

# Robert hires a lawyer

*by* Stephen Stark

The lawyer Robert hired was a woman. A totally awesome-looking supermodel-type woman who was easily two inches taller than he was. It seemed like a good thing to hire a woman attorney, since Ann had one. And she had seemed very competent on the phone—when he had no idea what she looked like.

Susan Blythe had a mild case of Tourette's—this was something he deduced, rather than something she told him specifically. He didn't know about the Tourette's when he talked to her. When he first talked to her on the phone, he thought there were children in her office, because there were childlike noises coming from her end of the line.

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Ann here: Susan Blythe does not look like a supermodel, Robert. She's tall, but you really have no clue what a supermodel looks like, do you? The way I'm reading this is that all the women are beautiful. I'm beautiful, for which, thanks. Bonnie's pretty, Claire's totally hot, Susan Blythe is totally awesome-looking, and so forth. Your lawyer was imposing, but Jerry Hall she was not.

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He went to her office the next day and brought the paperwork. While yesterday had been gorgeous, today was hot and oppressive. Even his Civic seemed to struggle through the thick, humid air. The world had gone sluggish in the heat. This was summer in DC, even if it wasn't quite summer yet (which Robbie liked to point out). A high pressure system had set in and the sky was white and affectless.

Her office was in Old Town, and he parked, then struggled to find the right address. Inside, there were the requisite leather chairs, and a reception desk with no occupant. In a moment, he was greeted by a tall, statuesque and sort of terrifying Texan with the aforementioned build and the looks of a supermodel—and the interesting thing about that was that she didn't turn him on in the least.

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But he immediately liked her whole gestalt—looming and imposing—like she'd be as comfortable on a New York fashion runway as she would be in a courtroom as she would be on a horse roping cattle (which, he learned, she had done). As they sat and talked about 'his case' the whole Tourette's thing became clear. It had a certain kind of disarming appeal. She wasn't one of those people who would be talking to you in a completely normal way and then burst out in a stream of high pressure obscenities. Nor was she a barker, though her outbursts—if you could call them that—were more of that nature. She would be talking to you and then there would be a little tic and her head would bob slightly to the left, and her eyes would go a little blank, and then this very strange childlike babble would emerge. It almost sounded like there was a little, pre-verbal girl residing inside her, making herself known now and then. Which but also gave the overall impression of a kind of ventriloquism.

It was probably this, the combination of the looming super model looks and the Tourette's—in addition to the fact that she had one of the cheapest child custody retainer requirements of any of the lawyers he talked to—that made him decide to go with her.

I want to see my son, he said.

You will, she said. Warble. Where is he now?

In West Virginia, with his mom and grandparents. He's, um, they—Ann's a teacher and for the last few years they've always taken the first week and spent it in the mountains. Jack—my father-in-law, he's Jack Miles, famous trial attorney, that's what Ann calls him. Heard of him?

She shook her head. She had blond hair, which she wore just below the shoulders, the kind of blond hair that puts you in mind of waving fields of grain, of opulence and plenty.

Anyway, he loves to fish, Robbie, and he and Jack have a good time. (Talking about this was choking him up, because the past was closing up like a telescope, but on the other end, the future was expanding away from him, out of reach.)

I'll give Elaine a call, and then we can go from there.

Okay.

Just be patient, Robert. Sit tight and I'll call you later this afternoon. He nodded his head way too vigorously.

Am I going to have to move out?

She nodded. Even if it's only temporary. Warble. But yes.

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He had forgotten about the heat by the time he went back outside, and it slapped at him, made him sweat. Even so, when he found the Civic and climbed in, he didn't roll down the window or start it up or anything for a long moment. He just sat there in the superheated car and stared, dazed. He imagined that this was what it was like to find out that your diagnosis was, indeed, cancer, and your time was brief.

Anything can happen, and anything that can happen will happen.

There was a sudden, piercing guitar solo from his pocket, and he dug out his cell. He looked at the little screen—more weirdness—and it appeared that he was calling himself. He clicked on. Hello?, he said.

Robert, dude. Bob Grayson.

Robert was drenched in sweat and got out of the car. Robert said: I am not even going to comment on how weird it is that we appear to have the same phone number yet also have the capacity to call one another—or at least you me.

I know. Weird. Listen, real quick.

Yeah, what's up?

I think I ran into your Ann last night.

While it seemed completely logical that if he was going to run into himself, then his doppelgänger was going to run into his wife, or pretty much anyone else, but still it surprised him. He hadn't quite wrapped his head around this idea yet. And so there was a tremendous amount that was not exactly settled. Like, for example, was this really the impossible and another instantiation (as Leo would put it) of him. And other for examples. Like possible CIA or NSA involvement, but while the latter actually seemed more probable in the probabilistic sense (as Leo would say), it seemed

way easier to believe the former. Believing something like the latter would likely indicate paranoia and maybe some level of insanity. It was too hard to think.

I thought she was in West Virginia.

Maybe she came back, because I first thought it was my Ann, but then I didn't know the women she was with. Do you know Claire and Bonnie?

Robert said. Yeah. BFFs.

Then it was her. She.

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This little detail, the correction of the pronoun, which was exactly the kind of thing that he, Robert, would do, was the kind of detail that made Robert believe that this was all actually happening, as totally not-possible as it was. And it was exactly the kind of thing that Arlene would do.

There was way more than that, though. There were thousands of little things, countless, that tied me to him. The whole thing was so weird and uncanny, that I could be nothing other than certain that Bob was me, which kind of sounds like I'm saying Lock me up!, but that's how it was.

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I hope I didn't fuck anything up.

Robert was pacing the sidewalk now. What happened?

They were at a restaurant, outside, drinking margaritas.

Ann? Ann hates margaritas.

I'm just reporting the facts. My Ann has a grand passion for anything with even the slightest hint of ethanol in it. But be that as it may (he was talking rapidly, the way Robert talked when he was tanked up on caffeine), I was with Mia. She's a paralegal, a friend. She's sort of a fuckbuddy, you might say.

*A fuckbuddy?*

Yeah. She's incredibly hot. But anyway, I thought it was my Ann, and so I stopped at their table and introduced myself. I was kind of pissed, because she was out drinking again, and—

Is this a problem with your Ann?

Sort of, I mean one of them. One of her many stay-at-home mom diseases. Nothing like dissecting the entrails of the other neighborhood moms over cocktails—at noon.

So did anything happen, other than that?

No. I introduced myself, and Mia, then we left.

Mia, Robert repeated. Robert was trying to picture this, to imagine Ann's surprise. It offered a certain amount of schadenfreude-type glee in an otherwise pretty gloomy day.

So I mean I don't want to cause any awkwardness, and I thought you should know.

So what am I going to tell her?

Are you suffering a failure of imagination?

Will you stop saying that?

All right, then. Be creative.

I'm not sure I remember how.

There was a silence as though Bob might have been considering a retort. Then, he just said, Are we still going to meet tonight?

(Was he, himself, the Robert-Robert, like this? Was he this bullishly ignorant that what he might say might actually impact people, might actually affect events?)

Sure, Robert said. Burke Lake. The boat launch. Six.

See you at six, dude. Wear your running clothes.

(And also did he use 'dude' that much?)

When he got back in the car, Robert thought about not only Ann, but also about Claire and Bonnie, them seeing 'him' out and about with a babe. And acting as though it was nothing out of the norm. This made him grin. He rolled down the windows and turned up Pearl Jam. *Alive* was going to be his theme song for as long as this went on.

