

# One Person, One Vote

by Laura Mahal

I SMILED AT the man who approached my desk, his untied work boots caked with mud. His open plaid jacket had a bit of stuffing poking out just below his right pocket. The contrast of that texture, a fluffy bunny's tail, attracted my attention to a glint of metal on his belt. Not in the center, where he sported a large silver buckle of an elk's head, but to the right, over his hip.

*Probably a cell phone*, I thought, dismissing my inquisitiveness as paranoia.

"I'd like to vote," he said.

"Glad to help," I offered. "Would you prefer a paper ballot or would you rather vote by machine?"

"Don't trust those damn machines," he said, spitting as he reached for his wallet.

*Did he seriously just spit on the floor of the voting center?* I asked myself.

A big globule glistened near his left boot, refracting the fluorescent lighting of the Sunday School room. The church had rented the space to the county through the end of elections for the use of our Early Voting Center. Bible verses still showed faintly through the big sheets of construction paper we'd used to cover the bulletin boards. "Love your enemy." "Be kind to one another." Puffy pastel hearts surrounded the advice to "Be tenderhearted."

A train whistle blew outside, startling me, as well as a woman in a blue rain jacket who had just finished voting. As she walked past me, I caught a whiff of her body lotion, pomegranate and blackberries.

She smelled like California.

She stepped right into the spit.

I politely asked the man if he had a form of ID.

“I’m an American. I don’t need no ID.”

I wondered why in the hell he’d been reaching for his wallet if he wasn’t planning to provide a form of identification, but whatever. My job was to take care of the customer. Yet I sure wished my supervisor wasn’t across the room behind the enormous TSX voting machines.

“Actually, I do have something I want to show you,” he said, leaning in close enough for me to see the hairs curling from his nose. He tucked his jacket back, long enough for me to see the glint of metal in a holster on his belt.

Not a cell phone.

He propped his elbows in front of me.

“I said I want to vote. And I mean to do so. But you’re gonna give me a stack of ballots, then wait here while I vote every single one of them.”

My breath stuck in my lungs like I’d swallowed salt water taffy down the wrong pipe. I cleared my throat, then did it again, louder, hoping my bipartisan partner would get back with her Keurig coffee. Red nametag for Republican, Black for Independent, or Blue like mine—I didn’t give a rat’s ass who showed up or what their party affiliation. I just wanted some help.

I started buying for time.

“Sir, I may have misunderstood you. I can only distribute one ballot per person. If you’ll just give me your name and birthdate, I can pull you up on my computer in twenty seconds.”

My gray metal folding chair screeched as I leaned back on two legs, desperate to draw anyone’s attention to what was going down at my station.

My second-line supervisor was helping a man with the distinct shake of Parkinson’s to unfold his paper ballot.

My Jolly Red partner was stirring nondairy creamer into her coffee, and sneaking bites of the donut she didn’t want anyone to notice she was eating. Her back was to me. She was facing a bulletin board that once had addressed the thrill of victory over sin.

I scanned my desk for tools of self-defense. A ball point pen. A cheap plastic stapler. A vase of black-eyed Susans and a potted chrysanthemum. The jeweled and studded purse of the woman in the blue raincoat who smelled like blackberries and pomegranates and had spit on her expensive shoes.

The man reached for his hip, grunting, “I don’t think you understood me.”

But I was quicker.

I sprung up and swung my chair like a baseball bat, smashing it as hard as I could onto his head and neck. I vaulted over the table and onto his chest before he could say “*What the . . . ?*”, pinning his arms and knocking his weapon out of the holster. It went spinning across the room toward the provisional ballots table.

I dug my knee into his ribs, right into the white fluff of the bunny tail on his plaid jacket.

“I understood you just fine,” I said.

People ran toward us from every direction. My partner dropped her donut. My supervisor shouted into her cell phone and the second-line supervisor herded voters out of the room. But my attention narrowed to the man at my mercy.

“Don’t ever make the mistake of assuming you can intimidate a woman. I was an MP long before I became an elections judge,” I said.

“One person, one vote. That’s democracy.”