poor. They moved frequently until 1967 when they settled in Southaven, Mississippi. Grisham's mother encouraged him to read when he was young, which began his love of books. He graduated in 1977 from Mississippi State University. From there he went to the University of Mississippi to study law, graduating in 1981. At first, he studied tax law but then switched to criminal law. After graduating, Grisham started his own law firm in Southaven. In 1983, he was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives, where he served until 1990. While working in politics, he continued his law practice.

In 1984, he started writing while working full-time. He got up at 5 a.m. each day so he could spend a few hours writing before going to the office. His first book, *A Time to Kill* (1989), did not sell well, but success soon followed. *The Firm* (1991) was a number one best-seller, and the movie rights were sold for

$600,000. Grisham gave up his law practice immediately and concentrated on writing. He has written one novel a year since then; many are best-sellers, and he was named the best-selling novelist of the 1990s.

There are a number of novels by Grisham in the Penguin Readers and Penguin Active Reading series. *A Time to Kill* is about the tense atmosphere between blacks and whites in Clanton, Mississippi following a murder. In *The Firm*, an intelligent and ambitious lawyer discovers that his firm is not what it seems. The *Pelican Brief* starts with the murders of two Supreme Court judges. In *The Client*, an eleven-year-old boy discovers a hidden body – which powerful forces wish to remain hidden. In *The Rainmaker*, a young lawyer helps his poor, uneducated clients fight a major insurance company, but finds himself facing some of the most experienced lawyers that money can buy. Readers may wonder why the jury behaves so strangely in *The Runaway Jury*. In *The Partner*, $90 million disappears from a law firm, after which it is discovered that one of the firm's partners, apparently dead and buried, is in fact alive. *The Testament* centers around a very rich man whose family want nothing from him except his money. In another story, three ex-judges who are serving time in prison and dare to continue practicing law, call themselves *The Brethren*. *The Street Lawyer* is about a lawyer in a large, wealthy firm who is shocked into discovering a strong sense of morality.

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More recent Grisham novels include *The Innocent Man* (2006), about a man who is wrongfully sent to prison in Oklahoma. *Playing for Pizza* (2007), is an amusing novel about American football played in Italy.

The Chamber (1994) is John Grisham's fifth novel, and was made into a movie starring Gene Hackman and Chris O'Donnell. The book takes the reader inside Parchman Prison for a tour of death row, the row of prison cells leading to the gas chamber. Grisham

gives a detailed description of the life there and the final days leading up to an execution. Through the young lawyer, Adam Hall, Grisham speaks out against the death penalty, especially the use of the gas chamber.

On September 2, 1983 in Mississippi, Jimmy Lee Gray was sent to the gas chamber for his crimes. Something went wrong. He did not die quickly. After eight minutes, the witnesses left because they were shocked by Gray's desperate attempts to breathe. Gray died banging his head against a steel pole behind his chair. Later, it was revealed that the executioner had been drunk and made mistakes. In *The Chamber* Grisham uses this true account to illustrate the cruelty of the use of the gas chamber for people on death row. Sam Cayhall tells his lawyer, Adam Hall, this story. Hall uses it in an attempt to persuade the judge to rule against the gas chamber in order to get a temporary delay. Together, Cayhall and Hall go to the prison library to "dig up every gas chamber execution that ever went wrong." Sadly, there are many.

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Lethal injection has replaced the gas chamber in many of the American states that have the death penalty. By 2007, only five states were still using the gas chamber, and even these were offering lethal injection as an alternative.

The death penalty is used as a punishment for only the most serious crimes, like murder. Grisham's character Sam Cayhall grew up in Mississippi at a time when groups of white men murdered blacks by lynching. These were proud racists, whose trail of death and violence against black people and Jewish people is a shameful chapter in U.S. history. But Grisham suggests that readers consider the childhoods of these racists, who are the sons of racists. If a person grows up in a family and a society that is proud of racist activities, should they be sentenced to death for their crimes?

Chapter 1 A Delicate Exercise

It began with a phone call on the night of April 17, 1967. Not trusting his own telephone, Jeremiah Dogan drove to a pay phone at a gas station to make the call. At the other end, Sam Cayhall listened to the instructions he was given. When he returned to bed, he told his wife nothing. She didn't ask.

Two days later, Cayhall left his home town of Clanton at dusk and drove to Greenville, Mississippi. There he drove slowly through the center of the city, and found the offices of the Jewish lawyer Marvin B. Kramer. It had been easy for the Klan* to pick Kramer as their next target. He had a long history of support for the civil rights movement. He led protests against whites-only facilities. He accused public officials of racism. He had paid for the rebuilding of a black church destroyed by the Klan. He even welcomed Negroes to his home.

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The operation had been simple to plan, as it involved only three people. Mississippi Klan leader Dogan provided the money, and enjoyed his role as organizer. The second man was Sam Cayhall, one of two men chosen by Dogan to do the actual dirty work. The Cayhall family's connections with the Klan went back very many years, but there was little Klan activity in Clanton so he was considered harmless by the FBI.† He was a good choice.

At eleven, Cayhall drove to Cleveland, where he looked for a green Pontiac. He found the vehicle parked at a truck stop on

* The Ku Klux Klan: a secret terrorist organization (of 'Klansmen'), which began in the south of the USA, targeting blacks, Jews, and other groups.

† The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation): the government agency in the USA which investigates crimes relating to the country's security.

Highway 61, got in, and drove it out into open farming country. There he stopped on a lonely road and opened the trunk. In a box covered with newspapers, he found everything he needed. Then he drove back into town and waited at an all-night café.

