



©iStockphoto.com/jordanchez

She Wore Blue

Risa Peris

"The CIA wants to kill me. They're tracking my thoughts," said Dougie in a harsh whisper. I looked at Craig who was leaning back in the old swivel chair with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He was wearing his usual law school uniform—Abercrombie jeans, blue collared shirt and a tie with green ducks on it. Craig looked serious and nodded his head.

"How are they tracking your thoughts?" asked Craig.

Dougie looked around him frantically and gripped the arms of the orange, nubby chair. "They implanted a chip into my brain when I was sleeping on a bench in Boston Commons."

"I see," said Craig in a slow voice.

I looked down at my blank yellow legal pad and started drawing daggers. It had become a doodling habit ever since the first day of contracts class. My professor liked to use penguins in every example and, far from being cute, it was annoying because I still had no idea how to decipher an offer or an acceptance in 'real' world scenarios. Contracts were a haze and I discovered that drawing daggers, knives and swords relieved my anxiety, at least temporarily.

"Can you help me?" asked Dougie.

"That's what we're here for." Craig smiled widely.

I rolled my eyes slightly and stifled a yawn as I drew a slim handle on a blade. This was only my second time volunteering for the legal clinic at the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans, but so far it was proving to be quite the adventure. I was only four weeks into my first year of law school and was sinking from the work load, the new terminology, the lack of sleep, and the overwhelming feeling of pressure. One of the 3Ls, Marvin, whom I usually shared a Dunkin' Donuts coffee with in the morning, suggested I volunteer with legal services.

"Law is about helping people and by volunteering for a clinic you will get to help people. It's great and rewarding. The best people in law school go to those clinics not the jerks. I started volunteering with Harvard's Legal Aid Bureau in my first year but Boston College and Suffolk have some great clinics too. I actually got clients. It's such a rush. I know you're tired but just think how great it would be to meet up with non-jerky law students."

Marvin had a point. Part of the anxiety I was experiencing was due to my fellow classmates. I am not sure who thought dividing up 1Ls into sections was a good idea, but it was a trend that every law school in Boston did and

probably throughout the United States. For the first year of law school I was basically stuck with the same ninety people for every class. There were a lot of bright people, but it was hard to appreciate with the whopping egos disfiguring them. Some of my fellow classmates made it clear they were in law school to make a million dollars without any care for who they had to step on or swindle to get there. Of course, some had milder dreams like Carrie who told me she just wanted "to make enough money to buy a condo in Manhattan and send my kids to the best private schools." Love of money was primary and love of the law was secondary. Or so it seemed.

"Ruby. Ruby!" Craig yelled.

I looked up from the legal pad where I had drawn five large swords.

Craig was looking at me with a slight smile. "You looked like you were in outer space."

"Sorry, my mind wandered for a bit." I ripped off the knife filled page and threw it into a bin by the desk. I wrote 'Dougie' at the top of a fresh page.

"Wandered? Looked like you were space traveling. Do you have any questions for Dougie?"

Dougie was bearded, smelly and bundled up in a ripped duffle coat. I saw him pushing his basket full of cans, stuffed toys, dingy clothes and other sundry through Downtown Crossing on several occasions. He sometimes took refuge in the shelter, but usually he slept in alleys in Chinatown.

"Dougie, when was the last time you took meds?" I looked him straight in the eye.

He waved his hands in the air. "No meds. No! It's how they control you."

"How who controls you?" I was genuinely curious.

"The government. The government controls the masses by medicating them."

I thought briefly about all those anti-depressant commercials with green fields, happy faces and hot air balloons. Those commercials certainly made me want to take meds.

"Dougie, even if you think there is a larger conspiracy, meds will help you."

"No!"

"OK. OK." I sighed.

"They pumped me full of meds when I got out of Hanoi Hilton."

"Hanoi Hilton?" Craig asked.

