

JOHN GRISHAM

LAST JUROR



DOUBLEDAY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Very few laws remain the same. Once enacted, they are likely to be studied, modified, amended, then often repealed altogether. This constant tinkering by judges and lawmakers is usually a good thing. Bad laws are weeded out. Weak laws are improved. Good laws are fine tuned.

I took great liberty with a few of the laws that existed in Mississippi in the 1970s. The ones I mistreated in this book have now been amended and improved. I misused them to move my story along. I do this all the time and never feel guilty about it, since I can always disclaim things on this page.

If you spot these mistakes, please don't write me a letter. I acknowledge my mistakes. They were intentional.

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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 disap-

pointed, 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 im-

pressed because I was employed. Each week I mailed her the paper, at least half of which was written by me. The owner/editor/publisher was a wonderful old gentleman who was delighted to have a reporter who wanted to write. He was quite wealthy.

After five years at Syracuse my grades were irreparable, and the well ran dry. I returned to Memphis, visited BeeBee, thanked her for her efforts, and told her I loved her. She told me to find a job.

At the time Wilson Caudle's sister lived in Memphis, and through the course of things this lady met BeeBee at one of those hot tea drinkers' parties. After a few phone calls back and forth, I was packed and headed to Clanton, Mississippi, where Spot was eagerly waiting. After an hour of orientation, he turned me loose on Ford County.

In the next edition he ran a sweet little story with a photo of me announcing my "internship" at the *Times*. It made the front page. News was slow in those days.

The announcement contained two horrendous errors that would haunt me for years. The first and less serious was the fact that Syracuse had now joined the Ivy League, at least according to Spot. He informed his dwindling readership that I had received my Ivy League education at Syracuse. It was a month before anyone mentioned this to me. I was beginning to believe that no one read the paper, or, worse, those who did were complete idiots.

The second misstatement changed my life. I was born Joyner William Traynor. Until I was twelve I hammered my parents with inquiries about why two supposedly intelligent people would stick Joyner on a newborn. The story finally leaked that one of my parents, both of whom denied responsibility, had insisted on Joyner as an olive branch to some feuding relative who allegedly had money. I never met the man, my namesake. He died broke as far as I was concerned, but I nonetheless had Joyner for a lifetime. When I enrolled at Syracuse I was J. William, a rather imposing name for an eighteen-year-old. But Vietnam and the riots and all the rebellion and social upheaval convinced me that J. William sounded too corporate, too establishment. I became Will.

Spot at various times called me Will, William, Bill, or even Billy, and

since I would answer to all of them I never knew what was next. In the announcement, under my smiling face, was my new name. Willie Traynor. I was horrified. I had never dreamed of anyone calling me Willie. I went to a prep school in Memphis and then to college in New York, and I had never met a person named Willie. I wasn't a good ole boy. I drove a Triumph Spitfire and had long hair.

What would I tell my fraternity brothers at Syracuse? What would I tell BeeBee?

After hiding in my apartment for two days, I mustered the courage to confront Spot and demand he do something. I wasn't sure what, but he'd made the mistake and he could damned well fix it. I marched into the *Times* office and bumped into Davey Bigmouth Bass, the sports editor of the paper. "Hey, cool name," he said. I followed him into his office, seeking advice.

"My name's not Willie," I said.

"It is now."

"My name's Will."

"They'll love you around here. A smart-ass from up North with long hair and a little imported sports car. Hell, folks'll think you're pretty cool with a name like Willie. Think of Joe Willie."

"Who's Joe Willie?"

"Joe Willie Namath."

"Oh him."

"Yeah, he's a Yankee like you, from Pennsylvania or some place, but when he got to Alabama he went from Joseph William to Joe Willie. The girls chased him all over the place."

I began to feel better. In 1970, Joe Namath was probably the most famous athlete in the country. I went for a drive and kept repeating "Willie." Within a couple of weeks the name was beginning to stick. Everybody called me Willie and seemed to feel more comfortable because I had such a down-to-earth name.

I told BeeBee it was just a temporary pseudonym.

The *Times* was a very thin paper, and I knew immediately that it was in trouble. Heavy on the obits, light on news and advertising. The employees were disgruntled, but quiet and loyal. Jobs were scarce in Ford County in 1970. After a week it was obvious even to my novice eyes that the paper was operating at a loss. Obits are free—ads are not. Spot spent most of his time in his cluttered office, napping periodically and calling the funeral home. Sometimes they called him. Sometimes the families would stop just hours after Uncle Wilber's last breath and hand over a long, flowery, handwritten narrative that Spot would seize and carry delicately to his desk. Behind a locked door, he would write, edit, research, and rewrite until it was perfect.

