

Honor Killing

By Robert B. Nelson

Not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. Bernie Atwell smiled as he read the disposition sheet in the *People v Christina Reeves* file. He had opened the file hundreds of times in the last 35 years, but this would be the last. He tossed it gently in the trash.

Atwell was planning to take down his shingle at the end of the week and move to Florida, having practiced law in Dearborn, Michigan for 42 years. He had sold his house, his car, most of the furnishings in his law office and house, as well as all his suits and ties. When she knocked on the door of his office on the first floor of a two-story building, he was wearing an old pair of jeans and was cleaning out his desk. He had dismissed his secretary several weeks ago so the tall, olive-skinned woman with a scarf covering her hair and neck was not asked to fill out a client information form. Despite the 35-degree temperature outside, beads of sweat formed on her brow as she sat down in the dust-covered chair across from Atwell. She was the first person who had sat in the chair for more than four months and most likely the last.

“How may I help you?” he asked.

“Well, I ... think I need an attorney.”

“And why is that?”

The woman paused. “You first have to assure me that what I say here will not be repeated.”

“Of course, ma’am. Attorneys are required to maintain the confidences of their clients and prospective clients. I must tell you that I will be leaving for Florida in a few days and closing my practice here. But I can give you some advice and assure you that no one else will ever know what you tell me. If you need additional help, I can refer you to someone you can trust.”

“So there’s no way that what I tell you will be used against me?”

“Not unless you tell me I can, or if you tell me you are about to commit a crime. Then I can divulge that information because I might be able to stop that crime if I did so.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

The woman appeared to be in her mid-twenties and spoke perfect English with a very slight Middle-Eastern accent. Although something in her voice was familiar to Atwell, he could not recall seeing her before.

“Now, why do you think you need an attorney?”

“Well, my sister may have killed her husband.”

“I see. You’re not sure she did?”

“No. She told me she did. She was...” the woman pulled out a tissue from her purse and dried her tears.

“Take your time, ma’am.” Atwell was regretting his decision to talk to the woman. He had a lot of loose ends to tie up with his practice and knew he was not going to make any money from talking to her. He would just hear her story and refer her to his friend, Sam Sullivan. In 40 years of practice, he had never refused to talk to a potential client.

“My sister was married to a real brute. It was an arranged marriage. They moved to Dearborn from Egypt three years ago. Last year, she got a job and was asked by her boss to stay after work several times. Her husband found out and thought she was seeing her boss, you know, in a ...”

“In an intimate way?”

“Yes. But she was not. She pleaded with her husband not to punish her. He choked her and beat until she had bruises all over her body. One night she went to bed and heard him talking downstairs. She crept down the stairs and heard him say on his cell phone that his honor was at stake. He was going on a business trip in the morning and when he returned, he would kill her. She

went back to bed and thought of a plan to save her life. She would wait for him to return from his trip and hide behind the front door with a kitchen knife. When he stepped through the front door, she would stab him in the back. And that's exactly what she did." The woman began sobbing.

"It's warm in here. Can I take your coat?"

The woman tightened the scarf around her neck. "No, thank you. Do you think you could help my sister?"

"Well, as I said, I will be leaving in a few days but I can refer you to another attorney, Sam Sullivan. He's got an office in Detroit. Mr. Sullivan has represented many criminal clients and is very good."

"Do you think she is in trouble?"

"I'm afraid so. She not only killed her husband, but she carried out a plan to do so. She'll probably be charged with first-degree murder."

"But she was going to be killed herself. Isn't that what they call self-defense?"

Atwell shook his head. "No, you have to be in immediate danger in order to claim self-defense. If she had waited for her husband to come after her and then stabbed him, she could probably say it was self-defense."

"But he was too strong. She would never have been able to overpower him. Haven't there been cases in this country where women have killed their husband and have been, how you say, found innocent?"

"Not guilty. Yes. There was a case in this state some 30 years ago. A woman set a fire near her husband's bed and burned down her house with her husband still asleep. But that was not self-defense. She was not in any immediate danger. She was found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity."

"What does that mean?"

“Basically, it means that she had temporarily lost her ability to think straight because her husband had beaten and threatened her so many times. The jury apparently felt that if she was so fearful of her husband that she had to burn her own house down, she must not have been sane at the time.”

“So my sister would be better off if she burns her house down?”

“You mean if she had burned her house down?”

The woman looked sheepish. “Yes, of course.”

“If she was in immediate danger, perhaps. But from what you tell me, her husband was going on a trip and she had plenty of time to get away.”

