

RICINUS COMMUNIS

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The King's English, Spring 2009

On my desk sits a castor bean, mottled tan and brown, shiny like snakeskin. It is a centimeter long and half a centimeter wide, with a coarse cap. The size (small) and beauty (unique) betray its contents. The castor bean, Latin name *ricinus communis*, is the source of the third most deadly toxin on the planet, a protein called ricin. Ranked with plutonium and botulism, a lethal dose of powdered ricin poisons irreversibly without a trace and maraudes minus a vaccine. The danger is heightened by the ease of distilling ricin – one needs a packet of castor beans, acetone, lye, Epsom salts, a coffee grinder, and a strainer. Properly made and distributed, one gram of ricin can kill hundreds within half a day of exposure. Whenever I hear news about ricin, I'm amazed by its potential to be so sinister.

I'm amazed, too, by how the kin of this bean on my desk connect me to a duo of men: my father, who grew this bean and sold others at his greenhouse; and Ken Olsen, the third person in the history of the nation brought to trial for possession of ricin. Olsen made the ricin from castor beans he bought from my father, and Olsen may have been plotting to kill his wife, while at the same time, in a slightly alternative universe, my father was plotting to leave my mother after a 30-year marriage. Two men trying to get out of marriages, two drastically different approaches.

I'll start with the man who isn't my father. Ken Olsen lived in Spokane, Washington, married since 1975, three kids, 25 years as a software designer at Agilent Technologies. In 1999, Olsen had an affair with his massage therapist. To cover, Olsen pursued massage therapy as a second job. He kept at the affair for a year.

In 2000, the other woman left him because Olsen wouldn't leave his wife.

Here my father enters the storyline in the most unexpected of cameos. As he remembers Valentine's Day of 2000, Hirt's Greenhouse was enjoying its usual run of rose-red profit. An online order for a couple packets of castor beans, placed at midnight, drew little attention. The next morning, he mailed the beans to a post office box in Spokane. In March, my father filled a second order, same customer. Two years later he'd have to explain the orders to the FBI, a predicament unprecedented for a third-generation greenhouse manager expecting inquiries about houseplants, not inquiries about ingredients for biological weapons.

Olsen was buying more than castor beans online; he also purchased the military's patented recipe for ricin, which he bought on a CD-ROM from Kurt Saxon, Arkansas author of separatist writings. The CD-ROM was titled *The Poor Man's James Bond*, one of Saxon's bestsellers – how to subvert the system on pennies a day. How to have the gadgets of the secret and the wealthy and build them in your basement. It's easy to look at Olsen's online purchases in 2000 and assume that he was planning to kill his wife so he could be with his mistress.

But then, in late 2000, the massage therapist rekindled her affair with Olsen, even though he hadn't fulfilled her ultimatum to leave his wife for good. Whatever he had been planning would wait.

All was quiet until July of 2001, that long-ago summer suitably labeled *before*. The affair had reached a critical point again, and again, Olsen would not leave his wife. The massage therapist bailed, again.

One day at work not long after the break-up, Olsen downloaded and printed a 150-page document about explosives. A manager noticed it and called the police. Olsen claimed it was research for his son's Boy Scout project. Agilent Technologies fired him almost immediately, had guards escort him from the building. They did not let him clean out his cubicle.

When a supervisor boxed Olsen's personal belongings, the contents of a locked drawer proved even more alarming: books with incriminating titles – *How to Kill*, and *Getting Even Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*; a turkey baster and measuring cups; test tubes; acetone and Epson salts; a baggie of castor beans; and a waxy white powder in a Tropicana juice bottle stoppered with a wad of paper towel. The

police confiscated the items. No one knew what the white powder could be; they just knew it had nothing to do with software.

On September 6th, 2001, after the Washington State Crime Lab concluded they had no way to confirm what the substance was, the police passed the items to FBI Agent Joseph Cleary of the Joint Terrorism Task Force. Cleary had joined the force 24 hours prior, and he had no idea what he was in for.

There is coincidence of the highest kind here. My dad, involved in his own affair with no easy way out, sells castor beans to a guy who thinks there's no easy way out of his affair. The first transaction, Valentine's Day 2000, happens the week my mom discovers my dad's affair; the second transaction happens the week that my mom calls to tell me about the affair. Can I admit that it's a dark parallel?

Another fearful symmetry: Olsen's mysterious white powder in a juice bottle finds its way to national crime labs five days before September 11th. It means that no one at USAMRIID (United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases) gets around to analyzing the powder until November 2001, because they are busy with a mess of things, including another white powder – the anthrax sent to Senator Daschle, a Florida tabloid, and the NBC studios.

