

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

JOHN GRISHAM

Includes a
preview chapter of
John Grisham's
new novel
THE ASSOCIATE

THE LAST JUROR

**"ONE OF HIS BEST: A THOUGHTFUL
AND ATMOSPHERIC THRILLER."**

—*New York Times*

THE
LAST
JUROR

A DELL BOOK

THE LAST JUROR
A Dell Book

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Praise for
THE LAST JUROR

“[GRISHAM] IMBUES HIS WRITING WITH A NEW STRENGTH, GIVING EXUBERANT LIFE TO THIS COMPASSIONATE, COMPULSIVELY READABLE STORY OF A YOUNG MAN’S GROWTH FROM CALLOWNESS TO SOMETHING APPROACHING WISDOM.... HEARTFELT, WISE, SUSPENSEFUL AND FUNNY, ONE OF THE BEST GRISHAMS EVER.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“IT RANKS AMONG HIS BEST-WRITTEN AND MOST ATMOSPHERIC NOVELS.”

—*USA Today*

“A MOST ENTERTAINING NOVEL...”

—*Washington Post*

“[GRISHAM WRITES WITH] CRISPNESS, STREAMLINED ENERGY AND SELF-DEPRECATING CHARM.... *THE LAST JUROR* DOES NOT NEED TO COAST ON THE AUTHOR’S MEGAPOPOPULARITY. IT’S A REMINDER OF HOW THE GRISHAM JUGGERNAUT BEGAN.”

—*New York Times*

“SIT BACK, RELAX AND SAVOR THE
DESCRIPTIONS OF MISS CALLIE’S HOME
COOKING AND A YOUNG MAN’S
SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION.”

—*Orlando Sentinel*

“GRISHAM WEAVES THE SUSPENSE OF
A COURTROOM DRAMA THROUGHOUT
THE NOVEL, BUT THIS STORY IS MORE
THOUGHTFUL AND WIDE-RANGING
THAN HIS USUAL THRILLERS. THIS
PORTRAIT OF A SMALL SOUTHERN
TOWN WITH ALL ITS ECCENTRICITIES
IS ONE OF GRISHAM’S BEST.”

—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“GRISHAM LETS HIS SUSPENSE BUILD
SLOWLY, HOLDING THE READER
TO THE END AND CREATING A
MEMORABLE CAST OF CHARACTERS....
A SUREFIRE BESTSELLER.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

ALSO BY JOHN GRISHAM

A Time to Kill
The Firm
The Pelican Brief
The Client
The Chamber
The Rainmaker
The Runaway Jury
The Partner
The Street Lawyer
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The King of Torts
Bleachers
The Broker
The Innocent Man
Playing for Pizza
The Appeal
The Associate

JOHN
GRISHAM

THE
LAST
JUROR

PART
ONE

CHAPTER 1

After decades of patient mismanagement and loving neglect, *The Ford County Times* went bankrupt in 1970. The owner and publisher, Miss Emma Caudle, was ninety-three years old and strapped to a bed in a nursing home in Tupelo. The editor, her son Wilson Caudle, was in his seventies and had a plate in his head from the First War. A perfect circle of dark grafted skin covered the plate at the top of his long, sloping forehead, and throughout his adult life he had endured the nickname of Spot. Spot did this. Spot did that. Here, Spot. There, Spot.

In his younger years, he covered town meetings, football games, elections, trials, church socials, all sorts of activities in Ford County. He was a good reporter, thorough and intuitive. Evidently, the head wound did not affect his ability to write. But sometime after the Second War the plate apparently shifted, and Mr.

Caudle stopped writing everything but the obituaries. He loved obituaries. He spent hours on them. He filled paragraphs of eloquent prose detailing the lives of even the humblest of Ford Countians. And the death of a wealthy or prominent citizen was front page news, with Mr. Caudle seizing the moment. He never missed a wake or a funeral, never wrote anything bad about anyone. All received glory in the end. Ford County was a wonderful place to die. And Spot was a very popular man, even though he was crazy.

The only real crisis of his journalistic career happened in 1967, about the time the civil rights movement finally made it to Ford County. The paper had never shown the slightest hint of racial tolerance. No black faces appeared in its pages, except those belonging to known or suspected criminals. No black wedding announcements. No black honor students or baseball teams. But in 1967, Mr. Caudle made a startling discovery. He awoke one morning to the realization that black people were dying in Ford County, and their deaths were not being properly reported. There was a whole, new, fertile world of obituaries waiting out there, and Mr. Caudle set sail in dangerous and uncharted waters. On Wednesday, March 8, 1967, the *Times* became the first white-owned weekly in Mississippi to run the obituary of a Negro. For the most part, it went unnoticed.

The following week, he ran three black obituaries, and people were beginning to talk. By the fourth week, a regular boycott was under way, with subscriptions being canceled and advertisers holding their money. Mr.

Caudle knew what was happening, but he was too impressed with his new status as an integrationist to worry about such trivial matters as sales and profits. Six weeks after the historic obituary, he announced, on the front page and in bold print, his new policy. He explained to the public that he would publish whatever he damned well pleased, and if the white folks didn't like it, then he would simply cut back on their obituaries.

Now, dying properly is an important part of living in Mississippi, for whites and blacks, and the thought of being laid to rest without the benefit of one of Spot's glorious send-offs was more than most whites could stand. And they knew he was crazy enough to carry out his threat.