I opened Dougie's thick folder. There was documentation from a VA hearing and reports from several psychiatrists. I quickly scanned one report. Dougie had been a POW in Vietnam. He was also diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

"Yes, Hanoi Hilton. The home of the vampires. The place of bloodletting. I had to become unholy to survive."

Craig looked baffled. I shoved Dougie's file into his hands. He started reading.

"Dougie, when was the last time you saw a doctor? The medical clinic here also meets tonight. Can I walk you over? They have really nice nurses," I said.

"No! I want you to sue the CIA. CIA. Crazy Insane Assholes."

Craig looked up from the file. "Tell you what...I am going tell you a trick to deflect the CIA signal so they can't read your thoughts."

Dougie licked his lips. "Tell me, tell me."

"Get some tin foil. Can you get some tin foil?" Craig took out his wallet and pulled out three dollars. "Here. Buy some tin foil. Then make a hat out of it and wear it. If you wear the hat, the CIA can't read your thoughts."

"Oh, that's wonderful. Brilliant. Brilliant. Remarkable. You are a good man. Such a smart man. I'll be safe. Thank you. Thank you." Dougie got up and walked out of the office.

I could still hear him exclaiming how wonderful Craig was as he walked down the hall.

"I don't think you should have done that, Craig."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't seem ethical to me. He needs medical attention."

Craig waved his hand at me. "Nonsense. You can't forcibly medicate him. He doesn't want to take meds. But he is miserable because he thinks the CIA is stalking him. So I gave him a solution."

"So what are you going to tell him to do when the FBI starts stalking him? A vest made out of wax paper?"

Craig laughed and then stood up and stretched. He didn't seem concerned.

"Hey, you guys done with Dougie? I got a new client for you to interview." Brenda was standing in the office doorway looking harried. She was the clinic supervisor and one of the lawyers who managed Northeastern's legal clinic program.

"Yeah, we're done with Dougie. And I am done for the night. I got a quiz in tax law tomorrow so I have to head back home to study." Craig gathered up his satchel. "Ruby can handle it."

"Uh...uh...Dougie was only my second interview. I don't think I should handle it."

"Just ask lots of questions, take notes and then be prepared to present at the wrap up meeting." Craig hung a striped scarf around his neck and slipped on his black jacket.

"OK..."

"So I can send in a new client?" Brenda was staring at me through her large framed tortoise shell glasses.

"Sure," I said.

Craig waved to me and exited the office.

A few minutes later, a slight man with black-framed eyeglasses walked in. He was wearing a white t-shirt and cargo pants. He sat down on the chair closest to me.

“Hi, I’m Ruby.” I extended my hand and the man shook it.

“I’m Ed. Nice to meet you.” He folded his hands in his lap like a Buddha.

“Ed, how can I help you?”

“Well...there are two things really. One, I want to divorce my wife and secondly, I would like to appeal being labeled as a sex offender. Some neighbor looked me up online and has since organized protests in front of my house. It is really bothering my girls.”

The legal clinic at the shelter was for all veterans regardless of finances. I wasn’t surprised to hear he had a house. But hearing he was a sex offender made me pause. His divorce seemed more pedantic and less dangerous.

“How long have you been married?” I asked.

“Ten years.”

“Why do you want to divorce your wife?”

“She’s a cunt.” Ed said it so matter-of-factly that I almost wrote it down on the legal pad.

“Why would you say that?”

“Ah, she tried saying I was abusing her and then disappeared with the kids to a shelter. I came home one day to an empty house. She had been threatening going to a shelter. So I staked out a few of the shelters and saw her and the girls leaving one. I confronted her. She came back home with the girls. But I found a new girl. So I want a divorce.”

I took a deep breath. I knew from volunteering in undergrad that shelter locations were top secret. “How did you know where the shelters were?”

Ed looked at me and smiled. “Shelters think no one knows where they are, but if you ask any guy on the street he can tell you all the locations. I’ve known for some time where the shelters are. Now, about the sex offender thing...”

