
§

The New Jury Duty

§

BY JOSHUA HARLOW



THE NEW JURY DUTY



There was an abrupt knock on Dean Jacob's apartment door followed by a few envelopes and flyers being shoved through the mail slot. Each day, around noon, all of the mail that was dumped in the front office was distributed to the inhabitants of the apartment building. With coffee still in hand, Dean shuffled towards the front door sporting a royal blue robe despite the afternoon sun glistening through the transparent balcony door. He bent over to retrieve the mail, skimming through each piece. Among the circulars and junk mail were only four letters. His immediate response was that none were of utmost importance, but as he approached the garbage pail, his eyes noticed the one addressed by the Federal Court of New York City.

Dean's stomach took a nosedive. Sweat gathered on his receding hairline and his face, pallid a moment earlier, was now flush with bright crimson cheeks. He felt like the temperature inside his small apartment had swelled thirty degrees. Tossing the other mail aside with disinterest, he scurried to the kitchen and tore open the white flap.

Dean closed his eyes, grasping the folded letter and tossing the envelope aside. He considered whether he should open it—he was aware of his fate at this point, but had no intention of accepting it. He slowly drew in a deep breath. The air filled his lungs and masked the growing pit in his abdomen. It was as if, for a second, he was okay. Then, he opened his eyes and proceeded to read the note and inevitability presented itself wholly. The date had been set: March 3, 2059. Exactly one week away.

Dean spent the next seven days in a constant and exhaustive state of fear. Each night, he turned restlessly in bed unable to catch a wink of sleep. During the day, his motivation to do anything meaningful around the apartment was drained. Instead, waking hours presented nothing but opportunity for him to lounge about lethargically, racking his brain with scenarios in the absence of anything productive. Dean's thoughts consumed him—what had he done, why he deserved the summons. There were over ten million other qualified citizens of New York City, each who could have been selected just as randomly as he. Why me, he kept asking himself.

On the third day of March, Dean made the trek to the dry cleaners with his best suit in tow, instructing the man at the counter that every component of his outfit was to be cleaned with meticulous perfection. He waited beside a vending machine in an unwelcoming, hard plastic chair, and once ready, left his previous outfit behind, changing into his suit and coupling it with a red and white diagonally-stripped tie that he tightened firmly against his Adam's apple. Dean thanked the store owner and walked outside into the early afternoon sun, which reflected off of his polished shoes.

“Just get in, do it, and get out,” he assured himself. “Make it as quick as possible.”

The court was six blocks away, but the midday heat convinced Dean to hail a taxi. One idled into the shoulder, and he climbed inside the backseat.

“500 Pearl Street, off of East Broadway,” he instructed the driver, who emitted an abrupt chuckle.

“The court? What business you got there? You ain’t indicted, are you?” The taximan pulled away from the curb, seamlessly merging into traffic and heading south towards the courthouse complex.

“None of your business.” Dean muttered. He stared out the window studying the rushed pedestrians huddled onto the sidewalks, hoping to avoid any conversation with the driver, but the man persisted.

“Well, you got all dressed up. There’s gotta be some sorta occasion.”

Dean ignored his comment and remained silent for the rest of the ride. Each passing second felt like an hour. The anticipation and despair grew exponentially with each passing block. Everything around him was rushing, blurring, and fading in and out of his vision as his stomach churned and his eyes fluttered from one indistinct object to the next. As soon as the cab pulled up in front of the court, Dean flung the door open and vomited all over the already grotesque city sidewalk.

“You alright, champ?” the driver asked as he studied his fare hunched over in the backseat.

Without saying a word, Dean pulled a crinkled banknote from of his pocket, shoved it into the man’s hands, and stumbled towards the court steps in a drunken stupor without having consumed a sip alcohol. The intense dread of the proceeding event itself caused him to become an impaired, physical wreck.

The courtroom was populated with a few spectators, a court reporter, clerk, and a bailiff. A judge’s lectern at the forefront, benches lining the opposite wall, and an open space in the middle. Dean envisioned himself in the center of the courtroom, every eye in attendance piercing his soul. A fate, he thought, that would be arriving shortly. But for the time being, he attempted to maintain a presentable appearance, concealing his sweaty palms in the depths of his pants’ pockets, sequestered in side room with other candidates. His outward composure was barely able to disguise its inner counterpart, which was in shambles as Dean struggled to recollect the pieces of the event that resulted in his present predicament.