“But she too had been beaten and she knew he would find her and kill her.”

“She could have called the police while he was away on his trip.”

“Did the woman who burned her house down call the police?”

“Many times.”

“And she was still not protected?”

“Well, when this happened, we were not dealing with domestic violence in the same way we do today. In fact, her case helped to raise awareness of the issue and we would probably do more to protect her now.”

The woman looked puzzled. “Would they have taken her word against her husband’s?”

“You’ve got a point. The police would not necessarily have believed your sister if her husband denied his intention to kill her. Even today, if someone can’t get the police to respond and they are so fearful of their spouse that they feel they have no choice but to kill, they might be judged temporarily insane.”

“So there’s a chance my sister might be able to say she was insane at the time she stabbed her husband?”

Atwell did not want to argue. "If anyone can help your sister, it's Mr. Sullivan. I will give you his phone number. You can call his office today and set up an appointment." Atwell tore off a sheet from a legal pad, wrote down Sullivan's phone number, and handed it to the woman.

"By the way, did your sister call the police?"

"No."

"So her husband's body is still at her house?"

"I don't know. I have not been there."

"All right. I would encourage you to have your sister call the police as soon as possible. The authorities will have more sympathy for her if she doesn't try to cover this up."

"Thank you, Mr. Atwell. I will contact Mr. Sullivan. If he is not available right away, can I continue to call you?"

"I will be leaving for good in a few days, but I will consider you a client until you can meet with Mr. Sullivan."

"Thank you. Just so I'm clear, nothing I told you here today will be repeated to anyone?"

"That's correct."

Atwell got out of his chair and walked the woman to the door. As soon as she left the building, he realized he had forgotten to get her name. Well, no matter, he thought. He wasn't going to collect any money from her and would most likely not see her again.

* * *

Atwell continued cleaning out his desk. He was still thinking about the woman when he locked up the office and headed to the apartment he had rented following the sale of his house. He poured himself a stiff drink and began reading the newspaper. His cat, Arlo, curled up on his lap. Atwell's wife had died 10 years ago and Atwell had bought the cat shortly after her funeral. "Well Arlo, are you ready to head to Florida?" The cat purred softly.

The next day, Atwell went back to the office. Shortly after midday, he called Sullivan. “Sam,” he said cheerfully, “it’s Bernie.”

“Bernie, my friend. I thought you had left for Florida already.”

“No, I’ve got a few days left here. Say, did an Arab woman come to see you either yesterday or today?”

“No. What would she be seeing me about?”

“I think she may need your help. I can’t tell you what she told me, but I referred her to you.”

“If she comes into see me, I’ll give you a call.”

“Yeah, use my cell number in case I’m sunning myself on the beach.”

“You know how to hurt a guy. You have a great retirement, my friend.”

“Thanks.”

Bernie hung up and began second-guessing himself. Maybe he should have asked the woman if she wanted him to call the police. After all, her sister’s husband could still be alive and if he had called the police yesterday, he might have saved the guy’s life. Maybe it’s not too late. I could call the police now, he thought. He could kick himself for not getting her name.

“Dearborn Police Department, Officer Cranston.”

“Officer Cranston, my name is Bernie Atwell. I’m an attorney here in the city. Yesterday, I talked to a young Arab woman who claims her sister killed her husband, somewhere in the area.”

“Do you have the name of the perpetrator?”

“No, unfortunately, I don’t. I was just calling to see if anyone had reported such an incident, say, in the last week.”

“Mr. Atwell, we don’t give out details of our investigations.”

“I don’t want any details, officer. I just want to know if such a crime were reported. If not, the husband may still be alive.”

“I’m not aware of any such case, but then again I’m not aware of everything that’s being investigated by our department. If you don’t have a name or an address, I’m sorry, but there’s not much we can do.”

“Thank you, sir.”

* * *

Three days later, Bernie was taking a cab to the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, where he would say goodbye to Michigan. He had Arlo in a carrier on his lap. It was 4:45 pm. The cab was within 10 minutes of the airport when his phone rang.

“Bernie Atwell.”

“Mr. Atwell, this is Kim from *Lanyers of Michigan News*. We want to confirm the fact that you no longer want your classified ad to run, the one concerning your furniture and law books.”

“That’s correct. I have closed my practice for good.”

“Thank you. We will cancel the ad.”

