

## PANIC ON PATERSON STREET

On a hot, airless Monday, 363 of us have been summoned to the Municipal Courthouse on Paterson Street in New Brunswick. We stand in line to pass our possessions through the x-ray machine. I am juror 071. It's 7:42 in the morning, and my heart is already sick with dread.

I've given my dog Nellie an eyedropper full of Pet Calm to try to get her through the next eight hours alone, and now I wish I'd taken an eyedropper myself. An Uber driver had chauffeured me down Route One, and though I'd driven down this road a thousand times, it suddenly looked strange: the upside down car on the lawn of Edison Generator with its sign: *Does Your Car Turn Over in the Morning?*

We wait: the juror with her tripod cane; the juror reading a paperback novel whose title is in French; the juror in his twenties, wearing desert boots, who keeps checking his summons as if it might somehow change; the juror next to me with his red face, goatee, and arm tattoos. The retired guy with four pens in his breast pocket. The punked-out young woman with purple hair, retro eyeglasses, triple-pierced ears, and combat boots who seems to be studying me.

All 363 of us sit in a windowless room whose walls are decorated with enlargements of New Brunswick postcards. A video tells us that we should be grateful that in America we're judged by a jury of our peers instead of professional jurors — and I think: Professional jurors would be vastly superior. We'd have paid, educated jurors with a real understanding of the law — instead of this roomful of angry amateurs whose chief concern is avoiding rush hour.

10:10. Fifty numbers have been called. It feels like the call to hell. The elevator holds twenty of us. The purple-haired woman in the combat boots stands next to me. No one says a word. Part of me wants to say to the entire group: "Hey, let's decide this thing right now, OK? *Innocent.*" I say nothing. Then I hold an imaginary argument in my head where I dramatically affirm to the judge my rights of *jury nullification*. "Suppose, your Honor, that an immigration officer has been fired because he refused to separate a mother and her child. The law clearly says he's guilty of insubordination, but I deliberately *don't* find him guilty because I believe in a bigger principle...."

"And what principle is that?" queries the judge. (Frank Capra is dutifully filming the scene.)

"My duty to *humanity.*"

This doesn't happen. Instead, we're sworn in as a group of 50, and I watch the potential jurors, one by one, shuffle to sidebar, and, in whispered discussion, get themselves dismissed. The purple-haired young woman, when called up, makes one of those I-can't-catch-my-breath gestures. I hear her murmur "social anxiety" and "Xanax," and she's gone, never to be seen again. I am eventually called. It's a malpractice case, and the

woman who is suing has hired what looks like a low-rent lawyer with a bad beard and no necktie, while the doctor has hired *two* gelled-hair attorneys in expensive-looking gray suits—and I find myself suddenly sickened by the whole process: by the money, the blaming, the shabby dreams of winning a fortune, the whole human *smallness*....

There are personal reasons why this enterprise is so unnerving. I tell the judge how my mother and my sister both sued for malpractice, and both ended up dying from the medical negligence for which they'd sued. The doctor's two lawyers nod sympathetically and practically push me out of the room with a broomstick.

I stand in the elevator, descending, and I cannot breathe. My legs feel unsteady. I'm back in the jury room till 3:45 until we are finally dismissed.

It is blastingly hot outside; I can't read the face of my phone. I'm amazed how undone I am by this experience.

On my cab ride home I hear that Trump has nominated a Supreme Court judge who will, in all probability, exonerate him from any crimes he has committed. But when I arrive in Metuchen, my neighbor Jean (unmasked) is walking Nellie for a second time. I am speechlessly grateful. My dog screams out in canine happiness when she sees me. We're both home.