

THE BRAVEST WOMAN IN SEATTLE



For herself, for the woman she loved, and for justice, the survivor of the South Park attacks tells a courtroom what happened that night. **by Eli Sanders**

The prosecutor wanted to know about window coverings. He asked: Which windows in the house on South Rose Street, the house where you woke up to him standing over you with a knife that night—which windows had curtains that blocked out the rest of the world and which did not?

She answered the prosecutor's questions, pointing to a map of the small South Park home she used to share with her partner, Teresa Butz, a downtown Seattle property

manager. When the two of them lived in this house, it was red, a bit run-down, much loved, filled with their lives together, typical of the neighborhood. Now it was a two-dimensional schematic, State's Exhibit 2, set on an easel next to the witness stand. She narrated with a red laser pointer for the prosecutor and the jury: These windows had curtains that couldn't be seen through. These windows had just a sheer fabric.

Would your silhouettes have been visible through that sheer fabric at night?

Probably. She didn't know for sure. When she and her partner lived in the house, she noted, "I didn't spend a lot of time staring in my own windows."

Everyone in the courtroom laughed a small laugh—a laugh of nervous relief, because here was a woman testifying about her own rape, and the rape and murder of her partner, and yet she was smiling at the current line of questioning, at the weird perceptual cul-de-sac to which it led. She appeared to understand why people might need to hear these answers, though. What happened to her and Butz in that house in the early morning hours of July 19, 2009, is hard to comprehend. A juror, in order to ease into the reality of what occurred, might first need to imagine how the man picked these two women. At least, then, there'd be some sort of arc to the story.

Maybe he stalked them, looked in their windows, decided they would be his victims. A young South Park girl named Diana Ramirez had already told the court that the man looked familiar. "His eyes," Ramirez said. The prosecutor had also pointed out that the women only had a partial fence in their backyard, the yard where they liked to sit on warm evenings, staring at the sky above the South Park Community Center and the trees in the large surrounding park. It would have been easy for the man to approach their home, unseen, through this park at night.

Maybe he'd noticed the women around the neighborhood during the day, both attractive, both shorter than him, working in their front yard, or attending a local festival, or heading to and from their favorite bar, Loretta's. That July it was unusually hot. Butz, a brown-haired dynamo raised in much hotter St. Louis summers, thought it ridiculous to install air conditioning in Seattle, the court was told. Maybe the man saw that these women were keeping some windows open at night.

Maybe he also saw their love for each other, noticed it in silhouette or on a sidewalk, a love that was exploding that summer, making them inseparable, a love that had grown into plans for a commitment ceremony that fall. Maybe he realized he could turn that

love against them, mercilessly, use it to control them in their own home, each subdued by the threat that he would kill the other.

They were two and he was one. But maybe he saw that, in a sense, they were one. He was six feet tall, 200 pounds, muscled. He would have two knives with him. Maybe, looking through one of their windows, he thought that if it did become a fight, the numbers would be on his side.

* * *

What happened to her and Butz in that house in the early morning hours of July 19, 2009, is hard to comprehend.

She understood, sitting up there on the witness stand, why people might need to imagine her window coverings. But this is not what the survivor of the South Park rapes and murder had come to talk about. The mechanics, both psychological and practical, of how the attacks might have come to pass were now well beside the point. In any sense that would satisfy, they are probably unknowable.

The reason for her sitting on the witness stand of a packed and sweltering eighth-floor courtroom at the

King County Courthouse on June 8, in jeans and a short-sleeved black blouse, hands clasped over knees, a jury of strangers taking notes, a crowd of family and friends and strangers observing, a bunch of media recording, was to say: This happened to me. You must listen. This happened to us. You must hear who was lost. You must hear what he did. You must hear how Teresa fought him. You must hear what I loved about her. You must know what he took from us. This happened.