“I need to get assistance with that. Can you hang on a sec?”

“Sure.” He looked calm.

I walked down the hall to the conference room. Brenda and a couple of law students were sitting at the round table chatting and eating licorice.

“I think I need help,” I said.

Brenda looked up. “Why?”

“He needs help with a sex offense. I don’t know anything about that. I don’t feel comfortable with it.”

“Chris, can you take over?” Brenda asked the student sitting next to her. Chris had been a regular at the legal clinic since his first year of law. He was

now a 3L and had already landed a law firm job post-graduation so he was both on auto-pilot and super confident.

Chris closed his laptop. "Sure thing." He walked out of the conference room with a notebook and his Starbucks coffee.

I sat down at the table. "There is something else, Brenda."

"What?"

"He knows where all the shelters are."

"What?"

"The DV shelters. He knows where they are. He stalked his wife and found her in one."

"Interesting." She looked down at a file.

"Should we do something?"

"Like what?" Brenda looked perplexed.

"I don't know. Tell the shelters."

"Knowing where the shelters are is street knowledge. I'm sure most of our clients know where the shelters are. It's just the population we deal with. Don't worry about it. Just head back into the interview. Chris is good at counseling. You can learn lots from him."

"Can I get out of this interview?"

Brenda looked at me and sighed. "You really shouldn't pick and choose clients."

*

One Saturday night in October, I headed to a tourist-filled Irish bar called the Black Rose to drink beers with my roommate, Jennifer.

"Can I get the largest Guinness you have and a shot of whiskey?" I asked the bartender.

"Sure thing," he said.

"Are you planning on getting drunk?" asked Jennifer.

I looked at her. "If at all possible."

"Is there something you want to talk about?" she asked. I shook my head. Jennifer was getting her masters in counseling psychology from Tufts and she kept trying to practice her new skills on me. I dodged her questions like a convict avoiding the prison guards.

"How are classes going?" I asked. I downed the shot the bartender had set before me.

"Oh, wonderful. I love my classes and my professors. Things are awesome." Jennifer swirled a cocktail straw in her cranberry vodka.

"Perfect." I gulped some Guinness.

"How are your classes going?" Jennifer's blue eyes drilled into me.

"Brutal." I had applied to law school after getting accepted to Dartmouth's creative writing program. All my undergrad professors and, of course, my mother told me that I would never get a job or make money if I studied creative writing. So I took the LSAT and applied to a few law schools and got the best offer from Boston College. I liked the idea of moving to Boston and imagined myself strolling by the harbor at sunset and going to Red Sox games. Of course, from the first day of law school I realized my plans of sightseeing and watching baseball were delusional. The schedule was crushing and the homework was intolerable. I started fantasizing about Dartmouth and the joy of sinking into creative writing. I would have started writing stories in class, but I found the drone of the professors and the constant interjections by eager law students jarring and distracting. So I settled into knife drawing.

I realized that part of my issue was that I had no clear reason for going to law school other than fear of poverty and joblessness. The summer before law school I had read a slim volume about Orwell's adventures in Paris. Each day he wrote pages and pages, and each day he had to figure out how to find money to eat and pay for the vermin infested room in the rooming house in the Left Bank. Orwell had to sleep on park benches in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower and beg for money to buy crusty bread on more than a few occasions. When I finished reading the book, I laughed. I sort of felt like Indiana Jones who, after spotting the treasure, manages to sidestep the booby trap with quickness, humor and dumb luck. Creative writing at Dartmouth was the booby trap.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Jennifer asked.

"Uh-uh." I swallowed some more Guinness.

A tall familiar looking guy leaned across the bar and hollered at the bartender for a Sam Adams. The guy looked at me. "Hey, how are you? How are things going at the clinic?"

"Uh, good...you volunteer there?" I couldn't place him.

