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Ruthann Robson

any reason

*yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts
and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks
and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars*

- HOWL
Allen Ginsburg

“Does anyone have any reason that they cannot be fair and impartial?”

What a blunt instrument. Not to mention an ungrammatical one. The lawyer seems confident; as if he thinks he is a great poet capable of seducing the truth. But really, who would answer a question like that?

Yet hands are being raised around me, as if we are students in seventh grade instead of qualified citizens in a county courtroom. The fluttering fingers woman says she has a relative in the hospital and so she would be distracted. The Heil-Hitler man tells us he has three kids in middle school and he loves them more than anything and as a divorced father he worries about them all the time. The waver, who'd already said she'd been a principal thirty years ago, wants to emphasize that she has certain strong opinions.

Like we all don't have definite ideas, I think.

But the attorney nods, earnest as hell.

“Anyone else want to tell me anything I haven't asked about? Something that if you were me, you would want to know? Any reason you can't give this trial, or my client, your full and fair attention?”

No one volunteers this time.

The prosecutor is smooth by comparison. His pose is one of genuine interest. He uses our names and asks us individual questions. He is African-American, probably placed in this position for maximum effect to connect with the people most likely to favor his opposition.

“They'll never pick you for the jury,” Estella had told me. “You'll be

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back by tomorrow. They don't like us colored folk since we acquit or give lots of money for damages. I read an article all about it."

Estella was always reading articles all about something or other, in some magazine or another. I thought she should pay more attention to her job. And snack less so that her uniform was not so tight. I'm glad I'm not a supervisor.

"Ms. Caldwell? Honey Caldwell? What kind of nurse are you?" the prosecutor asks me.

"An excellent one."

A woman behind me giggles.

A fleeting sneer tugs at the prosecutor's full lips. He looks at me a little more closely, seeing a high yellow woman, fashionably thin, with close-cropped hair. I feel him judging me: uppity, saddity, a hincty bitch, as my father would have said.

His own wife, I imagine, is white; his house suburban; his car a Volvo or Saab but nothing gangsterish for him like a BMW.

"I'm sure you are." He maintains his smile. "Let me rephrase. Do you have a specialty?"

"ICU," I say. "Intensive care." I feel respect for me elevate a notch. People are drawn to the drama of it; they imagine the high-stakes nature of the work; they romanticize me as dedicated to those most in need. I never tell anyone that the reason I like ICU is its serenity. The patients are co-operative since they are mostly unconscious. And they don't stay long. They make progress and are transferred to another unit. Or not.

Sometimes there was a young woman, recovering from surgery usually, and something about her would evoke Miss V. I'll admit I could succumb to a fantasy, me as the one in charge, taking care, the wiser and more accomplished one. I ministered to her, talked to her, breathed with the pneumatic leg pumps on her legs, inflating and deflating to prevent clots, monitored the nasogastric tube, kept the urinary catheter clear, protected her from visitors.

If she didn't survive, the cold clutch of grief would stalk me, until I managed to outrun it, miles on a track everyday until it sweated out, until

I was *burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night*. Amazing how many lines I still recall.

It had been the *negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix* that made me raise my hand to comment. I probably used the word “oppressive.” The other students had twittered. Honors English was whiter than most of the other classes, even Honors Biology; I had forgotten that.

But Miss V, as much of a novice to this junior high as we seventh graders were, looked at me seriously and nodded. “Excellent,” she said. She noticed me then, I knew.

The lawyers gather at the high bench. They whisper to the judge on the other side, clutch yellow pads, and jerk their wrists in check-mark motions. After a while, the lawyers go back to their seats, and the judge starts speechifying, trying to sound impromptu, though it is obvious she’s said these same things a hundred times. Jury duty is an important part of civic duty in a democracy and we shouldn’t be offended if we are excused. She carefully reads the names of the people who may leave. I’m not surprised to see fluttering fingers, Heil-Hitler, and the waving principal stand up to go. I’m a bit more surprised to see some of the others rise, including a youngish woman with a Spanish accent who had seemed kind. I glance down the row to look at the only Black man in the group; his motionless legs are a comfort.

The judge announces recess—what a juvenile word—giving us a ridiculously long time for lunch. In our little room, under the watchful eye of the bailiff, people make acquaintances if not friends, pairing off. Two white women, both straddling obesity, cut their eyes at me, guiltily, as if wondering if it would be obviously impolite to exclude me; they might be thought racist. I absolve them with a “See you this afternoon; I’ve got some errands to run,” and their eyes glint with gratitude. I am grateful too, for I try not to imagine what—or how much—they might eat.

I slip the Official Juror Parking Permit off my dashboard and into the glove compartment of my Honda Accord. My car is a few years old, but it still looks new. I have the outside waxed four times a year and I use

Armor All on the inside every week. Sometimes I think of this car as my best friend, since I don't have any pets. Not that I'd name it or anything childish like that.

