

The Accidental Juror

By Jennie Dorris



In 9th grade I participated in the Rose Parade as a snare drummer in the Owasso High School marching band. We had rehearsed endlessly for this opportunity, including marching around our local track on Christmas Eve.

My parents and I had long watched the Rose Parade on television. I was fascinated with the giant, colorful floats, peering close to my screen to see if I could make out the petals of each flower. The day of the parade I pulled on the scratchy wool-polyester red pants, and I tightened the suspenders down on my shoulders. I buttoned the hot jacket tight up to my neck and a parent knelt at my scuffed white shoes, painting them with one last coat of polish. In front of us was the Disneyland float, the float that had always looked so beautiful on television. Up close the flowers are disappointing – to see individual petals and the handiwork of how they’re attached is not beautiful, it’s like staring at a poem and only seeing the commas.

Halfway through the five-and-a-half-mile parade, the float broke down in front of us. We were wilting in our wool with the California heat, and our director called, “Drumline, repeat the cadence until we get moving!”

We wiped the sweat from our palms and played the same beats over and over, our hips creaking as we marked time. As my toy soldier hat slid down, the brim touching my nose, I realized I’d been duped, that this version of performance was everything I hated, having to play the same as five other drummers, having to only play the songs called by the drum major. I was stuck, and as I watched the flowers fade in front of me, I told myself this is the Parade Feeling. When everything is uncomfortable but you have to stay, you are in motion in a way where there is no way out, nowhere else to be—this is the Parade Feeling.

I rarely encounter the Parade Feeling in my life these days, but I felt it when I opened my mailbox and got a summons to jury duty. I knew from talk across my friend group that no one I knew ever made it past the first round of screening. But the night before I reported I still bemoaned it over pitchers of beer.

“No offense,” my friend said. “But there’s no way you’re going to get picked.”

I had a good amount of things to disqualify me. Journalist. Three higher education degrees. Self-employed. Opinionated about my irrational hatred of cops. A love for lunch beers. A disdain for lawyers. A loose filter on my mouth with lunch beers in my belly and cops and lawyers in the room.

I showed up at 8 a.m. the next day ready to be dismissed. The day started with a few hundred of us in the jury pool room. I had not brought anything to read. I had not had my morning cup of coffee. I was ready to be dismissed, get a cup of hot caffeine up the street, go to work.

I sat amid a slew of little old ladies reading John Grisham novels, their eyes bright, their juror numbers crimped and sweaty in their hands.

We were funneled into a courtroom where we learned that we might sit on a double murder trial. They told us it was a strangulation case. We will be talking about decomposition, they added. This trial will take a long, long time, they said. I eyed the door. There is no way I'm doing this, I thought. And, they added, do you see this guy? They gestured to the cop standing guard at the door, his chest six miles broad. He will be at your house if you leave. I looked up and the judge was looking right at me.

They gave us forms to fill out, with questions that made it hard to appear as crazy as I had planned. Where could I put my free-form rap about Ron Paul? Where could I write iambic pentameter about the alien baby growing in my lungs? Instead, I added a long note begging out under the "anything else we should know." We then took a lunch while the lawyers reviewed the paperwork, and I walked two blocks to a pub and drank as many beers as I could in 45 minutes. I came back tipsy and confident that I would not be chosen. I took a seat next to a meaty hipster with a strawberry handlebar moustache. I'm going down with his ship, I thought.

As the lawyers started asking questions of the jury pool, I pulled out my phone and openly sent texts. As my fellow potential jurors were grilled and cross-grilled, I learned more than I wanted to know about them; how the weepy lady with the strappy shoes had tried to cut violence out of her life but she would ... *oh she would* ... try to stick out this trial and be fair.

I was asked one thing and one thing only – it was about the note on my form. "Miss.....Dorris" said the attorney I would learn to hate for the way she pursed her lips together after each of her statements. "You say that you wrote a grant for a literacy program for at-risk youth," she said. "Do you think attending your final grant interview is worth missing civic duty for?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you want to serve on jury duty?" she followed up.

"No," I said. And I saw the little old lady on the other side of me shake with laughter.

"I don't particularly want to either," she chimed in.

There was an uncomfortable silence and each lawyer started dismissing jurors by their numbers. Then they stopped calling numbers and I realized I was one of 12 left. I shifted in my seat. Gone were all the little old ladies with their Grisham, the excited housewives and the teachers on summer break. I saw how we all moved in our seats, the slight movement of dissent, of knowing our days would not be our own until this was over.

The man who was responsible for us being there was named Gregory Owens. He was a big black man, the kind of color that is so black it's almost purple. He was accused of killing his invalid father and his father's caregiver. The prosecution said he strangled them both. Gregory Owens looked at me a lot. He had a long, slack face and eyes that always said "So what?" At first I would watch him, fascinated with his lack of emotion. I felt good to be breaking some unspoken rule.

