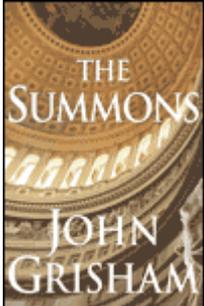




GRISHAM JOHN

THE SUMMONS



It came by mail, regular postage, the old-fashioned way since the Judge was almost eighty and distrusted modern devices. Forget e-mail and even faxes. He didn't use an answering machine and had never been fond of the telephone. He pecked out his letters with both index fingers, one feeble key at a time, hunched over his old Underwood manual on a rolltop desk under the portrait of Nathan Bedford Forrest. The Judge's grandfather had fought with Forrest at Shiloh and throughout the Deep South, and to him no figure in history was more revered. For thirty-two years, the Judge had quietly refused to hold court on July 13, Forrest's birthday.

It came with another letter, a magazine, and two invoices, and was routinely placed in the law school mailbox of Professor Ray Atlee. He recognized it immediately since such envelopes had been a part of his life for as long as he could remember. It was from his father, a man he too called the Judge. Professor Atlee studied the envelope, uncertain whether he should open it right there or wait a moment. Good news or bad, he never knew with the Judge, though the old man was dying and good news had been rare. It was thin and appeared to contain only one sheet of paper; nothing unusual about that. The Judge was frugal with the written word, though he'd once been known for his windy lectures from the bench.

It was a business letter, that much was certain. The Judge was not for small talk, hated gossip and idle chitchat, whether written or spoken. Ice tea with him on the porch would be a refighting of the Civil War, probably at Shiloh, where he would once again lay all blame for the Confederate defeat at the shiny, untouched boots of General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, a man he would hate even in heaven, if by chance they met there.

He'd be dead soon. Seventy-nine years old with cancer in his stomach. He was overweight, a diabetic, a heavy pipe smoker, had a bad heart that had survived three attacks, and a host of lesser ailments that had tormented him for twenty years and were now finally closing in for the kill. The pain was constant. During their last phone call three weeks earlier, a call initiated by Ray because the Judge thought long distance was a rip-off, the old man sounded weak and strained. They had talked for less than two minutes.

The return address was gold-embossed: Chancellor Reuben V. Atlee, 25th Chancery District, Ford County Courthouse, Clanton, Mississippi. Ray slid the envelope into the

magazine and began walking. Judge Atlee no longer held the office of chancellor. The voters had retired him nine years earlier, a bitter defeat from which he would never recover. Thirty-two years of diligent service to his people, and they tossed him out in favor of a younger man with radio and television ads. The Judge had refused to campaign. He claimed he had too much work to do, and, more important, the people knew him well and if they wanted to reelect him then they would do so. His strategy had seemed arrogant to many. He carried Ford County but got shellacked in the other five.

It took three years to get him out of the courthouse. His office on the second floor had survived a fire and had missed two renovations. The Judge had not allowed them to touch it with paint or hammers. When the county supervisors finally convinced him that he had to leave or be evicted, he boxed up three decades' worth of useless files and notes and dusty old books and took them home and stacked them in his study. When the study was full, he lined them down the hallways into the dining room and even the foyer.

Ray nodded to a student who was seated in the hall. Outside his office, he spoke to a colleague. Inside, he locked the door behind him and placed the mail in the center of his desk. He took off his jacket, hung it on the back of the door, stepped over a stack of thick law books he'd been stepping over for half a year, and then to himself uttered his daily vow to organize the place.

The room was twelve by fifteen, with a small desk and a small sofa, both covered with enough work to make Ray seem like a very busy man. He was not. For the spring semester he was teaching one section of antitrust. And he was supposed to be writing a book, another drab, tedious volume on monopolies that would be read by no one but would add handsomely to his pedigree. He had tenure, but like all serious professors he was ruled by the "publish or perish" dictum of academic life. He sat at his desk and shoved papers out of the way.

The envelope was addressed to Professor N. Ray Atlee, University of Virginia School of Law, Charlottesville, Virginia. The e's and o's were smudged together. A new ribbon hadn't been needed for a decade. The Judge didn't believe in zip codes either.

The N was for Nathan, after the general, but few people knew it. One of their uglier fights had been over the son's decision to drop Nathan altogether and plow through life simply as Ray.