The woman, now 38—out of respect for her wishes, *The Stranger* is not publishing her name—held the room with a transfixing emotional frankness. She cried at times. She set her jaw and pressed on when it got exhausting, the reliving of an ordeal that probably lasted around 90 minutes, but took close to six hours over two days to retell in court. She showed regret and terror and humiliation and grief and fury. She showed that she appreciated how awful, really absurdly awful, this all was, and she welcomed opportunities to laugh—at herself, at odd things her murdered partner had done when she was alive, at an inelegant, unin-

tentionally impolite question from the prosecuting attorney about a trip she'd made to Weight Watchers with her partner on their last morning together as part of the couple's plan to get in better shape before their commitment ceremony.

The prosecuting attorney asked something like: How'd it go at Weight Watchers? Without missing a beat, without shame, she framed her body with her hands, moved them up and down, and said: "Well..."

As if to say: Look at me. Go ahead, look at all of me. It's okay. Laugh at the awkwardness of this, as everyone in the courtroom is doing right now, if that's what you all need to do. It's okay. Really. Look at me. And thank you for looking, because later on in this trial, the prosecutor will step up to the witness stand and pull my straight black hair back from my neck so that I can more easily point out, for all of you who are looking, the four slashing scars that run from below my left ear toward my throat, the scars from when the man cut and stabbed me with his knife. I am not scared. I have nothing to hide here. Not anymore. Not for something as important as this, the opportunity to put him away.

* * *

She spoke of the perfect ordinariness of their last days together. How, the Friday before the attack, she stayed late working at her office in downtown Seattle and got an impatient call from Butz: "Are you coming home?" She went home and saw Butz sitting on a red couch in their little red house in South Park, the house that—back when they first met by happenstance during a downtown Seattle workday in 2007—Butz had brought up before almost anything else. How there was lots of weeding to do. How it wasn't the nicest "but she loved it."

On this Friday, Butz was sitting on the couch in the red house and, her partner recalled, "she had a pen and paper." Butz was excited. She had gone through all their finances. They had the money they needed for the commitment ceremony.

They decided to walk through the neighborhood to Loretta's. The second booth in from the door was theirs. It always seemed

to be free for them. Butz ordered a bourbon and water, her partner a margarita. They ate the tavern steak and a salad. They felt great.

"We had one of the deepest conversations that we'd had in a long time," Butz's partner recalled on the stand. "She'd always had this dream of—I think she always wanted to work for herself. And she had this dream of owning a cafe-slash-movie theater. She wanted to call it the Reel Cafe. We were talking about it, what it would mean, what it would take... We came to this decision that we would work at our corporate jobs for as long as it took to make that happen, and then she would do that."

They talked about children. Butz, who was 39, who had never been the one they thought would carry the child, announced: "Maybe I'll have the baby."

The prosecuting attorney asked: All of this happens at Loretta's?

She laughed. The crowd in the courtroom laughed. It did seem remarkable.

"Yeah," she said. "We were there for a few hours... It was our place."

They walked home through South Park, through faint cones of street-lamp light and long stretches of darkness. Butz stopped at a store along the way and got her brand of beer, Bud Light. She wasn't a regular smoker, but she was craving a cigarette. She said she was going to buy just one. They sat in the backyard of the little red house, staring at the trees, the community center, the sky above. "It

was really hot that night," Butz's partner recalled on the stand. "Probably like in the 80s or 90s." They drank. Butz, it turned out, had come away from the store with three or four cigarettes. She smoked them all.

"It was just one of those nights," her partner said. "I remember thinking: 'In this moment, my life may not be perfect, but I am so happy.'"

The next day was Saturday, July 18, 2009. Weight Watchers in the morning. Then a fun thing a friend had gotten them into: a double-decker bus tour of microbreweries in the South Park area. Butz played bartender on the bus. A friend took pictures of them together. "I remember the sun was shining," her partner said. "It was really hot. And I

The reason for her sitting on the witness stand was to say: This happened to me. You must hear who was lost. You must hear what he did.

remember a few times I glanced at Teresa, and she had her face up. She loved the sun. She was in heaven.”

There was a late-afternoon trip to a dressmaker who was working on a commitment ceremony gown for Butz’s partner. The dressmaker wrapped her in a muslin cutout of the pattern. “I felt so beautiful,” she recalled. They were invited to a friend’s party up in Woodinville that night, a sleeper kind of thing so that people wouldn’t have to worry about driving home. But they were both feeling tired. They decided to go back to South Park instead.