"No, I'm involved with the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau. The shelter sends cases our way. I saw you last week. I had stopped by to pick up some files from Brenda. My name is Patrick, by the way."

"Oh, cool. Nice to meet you Patrick."

"Do you like the clinic at the shelter?"

"It's interesting. A challenging population."

"Yeah, for sure. We have more women at our clinics. Still challenging, but different than if we had a mostly male population. You should come to our clinic to see what it's like."

"I'm kinda of busy though."

"I know. I know."

"Might be a nice change..." I said as I drank more Guinness.

"We meet on Monday evenings at a community center in Cambridge. Check us out. I have to get back to my girlfriend." Patrick turned and maneuvered through the crowd while carefully balancing his beer.

"So, what's been bothering you?" Jennifer was looking at me earnestly.

"You don't give up, do you?"

"Just letting you know I'm here if you want to talk."

*

On Monday, I felt oddly energized. When afternoon classes were over, I went to the library and finished my reading quickly and painlessly. It was getting easier to understand the cases even though much was still foggy. I was hoping that eventually I would have an "a-ha" moment—the moment when the law made sense and came together, and led me, like the yellow brick road, to ultimate understanding.

When six o'clock approached I locked up my law books in the library's basement lockers then hurried across campus to catch the Boston College shuttle. The law campus also housed the freshmen dorms for the main BC campus. There were always plenty of undergrads sporting trendy fashions and sports symbol-emblazoned gear on the shuttle buses. You could easily isolate the law students from the undergrads by their clothes alone.

When I got to the main campus I boarded the city bus that would cross the Charles River and end its route in Harvard Square. The bus was crowded but subdued. Boston was a city full of students and I had discovered that the trend was to read on public transportation—and not Danielle Steele I might add. I have seen people read Steinbeck, Polkinghorne on quantum physics, the Upanishads, and Carl Jung to name a few. Boston seemed to have the most literate group of people riding city transport that I had ever experienced.

I got off at Harvard Square and headed toward the law campus, which wasn't far from the main gate. Harvard Square was always crowded and overflowing with tourists, students, and the homeless. When I passed the main gate a man in a wheelchair rolled out and blocked my path. He was carrying a sign that stated "Help Me, I am a SICK veteran".

"Do you have some change?" He smiled wide revealing several missing teeth.

"Well...sure." I dug into my satchel and found the change I relegated to riding the Green Line.

"Thank you. A doll."

"Can I ask? What are you sick with?"

"Life, sweetie pie. Just life."

*

The community center was about a block from the Harvard Law campus. I found Patrick in a small office sitting with a client.

"Hey, you made it." Patrick seemed genuinely happy.

"Yep."

"We already have a client for you. She came in about ten minutes ago. She's sitting in the rec room. She's wearing a blue sweater. Can't miss her."

"Do you know what her issue is?"

"Not a clue. She's a new client. Just interview her. We'll talk after."

I turned right and found the rec room littered with toys, art supplies, a ping pong table, and several tables and folding chairs. The woman was sitting at a table near the window. She was staring out the window and mindlessly stirring her coffee with a straw.

"Hi, I'm Ruby. I'm a volunteer at the legal clinic." I extended my hand.

The woman looked at me carefully and then half extended her arm so that I had to lean over the table. "My name is Ann."

"Hi, Ann. Nice to meet you."

"You're a lawyer?" Ann had a mild South Boston accent.

"Law student. But everything is overseen and supervised by attorneys."

"Oh..."

"So how can I help you?"

"I'm not sure you can."

"OK, well maybe if you just tell me your problem, I'll ask some questions and we see where we go from there."

Ann looked at me and her eyes started watering. "My husband is going to kill me."

I took a deep breath. "Why do you say that?"

"He's getting worse. He...hits me...yells...more frequently. It seems he has more rage than ever."

"How long have you been married?"

