



Courting Justice by Caroline Frost

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They told us we weren't allowed to read in court, but they didn't say anything about writing, so I'm keeping a journal on the back of my summons to ward off the hysteria that I feel is setting in. The air is thick with discontent; people exchange looks of solidarity, seeming to say, "This is where our tax dollars are going?"

There's a woman sitting next to me, huffing and sighing and popping her gum. I'm amazed at how fast she can talk, the words rushing out of her mouth like people through an exit at a baseball game that just ended. Her arms are crossed, and she tightens them with every deliberate huff. "Sure, it's got a v6 engine and big tahres, big deal...What? gonna pull me over just cuz muh car stands out?"

Her voice is one of those permanently hoarse ones, raspy like she yelled too much as a kid. She huffs again, this time through her mouth, and her starched bangs do not move. If they hadn't been moussed into place they'd have blown straight up. She leans forward and grabs the pew in front of her; her bangs tap the wood but still don't move.

The guy behind me is talking to himself. "Three-hundred bucks poorer," he says, "there goes my trip to Vegas," and if he didn't sound like he was going to cry I probably would have shushed him. I've been shushing lately to blow off steam. The bailiff isn't doing his job; everyone is murmuring and complaining and the sign clearly says no talking while court is in session and if they don't lay down the law in the courtroom, then what is this all for anyway?

We're being forced to watch a trial while we all wait for our turn. The prosecution is a large woman with a formidable shelf of a chest, two torpedoes of breasts. She has the confidence of Patti LaBelle, and I wonder how cocky I'd get prosecuting traffic violations. The defense attorney looks like an intern, thin and gun-shy, and I'm pretty sure I head his voice crack during the arraignment. His closing arguments sounded like an eight grade class presentation: "Um..and so...thusly,...I

wish to argue that umm...." I can see the perspiration welling up on his freckled brow.

Gum Popper keeps looking over at me trying to get me to commiserate with her, but I won't. I'm determined to look patient and calm if only to spite her. Now she's leaning back, her head hooked over the back of the seat, legs splayed out in front of her, from this angle her bangs a rigid tube I can see straight through.

A man up ahead has a cold. He's been blowing into his Kleenex, then holding it up to the light looking for a dry spot. There isn't one. I want to tell him he's free to leave to use the restroom but I've already vowed not to talk, not to debase myself and join the ranks of the other thoughtless chatterboxes to whom I so fervently object. So I fix my sight on the judge, who is alarmingly cheerful, and who looks like he's grinding his teeth when he smiles.

Gum Popper lets loose a great gulping fart that thumps the bench I'm sitting on. It is all I can do to stifle the laugh prying at my lips. My stomach sours as I see the smug mustachioed officer who got me here in the first place. If he hadn't shown up, my case would be dismissed. The gun on his hip bobs up and down, the billy club on the other hip nods with less attitude. He pulls one side of his mouth back and sucks in to knock something out of his teeth. Pop, huff. She mutters "Jesus" under her breath, each time louder than before. I begin to fantasize pulling the fire alarm. She pops again and I want to shove my hand in her mouth and rip out her tongue to silence her popping and talking and insufferable huffing.

Freckles picks a wedgie with his thumb and looks at the docket. His next victim. He clears his throat and croaks my name.