

A Woman's Courage

Sylvia Baran

My perspective of working at a courthouse changed during my first year. I thought I saw and heard it all. I thought, "I'm strong, I can handle it ... so long as children or animals aren't involved, I'm fine." Right about then is when I saw Isobel testify.

Isobel is a beautiful petite woman who, at the time, was in her late 20s, about 5' tall, weighing about 100 pounds. She testified about how her ex-husband tried to choke her to death with a belt. Her ex was in his late 20s then, about 5'9", weighing at least 250 pounds. I could not believe the ordeal I was listening to; my mind struggled to take it all in. This tiny mother of two went through the kind of hell about which horror films are made.

He had beaten her so badly in the past that he was convicted of domestic violence and jailed. While out on probation, he beat her again and was jailed a second time for violating probation. He continued terrorizing her from jail by calling to tell her he was unhappy because she didn't visit or bring their children to visit. He promised when he got out, he was going to kill her.

Isobel was seated at the witness stand. Next to her was a victim's advocate who held Isobel's hand the entire time, feeding her an endless stream of tissues. The courtroom was ominously quiet and cold, and it felt unusually sterile. As she testified, Isobel's focus was toward the judge, staring more at the front of his bench than at him. When attorneys asked her questions, they spoke to her profile because she would not look in her ex-husband's direction. I kept thinking her composure was amazing given the graphic nature of questions being asked. She carefully listened to each question and after formulating her answer, she responded thoughtfully and deliberately.

The defendant, her ex, had a vacant scowl on his face the entire time. He deliberately glared at Isobel, angrily trying to intimidate her; mad dogging, it's called. She was having none of it. She was going to tell her story. Full stop. Isobel described that he was released from jail *that* day, a day that she had to work by herself late into the evening. She didn't usually confide in anyone about her fears, but that morning she did. She told her friend her ex was going to be released that day and she feared he would come for her. That fear became a reality when he burst through the office doors that evening, screaming at her as she sat alone. He was mad. He yelled that she was his bitch and she belonged to him. Isobel dialed 911 but he saw, ran over, and ripped the phone out of the wall. Isobel ran and dialed 911 from another phone, but he chased her and jerked that phone out of the wall, too. Neither call went through.

She ran again but he caught and cornered her in the breakroom and easily overpowered her. He kept screaming that he was going to kill her, she could never get away from him, and he would take the kids from her. Holding her by a fistful of her hair, he physically thrashed her around the kitchen while opening cabinet doors. He said he was looking for a place to stuff her dead body. He hooked his belt around Isobel's neck and thus began a 45-minute choking nightmare.

During this hellish ordeal, the phone rang. Somehow Isobel convinced her ex that it was probably her boss calling to ensure she was working because he let her answer the phone. The caller wasn't her boss; it was the friend Isobel confided earlier. She screamed into the phone, "He's here! He's here!" and this fast-thinking friend called the police and drove to her office. The police arrived and found all the doors locked with only her car in the parking lot. When they called the office, no one answered the phone. Meanwhile her friend called Isobel's supervisor, insisting that she come to the office right away to unlock the door. Thankfully, she did. When they went in and heard the commotion in the breakroom, the police negotiation for her release began.

The defense attorney asked her, "You say he had a belt around your neck for at least a half an hour. What did you do all that time?" Her expression became reflective, recalling memories of that day. She took a deep breath and described how she tried to wedge her hands between the belt and her neck so she could create room to breathe. "Why didn't you try to get away?" Dumbstruck by the question, Isobel quickly regained her composure. Her face did not hide her revulsion as she answered, yet her words sounded calm and matter-of-fact: "I was trying to stay alive. I was trying to breathe." She described in vivid detail how it felt for her arms and legs to go numb, how it felt to teeter in and out of consciousness, and how much it hurt to be jerked around the room by her hair and by the belt around her neck. She described the severe pain of having so much pressure built up in her head, how it felt like her eyes were going to burst, but they wouldn't. Isobel felt like she was slowly dying and through all those moments while she tried to stay alive, she said she thought about her children.