"Five years. You must think I'm awful. Marrying someone like that. But he wasn't like that. I swear. I thought I was marrying a nice guy who loved me."

"Do you have children?"

"One. A girl. She's four. She hears everything. We're living in a one bedroom in Somerville. He's started yelling at her. It drives me crazy." Tears were sliding down Ann's cheeks.

"When was the last time there was a major incident?"

"Last night. I was in the kitchen cooking and he came home from work and noticed there were no beers, so he started yelling. I turned off the stove and

tried to leave the kitchen. Too many sharp objects in there. But he blocked my way and pushed me up against the sink. He started throwing dishes at me.” Ann wiped tears from her cheeks. “Then he grabbed a steak knife from the sink and threatened to stab me, but he started laughing and sat down on the living room couch and watched sports until he fell asleep.”

“What did you do?” I asked quietly.

“I went to the bedroom and rocked my baby. I didn’t want her to cry. I thought it might trigger another episode from my husband.”

“Have you considered divorce?”

Ann laughed. “If I had a dime for every time someone said that I could fund a vacation to Europe.”

I blushed. It was a rookie question. “Sorry...”

“I have no skills, no college education, and no savings. My husband controls everything. And I have a daughter who needs to be fed. I can’t pay for a lawyer for a frigging divorce.” Ann’s voice grew an octave louder.

“We can help with the divorce.”

“Really? Suppose you can’t help with finding me a good paying job?”

“There are resources out there. Divorcing your husband won’t be easy, but it will help your situation.”

“I think he really would kill me if I file for divorce. There’s no way he would let me take our daughter away from him.”

“I’m concerned for you, Ann. Your husband sounds like he is escalating.”

Ann’s face grew soft. “Thank you for being concerned.”

“Are you afraid to go home? Where does your husband think you are?”

“He thinks I’m grocery shopping. My daughter is playing in the nursery here.”

“But are you afraid to go home?”

Ann sipped her coffee. “I’m always afraid. It’s like having a constant headache. I can’t remember what it’s like to feel OK. To not be afraid.”

“Tell me about your husband.”

“He’s thirty, a mechanic, from Dorchester, drinks a lot, loves sports, hates a dirty house. Handsome too. Honestly? I don’t think I know him too well. We stopped talking a few months into our marriage.”

“Where did you meet him?”

Ann smiles sheepishly. “The usual. A bar. I thought he was the best looking guy. He made me laugh.”

“Sounds like you loved him.”

“Love him. Still love him. Isn’t it weird to still love someone who you think might kill you? How sick am I?”

"You're not sick, Ann. Not at all. The temptation is to blame yourself. But you're not at fault."

"Easy to say but not easy to feel."

"Ann, do you want to leave your husband?"

Ann stares out the window and wipes her face with the sleeve of her blue sweater. "Yes. Yes. I can't stay with him. My daughter...I don't care about myself. It's my daughter. It breaks my heart seeing him yell at her. What happens when she gets older? Will he start hitting her?"

"It seems likely given his pattern of behavior. He's already starting to yell at her."

"So what's the next step? What do I do?"

"We call the police. They'll come here. We get a TRO. Then I'll get on the phone and find you a place at a shelter. I stay until everything is done. We can talk about other legal action after that. The shelter will help you with resources. I'll find a social worker to help you."

Ann was now crying profusely, but she was nodding to everything I said through her haze of tears.

*

Patrick and I started calling all the shelters in the Boston area. After the twentieth call, we found a shelter in Jamaica Plains. They said they would send a van over to pick her and her daughter up in two hours. That gave Patrick and I plenty of time to call the police.

Around 8:30 pm, the police arrived. The two officers seemed relaxed and bored compared to Patrick and I who were energized and focused. The two officers whipped out their notebooks and started asking a lot of questions. They wanted specific details. Ann handled their questions calmly. She didn't seem to mind. At 9:32 pm, Ann's TRO was official. A half hour later she and her sleeping daughter were on the van heading to Jamaica Plains. After she left, Patrick and I high fived each other and headed to Grindel's for beers.

