

SWEEPS  
By Patrick Tobin  
Short Fiction

Let's get something straight. The only reason I agreed to appear on the Trial Network was I thought I would get a free week at the Linda Evans Beauty Spa Sanctuary and Vineyard. I know I gave that interview to NBC and I said that whole thing about the power and dignity of being tried in front of my fellow American citizens, *by* my fellow American citizens.

I said a lot of things I didn't mean.

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I know I said I had no idea how the cigarettes ended up in my apartment. That was a lie – I snuck them back with me from Tijuana. It was an innocent little jokey thing, okay? I was going to have a dinner party later that week, with my friends Kyle and Douglas, and I was going to fix veal cutlets and martinis. An old-school kind of thing, okay? And then I thought maybe we'd have a couple of smokes afterwards and listen to Rosemary Clooney and Patti Page.

Okay?

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I know who squealed on me. My neighbor in 5A, that woman from Russia, the one who's been cooking the same fucking piece of whitefish for three years now. I guess you can take the girl out of the Soviet, but you can't take the Soviet out of the girl. How do I know it was her? Rita, my neighbor in 3C, the nice one who's been taking care of my cat, said Comrade 5A showed up one day with a brand-new juicer.

A *Braun* juicer.

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I honestly thought the penalty for possession of tobacco was a fine. You know, like a misdemeanor.

I said basically that very thing on the stand and I still think it was in poor taste when the judge asked me if I also believed in the tooth fairy.

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My mother was the one who suggested I take my case to the Trial Network. It's a great deal. TN pays your expenses, provides your wardrobe, does your makeup. And they promise you a week at the Linda Evans Beauty Spa Sanctuary and Vineyard if you win.

What self-respecting gay man could turn down a deal like that? What not-so-self-respecting gay man could turn down a deal like that?

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The lobby at TN's corporate office is huge. An agoraphobic's nightmare. TN actually hires someone whose sole job is to comfort agoraphobics in the lobby.

You can tell who the agoraphobics are. They're the ones who fall to the pink marble floor and start screaming as if they're about to be pushed over the edge of the Abyss.

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Bonnie was an all-around great gal. She was the TN producer assigned to my trial and she had been with the network for almost three years. Bonnie used to produce Blue's Clues until she and Steve, the goofball on the show, had an affair. I told Bonnie that Steve always struck me as gay. She told me Steve was the best lay of her life. Period. End of discussion.

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TN's image consultant, Maggie, was the first person in my life to figure out I'm a summer and not a spring. Maggie also helps people organize their closets on the side. I like to think Maggie and I bonded in a meaningful way over fabric samples.

She told me I have the kind of pores women would kill for. I don't think Maggie says that to just anyone.

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I was relieved when they signed Patty Duke to play my attorney and not that girl who used to play Roseanne's daughter. Yeah, sure, she's got an Ivy League education under her belt, but I

thought she came off a little smug in the audition tape. Patty was a phenomenal choice. I mean, here's a woman who's battled some heavy-duty personal demons, who's been president of the Screen Actor's Guild, *and* who's raised a couple of charming and handsome sons with John Aston.

Lisa Bonet was totally pissed that she hadn't even made the first cut.

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Maggie, the image consultant, was the one who suggested I needed a wife before we went live with the trial. Bonnie loved the idea and so did Patty.

A couple days before I had asked Bonnie what would happen if America found out I was gay. I mean, I *am* gay, but I'm willing to do whatever to win for the team. You know, 110%. Bonnie pulled out this map of the U.S. and pointed to the middle — to a brightly colored section that looked like a bloody T-bone steak — and she said *ouch*.

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Patty was pretty adamant about getting an unknown to play my wife, so we went with Dolores. Dolores was very pretty and worked mostly in the airline industry. She did all of Frontier Airlines' in-flight safety videos. If you've ever flown from Denver to LA you've probably seen Dolores put an oxygen mask over her face first, *then* over her young child's.

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At our first rehearsal, Dolores brought huge homemade muffins for everyone. She said something about getting into the role and everyone laughed. I tried not to laugh too faggy.

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*The State of California vs. Brandon Scheffly* went live the day before my birthday. Patty and Dolores and I watched from the greenroom as Morgan Fairchild read the charges: possession of tobacco; transporting across international borders. Patty was feeling pretty confident and up, so we all drank champagne and toasted each other. Then Patty said something like, *if they can't prove it was lit, they have to acquit*. But in a really overdone Amos n' Andy accent.

She kept saying it over and over. It was more than a little annoying.