A burly bailiff entered the room, glanced down at the docket in his hands, and shouted, “Dean Jacobs.”

Dean gulped then try to clear his throat, which was as dry as a desert. He picked himself up and followed the bailiff down a hallway towards the main arena.

“You need the rundown?” the man asked as he led him forward.

Dean shook his head. Although he had never been the one selected, he had heard the stories and seen it on television. Unless he had lived under a rock, he knew exactly how everything was going to transpire.

“Good. Don’t move until I bring you out. And whatever you do, do not open the case until you get the signal.” The man turned around and grabbed a black briefcase that hung on the wall. It was roughly the size of a sheet of paper, but thicker and latched shut. He placed it in Dean’s hands.

“It’ll be over before you know it.” The bailiff patted Dean on the back and left for the courtroom.

Twenty minutes passed before he returned and ushered Dean out to the floor. By then, the benches were full, the judge was in place, and a man—the accused—stood in the middle of the room chained between two posts, shackles bound to his wrists and ankles. He wore an orange jumpsuit which complemented his tangled, shoulder-length hair and the weathered mustache plastered beneath his nose.

“The Federal Court of New York City will now read the charges and verdicts against Mr. Bradley Vale. For the first account, First Degree Sexual Assault with a Minor, Mr. Vale was found guilty. For the second account, Attempted Murder of said minor, the court has also found Mr. Vale guilty. Per United States Federal Penal Code, any sentence of imprisonment in excess of twenty-five years is grounds for immediate capital punishment and the case against Mr. Vale will result as such today.”

Since the nation’s population surged past five hundred million citizens, and the global count had surpassed ten billion, measures like these were adopted throughout the industrialized world. It became the apparent solution to an

obvious issue of overpopulation—particularly aimed at solving the dilemma of overcrowded prisons. That was the government’s solution: to kill off anyone that would further push that envelope if sentenced to over a quarter century in the correctional system. Such was the sentence of Bradley Vale.

But even more twisted and incomprehensible than the new approach to alleviating the criminal justice system was the way the nation went about their executions. It was described as a method of cleansing society of its ills, but what was centrally aimed at instilling fear into the residents of the United States. Ordinary citizens, like Dean himself, were randomly selected to serve as the courts’ executioners. Ordinary citizens were forced to appear in court and tasked with taking the life of convict’s. In doing so, they and those serving as witnesses would know the severity of the government’s choices. Corrections were no longer about reform, but were about blood.

Dean peered up at the victim, Mr. Vale, one last time. The convicts eyes were glued to the floor, refusing to make contact with anyone in the room. For a moment, he almost appeared innocent to the witnesses in attendance. Innocent and helpless.

“Mr. Jacobs?” the judge inquired. “It is time.”

Dean carefully unlatched the black case and pried it open. Within it rested a glimmering, silver knife. The black handle featured a golden plaque that was engraved with a bald eagle. The words “In God We Trust” wrapped around the blunt side. Dean smirked at the irony, considering how little any of the present situation had to do with God. It was selfish, cruel, and one of the innumerable mars on the record of the United States government.

He removed the knife and gently laid the case on the ground. The courtroom had gone dead silent. Everything was so still, Dean could hear his own heart beating rapidly.

“You may proceed,” the judge instructed him.

He took a step forward and paused.

“Mr. Jacobs, please.” The judge was growing impatient. “Proceed.”

He took another step, and had come face-to-face with the accused, whose fists were clenched and eyes tightly shut, presumably holding back tears. Dean noticed Mr. Vale's body was trembling, and paused.

“Mr. Jacobs!” the judge roared in his direction.

“Just do it already!” Mr. Vale screamed. “Just kill me! Please!”

Dean raised the knife and took the final step forward.

In a nearly inaudible tone, Dean whispered, “I know you didn't rape Kate.”

Mr. Vale's lip quivered and his eyes opened. “How?” he stammered.

“Because I did,” Dean admitted before piercing the knife through Mr. Vale's throat.

About the Author

Joshua Harlow wrote the short story, *The New Jury Duty*, at the age of sixteen. It was edited and published during his first semester at Lynn University, where he currently studies Communication and Emerging Media. As an aspiring novelist, playwright, and screenwriter, this is Josh's first publication. His original, one-act play, *Beyond Death*, was professionally directed and performed at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in his hometown of Waterford, Connecticut.

Image creditss

Cover art. https://pixabay.com/p-1117367/?no_redirect

Gavel. https://pixabay.com/p-1707721/?no_redirect