The case was of three people in one house. Then two were found strangled, and the one left was Gregory Owens. He claimed he had trouble remembering how that all came to be. His father was in a wheelchair when it happened. He had slumped forward into death. The caregiver was downstairs in the basement when she was killed. Someone put her in a utility closet after it happened, she was laid on her belly, and her legs kept flopping and kicking open the door. So someone took her legs, and tied them up over her head.

"This is called *hog-tying*," said the prosecution, watching our faces.

"*No shit*," I tried to get my face to say.

"So what?" Gregory Owens' face said when it was revealed that he lived with the decomposing bodies for nearly a month before neighbors complained of the smell.

It took several days for the lawyers to finish their exposition. Having never held a full-time job, let alone a job that involves sitting in one spot, I found myself miserable to stay still for eight hours straight. I crossed my legs Indian-style. I shifted my weight cheek to cheek. I tapped my toes on the gold bar that ran underneath my chair, mockingly close to the style that is installed in pubs. Beyond my physical discomfort I was increasingly upset to live this nightmare with Gregory Owens, to have him watching my reaction as I heard his story.

Later, when the prosecution really wanted to punch up the emotional content, they put photos of the decomposing bodies on the expensive flat-screen television. I saw the flesh falling off the face of the father, a face I had previously seen in an exhibit when he was alive – when he was fat, with sunglasses, smiling over a barbecue grill. I saw maggots eating at the flesh around where the rope had sunk into the meat of his neck. Now it hung loose in folds.

The image took me by the face, pushed the tears from my eyes, pushed my shoulders into weeping. The defense snapped to look at the juror who cracked. The prosecution looked at each other. Gregory Owens looked at me, his eyes smiled. *So what?* I twisted in my seat, moving my sleeve to wipe my face and my nose. My legs itched, every inch of the flesh and skin, to get up and run, to say this is not what I have to offer my country, seeing these things and making these decisions. But no one moved. All the other jurors pretended not to see me, and the prosecution continued, ignoring the one woman writhing in her seat. It was the parade feeling, and we weren't done.

The defense was towing a tricky line. Gregory Owens had AIDS. HIV/AIDS, specifically. Since the '80s. He was one of the first recorded illnesses. Then the defense accidentally granted the jury a peek at a medical report, where we learned he was gay.

So what he looked at me.

The defense's case was that Gregory suffered from a case of AIDS dementia, where you go crazy and can't control yourself. So you're insane, see, the defense looked at us, showing us how AIDS ate away at your body. Crazy. You can't remember things.

Throughout our exchanging of glances, I had started to get scared. At night, in the shower, I would have a flash of him busting down the door, grabbing my throat. While jogging I would see him coming out of the bushes, taking me by the neck. I looked at him now, trying to pull the inherent irony of his situation forward to protect myself.

You really are tearing down gay stereotypes, I thought, raising my eyebrows at him.

Eventually, the lawyers talked themselves tired and the jury went off to our deliberation room, where we would spend over thirty hours together.

We had one person hanging the jury, who didn't want to convict him of anything. After *we* talked ourselves tired, we waited for him to make his decision. We ate lunch together. We took smoke breaks together. We peed together. And we waited. These chairs were even more uncomfortable, the silence heavy and the Parade Feeling even stronger than ever.

It was in the 33rd hour that our holdout broke. He finally got up and went to the small bathroom off of the deliberation room. We heard him urinating, and then we heard him hit the heel of his hand against the wall before he flushed.

"Let's do this thing," he said when he re-entered. Our foreman circled our answer, and we walked into the courtroom and presented our verdict. We found Gregory Owens guilty of murdering the caregiver, first-degree. This meant he would get life in prison. It was received calmly, and afterwards the judge said to us jokingly, "You're free."

Outside in the hallway, the lawyers were waiting for us, wanting to ask us questions about how we came to our verdict. They were cracking jokes about the defense. And then we heard the door open behind us, and it got quiet. Gregory Owens walked out, handcuffed and his ankles in chains. He was surrounded by a large group of policemen. When he walked past, I saw one of his legs was stiff, held straight out. He limped awkwardly against all of his bindings. The lawyer watched him, but Gregory Owens didn't look at the lawyer. He looked at us, our faces fresh with the idea of getting back to real life, work, friends. I looked at him with a face that had to say, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to be the one to do this." He kept his eyes on me, here he was, about to face a life somewhere I could not imagine and his face was the same as it was in the courtroom. So what? Evidently Gregory Owens knew something I didn't about the feeling of being caught in a motion that you don't get to decide, evidently he had accepted this feeling a long time ago. He turned away from me for the last time, walking down the hall in his own parade, and I was left to my life of freedom that looked much different than before.