They bought steaks and potatoes—“stuff that she loved”—and while Butz grilled the steaks outside, her partner made the rest of the meal inside. There was a phone call from Butz’s mom. “This beautiful, amazingly connected call with her mom, who she loved so amazingly much,” her partner recalled. It sounded like Butz’s mom, who is Catholic and had some reservations about their commitment ceremony, would indeed be coming. “While they may not have agreed with our choice,” Butz’s partner said on the stand of some members of her partner’s family, “there was no question that they loved Teresa, and there was no question that they loved me.”

Dinner. Then a movie that had been lying around the house for a while, a musical that made them both cry. It was around midnight. Butz checked the locks multiple times (like always), she brushed her teeth multiple times while flossing in between (like always), she took the left side of the bed (like always) right next to her water and her lip balm. Her partner took the right side of the bed (like always). They said good night.

“I kind of leaned in to her and said, ‘I love you so much,’” Butz’s partner recounted.

“She said, ‘I know you do.’ And that was it. We went to sleep.”

* * *

Butz’s partner doesn’t know how long they slept.

“I woke up to a start,” she told the court. “There was a man that I could see was naked, standing over the bed with a knife in his right hand... And the knife immediately went to my throat.”

She gasped. She thought: This is a dream.

“And then,” she told the court, “it’s just processing that there’s a person here and something’s going to happen.”

She didn’t immediately know if Butz was awake with her, but she didn’t want to take her eyes off the man in order to find out.

“He said, ‘Be quiet, be quiet.’ Because I made that noise or whatever. And he said: ‘I don’t want to hurt you. I just want pussy.’”

He told them to take their clothes off.

Butz was already awake. Her partner remembers her saying: “Sir, I’m on my period.”

The man’s response: “I don’t care.”

“So she took her pants off, and her shirt as well, and he got on top of her,” Butz’s partner told the court. “He started raping her.”

The man held onto the knife the whole time, kept it ready. (Prosecutors brought the alleged knife to court as evidence. It was more than a foot long from tip to handle.)

“I was as still as humanly possible,” Butz’s partner said. “I feel like I tried to put my arm as close to her as possible so she would know that I was there. I was terrified. I thought he’d kill us with the knife. I’d already had it to my throat. Already it was clear, you know—the energy was, if you don’t do what he says, he’ll kill her... It wasn’t just our own lives that we were worried about... I know when I laid there still I was thinking, ‘If I am good, he won’t hurt her.’”

After a time, Butz’s partner said on the stand, “He got off of her, and he told me to take my clothes off, which I did. And then he told her, ‘Lick her pussy.’ And she got in the position, but she didn’t do it. She pretended. I was really grateful for that. But I remember I could just feel her near me. And I watched him walk by the dresser near the window, and he just, one by one, shut all three windows.”

In the courtroom, it felt like windows were closing. Everyone was still, as if hoping that this would keep him from hurting them.

He raped Butz’s partner next.

“I remember I laid very still, or very flat. I remember thinking, ‘Just get through it and he’ll go. He’ll go. Don’t do anything crazy.’”

She recounted how he smelled (“clean”), what his build was like (“muscular”), his race (“black”), how much hair he had on his body (“very little”), the volume of his voice (“soft”), the speed of his speech (“medium”), and the manner in which he spoke (“Other

than using the word *pussy*, which kind of seemed lower brow, to be honest, the rest of his speech was very intelligent”).

She remembered feeling Butz reach for her arm, remembered Butz saying, “I’m so sorry.”

“Then,” Butz’s partner told the court, “he told me to get on my knees on the bed.”

The prosecuting attorney asked: Why?

“Because he wanted to. Well, he did. He put his penis in my anus.”

Already, Butz had been praying out loud through the ordeal: “Our father, please help us. Our father in heaven...” Her partner now started praying, too: “Please, God, let us live.”

Then, “He stopped and he stepped away. And he told Teresa to get down on the floor on her knees in front of him... I heard him say ‘swallow,’ and I heard what sounded like gagging noises from her.”