"You did great," Patrick said.

"Thanks. It feels so great to help like that. Better than a drug rush."

"You said it."

We clinked our glasses.

*

I got back to my apartment in Brighton around midnight. I woke up Jennifer when I came in the door.

"Have you been drinking?" she hollered.

"Yep. But celebratory drinking. Not 'my life sucks' drinking."

"What happened?"

I walked into Jennifer's bedroom. "I put a woman in a shelter tonight." I sat down on Jennifer's bed and told her the whole story.

She frowned when I was done talking. "I think you forgot something."

"What?"

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling."

"Well, thanks for raining on my parade."

Jennifer yawned and went back to sleep.

*

I was drowning in an ocean. There was a buoy being swayed by the waves with a sign that stated "Mariana Trench Below." I panicked and started swimming in circles. Waves kept slapping against my head, causing me to choke. I was suspended over an abyss. I wanted to let go and drown, but I didn't want my body to sink in the depths of the ocean. To my left, I could see a small tug boat heading towards me. Its lights were flashing. I waved my arms above my head and hollered. The boat motored within inches of me. I tired climbing up the sides but it was too slippery.

"Help!" I yelled.

"I'm not going to help you." I looked and saw that it was Ed from the legal clinic leaning over the edge of the boat. His eyeglasses were beaded with water and his white t-shirt was soaked through. "I know where you are. But I'm not going to help you."

"Ed, what are you doing here?"

Ed laughed. "I want you dead."

I sat up straight in bed and wiped the fine sweat on my face with my bed sheet. I looked at the clock. It was 7:30 am. It was time to get up and go to class.

*

On Thursday, I headed to the veterans shelter to meet with Brenda about a new social security case I had been assigned. I took the elevator up to the fourth floor. Brenda was waiting for me with her arms crossed and a curious look on her face.

"Am I late?" I asked.

"Patrick has been trying to reach you."

"I haven't gotten any calls."

"I don't think he has your home phone. But you need to call him."

"I will."

"Now. You can use the phone in the conference room."

I walked with Brenda down the hall. She handed me a sticky with a phone number on it.

“Do you know what’s wrong?”

“Just call him.”

I dialed the number. Patrick picked up on the first ring. “Ruby?”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Ann is dead.”

My throat grew tight and I felt my blood rise. “What?”

“Ann and her daughter are dead. They left the shelter to go see a social worker and they were murdered.”

“By who? You can’t be serious. Are you serious?”

“The police arrested her husband this morning.”

“Maybe it wasn’t her.”

“It was her. I just got back from the police station. I saw photos. She was wearing the blue sweater that she wore when we met her. It’s her.”

“Oh my god. Oh my god. And her child?”

“And her child.”

*

I walked to Boston Commons and sat on a bench near the lake where the swan boats operated during spring and summer. I cried, and people who passed looked at me quizzically.

“If you hadn’t pushed her she would be alive,” I said repeatedly to myself.

Brenda had told me that it wasn’t my fault.

“Has a client of yours ever been murdered?” I had asked her.

“Well, no...”

Patrick wanted to meet. I had agreed to meet him in Kenmore Square at 8:00 that night. I had an hour and a half to waste and I decided I would lick my wounds in the Commons. I found some tissue in my purse and blew my nose.

“Can I have that?” someone asked.

I looked up and saw it was Dougie wearing a tin foil hat.

“No, Dougie.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Something bad has happened.”

“Was it the CIA?”

“No, just one man who has hurt so many people.”

“Help him.”

“How?”

“Give him a tin hat.” Dougie continued on, pushing his basket down the path.

I laughed despite my mood and pulled out my contracts book. I started reading and wondered why suddenly the cases seemed easier to read. I thought briefly about writing in my journal or doodling, but I realized I actually wanted to read the law.