

Prologue

Sitting in the courtroom waiting for the jury to return with the verdict, I feel like I'm dying. My hands shake when I hold them in front of me. My throat is so dry I can scarcely draw breath. I try a few sample swallows, but it's like there's something obstructing the channel – my fist, maybe. I have to squint as the jury files slowly back into their box a single crazy arm-swing away from me. My palms drip with sweat.

I groan inside. A thousand times I have told clients: Don't try to guess what's on the slip of paper the foreman carries in the small white envelope. Don't stare too long into any jury member's eyes. Don't take the looks on their faces as a clue. Not a slight smile, not a dour grimace – especially not the look of serenity that sometimes envelopes a group that has finally come to a decision.

I knew because I have seen it so many times myself. People can look just as serene hurling a guy into a 1,000 foot deep pit as restoring him to grace in the city he grew up in, giving him back his life and everything he ever loved.

What their decision might be, I haven't a clue. Me, I always thought I was aces at jury-picking. The conventional wisdom was, if you're suing a business, then you choose workingmen, guys with wrenches and overalls. If you're going for the big award, then you go with Irishmen. If your client is a woman – take note now – you have to pack the box with men. Because most men can't bring themselves to pull the trigger on a woman, but women will line up to do it. Women's inhumanity to women can be incalculable.

I had this wisdom. I knew these tricks. I knew the neighborhoods. I knew how the melting pot worked. And I put that knowledge to use in the courtroom.

The conventional wisdom worked fine. But I, Nathan Gold, in my trade and practice as a personal injury lawyer – *barrister, solicitor, special pleader, silk, gentleman of the long robe, writer to the signet, ambulance-chaser, hard-on with a valise, land shark*, and my own favorite synonym, *pettifogger* – always try to stay a step ahead of that.

I know I am fighting the toughest battle I have ever

faced. Fighting for my own survival instead of the rights of a client.

My career was at the top. I was an exemplary lawyer, father, husband, friend, community leader. Sure, you step on toes on the way up because in litigation there is only one winner, and I always wanted it to be me. To a large extent I succeeded in earning people's respect and esteem. But this failure engulfing me now was like calling the vultures to circle above me. I am no star now. I am just meat.

I try to set the stereotypes aside. When I am hot, when I am on my game, I just let my instincts take over. I look into that juror's eyes. I look for something deep in there somewhere, a wince of pain or a hint of fellow-feeling, some vestigial sign that this is a human being sitting in that box, someone who would listen to what you have to say, if you could just figure out what it was. And when you spoke to that person, you would be in a state of union with them. They would have given you roaming privileges in their minds and hearts. It would be a kind of consummation.

As I look at them, I hope they recall that throughout

twelve difficult weeks, I never buckled for a moment. No one could question my integrity in defending myself, my honesty before the law.

Come with me, I say as I look into jurors' eyes, placing my humanity as an offering alongside theirs. Come take a walk with Nathan Gold, soul to soul, and heart to heart.

But look at me now, feeling grimy with fear, all my certainties smashed to smithereens, all my inside intuitions turned flat and bitter in my stomach. I cast about for something to hang my hopes on. I can't look at Evie, it's too horrible to see her, eyes all red and heart all hurting. How could I have brought her to this moment. Innocent or guilty, I was a crumb to have hurt her. Good men don't get into this kind of trouble. All those nights I stayed up working and preparing – I should have spent them with her, I should have held the yarn for me as she tatted all those sweaters. I should have stayed out of trouble. I should have been a better man.

Check out the judge's block. People think judges are always slamming their gavels and demanding order, but basically, no, that doesn't happen. Judges don't let things

get to that point, except maybe on TV. A gentle rap to conclude a case is about all that usually happens. Still, there is the block, and it is all blonde and shellacked and nice, and it does give me a moment's comfort. It symbolizes everything great about law – the fact that even the thorniest disputes are resolvable, if you're not too fussy about the fine points. Hearing the gavel rap against wood tells you that much of the monkey business of being a human being – the excuse-making, the denial, the loaded words, the insinuations – are not tolerated in this place. Here, you tell the truth. And the truth is all you can hope for.

But now the feeling of comfort flies out of me. This is the awful moment. Family behind me, about to take a bullet with me. Reporters ready with their cameras, to flash the exact instant when my heart breaks into a thousand pieces. The gawkers and the neck-stretchers, whose day would not be complete without having a look at this poor guy about to take a hosing. This fallen angel, this attorney in the dock. Me.

The judge waits until the jury take their places, a great shuffling of chair legs, a great rustling of notes. Then he addresses the foreman: “Do you have a verdict, sir?”

“We do,” announces the foreman, a large man with bulging eyes and an oversized red mustache, like Dirty Dan Magrew might sport.

The foreman passes it over to me. I glance at it dully, then the bailiff passes it up to the judge, who hands it back to the foreman, and intones the deadly words:

“Will the defendants please rise?”

We do.

“Read it,” the judge says, glancing away, as if he were elsewhere.

Before the foreman can speak, I place one hand on the chair back beside me, and unintentionally, and shockingly, knock it to the floor. I almost go down with the chair. People in the back of the courtroom titter. Have I fainted? No, just lost my balance. But everything is spinning. I put my head in my hands, a tough guy no more, wondering what has happened, what has become of me.

I close my eyes and try to stop the spinning. Yesterday is past, today is my future – what will tomorrow be like? And how did I arrive at this awful moment?
