

Voices

It seemed to be a clear-cut murder case.

On June 13th at 7:28am, Jonathan “Johnny” Osmand shot his neighbor Kelly Hodges in broad daylight. Kelly was heading to the national laboratory, where she worked as a research scientist. She exited her front door and walked across the front lawn towards her car parked in the driveway. When she was halfway there, Johnny walked towards her from his house across the street. She noticed him and turned to say hello. In return, John shot a bullet at her head, lodging it in her skull. She immediately collapsed on the lawn and a pool of blood began to form around her head.

Johnny just stood there with a stoned expression, gun in hand, staring at Kelly’s dying body. He was still standing there when emergency services, called to the scene by a few frantic bystanders, arrived. He complied with police orders to “Drop the gun! Put your hands up!” He continued to put up no resistance as they handcuffed him and shoved him in the back of the police car.

The interrogation was bizarre, but not unfamiliar to the investigators. When they asked why he had killed Kelly, Johnny talked about the voices in his head. They started talking to him out of the blue about thirteen months ago. They warned him that Kelly was an enemy spy who was watching and secretly plotting to kill him. At first, he brushed them off. Though he and Kelly weren’t close, they were on friendly terms. They would greet each other every time they saw each other and make small talk once in a while. When they did, she would always talk about her busy schedule, how tired she was, what her husband and three young children were up to - anything and everything related to a typical suburban mom life. She never probed into Johnny’s slife or tried to advance their relationship beyond an amicable acquaintanceship, let alone stalk him.

The voices first started as small whispers that crept into Johnny’s mind whenever he sat alone at home. He ignored them at first. But like an overplayed pop song on the radio, they constantly repeated that Kelly was watching him, that she was going to kill him, and it was slowly driving him insane. He started keeping the curtains of his house shut at all times of the day, peeking behind them to make sure Kelly wasn’t watching him from her house across the street. When he went out, he would keep his head down and hide his face. This behavior would intensify around cameras, which showed him covering his face with his hands or attempting to walk out of the camera’s range of sight. Friends and family noted that his behavior grew stranger in the past months. He would lower his voice and randomly look around the room during conversations as if he was trying to hide from someone. Holding a conversation with him got harder as he became more distant and preoccupied with the thought of Kelly.

As time went on, the voices got louder and it became harder for Johnny to keep his paranoia at bay. He stopped going out altogether in fear that would give Kelly the opportunity to stalk him, leaving discreetly only for work and groceries. He ignored calls and messages from friends and

family just in case they would leak information to her, to the point that his mother called the police to do a welfare check on him when he ignored calls from her for three days straight. Seemingly frustrated at the fact that Johnny hadn't killed Kelly yet, the voices escalated and started screaming at him. They insulted him, calling him worthless for being unable to defend himself. That he was a loser not being able to protect himself and those around him. That he was useless and did not deserve to live. Eventually, he broke and could not take it anymore. He picked up the gun, walked over to Kelly's house, and shot her.

For the professionals involved in the case, it was easy. The psychologist immediately diagnosed him with paranoid schizophrenia at the moment Johnny mentioned the voices. This report, in hand with Johnny's interrogation tapes, made the defense lawyers' job straightforward. When the case went to court, everyone knew exactly how it was going to turn out. Johnny would be found not guilty by reason of insanity and would be sentenced to psychiatric treatment for the rest of his life.

As the judge was about to announce the verdict of "not guilty", the doors to the court suddenly flung open.

"Stop this trial!" a voice hollered.

A man dressed in a suit walked through and made his way to where the judge was sitting. He leaned his head toward the judge's ear.

"We have some very important intel that may affect the outcome of this court case. You must adjourn court proceedings right now. This is an order from the Attorney General.", he whispered.

The judge looked at him in confusion, but nodded in compliance. He then turned to the people in the court, "Due to unforeseen circumstances, we are unable to announce the verdict at the current moment. Court is adjourned to a later date."

People whispered among themselves as they prepared to leave. This case should be finished by now. What could possibly keep it from being over?

A week passed before everyone was summoned to court again. Everyone came and took their place in the courtroom. But something felt off. When it was time for trial to begin, the bailiff bellowed, "All rise! The district court is now in session!" The judge entered the room, but he was not alone. He was accompanied by the Attorney General and James Morgan, a NASA lead research scientist. Why was the Attorney General at this local courthouse? And what does NASA have anything do with a local murder case instigated by a madman?

The judge took his place before the court and started to speak, "Thank you, you may be seated. Court is now in session. Case #75843, the State vs. Jonathan Osmand is now in session".

Then, things started to veer off script.

"We have received unprecedented intel that will have an impact on this case. Would James Morgan now take the stand?"