Olsen's white powder turns out to be 19% ricin, crude but only possible with the aid of intentional distillation. The feds prepare charges, but again, post-attack, things are different. Before September 11th, the feds would have had to have proven that Olsen not only made ricin, but that he had a clear, direct target. After September 11th, Patriot Act in hand, prosecutors only had to prove that he had ricin – whether he had plans to use it became, oddly, irrelevant. They could also make the case huge, high-profile, could pull out their federal privileges. So, what could have been a low-profile case of poor judgment became a federal case, a bio-weapons trial, with a handful of castor beans from Hirt's Greenhouse at the core.

And a final irony: The terrorist attacks would spawn the legislation that would help to incriminate Olsen, but those same attacks created an unprecedented delay in the forthcoming charges against Olsen. While the FBI juggled national security and orange alerts, Olsen lived at home with the wife lawyers would later argue he wanted to kill. He was arrested on June 18th, 2002 and charged

with possession of a biological weapon with intent to harm. Almost a year had passed since the discovery of his ricin.

The FBI called my dad in August of 2002, asked him to confirm transaction records. "The castor beans are big sellers," he told FBI agent Leland McEuen, and when he repeated the conversation to me, I heard nothing but pride in his voice. "The FBI was very nice," he said, knowing full well his legal right to sell castor bean seeds, and speaking with that haughty confidence that suggested he was pleased to thwart The Man via his harmless sales of a potentially harmful toxin.

In January 2003, the prosecutors subpoenaed him to testify in the forthcoming trial. The news of his subpoena was the first I'd heard of any of this. The final piece of the irony puzzle fell into place: at the time, I lived in Moscow, Idaho, just 80 miles south of Spokane, where the trial would be held. I could attend. I cleared my schedule.

My dad's reaction to the subpoena was mixed. He resented the snooping FBI, (blaming all of September 11th on their ineptitude, calling me frequently with excoriating rants against all involved), and he worried that the case would bode badly for innocent horticulturists who appreciated castor beans. But he was excited to have an all-expense paid trip west, and he was raving about the unusual aspects of Ken Olsen's dark life, even conducting his own fruitless Google searches to scrounge details. He'd always wanted to be a lawyer. What with his own ongoing divorce, after-hours litigation had almost become a hobby. He had an affinity with the troublemakers. He had his suspicions.

Back in Spokane, Olsen's wife, Carol, took an odd step. She acknowledged the affair and then stepped up to defend her husband's actions, claiming he was making castor oil for his massage practice and that the FBI was on an out-of-control post-attack witch hunt. Perhaps in response, to make it clear that this was no small-time game, the prosecutors leveled a second charge – possession of a chemical weapon with intent to harm.

And they did one other thing. They streamlined their witness list. My dad's planned testimony got nixed just a few weeks after the subpoena. He was distraught and worked up, edgy over the fact that his name and Hirt's Greenhouse were now in an FBI file, but he wouldn't get to testify to correct any misinterpretations about his peripheral involvement. I realized that was the reason why they probably cut his appearance; any FBI agent half worth his

psychological-profiling training would easily see that my dad could be a difficult witness, especially when forced to testify for who he saw as the bad guys.

I promised him I'd attend anyway, not only to see how the Hirt's Greenhouse connection would surface, but to lay eyes on a man who made ricin, another man caught between an affair and a marriage, like my father, yet on a path so much more malevolent. Olsen's perplexing narrative intrigued me, especially when I compared him to my father. Despite my parents' fighting during their divorce, I knew neither would ever resort to poison. So why would this typical American suburban man decide to make ricin – a toxin so powerful not even military labs knew how to deal with it? What could have been so awful about his home life, so tempting about the other woman, the affair, the deception?

Such a little thing, the castor bean. Such chaos beneath its smooth shell, where the white pulp naturally contains miniscule protein chains that, when distilled and ingested, can dissolve a circulatory system in twelve hours. Its existence, like Pandora's Box costumed as Pandora's Bean, reminds me how close chaos reigns. How odd that Kenneth Olsen stepped beyond the idea of ricin into the realm of possession and intent. How intriguing that under the shelter of a Midwest greenhouse, my father will send castor beans to anyone, anywhere, as long as the blinking speed of credit seals the transaction.

