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Duty Calls

Jacqueline Friemor

When I first received the summons in the mail--should I go back that far, to the summons? Or should I start with the selection, or--? Well all right, then, that's just fine. No, I don't mind the tape recorder. Oh my, yes, I know all about accuracy of quotes and such. Did I tell you that People done a big story on me? Did you know that? Well, that reporter sent me the story before it was printed, so I could check the accuracy of the quotes. So I couldn't say I was misquoted and take him or the magazine to court, you understand. Oh, would you? I'd be much obliged. I'll check the quotes and send it right on back to you. Right on back, the same day.

You got that thing turned on now? All right, then. That's just fine.

When I first received the summons in the mail, I was not pleased; no, I was not pleased at all. You see, I run a mail-order business out of my house--it's called Carlene's Chocolate Confections, by the by, and we make and sell the sweetest desserts you ever did taste--and I knew I couldn't afford to take the time away. In the past, you know, the government used to let people with small businesses alone, but they been cracking down lately, needing people to do their civic duty, ever since crime got so out of hand. As a matter of fact, I always used to be exempt up until about a year ago, when I received my first summons. Of course, I deferred it three, four times, but then I received this particular notice, and it said "MUST SERVE" in big red capital letters across the top. "MUST SERVE," it said.

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery
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Well, I knew that was supposed to put the fear of God in me, but it just made me mad. Not that I mind doing my civic duty, I thought, but if I do, who's going to whip up Carlene's Chocolate Confections while I'm gone? Who's going to take the orders? And make the deliveries? It seemed clear as day that I had to be exempted, or who was going to earn the money to put food on my table? The good people of Alabama? No sir! I thought, no sir! No member of my family was ever on the Welfare, and I wasn't about to be the first.

So I talked it over with Bo--that's my brother, Bo Wheeler, he's the sheriff over to Warrenton--and he said, "Honey," he said, "you just take yourself down to the courthouse and tell your troubles to that nice Aletha Schifflet. If she can't help you, I don't know who can."

And that's just what I done. I marched myself down to the courthouse and asked to see Aletha--she's the County Clerk and also someone I know to say hey to on account of her and Bo both being in the class of '75 at Carverville High. As a matter of fact, I do believe she was sweet on Bo back in high school--oh, my, you won't put that in the article, will you? It was all of thirty years ago, and Aletha's married now, so I hear, and I wouldn't want to be telling tales out of school, so to speak. Well, thank you. I surely do appreciate it.

Anyhow, I showed Aletha the summons and told her all the reasons why I couldn't possibly serve. And she was as nice as pie to me, she truly was, but after all was said and done she said she was sorry, there wasn't nothing she could do about it, I had to serve. Well, I fussed some, and begged, and when that didn't work, I fussed and begged some more, but Aletha would not be moved. It was the law, she said. Surely I could appreciate how important the law was, she said, seeing as how my brother Bo was sheriff over to Warrenton?

She had me there. She certainly did.

When I reported to the courthouse the next day, I was in for a shock. Seems that one of the cases they were selecting for was the Elwood Buggs case. Now, you might find it hard to credit, considering what's happened since, but at the time I wasn't too sure about who Elwood Buggs was on account of spending all my time working and not being one to read the newspapers or look at the television. It's because of all the violence. I can't stomach it--no sir. It makes me sick, it does, even thinking about it.

Anyhow, the lady sitting next to me in the selection room was more than willing to tell me about Elwood Buggs and what he done to that poor family. Even though I didn't really listen to most of what she said--as I told you, I have no stomach for violence, even for just hearing about it--I did come to understand one thing:

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anyone unlucky enough to be selected for that case could be on it for weeks, maybe even months. She said they put you in a motel, you know, and you can't talk to your friends or family until it's all over. "Sequestering," she said it was called.

Weeks, I thought, maybe even months? Oh, Lord, I prayed, don't let me be selected for the Elwood Buggs case.

Of course, this lady said--and there's no use asking me her name, I won't tell you--she said there's things you can do to get off of a particular case. For instance, you can say you know the prisoner personally, and that'll get you off. Or you can say you're one of them CCADP people and have what they call a moral objection to the proceedings.

"Why, I'll say nothing of the kind," I said to her.

"Why ever not?" she said to me.

"I have what you might call a moral objection to lying," I said.

She clucked her tongue. "Well, ain't we Miss Holier-Than-Thou," she said. "All I know is, ain't no way I'm gonna let myself be stuck in no motel for goodness knows how long, and you'd be wise to do the same."

Well, I didn't like that one bit. Can you imagine calling me "Miss Holier-Than-Thou" just because I don't hold with lying? "Above all things the truth beareth away the greatest victory." That's in the Bible, which it would surely behoove everyone to read and take to heart. It surely would.

