

The Scene of the Crime

A Teleplay for a Two-Hour TV Movie

SYNOPSIS

ACT ONE

It is night in a squalid migrant farm workers camp. Ben Hightower, a young lawyer, is led by his environmentally active, live-in girlfriend, Heather, to a cave, in which lives a poor, Mexican-American migrant farm worker family. Despite initial friction, Ben's "eyes are opened" to the traumas of such living and working conditions, including the ill health of impoverished Latinos, "acceptable risks" of pesticide exposures, and the struggles of the United Farm Workers Union. Ben vows to take their case against a pesticide to its manufacturer—his father.

ACT TWO

The next morning, Ben confronts his father, Sam Hightower, in the conference room at his father's chemical company. They argue about the "unqualified" successes of pesticides and the controversies surrounding testing, recall, and other pesticide regulations, loopholes in which Sam is exploiting, at the expense of public health and funding. Ben storms out, threatening to expose the irresponsible chemical contamination caused by his father's company. Sam feels he has but one recourse.

ACT THREE

Later that day, Sam phones Ben to tell him he's had a change of heart: Sam suggests they meet that evening.

That night, after greeting Keith, the loyal night watchman, who is supervising some workers cleaning-up a spill of fine dust in the factory compound, Sam goes to the audio-visual room, which adjoins the conference room—the wall between the two rooms bears a large, curtain-covered window, but not a door. In the audio-visual room, Sam leaves his briefcase and a 4' mailing tube, which he has told Keith contains charts and plans he's got to work late on. Taking a bag of green tea out of the briefcase, Sam enters the conference room. There, shortly, he meets Ben and, in the spirit of reconciliation, offers him a cup of coffee—as anticipated, Ben declines the caffeinated drink; so Sam offers him an herbal tea, from the green tea bag. After talking a bit, Ben passes out. Sam takes the tea bag and the empty cup of tea down to a chemical clean-up room, where he destroys them in the "witch's brew" of a toxic disposal vat. Returning to the audio-visual room with a janitor's cart from the clean-up room, Sam unrolls from his 4' mailing tube a sheet of reflective window film. On the open floor of the room he peels the backing off of the film; and using window cleaner and paper towels, from the janitorial

cart, he cleans grease-pencil marks off of a large glass panel that overlays a planning map on the wall—this glass is mounted at eye-level on posts rising up from a base with casters, which can allow the glass to be moved in front of the other wall maps in the room. With a spray bottle of soapy water and a squeegee, also from the janitor's cart, Sam affixes the reflective film onto the glass panel. Then, he takes great pains to move the now-mirror-like glass panel so that it is at a 45-degree angle to the window between the two rooms and to the small window, whose curtain he raises, in the door of this audio-visual room. Then, Sam removes from his briefcase the head of his drugged, sleeping son.

Making his rounds "like clockwork," Keith the night watchman sees the face of Sam look up and smile at him through the small window in the door of the audio-visual room. As Keith waves back, they both give a start as they hear a shot. Immediately, Sam looks to the side, which gives the illusion—in his image reflected by the mirrored pane and out through the small window in the door of the audio-visual room—that he is looking off to the conference room, where he actually is, with the now lifeless body of his son. Sam drops the gun on the floor; waits to hear Keith pounding at the door; quickly draws the curtain back into place, over the window dividing the two rooms; and while taking off his gloves, leaves by the side door. Keith uses his keys to open the locked front door; he rushes into the room from the main hallway; and he finds Ben shot to death, next to the still smoking gun. Sam quickly re-enters by the front door, sees the scene, tells Keith to not

leave his son but to call "911" on the phone in the room, becomes hysterical, and then leaves to supposedly get sick. Sam actually goes to the audio-visual room, where he strips the reflective film from the glass panel, which he wipes clean with some paper towels he had removed from the janitor's cart. He then moves the glass panel in front of the wall map, grabs the wet towels and the reflective film, and exits. Finally, he goes to the clean-up room; throws the towels, the film, and his gloves into the toxic vat, which dissolves them; says, "That's that"; and exits.

ACT FOUR

Later that night, making a surprise entrance and bedecked with one of the most magnificent examples of her flamboyant headwear, thirtyish Detective "Hattie" Lovetruth, L.A.P.D. takes charge of the crime scene, as the other officers take photos, etc. After examining the body, questioning Sam on such things as the unusual layout of the adjoining rooms, and trying to visualize the crime as Sam and Keith claim it "must" have happened, "Hattie" is asked by Sam if this was the work of drug addicts. "Hattie" doubts it, because the laboratories weren't disturbed and her instincts tell her the motive was more personal in nature. Leaving Sam somewhat unnerved, "Hattie" exits.

Early the next morning, "Hattie" talks to Heather, walking on Santa Monica Beach. Heather has an airtight alibi—she was seen at a "Save Our Bay" meeting. Agitated, not sad, Heather lashes out, condemning the despoliation of our land, air, and sea and crying out for tough laws.