Bernie recalled the day that he placed the ad. He had talked to someone other than Kim. He told her that he was closing his practice and wanted to try to sell his law books, most of them dealing with criminal law and procedure. Then it hit him like a thunderbolt. The voice. His nameless client was the same person who took down the information for his ad. The office she called from was in Detroit. My God, he thought. She must have chosen him for an attorney because she knew he was a criminal lawyer and was closing his practice soon. He would be gone before her sister’s case was resolved. But why?

Bernie opened his phone and selected “Incoming Calls” on the menu. He located the number for his most recent call and hit “Send.” “*Lanyers of Michigan News*. This is Kim.”

“Kim, I just spoke to you. This is Bernie Atwell. Do you have someone working there who is Arab, by any chance?”

“Why yes, we did. Azeeza Farwani. But she quit five days ago.”

“Do you have a phone number for her?”

“We can’t reveal that information, sir.”

“Look, Kim. I believe Ms. Farwani is in a great deal of trouble. I can’t reveal what she told me because of the attorney-client privilege, but if you don’t give me her phone number, I can assure you you’ll be in a lot of trouble.”

Kim said nothing for 10 seconds. “You won’t let anyone know I gave you her number will you?”

“I promise. Consider this a privileged conversation.”

“All right.” Kim gave Atwell the number for Farwani and he dialed it immediately. After a few seconds, Azeeza picked up the phone.

“Hello.”

“This is attorney Atwell. You spoke to me in my office several days ago.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. “What do you want?”

“I want to know if you have spoken to Mr. Sullivan yet.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t really need him.”

“But your sister needs a good attorney. She is in a great deal of trouble. Has she contacted the police yet?”

“No. She left for Europe yesterday.”

“Europe? Do you realize that you could be in trouble for aiding and abetting a fugitive?”

“As long as my sister is safe, I don’t care.”

“But they will track her down.”

“Only if they can prove she did anything.”

“Look, Ms. Farwani, they will find her husband’s body and they will be able to link her to the crime through fingerprints on the knife or through her DNA.”

“That seems like another reason for burning the house down.”

“You mean that if she had burned the house down, she would be better off.”

“Yes, of course.”

“But she didn’t burn down the house and there is probably more than enough evidence in the house to convict her. You have to contact Mr. Sullivan and tell him everything you know.”

“Everything I have told you today will be confidential then?”

“But you’re not my client anymore.”

“You told me that until I saw Mr. Sullivan, you would keep our conversations in confidence.”

The cab driver announced that they were arriving at the airport. Arlo began to meow and Bernie set the cat carrier on the seat. “I’m going to have to sign off now, but I have to ask you one question. Can you tell me why you chose me as an attorney? Was it because you knew I wouldn’t be around to help your sister?”

Azeeza did not answer. Bernie set the phone down so he could get out his wallet and pay the cab driver. When he picked up the phone again, the line was dead.

* * *

When Bernie arrived in Florida, he rented a car and drove to a hotel in West Palm Beach. Several days later, as he was scanning the newspaper for apartment rentals, his cell phone rang. “Bernie, this is Sam. Thanks for sending that Arab woman my way. Even though she didn’t mention your name, I got to believe it’s her. She saw me yesterday, the day after the fire.”

Bernie’s heart skipped a beat. “What fire?”

“It was the lead story in the *Free Press* this morning, but you probably didn’t see it in the Florida papers. The police think this woman torched her house two days ago with her husband inside. He had just returned from a trip. She was very distraught when she came to see me and wasn’t thinking straight. Even if they can prove she did it, I’m convinced we have a good shot at getting her off with a temporary insanity defense, like that case you handled a long time ago.”

“Christina Reeves?”

“Yeah. Anyway, this woman’s husband choked and beat her so badly that she’s got bruises all over her neck and back. He then threatened to kill her just because she stayed late for work with her boss. Can you believe it? I think the Muslims have a name for what he wanted to do.”

“An honor killing.”

“Right. I can’t believe this guy would think her life would be less important than his honor, especially when she didn’t even cheat on him. But hey, you saw her last week, before the fire. What did she want from you?”

“Oh, she just wanted to help her sister.”

“Hmmm ... she told me she doesn’t have any siblings in this country. She moved here three years ago with her husband from Egypt. Maybe this is a different gal. There are a lot of Arab Americans in Michigan.”

“What’s her name?”

“Let’s see ... I’ve got it here somewhere. Yes, Azeeza Farwani.”

Bernie remembered another exception to the confidentiality rule. If he had innocently helped someone with an illegal act, he could rectify it, but he was not required to do so.

“Yeah, it was somebody else. Good luck with your case.”

“Thanks, Bernie.” Bernie turned off his cell phone, picked up Arlo, and headed to the beach.