Well, I held my tongue, but no sooner did I settle down to read my magazine than my name was called for a case, and wouldn't you know, the case was none other than--well. Of course, they didn't tell us that it was the Elwood Buggs case right away, but I knew it as soon as them lawyers started talking about Randy and Flora Jean Williams and them poor, poor children, like the lady in the selection room told me about. But they didn't go on too long about the actual killings. Not then.

As I recollect, they called about twenty of us to that small selection room for questioning. Twenty-two? Well, I'm sure you've talked to them all, so you would know. You know, I've gotten letters from quite a few of them people saying it wasn't fair I was picked and not them and saying the system is wrong because it let me use my position to become a celebrity and make a barrelful of money. Well, it's true that business is booming--it seems I can't fill the orders fast enough--but I don't think there's anything in the least wrong with it. I done my civic duty is all, and if the people of America are interested in hearing about it, there's nothing wrong with that, now is there?

Besides, it's funny that them sour-grapes types say they should have been chosen and not me, because at the time most of them were lying through their teeth to get themselves excused, saying

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they were members of the CCADP and other such nonsense. It didn't seem to bother them lawyers none--they just dismissed them, so it seemed like I could have gotten out of it pretty easy, too. But when them lawyers asked me how I felt about the death penalty, I just couldn't lie.

"I'm in favor of it," I said. "As the Bible says, 'If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out.'"

Well, them lawyers perked up some at that.

In the end, it came down to me and two others, two men. Now, I know they got to have some way to choose between people, but I swear, the tests they put us through were the most terrible thing I ever had to go through in my entire life. I don't care for tests much to begin with--I was always big on what people call horse sense but never much for book learning--but these were even worse than the usual kind.

First they gave me an IQ test--I knew what it was because I had already took one once before in school, years ago--and I prayed that that would be all. No sir! After that came a long test with questions in reading, math, and what they called analytical problems but which seemed like plain old puzzles, what we used to call brainteasers when I was a youngster. And after that, a psychologist came in, and she said some words to me and I was supposed to say whatever came into my head. For instance, she would say "black," and I would say "white." Like that.

What else? Oh, there was a morals test, I guess you could call it, where they told me situations and asked me what I would do if I was in them. Like if there are seven people--one's a doctor, another's a lawyer, another's a bricklayer, and so on--stranded on a desert island with food enough only for four, who would I feed and why? I must confess, I kind of enjoyed that one, even though by that time I was mighty tired of taking all them tests. Finally, then, some doctors came in and checked me out--heart, lungs, eyes, ears. I guess the state don't want nobody dropping dead because of the stress, do they? Bad publicity, and plenty of lawsuits, I would imagine.

To this day I don't know why I was picked. They never told me, just took me to another room to sign a mess of forms and swear me in. Oh, and they let me call Bo to tell him I would be sequestered and he shouldn't worry himself none about my whereabouts. Well, Bo just about bust when I told him the news. "Carlene, honey," he said, "don't you worry about nothing but doing your duty. You do that, and you'll do the Wheelers proud." Well, I promised to do my best, but I can tell you now that if I had known what was going to happen next, I might have told them lawyers I was a Concerned Citizen Against the Death Penalty, too.

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Why, they told me about Elwood Buggs and his crimes, of course. And they showed me pictures. Pictures of what Elwood Buggs done to Randy and Flora Jean and them babies. Bobby, Mary Ann, and Francine, their names were--Bobby, Mary Ann, and Francine. And in them pictures, the blood was all--it was all--well. He killed them slow, you see, so the blood--I'm sorry. Even now, I can't--I'm sorry. Yes. Well. Yes. I'll just say it's truly a miracle that Flora Jean lived through it. Yes, sir. If I ever have cause to doubt that Jesus performs miracles here on Earth, I hope I'll remember what He done for Flora Jean. I hope I will.

But you knew all about them killings, didn't you? All the press knew. I swear, before I was selected I must have been the only person in the U. S. of A. not to know what Elwood Buggs done. So when them lawyers showed me the pictures that first day and told me about Elwood Buggs and his evil crimes, I was sick, literally sick. I hope I don't offend your readers when I say that I couldn't keep my lunch down when I saw them pictures of what that evil man had done. Oh yes, I call him evil. What else could cause a man to commit such acts? It's the devil, pure and simple. Pure and simple.

I had plenty of time to think about why he done it, as it turned out, because the lady in the selection room was right--they kept me for weeks, almost four weeks, as I recollect, in the courthouse during the day and at the Heart of Dixie Motor Inn at night. In that time I couldn't talk to nobody, you understand, nobody but the court officers, the lawyers, the doctors, and Flora Jean. That poor Flora Jean.

Every day was talk, talk, talk. What Elwood Buggs done. How he done it. How he knew he was going to do it months beforehand, and how he planned it and shopped for it and prepared himself for it. He told the police, you see, after they arrested him--he told them everything. So every day them lawyers would tell me all the facts all over again, and then they would play me the cassette tapes of his confession, hours and hours of Elwood Buggs talking in his broken-bottle voice about what he done to that family.

He raped the girls, you know. Oh, yes. But you knew that already, didn't you?