He told me the entire county was mine to cover. The paper had one other general reporter, Baggy Suggs, a pickled old goat who spent his hours hanging around the courthouse across the street sniffing for gossip and drinking bourbon with a small club of washed-up lawyers too old and too drunk to practice anymore. As I would soon learn, Baggy was too lazy to check sources and dig for anything interesting, and it was not unusual for his front page story to be some dull account of a boundary dispute or a wife beating.

Margaret, the secretary, was a fine Christian lady who ran the place, though she was smart enough to allow Spot to think he was the boss. She was in her early fifties and had worked there for twenty years. She was the rock, the anchor, and everything at the *Times* revolved around her. Margaret was soft-spoken, almost shy, and from day one was completely intimidated by me because I was from Memphis and had gone to school up North for five years. I was careful not to wear my Ivy Leagueness on my shoulder, but at the same time I wanted these rural Mississippians to know that I had been superbly educated.

She and I became gossiping pals, and after a week she confirmed what I already suspected—that Mr. Caudle was indeed crazy, and that the newspaper was indeed in dire financial straits. But, she said, the Caudles have family money!

It would be years before I understood this mystery.

In Mississippi, family money was not to be confused with wealth. It

had nothing to do with cash or other assets. Family money was a status, obtained by someone who was white, somewhat educated beyond high school, born in a large home with a front porch—preferably one surrounded by cotton or soybean fields, although this was not mandatory—and partially reared by a beloved black maid named Bessie or Pearl, partially reared by doting grandparents who once owned the ancestors of Bessie or Pearl, and lectured from birth on the stringent social graces of a privileged people. Acreage and trust funds helped somewhat, but Mississippi was full of insolvent blue bloods who inherited the status of family money. It could not be earned. It had to be handed down at birth.

When I talked to the Caudle family lawyer, he explained, rather succinctly, the real value of their family money. "They're as poor as Job's turkey," he said as I sat deep in a worn leather chair and looked up at him across his wide and ancient mahogany desk. His name was Walter Sullivan, of the prestigious Sullivan & O'Hara firm. Prestigious for Ford County—seven lawyers. He studied the bankruptcy petition and rambled on about the Caudles and the money they used to have and how foolish they'd been in running a once profitable paper into the ground. He'd represented them for thirty years, and back when Miss Emma ran things the *Times* had five thousand subscribers and pages filled with advertisements. She kept a \$500,000 certificate of deposit at Security Bank, just for a rainy day.

Then her husband died, and she remarried a local alcoholic twenty years her junior. When sober, he was semiliterate and fancied himself as a tortured poet and essayist. Miss Emma loved him dearly and installed him as coeditor, a position he used to write long editorials blasting everything that moved in Ford County. It was the beginning of the end. Spot hated his new stepfather, the feelings were mutual, and their relationship finally climaxed with one of the more colorful fistfights in the history of downtown Clanton. It took place on the sidewalk in front of the *Times* office, on the downtown square, in front of a large and stunned crowd. The locals believed that Spot's brain, already fragile, took additional damage that day. Shortly thereafter, he began writing nothing but those damned obituaries.

The stepfather ran off with her money, and Miss Emma, heartbroken, became a recluse.

"It was once a fine paper," Mr. Sullivan said. "But look at it now. Less than twelve hundred subscriptions, heavily in debt. Bankrupt."

"What will the court do?" I asked.

"Try and find a buyer."

"A buyer?"

"Yes, someone will buy. The county has to have a newspaper."

I immediately thought of two people—Nick Diener and BeeBee. Nick's family had become rich off their county weekly. BeeBee was already loaded and she had only one beloved grandchild. My heart began pounding as I smelled opportunity.

Mr. Sullivan watched me intently, and it was obvious he knew what I was thinking. "It could be bought for a song," he said.

"How much?" I asked with all the confidence of a twenty-threeyear-old cub reporter whose grandmother was as stout as lye soap.

"Probably fifty thousand. Twenty-five for the paper, twenty-five to operate. Most of the debts can be bankrupted, then renegotiated with the creditors you need." He paused and leaned forward, elbows on his desk, thick grayish eyebrows twitching as if his brain was working overtime. "It could be a real gold mine, you know."

BeeBee had never invested in a gold mine, but after three days of priming the pump I left Memphis with a check for \$50,000. I gave it to Mr. Sullivan, who put it in a trust account and petitioned the court for the sale of the paper. The Judge, a relic who belonged in the bed next to Miss Emma, nodded benignly and scrawled his name on an order that made me the new owner of *The Ford County Times*.

It takes at least three generations to be accepted in Ford County. Regardless of money or breeding, one cannot simply move there and be trusted. A dark cloud of suspicion hangs over any newcomer, and I was no exception. The people there are exceedingly warm and gracious and polite, almost to the point of being nosy with their friendliness. They nod and