It is a stunning pre-autumn day, the sky painted an aqua blue and the trees just starting to color, but the courthouse is too far from my apartment to drive home and back. I don't have a definite destination, but I drive as if I did.

The chain bookstore sits majestic in its parking lot. It is a new addition around here, like so much else in this part of Ohio, like the rest of the stores that sprawl around it. You can't really call it a "mall." Aren't malls for walking and window shopping? And it certainly isn't a downtown. My mother used to take me to Quackenbush, the department store on Main Street in Paterson, every year before school started—just this time of year—to buy me clothes. The store took up the whole block and the building was decorated with lions' heads and flowers, in a style I'd later learn to identify as Beaux Arts. I supposed that the year before I started seventh grade was the last time my mother would have taken me there. She would have bought me that voile green blouse. That corduroy miniskirt. Those boots.

The stores here in Ohio are like little principalities. Home improvement. World of Shoes. Appliances and electronics. Linens for the Home. Fabrics. How much fabric a person needs must be more than I could ever guess.

I go to the bookstore so I can smell the coffee. Most tasting is actually olfactory, which more people should realize. Aroma is very satisfying. They don't want us to know this, of course, otherwise how could they sell those coffee-like drinks with the exotic-sounding names and enough calories to sustain an African village for two days?

On the bookstore table is a fiftieth anniversary edition of "the most important poem in the English language," according to the cover. I guess there isn't any controversy remaining, not like when Miss V taught it to us, on its twentieth anniversary I remember her saying.

It was 1976 then. The nation's bicentennial. That past summer my

family had gone to New York City to see the tall ships and my parents had had a fight. The war was over, but my uncle the draft dodger wasn't back from Toronto yet and my uncle that had been drafted and blown away by "friendly fire" wasn't ever coming back. I was entering junior high. The race riots had stopped in Paterson, New Jersey, which is actually mentioned in the poem.

Lightning in the mind leaping towards the poles of Canada & Paterson.

Canada & Paterson. As if Paterson was its own sovereign nation.

I was Paterson.

And she was Canada.

The & symbol so daring, right there in the poem, in literature, as if connections were so simple and obvious.

The author of the poem was himself from Paterson, there was that connection. Miss V told us that. She told us that our principal, Mr Skrupskelis, called her in for a "little talk" about teaching the poem. She told us she was "in trouble."

Though this was nothing like the trouble she'd be in later.

"I told him that this beautiful beautiful poem had been subjected to an obscenity trial almost twenty years ago!" The word "obscenity" had an exhilarating ring to it. Her fingers caressed the flesh at her throat, leaving a splotch. She stood in front of the classroom and she stood close to me, just the two of us, in a private conversation. Whether she was in front of the class or not, she was almost always only talking to me. It was what I was beginning to understand about her, about her & me, by then.

Of course I buy the book.

Although I already have several other editions.

Back in the jury room, it is hurry up and wait. The bailiff comes in and counts us—the selected jurors and one alternate—and then tells us that it might be a while. "There are motions," he announces.

"You'd think they would have done that before," one of the fat white women who almost invited me to lunch says. Her name is Linda. Her

hobby is quilting. She works part-time in a fabric store. She has been married for twenty-two years, has no children, and raises Corgis. In case we didn't remember this from the questioning by the lawyers, she repeats it now.

"Honey, now that's a nice name." She turns to me. I'm not tempted to furnish her with anecdotes. I was born in 1964, my parent's own little Civil Rights Act, and my name is a wish they threw up into the dirty night sky. By the time I got to junior high, I realized it was not about being sweet. They could have named me Sugar. Or about some slow security, the ability to flow without being rushed, to be sticky and desired. I'm not named Molasses. No, they called me Honey for the color they hoped I'd be. Though really, they should have considered Carmel. Carmela. That probably didn't occur to them, but if it had, my mother would have rejected it as "too PR." She never liked Puerto Ricans. She said they were invading Paterson and taking away Black people's rightful jobs. Even as a kid, I understood that things weren't so simple. But you couldn't reason with my mother.

I look at the Black man, raising my eyebrows.

"Honey," he says. "That's easy to remember. My name is James."

"That's easy too," I reply.

My father's name was Ezekial. He came from that kind of family. Everyone called him Zeke. Except me and my younger brothers, of course, who called him Dad. Except the principal, who had called him Mr. Caldwell.

Miss V we called her. Her unpronounceable name, with too many vowels and consonants arranged in no particular order. Was it Vsurouwiecki? Vzourweiski? Vourourskiweiky?

I thought of her as Veruschka, which I also couldn't spell, the Russian or Prussian or German model, tall with ungainly hands, but seductively tragic, everyone agreed. Miss V seemed just as exotic, though her accent was high-class American rather than European. She was not as tall or as blonde as the model. Still, us seventh graders might be forgiven for thinking of Huns or Cossacks or Vikings, some ancient and fearless tribe,