It got so that I couldn't get them pictures out of my mind, what he done, even now I can't. I don't know how Flora Jean stands it. I asked her once, after she pulled up her blouse to show me what Elwood Buggs done to her chest. Do you know what she said? She said, "Carlene, sugar, the only thing that stops me from turning my daddy's shotgun on myself is knowing that that animal will get what he deserves. You'll make sure he will, won't you? Won't you? Not for me--I'd never ask for me--but for my babies. For my beautiful babies." And then--well, she broke down. Oh, she was screaming

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and screaming. I never will forget that day, not for as long as I live, Flora Jean's eyes starting from their sockets and the cords standing out in her neck, and her hollering and bawling like never to stop. She never did stop, neither, until a nurse rushed in and gave her a hypo.

They let me see Elwood Buggs only the one time before the end. I think they were afraid if I talked to him too long, you know, got to know him, I might develop some kind of sympathy for him. Well, there was no chance of that, not after what he done, not on your life. Elwood Buggs--you know, he didn't seem too different from most people, I guess, at first look. I mean to say, he was ordinary looking. But he didn't look you in the eye. I noticed that. He didn't look me in the eye once. Just looked somewhere near my foot and said, "So you're the one." Nothing else--"So you're the one." It struck me kind of funny, him not caring what happened to him. I guess that happens to some people; they just give up. Of course, Elwood Buggs must have gave up on himself a long time ago, or he never could have done what he done in the first place.

No, of course I don't mean it as an excuse! My stars! I have half a mind to turn you out right now. Yes sir, turn you right out. Plenty of other magazines want my story, don't you doubt it for one minute, and they're willing to pay a considerable--well, all right now. That's better. No, I'm sure you didn't mean nothing by it. All right. All right now.

Well, I might just be a touch nervous about what--well, anyone in my shoes would be nervous, telling the next part. I mean, if you had said to me even one year ago, if you had said, "Carlene Wheeler, you will be called to be God's instrument of justice on Earth," I would like as not have laughed in your face, I truly would. But there I was, being shown them pictures and listening to the evil spew out of Elwood Buggs like vomit and hearing Flora Jean screaming and screaming about her dead and mutilated babies day in, day out, for weeks and weeks, and finally I--

Well, I heard Him. Yes sir, it's the God's honest truth, I heard the voice of Jesus. His voice was low and close to my ear, but I heard Him clear as clear.

"Take up the knife," He said. "Elwood Buggs must suffer for what he done. Take up the knife and draw his blood, slow like he done to the innocent lambs."

So that's exactly what I done. When the day finally came and them lawyers asked me what I had picked to do it with, the gun or the bat, the brick or the knife, I said the knife. And then I took it to the table where they had strapped him down. He looked me in the eye then, yes sir. He looked me in the eye.

"Do it quick," he said. "Lady, do it quick."

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But I didn't. Oh, no. I done it slow like Jesus told me, slow like Elwood Buggs done to the Williams family. When Elwood started screaming, it sounded to me like Flora Jean screaming, and I almost dropped the knife. But I looked up and saw all them people watching--the lawyers and court officers and doctors and witnesses and Flora Jean--and just then Jesus steadied my hand and whispered in my ear and I kept on cutting.

What's that? Oh. Well, it was like...carving the Christmas roast. Yes, strangely enough, just like that.

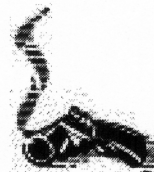
When it was over, the doctors took me away, cleaned me up, and gave me a drug of some kind to put me to sleep for awhile. I was a little confused, I confess, when I first woke up. Didn't know where I was or what had happened. Them doctors filled me in, though. By order of the state of Alabama, the execution of Elwood Buggs commenced at 6:00 a.m. on Thursday, April 21, 2004, and the prisoner was pronounced dead, exactly 172 minutes later, at 8:52 a.m.

They didn't have to keep me long after that, not like they do with some people. They talked to me some, all right, maybe for a day or two, but I didn't feel no aftereffects, as they called them, didn't feel bad at all. It was because of Jesus guiding my hand, you see. That's what I told them doctors, and it's true. And Flora Jean--she don't feel bad about it neither. Every so often, she calls me to thank me. She says that what I done keeps her from picking up her daddy's shotgun and all.

Well, maybe I do feel bad about one little thing. You see, since the execution, Jesus don't talk to me no more. Sometimes my nose fills with the smell of blood, like it done that day in the execution room, and I expect to hear Jesus speak into my ear like He done that day. But that's fanciful. Of course He wouldn't, now would He? I don't act as His instrument no more, do I? I'm just plain old Carlene Wheeler, of Carlene's Chocolate Confections, and Jesus certainly don't need me to whip Him up a batch of fudge. No, He surely don't.

One day, though, He might need me to do something else for Him. I'm not saying He will, mind you, just that He might. But I can tell you one thing for sure: when He calls, I'll be ready.

Yes sir. I'm ready.



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