The next edition was filled with all sorts of obituaries, blacks and whites, all neatly alphabetized and desegregated. It sold out, and a brief period of prosperity followed.

The bankruptcy was called involuntary, as if others had eager volunteers. The pack was led by a print supplier from Memphis that was owed \$60,000. Several creditors had not been paid in six months. The old Security Bank was calling in a loan.

I was new, but I'd heard the rumors. I was sitting on a desk in the front room of the *Times's* offices reading a magazine, when a midget in a pair of pointed toes strutted in the front door and asked for Wilson Caudle.

"He's at the funeral home," I said.

He was a cocky midget. I could see a gun on his hip under a wrinkled navy blazer, a gun worn in such a

manner so that folks would see it. He probably had a permit, but in Ford County one was not really needed, not in 1970. In fact, permits were frowned upon. "I need to serve these papers on him," he said, waving an envelope.

I was not about to be helpful, but it's difficult being rude to a midget. Even one with a gun. "He's at the funeral home," I repeated.

"Then I'll just leave them with you," he declared.

Although I'd been around for less than two months, and though I'd gone to college up North, I had learned a few things. I knew that good papers were not served on people. They were mailed or shipped or hand-delivered, but never served. The papers were trouble, and I wanted no part of them.

"I'm not taking the papers," I said, looking down.

The laws of nature require midgets to be docile, noncombative people, and this little fella was no exception. The gun was a ruse. He glanced around the front office with a smirk, but he knew the situation was hopeless. With a flair for the dramatic, he stuffed the envelope back into his pocket and demanded, "Where's the funeral home?"

I pointed this way and that, and he left. An hour later, Spot stumbled through the door, waving the papers and bawling hysterically. "It's over! It's over!" he kept wailing as I held the Petition for Involuntary Bankruptcy. Margaret Wright, the secretary, and Hardy, the pressman, came from the back and tried to console him. He sat in a chair, face in hands, elbows on knees,

sobbing pitifully. I read the petition aloud for the benefit of the others.

It said Mr. Caudle had to appear in court in a week over in Oxford to meet with the creditors and the Judge, and that a decision would be made as to whether the paper would continue to operate while a trustee sorted things out. I could tell Margaret and Hardy were more concerned about their jobs than about Mr. Caudle and his breakdown, but they gamely stood next to him and patted his shoulders.

When the crying stopped, he suddenly stood, bit his lip, and announced, "I've got to tell Mother."

The three of us looked at each other. Miss Emma Caudle had departed this life years earlier, but her feeble heart continued to work just barely enough to postpone a funeral. She neither knew nor cared what color Jell-O they were feeding her, and she certainly cared nothing about Ford County and its newspaper. She was blind and deaf and weighed less than eighty pounds, and now Spot was about to discuss involuntary bankruptcy with her. At that point, I realized that he, too, was no longer with us.

He started crying again and left. Six months later I would write his obituary.

Because I had attended college, and because I was holding the papers, Hardy and Margaret looked hopefully at me for advice. I was a journalist, not a lawyer, but I said that I would take the papers to the Caudle family lawyer. We would follow his advice. They smiled weakly and returned to work.

At noon, I bought a six-pack at Quincy's One Stop in Lowtown, the black section of Clanton, and went for a long drive in my Spitfire. It was late in February, unseasonably warm, so I put the top down and headed for the lake, wondering, not for the first time, just exactly what I was doing in Ford County, Mississippi.

I grew up in Memphis and studied journalism at Syracuse for five years before my grandmother got tired of paying for what was becoming an extended education. My grades were unremarkable, and I was a year away from a degree. Maybe a year and a half. She, BeeBee, had plenty of money, hated to spend it, and after five years she figured my opportunity had been sufficiently funded. When she cut me off I was very disappointed, but I did not complain, to her anyway. I was her only grandchild and her estate would be a delight.

I studied journalism with a hangover. In the early days at Syracuse, I aspired to be an investigative reporter with the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. I wanted to save the world by uncovering corruption and environmental abuse and government waste and the injustice suffered by the weak and oppressed. Pulitzers were waiting for me. After a year or so of such lofty dreams, I saw a movie about a foreign correspondent who dashed around the world looking for wars, seducing beautiful women, and somehow finding the time to write award-winning stories. He spoke eight languages, wore a beard, combat boots, starched khakis that never

wrinkled. So I decided I would become such a journalist. I grew a beard, bought some boots and khakis, tried to learn German, tried to score with prettier girls. During my junior year, when my grades began their steady decline to the bottom of the class, I became captivated by the idea of working for a small-town newspaper. I cannot explain this attraction, except that it was at about this time that I met and befriended Nick Diener. He was from rural Indiana, and for decades his family had owned a rather prosperous county newspaper. He drove a fancy little Alfa Romeo and always had plenty of cash. We became close friends.

Nick was a bright student who could have handled medicine, law, or engineering. His only goal, however, was to return to Indiana and run the family business. This baffled me until we got drunk one night and he told me how much his father cleared each year off their small weekly—circulation six thousand. It was a gold mine, he said. Just local news, wedding announcements, church socials, honor rolls, sports coverage, pictures of basketball teams, a few recipes, a few obituaries, and pages of advertising. Maybe a little politics, but stay away from controversy. And count your money. His father was a millionaire. It was laid-back, low-pressure journalism with money growing on trees, according to Nick.

This appealed to me. After my fourth year, which should've been my last but wasn't close, I spent the summer interning at a small weekly in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. The pay was peanuts but BeeBee was