Butz’s partner visualized waiting, getting through this, the man leaving, then calling someone to come get them. At some point, he was done forcing Butz to perform oral sex and the two women both “scuttled up” on the bed, backs against the headboard, knees pressed to chests, arms around knees. Butz told him their purses were in the kitchen, that they didn’t have much cash but he could have whatever he wanted.

“He said, ‘I’m not going to hurt you. Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you.’ Then he said, and I remember: ‘Don’t get too excited. That was just round one.’”

He stood there, leaning against the dresser in their bedroom, naked, knife in hand, staring.

“He wasn’t smiling. He wasn’t scowling. He was just staring.”

For Butz’s partner, this waiting for more pain was worse than experiencing the pain in the moment.

The prosecuting attorney asked: How many rounds were there altogether?

“Three.”

* * *

Her first day of testimony ended. The next morning, June 9, she was back on the witness stand. In a building filled

with trial horrors, this courtroom was about to go well beyond the normal—beyond what most people are brave enough to imagine, let alone recount. Some of her testimony from this day is not going to be recounted in this story. It got very gruesome. But in order to understand her courage it’s necessary to hear, as much as possible, what she lived through.

Butz’s mother sat listening to the testimony on one of the wooden benches, just as she had every day of the trial so far; other members of the Butz family tight on either side of her. She is a small woman, just like her daughter, who was only five feet two. One thought: If this woman can absorb, at the level of detail required for proof before a jury, the particulars of what happened to her daughter—can view the bloody crime-scene photographs, can listen to the 911 call from a neighbor leaning over her blood-soaked daughter and screaming, “Ma’am, please wake up! Please wake up!” (while, to the 911 operator pleading, “Please hurry, please hurry”), can hear the testimony about DNA evidence and what orifices it was recovered from—then no one else in this courtroom can dare turn away. Butz’s mother’s presence, too, created an imperative: This happened. You must listen.

Isaiah Kalebu, the man accused of these crimes, sat in a sealed courtroom on a higher floor, deemed so uncontrollable he’s been banned from his own trial, left to watch the proceedings on closed-circuit television while strapped into a restraint chair and dressed in a thick green flop of fabric known as a “suicide smock.” (No ties, strings, sleeves, or other possible aides to self-harm.) Up to this point in the trial, Kalebu hadn’t been fighting his confinement in the upstairs courtroom, but this morning, of all mornings, he changed from his suicide smock into a dress shirt and slacks and requested that he be allowed to sit in the eighth-floor courtroom with his accuser. After his lawyers went up and talked to him, he retracted the request.

Butz’s partner began her second day of testimony with the awful silence of the man standing there that night, leaning against the dresser, staring, promising more. “So

“I woke up to a start,” she told the court. “There was a man standing over the bed with a knife in his right hand.”

much had already happened. I was trying to imagine what else..." And: "I didn't feel like Teresa and I could communicate. I didn't feel like I could tell her 'I love you'... I almost thought it would be worse, and I don't know why, if he knew I loved her too much."

He said to the two women: "All right, get ready for round two."

The horror of what happened next made the court reporter's eyes well up, made the bailiff cry, had the whole room in tears. The jury handed around a box of tissues. The prosecutor took long pauses to collect himself. The family and friends in the courtroom cried (though, truth be told, they had been crying throughout). The *Seattle Times* reporter seated next to me cried. I cried. The camerawoman who was shooting video for all the television stations in town cried—and later on hugged Butz's partner as she left the courtroom for the midmorning break.

Perhaps it is enough to restate how one of the two prosecuting attorneys summarized the attacks in opening arguments at the beginning of the trial. Kalebu, this prosecutor said, "raped them every way imaginable. Vaginally, anally, orally. He wasn't wearing a condom, and he ejaculated several times."

Perhaps it is enough to listen to some of their conversations during the later phases of these attacks, as Butz's partner recounted them on the stand.

The man asked the couple for lube before one of his rapes of Butz. When the women replied that they didn't have any lube, he said: "Too bad for her."

The man asked, at one point: "So are you guys lesbians or are you bisexual?"

Butz's partner's mind spun. Which would be worse? Which answer would make him more likely to stop?

