

A Jury of Your Peers

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It was nearly the end of my allotted two weeks during which I was required to call the county courthouse after 5 P.M. and find out if I had to show up for jury duty the following day. I had received the little loathsome packet in the mail about a month before indicating that I had been chosen through lottery to be a good citizen. The timing was poor with my teaching coming to a close for the semester followed by winter break.

I was good about calling for the first few days, then my wife picked up the chore for me. Each time, though, the drawn out recorded message from the scratchy, listless voice on the other end indicated that my group was not needed the next day. I woke on Wednesday morning about five and couldn't remember whether either of us had called the day before. Just to make sure, I searched around for the number and dialed in a still semi-somnambulant state. Then the wearisome female voice began to call roll:

Tomorrow, Wednesday, December 17, 2003, the following groups are required to come to the fourth floor jury lounge and await further instructions: groups 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24. If your group was not amongst those read, you will need to call tomorrow after 5 P.M. for new instructions. Do not show up if your group was not called. If your group was called, you are required to bring your jury group sheet with you. Parking is available for all groups in....

It goes on like this for another couple of minutes. But then, suddenly, and to my complete horror, I began to become faintly suspicious that my group was actually called. The word 'group' was said so many times, and the voice spoke with such unyielding boredom, that it was hard to tell. I was in group 21. Was it amongst those read and thus required to brave a sub-zero morning to fulfill its lottery-appointed duty? Why couldn't they say, "hey you - yes you - come tomorrow!" After the message concluded I hastily redialed, now fully aware and attentive. With every fiber of strength in my mind, I tried to uphold a state of complete concentration to hear if the number '21' was read. Aghast, as the droning voice repeated its missive, I heard it. "21." Yes, it was true. So I called work and left messages on my boss' phone as well as her secretary's that I would not be

able to get to our scheduled noon meeting today as I was called for JURY DUTY! I said it like I had been drafted to be a paratrooper on D-Day, with as much weight and feigned sense of duty I could muster before daybreak.

I went to the bathroom and noted an entirely disheveled appearance staring back at me. I reached for my razor. But then, mid-reach, I decided to appear in my typical casual, unshaven weekend style, even though it was only the middle of the week. Maybe this bum-like visage would steer the attorneys away from choosing me. I carefully selected clothing that would fall somewhere between indifferent and unkempt, showered and had a quick bite for breakfast before embarking on my downtown, rush-hour, sub-freezing, drive into traffic. Who knew, maybe they'd feed us with bagels and cream cheese or the like? I couldn't spoil such an opportunity! Right before I left, I stuffed a bag with students' papers and a red pen for me to grade, as I heard from others that jury duty can consist of a lot of waiting around

I arrived just a few minutes before the appointed time of 8 A.M. at the courthouse and promptly found the fourth floor jury lounge. I opened the door with an assured, business-like resolution, but was suddenly confronted with forty or so drooping bodies slouched at a ramshackle assortment of semi-dilapidated conference-room tables (clearly from the 70's, complete with cracked and peeling Formica tops). The chairs also seemed to be the leftovers from some by-gone age, gushing discolored yellow and black foam from their cushions, visibly uncomfortable even from a distance.

As I stepped into the room from the much dimmer hall, the overly bright and loudly buzzing fluorescent lights illuminated what seemed like a domino effect of bewildered heads swiveling in my direction. Each blank stare followed my tentative progress like suspicious synchronized security cameras at a department store, and with as much sympathy. (I instantly remembered that Twilight Zone episode in which corpses beckon a woman, "Room for one more...") Coats still adorning some, others with theirs draped over adjoining empty chairs, I noticed the eyes of these poor wretches were not able to fully focus on me. I needed to hastily choose a table at which to sit and join the undead in our wait for the next potential juror to step into the room. I did a once-over to spot a table occupied with people least likely to try to strike up a conversation and dashed over to it. Placing my bag of my music student's final papers in the chair beside me, I

subtly hinted to my neighbors and any further wanderers looking for a seat or a partner for idle banter to navigate elsewhere.