The plants and seeds are botanically interesting and perfectly legal. Picture one castor bean plant – stunning doublestar leaves and arching stems, some high as twelve feet, and the tantalizing clusters of shiny seeds – a presence like a dragon lording the land of botany. They grow wild in warmer regions, and expansive fields shimmer in the California sun. When harvested, their oil ends up in the infamous laxative, and also as a cheap lubricant for machinery. The husks and leaves and stems, purged of their valuable oil but not their troublesome toxin, can be detoxified with a heat treatment and then trucked to livestock yards for hungry cattle. Castor bean plants are an excellent crop for an industrialized society that runs on meat and machines. They'd be perfect, were it not for the one lectin protein – the ricin – that makes them indisputably deadly.

My father started growing castor beans for his usual reasons for doing anything – a mix of curiosity and controversy. Savvy and more than willing to sell strange stuff, he offered the plants and seeds at the greenhouse and online through the website and eBay

auctions, never imagining that one morning the FBI would question him about one customer, one purchase, one transaction, that led to three grams of ricin in one cubicle, far away. And even if the thought crossed his mind, my dad is the type of transgressor who would go ahead and sell castor beans anyway, almost as a challenge. They've always been a favorite of the fringe, symbols on the estates of the disgruntled.



The case of *USA vs. Olsen* opened on July 1st, 2003, earning blurbs on the national morning news shows and the AP wire. I saw it on the CNN ticker as I ate my breakfast at 5:30 am, before making the 83-mile commute on a two-lane road through the burnished wheat fields of eastern Washington, tracking the Idaho border, emerging from the high plains to wind through pine forests into the city of Spokane. I clutched a new blank notebook and walked like a nervous fool to the steps of the courthouse.

I had worked as a journalist years before, so I sort of knew how to document this event. Mostly, though, I was a creative writer, fairly intent on subverting "facts" rather than reporting them, addicted to narrative and anti-narratives, two-thirds of the way through my MFA degree. I didn't know what to expect from the federal trial, or even from myself. Would I have to explain why I was there? Would the testimony be hard to follow? Would this trial last for months and months? How rusty were my journalism skills? What was I going to do with this bizarre narrative thrust into my path? Of all the unknowns I tried to anticipate on my drive up to Spokane, I hadn't anticipated the perpetual yellow alert status of the security guards at the courthouse – four at the main entrance and two more in the hall outside the courtroom. One step through the metal detector and an old guard pulled me aside, wondering what I was doing with a Gameboy and cell phone in my bag – didn't I know about the ban on electronics? Hadn't I watched the news recently? He nodded toward a placard on an easel. Trimmed in stoplight yellow, it listed the specifics of a nation on alert. There was a bulleted point about being vigilant for electronics doubling as detonators. He wrote my name on appropriately yellow sticky notes, thumbing them onto my electronics. He bundled the phone and the Gameboy with a rubber band and set them in a drawer crammed with other gadgets.

Another guard requested my driver's license, tilting it for hints of fraud. He quizzed me about where I was headed in the nine-story building, then pointed me to the elevators. At the ninth floor, the

next duo of guards confiscated my water bottle and my newspaper. No liquids. No reading material. I relinquished them, held my breath, and they nodded me through one more metal detector. Cleared. I went into the courtroom, the sanctum, windowless, high ceiling, not huge but not tiny, seats like pews in a church of judgment. I spotted Olsen's wife, Carol, in the front row. I sat in the back row.

Ken Olsen arrived with his handlers, two federal marshals. Olsen's navy suit and tie suggested ease and confidence, but his face, pale and tight over a clenched jaw, was a portrait of anxiety. He flipped papers and bent his ear to whispers from his lawyers.

He smiled fleetingly at Carol. She'd held a press conference the day before, supporting him without reservation. Reacting to the press conference stunt, Judge Neilsen had requested she not talk to reporters during the trial, since she was refusing to take the stand in her husband's defense. The front row was where I'd see her for the next three weeks, sometimes with her four children, all in their teens and twenties and good-looking as movie stars; sometimes with her father, a retired military man who took notes; and sometimes by herself.

I was relieved that she was not allowed to talk to me. I was worried she would want to know who I was and why I was perched at the back, taking tons more notes than the reporters. I didn't know how to begin to explain. Was I here out of fascination? How morbid. How inappropriate. Was it obligation? But to what – my last name? Was I here to glean more fodder for distrusting the government?

Opening arguments began with United States Assistant Attorney Stephanie Whitaker. Petite, blond, professional-chic in high heels. Her voice was hushed and trained. Even the surveillance cameras paused to hear the nuances.

"This man appears normal," she said, enunciating each syllable with the skill of a performer. Olsen was behind her so she turned to face him, saw that he was not watching her, then tilted her face back to the microphone. "But there's a side no one knows." The jurors cautiously opened their notebooks, pens poised. Like a narrator for a true-crime primetime news magazine show, she listed the Internet search strings the FBI uncovered from Olsen's computer. *Poison. Ricin. Undetectable. How to kill. Killing without a trace.* Incrimination lingered in the calculated pauses. She might as well have been whispering *guilty*.