At exactly 2 a.m., the third person in the team walked into the café and sat across from Sam Cayhall. This young man's name was Rollie Wedge. At the age of twenty-two, Rollie was already deeply committed to the struggle for white power. His father was in the construction industry, and had taught his son how to use explosives. Cayhall knew little about the young man, but they had done this kind of job together several times now and Rollie certainly knew what he was doing. They drank coffee together for half an hour. Sam's cup shook in his hand, but Rollie's was steady.

The two men climbed into the green Pontiac and, with Cayhall at the wheel, the car headed south on Highway 61. It was around 4 a.m. when they drove up to Kramer's office in Greenville. The street was very quiet and dark.

"This'll be easy," Rollie said softly. "Too bad we can't bomb his house, though."

"Yeah. Too bad," Sam agreed nervously. "But there's a guard at the house. And he's got kids in there, you know."

"Kill them while they're young," Rollie said. "Little Jews grow up to be big ones."

Cayhall parked the car in an alley behind Kramer's office. The men quietly opened the trunk, removed the box and Rollie's bag, and moved silently along to the door at the back of the office. Cayhall broke open the door and in seconds they were inside. In the main hallway was a closet filled with old legal files. The perfect place for the bomb.

"Stay by the door and watch the alley," Wedge whispered, and Sam did exactly as he was told. He preferred not to handle the explosives himself.

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Rollie quickly set the box on the floor in the closet, and wired the dynamite. It was a delicate exercise, and Sam's heart raced as he waited. He kept his back to the explosives, just in case something went wrong. They were in the office less than five minutes.

In each of the bombings they had carried out before, Wedge had used a fifteen-minute fuse, lit with a match. The two bombers enjoyed being on the road, on the edge of the town, just as the bomb destroyed its target. With the car windows down, they had heard and felt each of the explosions at a comfortable distance.

But tonight was different. Sam made a wrong turn, and suddenly they were stopped at a railroad crossing as a long, slow train went through. Sam checked his watch. The train passed, and Sam took another wrong turn. The ground would shake in less than five minutes. Greenville was not a big city, and Sam guessed he must soon meet a familiar street. As he turned again, he realized he was going the wrong way down a one-way street. He hit the brakes hard, and the car stopped. He tried the engine, but it wouldn't start. Sam was shaking with fear.

"Stay calm," Rollie said slowly.

The minutes were passing. They could not be very far from the lawyer's office. When the bomb goes off, thought Sam, we might be too close for comfort.

He turned the key once more, and the car started this time. They sped away. More than fifteen minutes had passed since they had left the office. No explosion. At last Sam found himself in a street he knew, and began to head toward the edge of town.

"What kind of fuse did you use?" Sam finally asked, as they turned on to Highway 82. Rollie didn't reply. That was his business.

They slowed while they passed a parked police car, and then

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gained speed out of town. Within minutes, Greenville was behind them, still quiet and at peace.

"What kind of fuse did you use?" Sam asked again, more loudly this time.

Rollie did not look at him. "I tried something new," he answered.

"What?"

"You wouldn't understand," Rollie said. Sam considered the possibilities.

"A timer?" he asked, a few miles down the road.

"Something like that."

♦

The horror of the Kramer bombing actually began about the time when Sam Cayhall was leaving Rollie Wedge back at the truck-stop café in Cleveland. Ruth Kramer's alarm clock went off around five-thirty in the morning, and she realized immediately that she was very sick. Her husband Marvin helped her to the bathroom and said he would take the five-year-old twins, Josh and John, to their nursery school. As soon as the boys were bathed, dressed, and fed, he said goodbye to Ruth, and he and the twins left the house. They were early, and as Marvin had some work to do before going into court for the morning, he decided to take the twins into the office with him before delivering them to nursery school.

The boys loved their father's office. When they arrived there around seven-thirty, they went straight to the secretary's desk, with its tempting pile of typing paper, scissors, and pens. Marvin looked in and began to lecture the twins about the mess, but they were running off down the hallway, not listening. Marvin smiled to himself.

At that time, none of the other staff had arrived at the office. Marvin's secretary, Helen, was on her way, just leaving the post

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office. His colleague, David Lukland, had just locked his apartment door three blocks away.

Marvin decided to go up to the third floor to find an old file which might help him with the case he was preparing. As he climbed the stairs, he could hear the little boys laughing somewhere down the hall. At about a quarter to eight, the huge explosion shot upward and horizontally at several thousand feet per second. The fifteen sticks of dynamite in the center of the wooden building destroyed it in seconds. It took a full minute for the pieces of wood, metal, and glass to return to earth.

Josh and John Kramer were less than fifteen feet from the bomb and were killed immediately. Their twisted little bodies were found under the ruins by local firemen. Marvin Kramer was thrown against the ceiling of the third floor, then fell through the great hole in the center of the building. He was found twenty minutes later and rushed to hospital. He lost both his legs.

A number of pedestrians in the street outside were also hurt. One of these injuries was minor but very significant. A stranger called Sam Cayhall was walking toward the Kramer office when the ground shook so hard he fell over. He was hit by flying glass. His face turned pale with horror at the sight before him, then he ran away. In shock, and with blood still running from him, he climbed into a green Pontiac and drove off. Two police officers were speeding toward the scene of the bombing. When they met the Pontiac, it stopped still, frozen in its traffic lane, refusing to move and let the police car through. The officers ran to the car, pulled open the door, and found a man covered in blood. They secured his wrists and forced him into the back of the police car. The Pontiac was taken away.

At the jail, they almost decided to release Sam on the minor charge of blocking the road to emergency vehicles. But then Detective Ivy saw him, bloody and pale-faced, and decided to ask

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