"I remember what I said was, 'Well, we've been together a long time, so I guess that makes us lesbians.'"

She felt that she deserved to ask him a question at this point, so she asked: "Have you seen us before?"

He shook his head no.

Butz asked: "What if we'd been an old man?"

He just shrugged.

Butz's partner made up a story that someone was coming to pick them up at 5:00 a.m. to take them to a wedding in Portland. She asked him if they were going to make the

wedding. He said yes. She said: "Please don't hurt us. We're good people."

He said: "Yeah, you seem like you're good people. I wish we could have been friends."

Butz replied: "Yeah, I wish we could."

"Which," her partner said on the stand, "is exactly what she would do... Even in that moment, she wanted to make some sort of connection. She said, 'Maybe we still can.'"

He asked: "Do I seem like a good person to you?"

"She put the tips of her fingers on his chest—I will never ever forget this—and said, 'I am sure there is some good in here.'"

He said: "No more questions."

* * *

"I just did what I had to do," Butz's partner said. "At one point, I felt the tip of the knife just kind of touch my arm. I said, 'Ouch!,' and he actually said, 'Oh, I'm sorry.'"

She remembers thinking: "There's no way he'd say 'I'm sorry' and be a murderer. We're going to get through this. There's got to be some level of compassion there or something."

At one point, Butz made a play for the knife. He said: "Don't do that! Don't do that!"

Butz's partner, who was being raped at that moment, and was in a more vulnerable position, also said to Butz: "Don't do that. Don't do that."

Butz stopped trying to get the knife. The man said: "I know you're going to call the police. They all do. But I'm going to be long gone. I always am."

"Maybe we won't," Butz's partner told him.

"Well, you might not," he said.

Then he looked at Butz: "But she will."

The attacks became more sadistic. Things began to happen that were beyond the worst imagining of Butz's partner. She felt like she was going to be ripped in half. She thought: "He's not going to kill me with a knife, but he's going to kill me this way."

Then she heard Butz say: "Why are you cutting me? Why are you cutting me?"

The man said to Butz: "Shut up, or I'm going to kill your girlfriend."

He took the women into another room in the house, where he pulled another knife out of a pair of jeans he'd left on a guest bed.

The story he had been telling them, the story Butz's partner had been telling herself, the story that he just wanted sex and was not going to hurt them, now completely shattered. "In that moment I just knew he was going to kill us," Butz's partner told the court. "I just knew. There was something different in his gaze. There was this kind of looking. I didn't feel fear from him, I didn't feel anger from him, I just felt this nothing."

He made them go back into their bedroom. They pleaded with him, tried to think of what they could possibly say. They told him they were on the board of a nonprofit that helps homeless people, which was true. He didn't respond. They were back on the bed, on their backs, one of his knees on each of them, pinning them down, a knife in each of his hands.

The next thing she heard was Butz saying: "You got me. You got me. You got me." He had stabbed Butz in the heart.

"I remember thinking, 'No. No. No. No. No. No. No. We were supposed to get to leave. We were supposed to get to go. She can't be dying.'"

The man was slashing and stabbing Butz's partner, too.

"He just cut, cut, cut, cut, and I remember just feeling the blood come down, some of the blood just spurting up and out. And I remember thinking, 'This is it. There's no way I can have my throat slit and live. There's no way. There's just no way.'"

"The next thing I remember him doing was switching his hand from a cutting motion to a stabbing motion."

Each of the women had their hands up, trying to push him off. Butz's partner realized, though, that the more she struggled, the more blood gushed out of her neck.

"It's the weirdest thing. You don't hurt. Blood's spurting out of you, but you don't feel anything," she told the court.

She thought: "This is how I'm going to die."

It was, she said, "sort of a moment of peace."

She thought: "Maybe what Teresa tells

me about heaven is true. Maybe it will be okay."

She stopped fighting and released.

* * *

"The next thing I felt was just this powerful surge of energy."

Butz had pushed and kicked the man off of the bed.

"I remember screaming: 'Get him!'"

He punched Butz in the face. (An autopsy later showed her three bottom teeth broken and pushed back.) Butz grabbed the nightstand.

"I saw her holding that metal table, that little teeny tiny table. She kind of pushed him back with it."