"Hattie" learns of Heather's extra special concern regarding chemical hazards—she's pregnant—and about the father/son argument the day of the murder.

ACT FIVE

Later that morning, covered head-to-toe in protective clothing, "Hattie" tours the chemical factory with Sam, who claims to be working in order to keep from getting depressed. He tells her about the nature of the chemical industry and the success story of his company. After "Hattie" pokes some holes in his hypothesis that a burglar must have committed the murder, Sam suggests that the murder and break-in were the result of industrial espionage.

That afternoon, in an aerobatic, crop-dusting helicopter, "Hattie" talks to Wiley Pringle, a pesticide applicator who has had dealings with Hightower Chemicals—a "shoddy" operation, in his estimation, with no trade secrets worth stealing. A proud Vietnam veteran, Wiley relates how he runs HIS chemical operation safely and efficiently, treating his loyal employees and good neighbors firmly, yet fairly. He speaks-up for regulations, even though they are a mess of paperwork: They provide not only safety for his workers and customers—which is good for legal as well as humanitarian reasons—but also a competitive edge against those who cut corners as they undercut costs and give the rest of the chemical industry a bad name. Understanding "Hattie" and honorable Wiley earn mutual respect.

ACT SIX

That evening, in the chemical company audio-visual room, "Hattie" hears the complaints of the company's Vice President, Ms. Saunders: She's angry that her grease insinuations he's overheard. He admits that it was he who erased Ms. Saunders' marks last evening, but he asserts that he simply didn't care for her presentation. Sam also contends that he just wore his hair differently earlier that evening—something that now unnerved Keith cannot remember.

When "Hattie" contends that he "did it with mirrors," Sam challenges her to tell him how he could have gotten a mirror large enough for the trick past Keith—there is no such mirror on the premises. "Hattie" is at a loss to explain this mystery but promises to solve it or "I'll eat my ... "

As we zoom-out from a close-up of her straw hat, we see "Hattie" driving her classic, red Mustang convertible into a citrus grove. There, "Hattie" visits her Uncle Theodore, an old lemon grower. Giving her a crash course in the "real-world" practices involving pesticides, such as the "overdoses" typically applied, Uncle Theodore tells "Hattie" about creative, yet effective and often inexpensive "biological" pest controls, such as using ladybugs to feed on aphids—practices that yield pesticide-free produce, which customers and markets pay a premium for. In a chaise lounge in the front yard of her uncle and aunt's farm home, "Hattie" relaxes with a lemonade, reads-up on hazardous chemicals, and tries to figure-out a way to not let Sam literally get away with murder. Exhausted, she

falls asleep. Towards sunset, she is awakened by a light glaring in her eyes: The sunlight is reflecting off the silvery film in the west-facing windows of the farmhouse.

ACT SEVEN

With uniformed officers at her side, "Hattie" confronts Sam and his sleazy lawyer in the hallway outside the murder room. "Hattie" produces a portable black-light as she reminds Sam about the chemical dust spillage in the factory compound the night of the murder—a spillage that occurred after all the office workers had left for home and was cleaned-up as Sam entered the office: The dust was a fluorescent dye; and although the traces of the dust on his shoes were invisible to the naked eye, they were indeed present. Using the black-light, "Hattie" leads the group to follow Sam's originally invisible but now glowing footprints down the darkened corridor, into the audio-visual room, and off towards the washroom (and clean-up room) where he supposedly got sick—this apparently confirms Sam's story.

Then, however, she shows how the murderer's footprints in the conference room—the only ones to leave by the side door—did not lead out the back way in the hall, as generally assumed, but instead led around to the front door, through which Keith had witnessed Sam—and only Sam—entering after the murder. Realizing he's caught, Sam claims it was self-defense: Ben tried to destroy the company he had poured his own life into.

Now that she's done her job apprehending the guilty party, "Hattie" puts aside professional

detachment and gives Sam a piece of her mind. "Hattie" takes Sam to task about the hazards to workers and consumers posed by chemicals causing birth defects and cancers and about the need for research to overcome the vast lack of knowledge about chemicals, especially about how they act together. Sam retorts, citing the prevalence of natural carcinogens; the "insignificance" of chemical risks in the real world; and the fact that millions of Americans voluntarily expose themselves to all sorts of unnecessary chemical hazards, as from recreational drugs, including alcohol and tobacco. Although "Hattie" decries the irresponsibilities of drug abuse—she's seen first-hand the victims during her years on the police force—she also condemns his "playing God," by making life-and-death decisions for everyone else without their consent. When Sam protests that even with informed choices about chemical risks you could end-up just as dead, "Hattie" declares, "Choice is the difference between slavery and freedom, between being raped and making love, between accidental death and premeditated murder."

As she puts the handcuffs on him, Sam laments that he was done-in by one of his own chemical spills and by this "flake." "Hattie" takes exception, asserting, "Excuse me, Sir; but it was your chemicals, not my thoughts, that were a mess. I may be ... unorthodox, but 'Hattie' ain't battie!"