When defense attorney John Clark took the podium, he played the September 11th card as if he held nothing but aces. "We were different then," he said, meaning *then* as August 2001, the month of the ricin discovery, as compared to *now*, the summer of 2003. He was asking the jurors for what may have been impossible – to see the evidence through a pre-terror attack lens. Clark continued with the rationale for a not guilty verdict – Olsen was just trying to make castor oil to fulfill his "irresponsible sense of curiosity," a curiosity fueled by Boy Scout merit badges and massage techniques. When the oil dried, the residue contained crude ricin, and Olsen meant to throw it away but he forgot. So what the government called a biological weapon the defense called a byproduct. The timing of the affair with the massage therapist was coincidental, what Clark called "a very human mistake."

And then, Clark took sideways aim at the Patriot Act – the new interpretation about possession and intent. He reminded the courtroom that possessing ricin was, technically, not illegal – possessing it with *intent to harm* was illegal. And Olsen, Clark pointed out, had not harmed anyone, nor was there solid evidence of intent. If the word *guilty* traipsed in the pauses of the prosecution's opening argument, the word *circumstantial* flashed during the defense's opening arguments. Evidence culled from the chaos of Google searches? A nation in fear of white powders? Enemies of the state, from Spokane to Afghanistan? Clark jabbed at the government's mentality – "To those who only have a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail."

With opening arguments finished, the first of 44 witnesses – none of which would be Olsen or his wife – took the stand.



The castor bean is a *seed* misnamed *bean* for its oval shape. The first half of its name, *castor*, points to more confusion. Amateur gardeners might assume since so many plant names link to the daytime celebrities of Greek mythology that the castor bean cues its name from Castor, one of Leda's twin sons possibly born from the rape perpetrated by Zeus in swan form. The metaphorical possibilities are perfect – castor and his twin Pollux were cast into the midnight as the constellation Gemini, the twins of light and dark, of lust and violence, namesaked in a gorgeous plant whose seeds can be both cathartic or harmful. Too bad that's not the case. Instead, the plant takes its name from the Greek word for *beaver*. The soggy genius of dams and log piles was known to the

olive-eaters as *kastor*, from the Sanskrit *kasturi* – musk. Beaver musk was cathartic. So was the oil from the strange new seed.

The etymology of *ricin* is even less interesting. It is merely a shortening of the plant's Latin moniker, *ricinus communis*. It debuted in medical dictionaries at the end of the nineteenth century, when scientists identified the lectin protein – the poisonous one – and had to name it. The pronunciation of *ricin* is notable – say it without an accent, the first syllable rhyming with *cry*, the second a homophone of *sin*. Say it softly. Louder. It defies enunciation. It is the sound of jilted love. It is the sound of blood making its last pulsing rush.

How did anyone look at the seed and end up with such a powerful biotoxin? It's tough to say for sure – documents on the true origins of state-sponsored biological warfare are shredded or seriously confidential or complete lies or out of reach for a graduate student in Idaho. One heady source is the book *Castor*, an English translation of the old USSR's agricultural exploits in the early years of the twentieth century. For 300 mind numbing pages, V.A. Moshkin and a few of his peers report the minutest details of castor cultivation. Flowering of. Pollination of. Seed Ripening of. Soil Preparation for. Cytology and Genetics of. Page after musty page of tiny charts and tables with numbers stretching behind decimal points. Hurrah hurrah for the Soviets, whose astute farming would provide the world with an abundance of castor oil. And then, seven pages – two percent of the book – about ricin, wherein Moshkin notes that the toxicity of the ricin protein is reduced when the plant grows in very hot climates. A cooler controlled climate, with plenty of water, and the seed becomes highly toxic. His awareness of the horrific symptoms of ricin poisoning is appropriately obtuse: "The toxin is a protein of the globular type. It is capable of causing agglutination of suspension of erythrocytes." Translation: It dissolves circulatory systems. So, if Olsen were planning to poison his wife, and if he did it by somehow getting her to inhale and ingest the ricin, within twelve hours his wife's retinas would hemorrhage. Her throat would burn. Her stomach would churn and expel whatever she'd eaten, and her colon would convulse continuously. She would see blood and mucus in her diarrhea because the ricin would be shutting down her intestinal walls while also exploding her red blood cells. By day two, she'd be in shock due to dehydration. Her vision would blur, her heart would jitter as if the chambers were trying to separate. By day three, the ricin would ransack all her organs and she'd die. An autopsy would reveal massive circulatory failure, with the cause undetectable.

