

MARY BYRNE

IN A GRACIOUS LAND

MA'AM, I AM sorry to bother you. But could I have a few moments of your time.

I was sorry to bother her. I was always sorry to lift my hand, make the fist, knock, knock. Always at the dinner hour, that's when you caught them at home. But isn't it odd—I never interrupted anyone's dinner, not in all my years of knock, knock. People would come to the door. They would look me up and down, the rank stranger behind their screen. Six o'clock and what I had interrupted was not dinner. When did people eat anymore? Young, old, rich, poor, Baptist, Presbyterian, Assembly of God—what I interrupted was not dinner.

But why was I sorry? I was sorry because we were going to discuss something unpleasant.

Wait, she said. I know you. I know exactly who you are.

Ma'am—

The district attorney said someone like you might come around. Well, I do not want to talk.

I certainly understand if this isn't a good time.

It will never be a good time. Not ever. I voted for death and have not lost a minute's sleep over it. Never once did I doubt he was guilty. You can tell whoever you work for and—him—that I said so.

Midway through her speech I could have recited it with her word for word just to be cute, I'd heard it so many times, but I waited until she was finished.

Could I simply ask then why you voted for death.

Indignant: because he was guilty.

Another odd thing: people looked good when I startled them at home. They were dressed in freshly cleaned clothes, shirts ironed and tucked in; their hair was styled. Women wore tasteful makeup. Often they looked better put together than I did, and I was at work.

Is there anything, I said, anything at all, his lawyers could have told you that would have made you go a different way. And vote for life without parole instead.

Of course not. I believe in an eye for an eye. I even read the Scripture to my fellow jurors. To keep our spirits up.

I know it was an extremely long and difficult trial for you all.

I will never forget it.

It is amazing what people will agree to sign. I took out a sheet of paper and wrote down what she said. She didn't object; they never do. They cannot bear to slight, to give offense. Standing in the hot whipping wind of a September evening in Georgia's peanut country, wedged between the screen door and the front door with diamond-shaped portals, the woman took my pen and signed her name at the bottom.

I WENT BACK inside after the young woman left and called the district attorney right away. I felt he should know these people are on the prowl. Long ago I lost that list of my fellow jurors' names—we used to get together once a year at a restaurant and reminisce about our trial. We became close during that long, terrible time.

You do not easily forget the details. Fingers cut to the bone where they closed around the knife. In full color. What it really looks like to fight for your life and lose.

That's a part we tended not to talk about, but we didn't have to. Just seeing each other's faces would bring it all back—wishing each other good night as we went into our hotel rooms, sharing breakfast together every morning, boarding the sheriff's van right on time bound for the courthouse.

I remember the odd time that followed, too. Having trouble being in a room alone. It was the oddest thing. Even my husband would go out the garage and I'd invent some reason to trail after and hang around with him and the tools and rakes and lawnmower. It was funny and sad. Took a long time to move on from that forlorn body with no one tending to. Starring in the sickest photo spread you ever saw—you cannot imagine anything so lonely. I really think God abandoned the poor soul. But I haven't told anyone.

If I'd still had that list I would have been calling each of them to spread the word about a scruffy-looking girl from a big-city defense team coming all the way down here to kick up dust about the service we performed together in good faith.

Mr. Dahlgren, this is Judy Dobbins. I was a juror on the—

I remember, absolutely.

The people you warned us about came to see me today.

They did.

I told the young woman I did not want to talk.

That was your right.

I told her my conscience is clear.

As it should be.

As clear as it was in the jury room all those years ago, reading the Scripture to give us strength.

You did—

And then I sent her on her way.

Mr. Dahlgren was quiet.

In the silence I spoke up again. I offered to call the other jurors if he still had their numbers handy.

Mrs. Dobbins, did this young woman have you sign something.

Why sure.

I rather wish you hadn't.

Sir?

How in God's name did you have a Bible in that room.

He didn't say it like a question, he said it like a reprimand. I was confused. I didn't know what to say. He said good-bye in a stiff and peculiar way. I certainly don't know why he would object to the Bible. We go to the same church.