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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,

and she the lone explorer, sent to our village of Paterson, New Jersey, that might as well have been in the Western Cape of Africa, given the looks of most of us. Especially those of us who weren't in the Honors classes.

"She looks like your mamma," one of my classmates, not in Honors English, said to me. But I didn't see the resemblance. Other than Caucasian.

On the juror qualification and information form, there was the inevitable box for "race." You think we'd have moved beyond that by now. What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? I left it blank. And I didn't check either box for "sex." Let them guess.

The bailiff escorts us back into the courtroom and the smooth Black prosecutor is talking to us, lecturing, but conversationally. "There are healthy relationships, such as the one between teachers and students, that rest upon authority and mutual respect. But every once in a while, the person with authority abuses it, abuses the person—the child!—who she should be protecting. And here, to make it more egregious, the person in authority is a guidance counselor. Someone especially entrusted with responsibility." *Yacketayak.*

Miss V told us that Moloch, who was the repeated anaphoric device throughout the entire second section, was a fire-god who demanded the sacrifice of children.

Paulette Brigham, the defendant, doesn't look horrific. She looks as normal and average and unremarkable as her attorney could make her, though someone should have done something about her hair. It's frizzy and longish, so that she seems both wild and haggard, more like a bar keep than a guidance counselor. As someone with hair issues myself, I could have given her some advice, but of course that would be useless at this point. She can't very well change her hairstyle once the trial begins. That would seem trivial and dishonest, both. And we jurors would talk

about it among ourselves, so careful to cabin our conversation. We've been instructed—admonished the judge told us—not to talk about the evidence or deliberate or speculate or reach conclusions of any sort. But hairstyles! Surely we are not barred from discussing the merely aesthetic, as if morality doesn't always lurk just beneath the surface.

She looks nothing like Miss V. Miss V had been younger, for one thing, though of course she had seemed old to me. Well, not old like a grandmother or the other teachers or even my mother, but old as in adult, the way I saw myself. She was old enough to say the word "beautiful" with sincerity, but not so old that she said it with condescension. And, as I realize now, young enough to say it without bitterness.

The first time Miss V touched my face was the first time she called me beautiful. Her fingers were soft against my cheek, and just as an image of my mother rubbing on Jergens hand lotion was flitting somewhere in my skull, Miss V's thumb pressed hard against the bone of my jaw, then moved back and forth, as if she was erasing something below my chin. I hoped I had not dribbled anything at lunch. Although even if I had, it didn't seem to matter to her, because she was saying that word. Beautiful. Her voice was low and masculine, like one of those cigarette-wielding actresses on the Sunday afternoon classic movies my mother liked to watch on television while she ironed the clothes she would wear to meet her newest boyfriend.

Beautiful. It was a judgment, an aspiration, a gift. It was a hook, the first-one's free, an offer and an acceptance. We read to cultivate a habit and I understood. We read the romance of the streets and I knew. *We read red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sun rise and I wanted.*

I was the one who leaned over to kiss her. It was in her car, a 1973 aqua Chevy Impala, with a crack in the dashboard she laughingly called the "mark of excellence." We were parked downtown near Quackenbush and listening to the radio.

"He's got such a smooth voice," Miss V said.

I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable when she complimented anyone

else, even some singer.

“In this mas-quer-ade...” she sang along, “...reason for this lonely game we’re playin...”

“George Benson’s actually a talented jazz guitarist,” I said. I’d heard my father say this, with a kind of admiration, but also the taint of jealousy of a man who worked in a butcher shop on Railroad Avenue, seeking jazz or sex or soup.

“Well, aren’t you smart,” she said.

There are things that I know that you haven’t taught me, I thought, as something ugly shifted around inside me, settling in my mouth, like a sourball, or the taste of my own tongue some mornings when I’d forgotten to brush my teeth before bed.

I clamored out of her stupid Chevy and slammed the door.

I’d rather be beautiful than smart, I screamed. But I was out of earshot, as I knew; and I wasn’t sure that my statement was entirely true, as I also knew.

She didn’t even have to call me to come back.

The radio was silent and so were we. The autumn evening was bearing down on us. *Zen New Jersey*, I thought, *crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology*.

And then I was leaning into her, my mouth open, my tongue hungry.

“Easy,” she said to me. “French kissing should be easy. Liquid. Slow.”

“Honey,” she said.

Honey! Honey! Honey! I heard. Sixteen times. A hundred times. Anaphoric. Euphoric.

“Beautiful,” she said.

And touched my face.

In the jury box, we must sit in the same seat every time. The judge scolds one of the jurors—Linda, the fat one with the Corgi dogs—who tries to sit in a different seat. Linda’s face flushes. But before I can even be embarrassed for her, the redness recedes, and we are all seated, and

the witness is sworn.