Moshkin's numbers in the tables about the toxicity of ricin do their job of masking. It is impossible to glean any details about the experiments the Soviets must have conducted – on what, on who? Where? *What did they know?*

Enter the United States and World War II. 1944. At President Roosevelt's request, the newly formed Biological Warfare Committee received \$250,000. With the money, the military built research centers at Fort Detrick, Maryland; Horn Island, Mississippi; and Granite Peak, Utah. The research centers focused on chemical agents, infectious agents, and ricin's trippy 'hood, the toxins.

Fort Detrick got the go-ahead for decoding ricin. The book *The United States and Biological Warfare* reports that Proctor and Gamble got involved, concluding that not only was ricin as powerful as botulism, but, as an economic bonus in trying times, would be cheap to produce. The boys at P and G really wanted the government to award them the ricin contract. However, the military had already gone ahead with ricin experiments at Mississippi's Horn Island, 4,154 acres of sand dunes, and when they realized that ricin could be carried ashore via coastal winds to Biloxi, they halted plans for mass production and testing. The big obstacle was that ricin had no vaccine and no cure. Scared of their own potential for devastation, the researchers quietly pushed ricin aside and turned their attentions to anthrax.



By the seventh witness on the second day I felt like an expert in corporate security strategies, because the prosecution was using reams of workday data to try to prove Olsen's intentions. Agilent Technologies imposed rigorous control over its employees and stored their online activities. This proved handy for the prosecution. Microchip ID cards tracked arrivals and exits. Internet proxy logs stored every website visited, every pop-up ad encountered, every print job and email and search string. The proxy logs so excited Stephanie Whitaker that she claimed, "we have captured a thought process. We have his pattern, his progression. This is as close as we can get to getting into someone's mind."

If anyone else in the courtroom was as unnerved by this presumption as I was, I couldn't tell, which worried me. If computers represented thought processes, we were all guilty of something. How many Internet searches had I conducted, that, if I

did something questionable in the future, could be used against me? Enough. *To those who have a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail.*

The implications worried me. But then came Witness #14, Kurt Saxon, via a video recorded back in March before the trial encountered delays, and a vast new set of concerns besieged me.

White-haired Saxon, 71, had been allowed to testify by video due to poor health. He owned Atlan Formularies in Alpena, Arkansas, a "company" that sold "information" on "how to do everything your grandparents did around the house." He, like my father, had sold Olsen one thing he needed for ricin – the government's recipe.

On the video, Saxon leaned back in his chair as he testified about one of his best sellers, *Granddad's Wonderful Book of Electricity*, and the ever-popular *Poor Man's James Bond* CD-ROM series. The PMJB, which Saxon confirmed that Olsen purchased from him, taught "improvised weaponry." Saxon wrote all the material himself, and was pleased to announce that the four-volume PMJB had recently expanded to a fifth volume.

"Volume three is very specific about making ricin," he affirmed, flashing back into a story about how he simply asked the military for their ricin recipe, claimed that he received it without hassle, and had been filling the orders of the disenfranchised ever since. Without hesitation he explained the function of the acetone (removes the castor oil) and the Epsom salts (forces the ricin to the bottom of a mixture, so the nontoxic liquid can be easily discarded). But he felt that only trained chemists could make true weapons-grade ricin.

Yet Saxon, eager to test the military's recipe, had actually made ricin, and he talked about it under oath, either oblivious to or dismissive of the Patriot Act. A prosecutor asked him why he had made ricin. "Because it's interesting," he answered. He asserted that he would never actually use it, not even on a cat, not even in conjunction with his strong dislike of the CIA. The jurors chuckled.

He added that he'd gotten a call from an unsatisfied customer. The ricin apparently "just made the victim throw up." Saxon's back-up advice? "Hit them with a brick."

Creepy though he was, I liked Saxon. I think the jurors did too. They grinned at each other, grins that said *well now here's a character! Can you believe this guy?*

In the back row, which I was coming to think of as *my back row*, I filled my ninth page of handwritten notes. I realized I was enamored with the situation because Saxon was claiming precisely what Olsen was claiming. Both admitted to making ricin. Both asserted they never intended to use it on anyone. Olsen's lawyers defended him with the notion of irresponsible curiosity. Saxon thought "interesting" was reason enough. Olsen was on trial; Saxon, after his testimony, got to refill his coffee and head home to his next set of \$50 orders for the PMJB series. The disparity added another twist to my insides. Why was the government so keen on prosecuting Ken Olsen, but not the likes of Kurt Saxon? And why did Saxon's brazen bravado seem so much more appealing than Olsen's agreement not to testify on his own behalf?