About 5 after 8, a middle-aged court official that looked as if she had been doing this same task every morning for the past twenty years, like feeding chickens at a farm, came in and gave us sheets for us to sign in. In a tone of equal exuberance as the one on the phone, she profusely apologized for the, “obvious inconvenience that jury duty surely is,” and invited us to visit the table at the rear of the lounge where we’d find coffee and hot chocolate. We all got up, even as she was still speaking, and trudged in a supine, meandering, chaotic mess, half deciding to sign in first, while others decided to first get a drink. I was with the later, and like cattle at an auction, we created a mumbling, moaning, jumbled line waiting for our turn. The hot chocolate turned out to be packets but the hot water spout was broken, so everyone was left with the choice of either downing the sludge-like coffee from dirty-rimmed paper cups or lick the inside of a packet. I took my cup and headed to find my name on the roster, making sure I’d get my \$20 from the state with their usual efficiency. And, no, I’m not holding my breath.

After the slow-motion bedlam settled and everyone was back in their seats, the court official started up again with an emotionless litany of apologies - I was sure that this *had* to be the voice I’d been hearing for the last two weeks on the phone! That was until another woman entered (the first left with our sign-in sheets) and said with an *identical* tone to the last official that we’re, “now required to view the following 15 minute video illustrating the jury process and our rights and responsibilities.” I was now convinced that the state was trying to save money by cloning their employees.

The lights were shut off and the little wheel-in TV and VCR (both as old as the tables that surrounded us) creaked as the feature began. First of all, I don’t know in what TV studio this tape was shot, but it definitely didn’t resemble my experience thus far. Save for the apparent non-entity status of the actors, the over-ripe, enthusiasm imbued performances did not resemble our consortium in the least. As we struggled not to doze off completely during such memorable lines as, “I’d like to volunteer to be jury foreperson!” were exclaimed through the tiny distorted speaker, the lights were abruptly turned on as the credits began to roll. The shocked lot of us began to reel like an

ensemble of draculas suddenly faced with the morning sun, right down to the audible wails that only the undead could muster.

And now, we were instructed to wait. OK. I was never so glad to have student papers to grade in my life, and this usually monotonous task was approached with fanatical zeal as I removed the cap from my little red pen; I wanted to look completely engrossed to further ward off any unwanted conversational advances from the other asylum inmates. Not THREE minutes had passed when I realized that my usual accurate judgement of people, based on their appearance or their likelihood of not bothering me, had been far off the mark this time around.

In a childlike, chirpy voice, the 20-ish blond blurted out, “Wow! What a video, huh? I can’t wait for that one to come out on DVD-just kidding.” She said ‘just kidding’ like it was attached to the word DVD and at first it was difficult to realize from the suddenly bright-eyed woman that she was being sarcastic. Within a second of that bizarre comment, the up-until-now silent, 40-ish grizzled man sitting across from me opened his mouth, revealing a set of sickly yellow teeth, like a boxer’s mouth guard protruding uniformly from beneath his haggard moustache. I was praying it was only to yawn, but then, without warning, it spewed out brassily while pointing in my direction, “So you’re a teacher or somethin’, huh?” AGAIN with the ‘huh’?

The young woman chimed in, obviously yearning for conversation. “I was just thinking the same thing seeing how much red you’re using there. One of *my* papers isn’t in the pile is it?-just kidding.” AGAIN with the ‘just kidding’? “I’m actually not in school, I’m in the air national guard - family thing. It’s like I was just a born airman - just kidding.” Oh boy, what had I gotten myself into?