No stories mattered anymore. No hopes. No promises. It was now fight or flight in that room, kill or be killed. Butz threw the table through the window. She pushed herself through the jagged glass, fell to the ground outside, got up, sprinted to the curb, ran into the street. Then, her partner said, "As quickly as she started running, she just fell straight back."

The man and Butz's partner were still standing there in the bedroom, and they looked at each other.

He ran out of the room.

She ran to the front door.

"I remember I couldn't get the front door open because my hands were too bloody," she told the court. Eventually, she did get it open and she ran to the neighbors across the street, ran past her partner lying on her back on South Rose Street, because both of them needed help right now, because it seemed like they didn't have much time. "Just ran as fast as I could," Butz's partner told the court. She was naked. They were both naked. She reached the neighbors' front door.

"I bang on the door as hard as I can," she said. As she did, she noticed the skin open on one of her arms, muscle popping through. She didn't even remember being stabbed there. Her flat palms left perfect bloody prints on the door. The neighbors weren't home.

The horror of what happened next made the court reporter's eyes well up, made the bailiff cry, had the whole room in tears. The jury handed around a box of tissues. The prosecutor took long pauses to collect himself.

“So I just turn around and start screaming: ‘Help us! Help us!’”

* * *

Indifferent silence. Unanswered screams. A murderer and rapist running away through the night. Cruelty unchecked.

And then civilization, which did not stop this from happening, which did not even know this was happening, slowly returned, slowly wrapped itself back around the women, layer by insufficient layer.

Butz’s partner saw a young Hispanic man running toward them. “He just ran,” she told the court. She saw a young woman leaning over her partner. Neighborhood kids, up late on a warm night, were coming to help. One of them took off a sweatshirt and gave it to Butz’s partner. “I just grabbed her sweatshirt and held it up to my neck,” she said. She told a young man to call her mom on his cell phone and tell her she loved her. “And the next thing I remember at this point is an officer coming up to me and kind of abruptly telling me to stop screaming.” The officer asked: Is the bad guy gone? Which way did he go? He needed to secure the area before the firemen, waiting down the block, could rush in, blue smocked and white gloved, and try and help whomever they could. “I remember they came to me”—the firemen—“and they didn’t go to her, and I was like, ‘Go to her! Go to her!’” Other firemen and medics would go to Butz, but it would be too late.

The canine unit would come to track the man’s scent. An emergency room physician would swab Butz’s partner for evidence and, for a time, with her best interests in mind, withhold from her the information that Butz had been killed. The coroner would autopsy Butz’s body. The crime lab would process the evidence: fingerprints on the dresser and the bathtub, a bloody footprint on a piece of paper that had been on the floor, DNA in and on the bodies of the two women. Detectives would run down leads, match the prints and DNA directly to Kalebu.

One of the detectives, a woman named Dana Duffey, would call one day while Butz’s partner sat in St. Louis at one of Butz’s favorite places, a bar and restaurant overlooking the Mississippi River. Detective Duffey would tell her: “We have him.” (And—no joke—fireworks would go off right at that moment across the river, an accident on the part of some worker preparing for a later

show.) State psychiatrists would evaluate Kalebu and declare him competent. King County prosecutors, well aware that Kalebu had been repeatedly held—and repeatedly released—by the state’s mental health and criminal justice systems in the 16 months before the South Park attacks, would prepare to try to put him away for life this time. Public defense attorneys would prepare his defense, which currently is “general denial.” A judge would be assigned, a jury selected. The component pieces of this effort to be civilized even toward those accused of defying the demands of civilization, this attempt at a fair trial, would fall into place.

And then she—the bravest woman in Seattle—would testify at this trial, relive and recount it all, bear witness and bare her pain for the hope of justice.

Before all of this, though, the firemen would try to get Butz’s partner to sit down on South Rose Street, to stop her screaming. But she would not sit down and stop her screaming. Not after what happened. Not after all that silence. Not anymore.

A part of her knew Butz’s fate. Still, she shouted into the night. Even if Butz couldn’t hear her anymore, maybe someone would hear: “I love you, Teresa! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!” ■