Listening to Saxon got me thinking about perspective. Put Olsen's case in perspective, and it's not much – his case toddles next to the giants of ricin legend.

In two infamous and dramatic cases often reported in biological weapon literature, the dissident Bulgarian writer Vladimir Kostov, in exile in London, was sickened, but not killed, by a ricin attack in 1978. Ten days later, Kostov's fellow radical writer, Georgi Markov, also exiled to London, was killed with ricin. An assassin jabbed Markov with an umbrella tip doubling as a pellet gun. The assassin had injected Markov with a lethal dose of ricin. Meanwhile, Kostov heard about Markov's strange demise and recalled receiving a similar mysterious jab, followed by an inexplicable fever. An autopsy of Markov and an examination of Kostov revealed that each writer had a tiny pellet lodged beneath the jab wound. But Kostov's pellet had lodged in fat, and therefore the ricin hadn't been fully released. For 1978, the pellets were notably advanced and devilishly clever.

In 1980, Boris Korczak, a CIA double agent, died the same way, via ricin pellet assassination, in Tyson's Corners, Virginia. A colossal argument rose between the Soviets and the CIA over the circumstances of Korczak's posthumous future. In the end, a compromise: the CIA kept the ricin pellet, and the Soviets ferried Korczak's body back to the homeland. Various sources report "other assassinations" involving ricin in the states, but the details never emerge between the lines. No names, no dates, no suggestions.

I think that the government went after Olsen because they could, because the irony of Olsen's situation is that in an attempt to distill an undetectable poison, he left a very detectable online paper trail.



When FBI Agents Cleary and McEuen took the stand, they did so with laptops and binders marking a sometimes minute-by-minute progression of what they called Olsen's online activity, synonymous with *thought process*, if you asked the prosecutors. As the first week of testimony recessed for the holiday break, I realized that Olsen's decision not to testify was a colossal mistake. By not speaking, he was letting the Internet speak for him. He was letting the prosecution get away with saying that his Google searches were "in his own words," and that they were his *only words*. How much easier to prosecute the silent, I realized.

Agent Joseph Cleary's four hours of Monday-morning testimony revealed the thudding dullness of day-to-day FBI work. No Agent Mulder and x-files, no witty Law and Order investigators. Stephanie Whitaker walked him through every minute facet of his involvement in the case. *What were the items found in Olsen's cubicle? How many items were there? Did you put them in separate containers? When did you send them to USAMRIID? When did USAMRIID respond? How did they respond? Is this a photograph of the items you sent to USAMRIID?*

Because he was the FBI, he was allowed to have his laptop on the stand, to doublecheck his facts. *No wonder Olsen was reluctant to testify*, I thought to myself. His day on the stand would have pitted his word against the credentials and hard drive of the FBI. It would have been his (probably) soft and aw-shucks voice against the trained-dog authority of Agent Cleary. It would have been the inexplicable narrative of Ken Olsen juxtaposed against the cast-in-stone criminal narrative used by the prosecution. Chaos versus an established pattern – the verdict has been in for a long time.



When would my father have testified? Maybe on the day Saxon testified, since it was the CD-ROM from Saxon and the castor beans from my father that gave Olsen the two starting points. Or maybe he would have testified in the midst of FBI agent testimony. I decided to subpoena him for my own tangential questioning. I asked him for his honest appraisal of the fact that he had sold, was selling, and would continue to sell a product that, in the wrong

hands, was so uniquely poisonous. He hardly paused before responding, "Drug stores sell Drano, and you can kill people with that."

It was the type of response I should have expected – one that absolved blame, and that displaced blame, one rife with some sort of fallacy of association – his usual. True, Drano could kill. However, Drano had a practical purpose, whereas ricin, in the context of Ken Olsen, did not appear to have a practical purpose. Furthermore, Drano poisoning could be halted and averted – not pleasantly, but it was not a death sentence, unlike ricin poisoning, guaranteed to dissolved blood cells in a matter of hours. And Drano is detectable. Ricin is not.

I wondered about my dad's moral leanings in relation to the tendencies of someone like Kenneth Olsen. My father was hardly an extremist in the sense of militias and lone wolves. Neither was Olsen. But my dad was certainly on some sort of fringe, and his fringe seemed to be landscaped with castor bean plants, which he had planted recently in his front yard.