The Judge's letters were always sent to the law school, never to his son's apartment in downtown Charlottesville. The Judge liked titles and important addresses, and he wanted folks in Clanton, even the postal workers, to know that his son was a professor of law. It was unnecessary. Ray had been teaching (and writing) for thirteen

years, and those who mattered in Ford County knew it.

He opened the envelope and unfolded a single sheet of paper. It too was grandly embossed with the Judge's name and former title and address, again minus the zip code. The old man probably had an unlimited supply of the stationery.

It was addressed to both Ray and his younger brother, Forrest, the only two offspring of a bad marriage that had ended in 1969 with the death of their mother. As always, the message was brief:

Please make arrangements to appear in my study on Sunday, May 7, at 5 p.m., to discuss the administration of my estate. Sincerely, Reuben V. Atlee.

The distinctive signature had shrunk and looked unsteady. For years it had been emblazoned across orders and decrees that had changed countless lives. Decrees of divorce, child custody, termination of parental rights, adoptions. Orders settling will contests, election contests, land disputes, annexation fights. The Judge's autograph had been authoritative and well known; now it was the vaguely familiar scrawl of a very sick old man.

Sick or not, though, Ray knew that he would be present in his father's study at the appointed time. He had just been summoned, and as irritating as it was, he had no doubt that he and his brother would drag themselves before His Honor for one more lecture. It was typical of the Judge to pick a day that was convenient for him without consulting anybody else.

It was the nature of the Judge, and perhaps most judges for that matter, to set dates for hearings and deadlines with little regard for the convenience of others. Such heavy-handedness was learned and even required when dealing with crowded dockets, reluctant litigants, busy lawyers, lazy lawyers. But the Judge had run his family in pretty much the same manner as he'd run his courtroom, and that was the principal reason Ray Atlee was teaching law in Virginia and not practicing it in Mississippi.

He read the summons again, then put it away, on top of the pile of current matters to deal with. He walked to the window and looked out at the courtyard where everything was in bloom. He wasn't angry or bitter, just frustrated that his father could once again dictate so much. But the old man was dying, he told himself. Give him a break. There wouldn't be many more trips home. The Judge's estate was cloaked with mystery. The principal asset was the house -- an antebellum hand-me-down from the same Atlee who'd fought with General Forrest. On a shady street in old Atlanta it would be worth over a million dollars, but not in Clanton. It sat in the middle of five neglected acres three blocks off the town square. The floors sagged, the roof leaked, paint had not touched the walls in Ray's lifetime. He and his brother could sell it for

perhaps a hundred thousand dollars, but the buyer would need twice that to make it livable. Neither would ever live there; in fact, Forrest had not set foot in the house in many years. The house was called Maple Run, as if it were some grand estate with a staff and a social calendar. The last worker had been Irene the maid. She'd died four years earlier and since then no one had vacuumed the floors or touched the furniture with polish. The Judge paid a local felon twenty dollars a week to cut the grass, and he did so with great reluctance. Eighty dollars a month was robbery, in his learned opinion.

When Ray was a child, his mother referred to their home as Maple Run. They never had dinners at their home, but rather at Maple Run. Their address was not the Atlees on Fourth Street, but instead it was Maple Run on Fourth Street. Few other folks in Clanton had names for their homes. She died from an aneurysm and they laid her on a table in the front parlor. For two days the town stopped by and paraded across the front porch, through the foyer, through the parlor for last respects, then to the dining room for punch and cookies. Ray and Forrest hid in the attic and cursed their father for tolerating such a spectacle. That was their mother lying down there, a pretty young woman now pale and stiff in an open coffin.

Forrest had always called it Maple Ruin. The red and yellow maples that once lined the street had died of some unknown disease. Their rotted stumps had never been cleared. Four huge oaks shaded the front lawn. They shed leaves by the ton, far too many for anyone to rake and gather. And at least twice a year the oaks would lose a branch that would fall and crash somewhere onto the house, where it might or might not get removed. The house stood there year after year, decade after decade, taking punches but never falling.

It was still a handsome house, a Georgian with columns, once a monument to those who'd built it, and now a sad reminder of a declining family. Ray wanted nothing to do with it. For him the house was filled with unpleasant memories and each trip back depressed him. He certainly couldn't afford the financial black hole of maintaining an estate that ought to be bulldozed. Forrest would burn it before he owned it.