The NASA scientist got up and took the stand, where he was examined by the judge himself. He testified that Kelly's job at the national laboratory was to capture and analyze cosmic rays for a government-funded project. About thirteen months ago, around the time Johnny reported to start hearing voices in his head, she discovered an unusual signal. Unlike the majority of signals she analyzed, it resembled some kind of language. It consisted of repeated patterns which seemed to function as words. These repeated patterns were then organized in a specific order, much like how grammar is used to string words together in language. Kelly was fascinated and began to capture more signals at this frequency, decoding them until her death. When she died, she was able to decipher about 45% of the signal's content.

After her death, another scientist was assigned to continue capturing and analyzing these signals. While Kelly solely focused on the content of the signal, her successor looked at them more holistically, including where these signals came from and where they were headed. He found out that some of these signals were directed at Johnny's house. At this point, he wasn't able to fully decipher them yet but was able to make out a word or two based on Kelly's notes, such as "kill" and "spy", which corroborated Johnny's testimony. The signals were even played in court, which caused Johnny to have panic attacks screaming, "Make it stop! Make it stop!". He even tried to run out of the courtroom before being apprehended by security.

When the scientist finished testifying, the reaction in the court was mixed. Some stood still in shock while others whispered their opinion to their neighbors. The courtroom was filled with loud murmurs. "Order! Order!", the judge yelled, hammering the gavel. As everyone quieted down, he continued, "In light of this information, the severity of this case has escalated. This is no longer a local crime, but is now a national, and perhaps, an intergalactic matter. This goes beyond the scope of the district court and this case will be reassigned to the Supreme Court. Court is dismissed!"

Johnny's case had to be reexamined from scratch. Investigators conducted another round of interrogations, in which he simply confirmed what he told them before with a few more confirmations. It is true that he only heard the voices in his house. Since he had been detained in prison after killing Kelly, he had not heard from them. As a result, his mental state improved and he seemed more in touch with reality. This was noted in his mental evaluations, which were also redone. When asked about what he thought about murdering Kelly, he admitted that he knew it was wrong. He even confessed to the psychologist that he did not want to kill Kelly but was afraid of what would happen if he didn't. On top of that, he was simply driven insane by the voices and just wanted them to stop. Furthermore, the psychologist had to consider the nature of the voices. The subject is traditionally considered insane if they hear (often imaginary) voices in their head. But this was no longer the case. These voices came from an existing external source that was threatening Johnny if he didn't act on their orders to kill the woman decoding their intel. The psychologist concluded that he was "sane" and "fit to stand trial".

The fact that Johnny was diagnosed as sane emboldened the prosecution. "His decision to murder was a rational one", argued the prosecutor, "He could have chosen not to listen to the voices and not kill Kelly. He made a conscious decision and he should be held accountable for it." Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the voices won't return and ask him to kill another person, and he may follow their order again. "He obeyed orders from an intergalactic source. There is no guarantee that he won't side with them and turn against us. He should be locked up for the rest of his life!"

The defense thought the prosecution's argument was too hasty, too simplistic. Although it is true that Johnny's decision to kill Kelly was a conscious one, it was not one that he wanted to do. "He endured the voices for thirteen months. That's just over a year! That's how long he resisted killing Kelly for. He did not want to do it. He was not a willing murderer," emphasized the defense lawyer. "If someone tells you that you have to defend yourself, what would you do?" Additionally, the source of the voices were a complete mystery to him. "It's not like he knew where the voices were coming from. He did make a conscious decision to kill, but not on behalf of some other alien entity," argued the defense lawyer, "Besides, we now have a better idea of where these voices come from and can deal with them. For one, we can move Johnny from his home, which is the only place he heard the voices."

The trial dragged on for a week. Conversations within the jury room were contentious. Coming to an agreement would've been easier if it wasn't for one thing.

"Look, if someone asks me to kill someone else, and I do it, I would be found guilty of murder for sure," one juror asserted.

"But, this is different - I don't know what I would do if voices suddenly appeared in my head and started talking shit. Like what if what they are saying is true? I wouldn't be able to tell honestly," another countered

"If it was true, it would then be self-defense. I mean, we don't know, there is no absolute proof to show that Kelly wasn't after him," piped another

"Yeah, and the voices wouldn't stop either. Sounds like torture. I don't even know if I would last a month, let alone a year"

"And they may be sent by aliens too"

"Do you really believe those NASA dimwits? Sounds like the basis for a third-rate science fiction story. I say they are all insane and should be charged as such"

"But the psychological reports show that Johnny has stopped hearing voices and has regained his sanity, should we really sentence him to a loony bin for the rest of his life?"

"Science this, science that. If science really had all the answers, we would have solved this by now."

"It's true that we don't have all the answers. Not even the scientists know everything about the signals. Like what if they had some mind-control ability to get Johnny to do their bidding against his will and he was their first soldier in their war against Earth?"

"Oh gawd..."

The jurors continued to argue for several days. Though they were still quite divided in their opinion, a decision was reached through a majority vote. All attendees were gathered in the courtroom of the Supreme Court Building. The court clerk stood up, and began to read out the verdict, "We, the jury, find the defendant, Jonathan Osmand..."