Years ago, he had claimed that the government was behind the Oklahoma City bombing, that McVeigh was the fall-guy for a major conspiracy. In fact, shortly after the bombing, my father pointed to a towering stack of bagged lawn fertilizer – potassium, nitrogen, and phosphorous – and told me that was what was in the rental truck that drove the bomb to the doorstep of the federal building. He was furious after September 11th, claiming that Bush knew exactly what was planned, that the government did not immediately ground all air traffic because they wanted to see what else would happen. Was it, I wondered, the beginnings of paranoia – his, for thinking this stuff, or mine, for conflating his baseless opinions.

But his was also the type of response that denied a moral distinction between weapons, and this is what lingered with me long after our conversation. By comparing ricin to Drano, my dad was trying to tell me that the weapon didn't matter – what mattered was the intent to kill. But again, my dad was deflecting responsibility. He was essentially saying, *I don't matter in this drama. I just sold him the castor beans. He would have found some other way to accomplish his goal, anyway.* Which is true, to a point. The brick if not the ricin, right?

Perhaps what I was after with my father was some admission of long-term consequences, some awareness that he thought beyond

greenhouse profit and the titillating idea of poison. Or just some hint he was not planning on stocking the *Poor Man's James Bond* a shelf above *The Backyard Rose Garden*, just for kicks. And I knew I was anxious over what the FBI might conclude about my father, because I saw how adept they were at crushing Olsen. What they had was more than a hammer, more than a brick.



Who reads stuff like the *Poor Man's James Bond*? I think it must be people who are bored, people who are disillusioned with the steady routine of the average American life. And, of course, people who are poor or middle class, yet aspire to the tricks and gadgets of the wealthy – Batman and his butler and Bond and Q, for example. When Olsen's girlfriend testified, she succinctly placed Ken Olsen in the readership of the PMJB. She testified that even after Ken fronted with marriage counseling to calm Carol, he wrote covert messages requesting they "find a way to communicate that will not be easy to track without anyone's knowledge." He wanted anonymity, or at least an alter-ego. The girlfriend said that he often signed his letters YPFF, code for *your punctilious forever friend*. "Precise in behavior" is the definition I bet he intended for *punctilious* – amusingly, she claimed she never knew what the word meant. Precise behavior indeed – but to what end, when the object of affection doesn't get it?



By the middle of the second week, the pace of the trial stalled as the prosecution went forth with nine USAMRIID witnesses in video testimony format – on video not because of illness, as was Saxon's case, but because matters of national security prevented them from leaving Fort Detrick. So, again, the motionless camera focused, the weak lighting appeared yellow, and disembodied voices asked the most mundane questions ever, and everyone in the courtroom stared at monitors. This witness received the packages each day. This witness logged the packages. This witness decided what level of biohazard safety to employ. This witness scraped powder. This witness was an idiot and mixed up the identification numbers on some of the baggies. This witness caught the mistake. As the tape rolled, all the lawyers appeared deeply engaged in other things. For them, the testimony was the equivalent of a summer re-run.

It was boring. Everyone's attention waned. Olsen, at one moment, mouthed something to Carol. They were not allowed to talk, really, but this one communication slipped past the jarheaded federal marshals. Later, during a break, I heard Carol tell a friend who had just arrived that "Ken is wearing his Goofy socks today. For good luck. They are the ones I sent him in jail." Goofy socks? Did I hear her right? I was petrified to ask. The prosecution had bioweapons experts on the docket; the defense had Goofy socks.



Eventually, we came to the agent who called Hirt's Greenhouse, Agent Leland McEuen. He had an oversized binder that held Olsen's entire Internet proxy log. Somewhere in there was a visit to www.hirts.com, at a midnight on a distant Valentine's Day.

The mention of Hirt's Greenhouse, when it came, was brief, exciting, and earned the marginalia of stars and three exclamation points in my notes. Agent McEuen confirmed that yes, Olsen had most likely purchased castor beans from www.hirts.com. That's all there really was to say about it. Yet my heart thumped. I think what was so exciting was that no one knew a Hirt was sitting in the courtroom. I felt like a spy. It was a great day and that evening I called my father to tell him Hirt's Greenhouse had ten-seconds of mention in the nation's third-ever ricin trial, and I'd been there to hear it.

I replayed the moment for him, and he listened intently. He wanted to know when Olsen would testify. When I told him Olsen wasn't on the witness list, hadn't even spoken a public word since his arrest, my father was dumbfounded.



The trial wound down with a whimper once the prosecution rested their case and the defense needed just two days for their witnesses. My high hopes for a stellar defense, one that would shut down the federal steamroller, drooped when the star witness for the defense, Vanderbilt chemistry professor Thomas Harris, couldn't do much better than point out the "1 in 1,000" chance of USAMRIID's weight measurements all ending in zero, which they apparently did.