A psychologist is on the stand: not even a psychiatrist, with a medical degree, but a glorified therapist. The judge, "hearing no objection," allows the psychologist to be "qualified."

The prosecutor disappoints with his stumbling: "having been so qualified" and the "predicate having been laid," the witness may "proffer for the jury" his "expert opinion."

The psychologist turns towards us, the jurors imprisoned in our box, a captive audience for his well-rehearsed performance.

He has a litany of evidence validating the sexual abuse.

He has silvery hair, shiny as a new car, and a nimble tongue, caressing his quixotic words.

He has an inventory of possible long-term effects: adult survivors of child sexual abuse are promiscuous (who went out whoring), obese (who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg), drug-addicted (who retired to Mexico to cultivate a habit), alcoholic (who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer), suicidal (who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully), and self-mutilating (who burned cigarette holes in their arms).

"Or," he says, "quite the opposite."

Who lounged hungry and lonesome?

I can hear paper rustle. It is Linda, unwrapping something: a stick of gum? Or is that the cloying odor of cheap chocolate?

I wait for the judge's rebuke.

When I asked my mother what she knew about French kissing, she laughed. She was getting dressed to go out, although she had come home from work late. "It's just an older way of kissing," she explained. I thought of the ancient Egyptians, for some reason, and then the Vikings, the Huns, the Czar whose name I should remember before the History test. Only later did I comprehend my mother hadn't meant "older" in that way. Only later did I realize my mother hadn't asked me why I wanted to know. I did have a lie prepared. I'd heard the term in school. Not in Honors English, but Honors Biology. A joke someone had made, some

white boy in the back of the classroom. But I hadn't needed my lie.

My mother's lie was that she'd somehow saved up enough money to buy her own car, a battered Corvair. My mother's lie was that I was old enough to take care of my little brothers. My mother's lie was that she'd be back soon. My mother's lie was that she loved us.

My father and I were driving west on Route 80, my brothers deposited with our grandmother, the radio full of static.

"Is he Black?" My father's question vibrated around the car, as if he were George Benson, holding the note as long as he could, the melody veering into breathless accomplishment. Although of course, he'd said it as fast as he could, as gently as he could, as if he were the husband of a woman in intensive care, and knew that the answer could alter all his plans, when in fact, of course, it wouldn't. What difference did it make?

I didn't answer. I didn't say, you'll have to ask her, because I wasn't rude or sassy to him ever, and now was not the time to start. My father's Trans-Am skittered across Pennsylvania and into Ohio, where my mother had been moved out of the ICU.

"She was in a car crash and killed herself," my brothers learned to explain.

I explained missing almost a week of school by referencing a road trip, implying something grand but casual: *drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity*. Definitely not something like going with your father to get your mother's corpse. Though my father didn't bring her—it—back. The arrangements were all made in Ohio. No funeral in Paterson. No casseroles, no soups, no pots of coffee.

We were still doing the same poem when I returned to Honors English. Miss V was talking about the trial, so it sounded more like History. "What are those six asterisks?" she asked. The girl next to me, white and overweight, leaned across to my desk and placed her finger on the page: *with mother finally ******.

"Fucked," she whispered to me. "Six asterisks. With mother finally fucked."

I raised my hand for the hall pass, went to the girls' room, but could

not vomit.

Miss V was waiting for me, parked downtown near Quackenbush. I just happened to walk by, only a few blocks out of my way. My eyeballs kicked to see that aqua Impala.

I got into the car. I saw her breath, hot and steamy. It was chilly and the sky was darkening early. I had on my green voile blouse and then it was unbuttoned. My corduroy mini-skirt was bunched beneath me. I was glad I had worn socks with my boots; that I hadn't worn tights. I should remember what Miss V was wearing, but I don't. I only remember her voice, a sing-song soothing rumble. I only remember her smell. Her taste.

The windows of the car were fogged up, but apparently not enough.

My Honors History teacher was waiting for me when I got to the revolving doors of Quackenbush. I was going to use the ladies' room. I was going to look in the book department on the third floor for a gift. I was going to walk around before I went home to my brothers and my father.

"Are you all right?" She had her hands on her hips and was inspecting me, as the lions' heads on the building maintained their stony gazes.

"Sure," I shrugged.

"You don't look all right, young lady," she said.

She bent down and pointed at the top of my boot, where a shred of white protruded: forget your underwear we're free. I didn't say anything, since I didn't have a lie prepared. But I took my underpants out of my boot before I got home.

I had to make dinner and then clean up. My brothers were too young. My father had worked all day. I was a woman now, my father instructed. I had dreaded doing the dishes more than usual, soaking the smell of Miss V from my fingers. I slathered on some Jergens hand lotion after I was done.

It felt holy.

I felt nothing other than holy. Holiness washed over me, remembering being with Miss V in her sacred aqua car. Sixteen repetitions of holy began the footnote section of the poem, so Miss V had made us notice.