Seemingly disconnected from his surroundings, and with no obvious control or concern for his ample vocal projection, my fellow potential juror continued, “I don’t work, see?” He rolled up his sleeve to show anyone that would look a small, but apparently severe scar. “I’ve been on disability ever since I near tore my right arm off moving a box for my job.” Reluctantly, I went for the bait, “Oh, what was your job?”. He jumped all over me as I was still saying ‘job’ with unusual fervor. “I was a box mover - not any more though - now I got a hot tub and don’t work a lick but it’s nice to get out here this morning - I think we get 30 some cents a mile each way plus \$20 a day -

yeah - that'll pay for new batt'ries ya' see I have seven smoke alarms in my house cause you never can be sure - got one right over the hot tub - those things can have electrical problems - my friend near killed 'emself when his deep fryer overturned in the kitchen got mine out on the deck - which has a smoke detector too by the way got a couple in the bedroom one over the waterbed cause I admit I do smoke in bed and 'nother at the door just in case smoke comin' in from the living room."

Allowing me to just observe dumbstruck, our family airman interjected, "If you ever have a fire you could just put your cigarette out on the bed and then the water would put out the fire - just kidding." My jaw dropped just a bit more.

The injured box mover didn't respond to her quip, but rather turned to me while spying my papers, "So you bein' rough on those kids you're gradin'?" "No more roughly than they're being on me." How clever I thought. "Got another one over the TV and one over the radio..." - he obviously had no interest in my response, or seemed to even have listened for one - "gonna get one for the computer cause I've been downloadin' plenty from the internet - songs and stuff..." (God knows what 'stuff' could entail) "...so you like music?" Despite the fact that they have both been watching me grade music examples for the past fifteen minutes, I decided to avoid any discussion of the subject and bluntly said, "No." But as long as 'music' had been brought up, the overly thrilled woman couldn't seem to control her compelling need for breaking up the line of already strained conversation with her particular brand of humor and said, "I like the music from that video we just watched - maybe I can use the \$20 they'll be givin' us to get the CD for Christmas for my boyfriend - just kidding." Of course I said 'just kidding' along with her in my mind as she said it.

I looked around at the other tables at this point, trying to facially portray a look of intense despair - perhaps in need of an empathetic glance or simply a nod of understanding. But no - I was alone in my purgatory. Everyone seemed to be tottering in and out of consciousness, waiting their turn to be interviewed for either of the two criminal cases on the docket that day.

I had been sitting at this table for just under a half an hour, and already I would have voted guilty and proposed hanging for whoever was on trial and made me come down here to judge their flagitious behavior. I didn't care if it was mowing the lawn

nude, screaming obscenities in a public place, robbing a bank, or any combination of the above, I was voting guilty and wanted a hanging for sure.

I didn't want to seem rude and just leave the near-vacant table for a more congested, albeit quiet one. I decided to stop grading, take my medicine with grace, and do my best to follow the (with no better word for it) conversation, even though my ability to keep track with who was talking about what wavered constantly. Topics ranged from local mortgage rates and Democrats who were secretly plotting against the US military, to what anchovies were really made from and battery types. This last one always gave me my bearings as I knew *who* brought it up and why.

An hour passed - a painful one for sure - but finally the judge from one of the trials came in and said that her case had been settled and that, by lottery, one half of us would be dismissed. She begged our pardon for the inconvenience in the monotone-clone voice that I had already become all too easily accustomed, but reiterated, almost verbatim from the video tape, how commendable it was that we had come to the service of our country and the judicial process. Of course, our other choice would have been to suffer some vague array of possible state-inflicted punishments, but who's concerned with details? And which would really have been worse?

The Fates, who up until now had showed no mercy, granted me a reprieve, and indeed, my name was called. As the twenty of us that heard our names aloud chaotically grabbed our jackets and jumbled out the door, I graciously bid my two acquaintances a fond farewell and even said, "Wonderful meeting you both," to which neither responded or seemed to notice I had even said anything at all. I walked away while they both continued throwing out incoherent sentences into the air.

Just before exiting, I held the squeaking door as it swung toward me and looked back into the jury lounge. I took one final eye-full of this pair, along with the rest of the dejected folks, all of whom now had a better than 50% chance of deciding an accused criminal's future. I cringed and solemnly swore never to commit even the most meager of crimes, less I find myself before a panel of my peers awaiting their carefully deliberated judgement.