The defense tried to use Harris to cast doubt on the reliability of USAMRIID's testing – a peculiar decision, since Harris had unsuccessfully testified for the defense just two years ago at the

nation's second-ever ricin trial, where Dr. Ray Mettetal, a Vanderbilt colleague of Harris, was initially found guilty of possessing ricin with intent to harm. But in reality, the defense didn't have much of a selection of expert pro-ricin witnesses. The government has had, after all, a winning streak.

Family friends testified that Ken Olsen was a peaceful man, loved his family, worked hard. But on cross-examination, the friends admitted they knew nothing of his ricin research, and were surprised at his arrest. *Get him on the stand*, I imagined myself telling Tina Hunt, should she care to seek my counsel. *Make him explain himself. Require him to defend his actions against this juggernaut of government*. I couldn't begin to imagine how Olsen was just able to sit there, hands under the table, Goofy socks pulled up and snug.

I saved hope when Olsen's private investigator, Tom Krzyzank, took the stand – a last-chance witness to go head to head with the slew of formal experts. Krzyzank said he'd purchased a bottle of castor oil at a grocery store and another at a nutrition store. He mentioned the price and gave the cost different between buying castor oil and making castor oil. It wasn't significant. That was his entire testimony. The strategy confounded me. Why was Ken Olsen even in the courtroom? I felt like I was suddenly watching a Pinter play, assailed with non-sequiturs.

The final witness in *USA vs. Olsen* was Rex Walker, a family friend and gentle-giant guy who said *oh lord* and *darnedest*. "Oh Lord, I'm doing my darnedest to understand what's happened to my very good friend." On cross-examination, he maintained that none of this changed his opinion about Ken Olsen. Not a bit of it.

He was trying very hard not to cry. His brief testimony made me realize that the testimony of the defense witnesses felt so futile because it was, well, absolutely futile. The prosecution could summon science to prove the purity and the weight of the ricin; they were allowed to have binders upon binders of Internet proxy logs; the FBI agents were allowed to consult documents on their notebook computers as they testified. The defense, left to defend whatever Ken Olsen was up to, was left with the losing ticket – the defense of the decidedly unscientific chaos, amplified by the silence of the accused.

In the closing arguments, the prosecutors took this angle: "Either USAMRIID is wrong, or the defendant purified [his ricin]. Which one makes more sense?" The question lingered in the air, twisting

itself into permutations that made me angry because I resented the assumption that the government got to impose a definition on *sense*. I didn't wait around for the verdict.



My father still sells castor beans at the greenhouse. Ken Olsen, however, won't be grinding poison anytime soon. On July 17th, 2003, the jury took just four hours to find him guilty on two counts – possession of a biological weapon with intent to harm, and possession of a chemical weapon with intent to harm. He faced life sentences for both charges, but ended up with thirteen years and nine months. He'll be free just in time for his sixties, in 2017. His wife and children dried their eyes and ducked from the media spotlight. I shelved my notebook from those three weeks in the world of law. My parents got divorced and went on with their lives.

If I could have said anything to Olsen, I would have told him what I think his defense failed to thoroughly argue: Just because pieces fit into a pattern does not make the pattern accurate. Patterns are an attempt to compensate for chaos – to catch what might spill from Pandora's Box. The *what might* is a major *what if*. The systems of the FBI thrive on the *what if*, not allowing for multitudes of Pandora's Boxes outside the established pattern, in the gray of chaos. The five-colored pattern of the Homeland Security Alert System stands in testament. I'm supposed to believe that detecting patterns may make the difference in thwarting the next terrorist attack. But I watched government prosecutors choke-hold and pin a guy who wasn't smart enough to stand up for his chaos. Somehow, the fight isn't fair. I would want to ask Ken Olsen, *if the fight wasn't fair, why didn't you object?*

The last time I rolled my castor bean between my fingers, contemplating how it shared with Pandora's Box the promise of continual and escalating trouble yet deviated from the myth that hope lingers in the bottom of the box, a scale of shiny shell flaked off, disrupting the mottled pattern. Underneath, it was gray as bars and locks.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jen Hirt received a 2009 Fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. She was also the 2004 writer-in-residence at Bernheim Arboretum and was the 2003 recipient of an Ohioana library grant. Her essays and poems have most recently been published in *Conduit* and *Redivider*. Essays are forthcoming in *The Gettysburg Review* and *Natural Bridge*. She earned her M.A. at Iowa State University and her M.F.A. at the University of Idaho. She lives in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and teaches writing at Penn State Harrisburg. Her homepage is www.geocities.com/jenszijen; you can email her at jennifer_hirt@hotmail.com.