Then: *The skin is holy!*

Then: *The soul is holy!*

So this is what my mother died for, I thought. Such thrilling and threatening words were only two-thirds formed in my mind. M-o-t-h-e-r was only m-o-t-h, banging at the window screen until I shut off the kitchen light and the white-winged creature departed. Soon, it would be dead; it was late autumn after all.

There are no seasons inside the courtroom. It is as insular as a hospital, although the chairs in the jury box are less worn. They are covered in pleasingly deep blue fabric, mottled like a twilight sky. Across a highway of blank space, the defendant, Paulette Caldwell, writes something—it can't be more than a word or two—on the yellow legal pad in front of her, then slants it toward her attorney.

Her hands seem smooth, soft, pale. She brushes her disruptive hair from her face. She licks the corner of her lips. She seems to wait for her attorney to write something on the pad and slide it back toward her: *to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose*. But he doesn't.

Jail would be a shock to a woman like her.

"Is he white?" my father asked. The radio was turned low, but I heard "this masque-err-ade" lifting and falling.

For a moment I thought he meant George Benson, the singer.

It couldn't have been Mr. Skrupskelis. My father had been in the principal's office the same as me; he'd seen Mr. Skrupskelis was white as a lily, or kind of pinkish really, with a piggy face, protruding eyeballs, and thin wisps of greasy hair.

"Who?" I finally asked.

His moustache twitched. He clicked off the radio.

"Honey. Can you do one thing for me? Just one thing? Don't be a lying whore like your mother," he said. He was not screaming, but he was. "Your English teacher...."

Miss V? I bit my lip. Where was she? The whole time in the principal's office I listened to Skrupskelis for a hint of where she was, of what had

happened to her after the History teacher—must have been—had told.

“Mr. Caldwell, I must tell you that there have been reports,” Mr. Skrupskelis had said. “They’d been reading an inappropriate poem, I’m sorry to tell you, Mr. Caldwell,” he added.

Dad? She’s white, white, white, I said, I didn’t say, hadn’t really noticed, had I? Hadn’t thought about that. Was thinking now about something else, a shock that would kill my father, I guessed, if he knew now. Hadn’t Mr. Skrupskelis said? Used a pronoun? Or hadn’t my father heard it? Could only hear the word “whore,” echoing all the way to Ohio, and past that, out to Colorado, and farther to the glorious Pacific. Zeke’s whore wife dead, and now his daughter was . . . what? Surely, a victim, Dad?

Or what? I’d heard the word on the streets of Paterson. Bulldyke. It sounded like some sort of animal, to be butchered into steaks.

There were no bulldykes in that poem. Not one. “Shouldn’t there have been?” I want to ask Miss V now.

“Reports of what?” I want to ask Mr. Skrupskelis now.

“The jurors should be able to ask questions,” Linda says. “I mean, where’s the victim?”

“Be quiet,” her new friend scolds. “We’re not allowed to talk about the case.”

“It will be over soon,” one of the older men says. He likes to talk to the other elderly white men on the jury about the war. Not the present war, which is too controversial to talk about, although I guess they all support it, but about “their” war. *Yacketayakking* about this ship and that place and some battle. As if they had been on a holiday.

Linda isn’t going to give up complaining. “I wish I could bring my quilting,” she whines.

“Do you want a bagel?” James asks. The bailiff had brought in coffee and doughnuts and little muffins and these bagels. And most of the people eat them, not knowing, I suppose, how many calories are involved.

“You should eat more,” James tells me.

I give him my best hincty look, but decide to let it slide, since he

really is old enough to be my father. He has a rather sweet George Benson moustache, though it is grayed. He reminds me of someone my mother would have liked. All her boyfriends had been Black. I knew that. And my father knew that. And who knew? Even James here in Ohio might know that.

“Back to court,” the bailiff announces.

“I hope they’ve made a deal,” Linda whispers. “She should cop to an insanity plea.”

“Like on television,” one of the white men says.

“Yeah.” Linda wraps a bagel in a paper napkin and puts it into her purse. “I mean, I don’t think we should send this bitch to jail without seeing the kid she abused.”

“Hush,” her friend hisses.

We parade into the courtroom and settle in our seats in the jury box. Everyone else sits down. The Prosecutor stands, faces us, and announces that he “rests.”

The so-called victim isn’t going to appear after all. I hear Linda sigh.

The defense counsel, looking much more worn than he had the first day, asks permission to call his first witness.

We jurors lean forward. I lick my lips. I hunger for her to testify.

I want to hear the word “love.”

Do you know, Miss V, the word “love” does not appear in the most important poem in the English language?

I want her to divulge a reason.

Do you know, Miss V, the word “reason” similarly does not appear in the poem you called beautiful?

I want to hear this woman—any woman—one woman—howl with love & reason.

I want any reason to acquit.