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False Confessions, True Calling

The first time I brought him my research, he handed it back without a word—just a single sentence scrawled in the margin: *"Try again, but this time, tell the truth."*

I stared at the note for longer than I care to admit, unsure if I felt more exposed or annoyed. It was my third draft in two weeks. I had written pages on social cognition, identity formation, even the psychology of love—half-hearted ideas I hoped would stick. But I knew, even as I typed each one, they weren't mine. Not really.

I was a third-year psychology major at Penn, struggling to find a research topic for my year-long junior thesis. I had thrown together vague ideas about memory and behavior, hoping one would be good enough to pass. But Dr. Bermant—my research mentor—wasn't interested in "good enough." Deep down, he knew none of these topics really moved me. And so, he kept turning them away, each rejection more unnerving than the last.

He was a retired professor, volunteering his time to mentor students simply because he still cared. He specialized in the intersection of psychology and religion—Buddhist psychology, in particular. Niche, yes, but he had a quiet brilliance about him that drew students in. He never told you what to study. He asked, gently but persistently, what you *cared* about.

One day, after another meeting, I stayed behind and mentioned something I had found in his old research portfolio.

"I didn't know you went to law school," I said.

He gave a small smile, then sat back down. "I did. Long ago."

"What pulled you off that track?"

He shrugged. “Because I was more interested in the *why* than the *what*. Law resolves. Psychology explains.”

What followed was an unplanned two-hour conversation about the crossroads of law and the human mind. He spoke about interrogation tactics, courtroom behavior, the limits of memory, and the fragile boundary between pressure and coercion. When he mentioned false confessions, something in me snapped to attention.

“Wait,” I said. “Why would someone confess to something they didn’t do?”

He looked at me over his smudged glasses. “That’s a very good question. Why do you think?”

I left his office that day obsessed. The idea that innocent people could be persuaded, even psychologically *cornered*, into confessing to crimes they hadn’t committed shook me. I read everything I could find: landmark cases, psychological studies, interrogation transcripts, wrongful conviction stories. It was chilling and addictive—this deeply human, deeply legal issue.

I came back the next week with a new proposal.

“False confessions,” I said, breathless. “That’s what I want to study.”

For the first time all semester, Dr. Bermant nodded immediately. “Finally,” he said. “Now you’re asking the right question.”

Over the next year, I poured myself into the research. My thesis focused on the psychological vulnerabilities that lead to false confessions—sleep deprivation, isolation, youth, suggestibility—and how these factors intersect with flawed legal procedures.

I quickly learned that false confessions don’t happen in a vacuum—they’re often the result of long, high-pressure interrogations paired with human vulnerability. Interrogation expert Fred Inbau once said sessions should never exceed three to four hours (Inbau, 1967), yet Drizin and Leo found the average length in false confession cases was over 16 hours (Drizin and Leo, 2008). That time is often filled with isolation, fatigue, and relentless questioning. Kassin found that people under this kind of pressure will admit to things they didn’t do just to escape the moment, even if it means facing harsher consequences later (Kassin, 1996). Police are also legally allowed to lie about evidence, a tactic proven to make innocent people not just confess, but believe they’re guilty (Kassin, 1996). Add in factors like youth, mental illness, or intellectual disabilities, and the risk only grows (Lackey, 2020). It was chilling—and deeply human.

My work centered on one haunting truth: that the justice system, in all its formality and structure, often misreads the mind under pressure.

Dr. Bermant and I would talk for hours in his office. He'd push me to consider the legal implications: "What should a fair interrogation look like?" "What role should psychologists play in legal reform?" "What will you do with this knowledge?"

At first, I didn't know how to answer. But slowly, something began to form. His questions weren't just about the thesis—they were about my life. And I started to realize that I didn't want to just study injustice. I wanted to challenge it. His questions became my calling. He lit the flame and kept it burning with every conversation.

"I think you should consider law school," he said one day, sipping his tea.

I looked at him, surprised. "You really think I could do it?"

He smiled. "I think you already know the answer—you just needed someone to say it out loud."

Dr. Bermant became more than a mentor—he became my hero. Not because he stood in a courtroom or wrote landmark opinions, but because he showed me that the law isn't just about rules. It's about people. It's about psychology, power, vulnerability, and truth. And it's about asking the questions no one else thinks to ask.

He never treated mentoring like a job. I remember the day he told me he was finally retiring—really retiring. "You're my last student," he said quietly, reaching into his worn leather bag. He pulled out a mug, custom-made, with my name and the names of two other students he'd mentored in his final year.

"I have a gift for you," he said.

That mug sits on my desk today.

On our last day together, he invited the three of us to his Philadelphia apartment for dinner. His kind wife cooked, and we sat around the table like family—laughing, talking, remembering. When I got into Penn Law, my first-choice school and my alma mater, he was the first person I told.

I chose law because of the research. I stayed because of the people. And I owe that path to Dr. Bermant—my legal hero.

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