As luck would have it, the TV show "COPS" was filming with the local police that day and recorded it all. It was about a two-minute video, and it captured this intense melee:

A police officer speaking to Isobel through the breakroom door: "Isobel, what's he doing right now?" Her gurgled response was gut-wrenching, "He's choking me. Hurry up!" Her ex yelled, "Shut up, bitch! You're mine! No one can have you!" The police demanded one last time that he open the door. Then four or five police officers rammed the locked breakroom door and rushed the defendant. Isobel stood facing her ex, her head pulled back awkwardly, one hand limply stuck between the belt and her neck. An officer shot him with a taser. The defendant fell to the ground and jerked Isobel by the neck to the ground with him. Her body flew through the air like a ragdoll and landed hard on the floor. More police came and scuffled to get ahold of the belt that nearly choked the life out of Isobel. The video was punctuated with the defendant's endless high-pitched shrill screaming and officers demanding, *"Let go! Let go! Get the belt! Get the belt out of his hand! Get her out of here! Get her out of here, now!"*

Two police officers emerged from the side of the scuffling pile of humanity, dragging Isobel's lifeless body from the room (one officer holding her by the hands, one by the ankles). Isobel's head slumped forward and flopped expressionless from side-to-side. They laid her on the ground outside to receive medical attention.

I was in shock. My mouth hung open and my hands shook involuntarily. If she hadn't been sitting nearby in the courtroom, I was convinced she died that day. Her skin was a tomblike pale

white. The belt was so tight that it caused her head to swell heavily, creating a distorted pumpkin-like shape. Her face was unrecognizably swollen. Blood streaked down her face from her eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. The contrast of red blood against white skin was ghoulish and made her look like a sci-fi creature.

At some point, I squeezed my eyes shut trying to force that image from my mind. I remember hearing screams, orders being shouted, and lots of scuffling sounds coming from the video. Then my mind raced back to the courtroom and to Isobel. She sat holding hands with the advocate watching the video with tears streaming down her face. Her whole body was shaking. Unlike me, she did not look away.

The defendant stared blankly at the video and occasionally looked back at Isobel gleefully. I couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking. Was he proud? Did he understand or care about what he did? What happened to him to make him do that? How did he become the person sitting in the courtroom that day? No one – *no one!* – deserves to be treated like that.

When the jury returned with their verdict later that day (guilty on all counts), Isobel and her advocate sat together in the back of the courtroom. A sense of relief filled the air because he was going to jail for a very long time. Isobel buried her face in the advocate's shoulder and let herself be hugged. They rocked back and forth together and cried. The advocate wiped her own tears and handed Isobel more tissues. The advocate kissed Isobel on the head in a very motherly, nurturing way. The advocate's feelings and obvious compassion for Isobel undoubtedly came from having spent so much time together preparing to re-live this nightmare during the trial and face her ex again. How could the advocate re-live this type of ordeal with someone and not create an intense bond?

I looked at Isobel's beautiful face and beautiful long hair and tried to assimilate all this brave young woman had experienced in her brief life. I wanted to memorize a face full of life, a soul full of potential, and a future filled with love and caring support. I needed to dump the near-death image I saw.

Some minutes later I realized the ominous silence had returned to the courtroom. Jurors were leaving and wiping tears from their eyes. The judge and courtroom staff looked down trying to keep their hands busy, and avoided each other's gaze. How long would it take them to release the tumult of this case? How long would the image of Isobel's distorted face be in their mind? And for the advocate, how long would it be before she had to sit with another crime victim and go through this gut-wrenching process again?

Then I looked at Isobel again and thought, "Wow! That woman has courage!" I realized then that the word "courage" means different things for different people. For some, it means summoning the will to speak before a large audience. For others, it means bungy jumping to overcome a fear of falling. Or maybe it means being a first responder/medical professional working during a pandemic. That day, my definition of courage increased to include another word: *Isobel*. Despite the unimaginable abuse she endured for years, culminating with that final horrible act, she willed herself to stay alive. Where did she get her stamina? Where did she find the strength to face her abuser in court? She was heard in court that day and for all her nights

to come, she will be able to sleep a little better knowing he is jailed. She will return to work and will continue to raise and inspire her children.

I raced home that day, hugged, and thanked my husband for being such a wonderful person. I promised myself that I will remember Isobel if ever I feel uncertain. I will also think about the resilient victim's advocate who opened her heart to that awful pain to support Isobel while she testified. I will be enormously grateful to Isobel for teaching me a valuable lesson in courage by her powerful example. I committed that day to recognize the reality of domestic violence, that it is everywhere among us, and that we must move heaven and earth to help every woman, child, and man escape from it.

Although she will never know me, I will always know her. ***A Woman's Courage*** has changed me and opened my eyes forever.