The Judge, however, wanted Ray to take the house and keep it in the family. This had been discussed in vague terms over the past few years. Ray had never mustered the courage to ask, "What family?" He had no children. There was an ex-wife but no prospect of a current one.

Same for Forrest, except he had a dizzying collection of ex-girlfriends and a current housing arrangement with Ellie, a three-hundred-pound painter and potter twelve years his senior.

It was a biological miracle that Forrest had produced no children, but so far none had been discovered.

The Atlee bloodline was thinning to a sad and inevitable halt, which didn't bother Ray at all. He was living life for himself, not for the benefit of his father or the family's glorious past. He returned to Clanton only for funerals.

The Judge's other assets had never been discussed. The Atlee family had once been wealthy, but long before Ray. There had been land and cotton and slaves and railroads and banks and politics, the usual Confederate portfolio of holdings that, in terms of cash, meant nothing in the late twentieth century. It did, however, bestow upon the Atlees the status of "family money."

By the time Ray was ten he knew his family had money. His father was a judge and his home had a name, and in rural Mississippi this meant he was indeed a rich kid. Before she died his mother did her best to convince Ray and Forrest that they were better than most folks. They lived in a mansion. They were Presbyterians. They vacationed in Florida, every third year. They occasionally went to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis for dinner. Their clothes were nicer.

Then Ray was accepted at Stanford. His bubble burst when the Judge said bluntly, "I can't afford it."

"What do you mean?" Ray had asked.

"I mean what I said. I can't afford Stanford."

"But I don't understand."

"Then I'll make it plain. Go to any college you want. But if you go to Sewanee, then I'll pay for it."

Ray went to Sewanee, without the baggage of family money, and was supported by his father, who provided an allowance that barely covered tuition, books, board, and fraternity dues. Law school was at Tulane, where Ray survived by waiting tables at an oyster bar in the French Quarter.

For thirty-two years, the Judge had earned a chancellor's salary, which was among the lowest in the country. While at Tulane Ray read a report on judicial compensation, and he was saddened to learn that Mississippi judges were earning fifty-two thousand dollars a year when the national average was ninety-five thousand.

The Judge lived alone, spent little on the house, had no bad habits except for his pipe, and he preferred cheap tobacco. He

drove an old Lincoln, ate bad food but lots of it, and wore the same black suits he'd been wearing since the fifties. His vice was charity. He saved his money, then he gave it away. No one knew how much money the Judge donated annually. An automatic ten percent went to the Presbyterian Church. Sewanee got two thousand dollars a year, same for the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Those three gifts were carved in granite. The rest were not.

Judge Atlee gave to anyone who would ask. A crippled child in need of crutches. An all-star team traveling to a state tournament. A drive by the Rotary Club to vaccinate babies in the Congo. A shelter for stray dogs and cats in Ford County. A new roof for Clanton's only museum.

The list was endless, and all that was necessary to receive a check was to write a short letter and ask for it. Judge Atlee always sent money and had been doing so ever since Ray and Forrest left home.

Ray could see him now, lost in the clutter and dust of his rolltop, pecking out short notes on his Underwood and sticking them in his chancellor's envelopes with scarcely readable checks drawn on the First National Bank of Clanton -- fifty dollars here, a hundred dollars there, a little for everyone until it was all gone. The estate would not be complicated because there would be so little to inventory. The ancient law books, threadbare furniture, painful family photos and mementos, long forgotten files and papers -- all a bunch of rubbish that would make an impressive bonfire. He and Forrest would sell the house for whatever it might bring and be quite happy to salvage anything from the last of the Atlee family money.

He should call Forrest, but those calls were always easy to put off. Forrest was a different set of issues and problems, much more complicated than a dying, reclusive old father hell-bent on giving away his money. Forrest was a living, walking disaster, a boy of thirty-six whose mind had been deadened by every legal and illegal substance known to American culture.

What a family, Ray mumbled to himself.

He posted a cancellation for his eleven o'clock class, and went for therapy.

Excerpted from *The Summons* by John Grisham Copyright 2002 by Belfry Holdings, Inc.. Excerpted by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.