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Everyone loved Dolores and TN had the numbers to prove it. She was especially popular in bedroom communities in the Midwest and we all know what that means.

I seemed to be popular in Eugene, Oregon.

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One day in the greenroom Bonnie congratulated Dolores. Dolores had just signed to be a spokesperson for Home Depot. I tried to be enthusiastic, but the only thing that came out of my mouth was telling Dolores that this was my fucking trial and not hers.

In a pretty spiteful, petty way, I might add.

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The next day Dolores brought in a pan of homemade Peanut Butter Crunchy Cream bars. My favorite. By the time Dolores got to me she didn't have any left. Dolores apologized and I said something about trying to lose weight anyway, you know, because the camera adds fifteen. At least.

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Connie Selleca did an okay job for the prosecution but I could tell her heart just wasn't in it. Especially the way they were trying to paint me as this, I don't know, drug runner or something. It rang false. Totally false, and Connie knew it.

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One day I saw Connie and Dolores talking in the TN cafeteria. Connie saw me walk in and stopped talking to Dolores. I'd come in to get my usual lunch, the squid risotto on a bed of baby bok choy, but after I saw them, and they *didn't* smile, I got a Diet Coke and left.

Later, I asked Patty when Dolores and Connie had become such good friends and she got this puzzled look on her face.

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I will admit, Dolores gave the performance of her life. On the stand she told Connie how she'd come home early from work one day and found me not only having a cigarette, but also giving a blowjob to our neighbor Steve. Then Connie called Steve to the stand and it turned out he was this guy I went out with one time and yeah, we'd had sex and all, and then I hadn't called him back. The only defense I can offer is I find it impossible to take a guy seriously, no matter how hot he is, if he's been to over three dozen Jimmy Buffett concerts.

Steve acted like he was my best friend and said how one time at a neighborhood barbecue I'd put my hand on his knee and then another time I'd offered him a beer when he and his wife were having marital problems. I can't tell you how many times Steve said he wasn't gay, he had just been lonely and confused.

It was a little on the nose if you ask me. But nobody was asking me. Patty just kept shaking her head and saying *ouch*. Over and over and over.

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It's hot under those studio lights, especially when you're on the stand. Once, one of the technicians said he'd cooked a turkey under the studio lights, in something like four hours.

I wonder if the turkey turned out juicy. I meant to ask the technician, but I kept forgetting.

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On the stand I told Patty that yes, Dolores and I had been having a hard time, that Dolores was very angry that we couldn't have children, that we couldn't have children because of a *profound* injury I'd sustained during a peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, that I wanted to save my marriage but there's only so much emasculating anger a man can take.

I threw in a bit about having bought a football for my future son, years and years ago, during the sweet season of bliss right after the wedding, and how the football was on my desk in my office, and how every time I looked at the football I died a little inside.

I thought I was pretty fucking amazing.

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When they turned off the cameras and the studios lights, that's when it hit me – how could I possibly be having a cigarette *and* giving a blowjob? Not that I'm pointing fingers at Patty. Because I'm not. She was a total pro, at the top of her game. If she doesn't get an Emmy nomination then the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences really does have its head up its ass.

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I've seen the tape of my testimony. You can tell where I start to lose my pitch. I don't think I ever come off as flaming, but I will agree with TV Guide's assessment — I seem a little coquettish.

Also, instead of saying Kosovo, I said Kokomo. As in, Indiana.

Big difference.

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I don't think Dolores knows I saw her cleaning out her dressing room. Or that I saw her carrying

her Braun juicer to the parking lot.

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Maggie asked me to return all my Dockers to the wardrobe department. In a memo that I had to sign.

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They're going to execute me on Arbor Day. Arbor Day falls right in the middle of sweeps week for TN and they're feeling the pressure from Court TV. Patty's been very nice about the whole thing and says we could have won if we'd just carried a few more votes in New Mexico.

I've never been to New Mexico but I imagine I would have liked it. Friends say Sante Fe is amazing.

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Bonnie wants me to do extra preparation for my emotional breakdown when the executioner, played by Richard Thomas, hooks me up to the electric chair. It's not been going well. At the first rehearsal Richard pretended to touch the electric chair and said he hoped it was grounded, and everyone laughed.

Except me.

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I know everyone thinks I'm being difficult because I'm afraid to die. That's not the reason at all. I guess I'm still upset that they've signed Meredith Baxter to play my mother. She's so totally wrong for the part but no one is listening to me anymore. I just don't want my death to become about Meredith and I'm afraid the way she overacts it's going to be only about her.

But like I said, no one is listening to me anymore. And TN has the numbers to prove it.

