

UGLY SHOES

Dr Murado stood motionless in his New Orleans office, rooted to the floor. His white medical coat hung still, not even the air conditioning vent blowing overhead moved it. The game was in his mind. Like a hard-throwing baseball pitcher, his mind threw questions fast.

Every doctor takes an oath, but every doctor still has to decide what is ethical. This was the biggest ethical decision of his life. If he struck out on this one, the loss would be too big to bear. He had to get it right.

Ever since coming to the U.S. to attend medical school, Abraham Murado, now known as Brad Murado, blended easily into the melting pot. In New Orleans, it seemed everyone had a mixed heritage of Spanish, French, Native American, and/or Acadian. His slightly tanned skin did not look out-of-place. A good-looking fit man, he played golf, married, had kids, – basically living an ordinary, wonderful life. His reputation among plastic surgeons was excellent. His colleagues told him, “Hey, if it’s me or my family, I want you. You’re the best.”

Yes, he was the best. He glanced at the manila folder on his desk in plain sight. “Private” was written in Arabic on the tab. The word reminded him of his past not known by many people. Now, it felt as though “the best” was a curse. And, having family roots in the Middle East, whom he loved, provided an extra twist to his curse.

It was not that he couldn’t imagine how to do the surgeries he had been “asked” to perform. He was a skilled, trained surgeon who took on problems that other surgeons backed away from. No, he would be able to stitch donor nipples over existing nipples,

leaving space for an explosive gel infusion. That was simple enough. It was the purpose of the surgery that stopped him in his tracks.

He knew he did not know the whole story behind this “request.” But, he knew enough to surmise that two people, (1 man, 1 woman) having explosive gel in their bodies would be able to give a sharp hit to the their chests and set off a massive and deadly explosion.

According to the letter in the folder, Dr Murado would not be told who they were or where they would go after surgery. He could only imagine that their mission would lead to their own suicides, and more likely, death and maiming of others. Ironically, he thought, he may be called on to deliver care to those who lived. He’d delicately put people back together many times over but he knew that some wounds became scars he couldn’t repair.

Finally, Dr Murado took a step toward his desk and picked up the folder. He read the folder’s contents before laying it back on his desk. No need to hide it; he was the only one who could read Arabic in his office, he thought. He paced – solemnly.

The Team

Dr Murado’s medical team included himself, his nurse Della, and the anesthesiologist, Fred. They had worked together so much they intuited the surgical process, speaking very little during a patient’s surgery. Talk about surgeries was done before surgeries, often during informal lunches in the office. But, this time, there would be no discussion about the upcoming surgery.

When Della breezed in to work that morning, she immediately saw the file on Dr. Murado’s desk, but pretended she didn’t. The Arabic writing on the folder stood out.

Although Dr Murado did not know this about his nurse, she spoke and wrote Arabic fluently, like her twin brother, Adeem Presley. Dean, as he called himself now, worked for Homeland Security and was stationed at the Louis Armstrong airport. Della had been happy when he landed that job because it meant they could share their lives again, as they had as children. They had always looked out for one another.

Besides the new folder, Della sensed something wasn't right. Several times during the day, she caught herself watching Dr Murado. He was quiet, distant. Maybe there had been an argument at home, she thought. After all, with a wife and teenaged daughter there had to be some days that left a shadow.

Today was her day to lock the office, making her the last person to leave. She had never snooped in Dr Murado's office before, but today she opened the folder on his desk and read the letter. She felt her knees give way a little and she could hear her heart beat in her ears.

She read the threats toward Dr Murado's family if he didn't do as "asked." She felt weak and faint. She now understood Dr Murado's mood change she noticed today. He was under the gun, literally, to participate in a plan bigger than himself; a plan requiring loyalty to countrymen and faith.

She placed the folder back on Dr Murado's desk, and moved toward the back door. She couldn't wait to get out of the building and catch her breath. But, once outside, she was overcome with the feeling of being watched. "Your penance for snooping," she told herself.

She fished for her phone in her purse and dialed her brother's number and asked the coded question "Can we meet for coffee?"

The Meeting

“LM at 7” he replied, the code for La Madeline’s restaurant. His shift would be over at 6 p.m. A light dinner and a cup of strong black coffee would serve as a pleasant backdrop for seeing his sister. LM’s had marvelous food. No cooking tonight.

The coded question was rarely used between them, The last time it was used, his sister had revealed she was getting a divorce and wanted to know if she should hire a Private Investigator or just get on with it. Maybe she had met someone. He might hire a PI, he thought with a grin on his face.

Dean pulled into the parking lot in his non-distinct silver car and parked away from his sister’s flashy yellow sports car. Despite being fraternal twins, they shared similar body types – lean with graceful, quick-moving strides. His hair blonder than hers; both had light freckles across the nose.

He saw her at the far table, facing the window still wearing her scrubs. She had gone through the serving line and chosen tomato bisque and iced tea. He chose the bisque, Caesar salad, and bottled water and coffee. Trying not to spill his soup, he placed his tray on the table and unloaded everything onto the table before hugs.

It was good to see her but he noticed that her face was tense. Both looked around and made small talk until they were sure they could talk without someone overhearing them.

Della began. Dean interrupted.

“Who wrote the letter?”

“Can’t tell”

“ When is the surgery?”

“ Don’t know.”

“ Has the explosive gel been delivered?”

“ Don’t think so.”

At the same time, they said, “we have to substitute something for the explosive gel.”

Dean said he would take care of it. A package would arrive, mailed to her. It would look like ordinary office supplies. It would be up to her to switch the gels.

Dangerous work.

Vacation

Dr Murado needed a vacation - alone. He had planned the details of it the day he paced in his office. He told his wife and staff that he was going to attend a conference in Tokyo. Della wondered if he would offer her a ticket. They often attended together to learn new surgical procedures. He didn’t. But, he did tell everyone that the office would be closed the week he was away. A week off sounded good to everyone. What the staff didn’t know was that Dr Murado thought he might be dead by that week.

His secret plan (he thought) was to use his ticket to fly to LA where he planned to “miss” the next leg of the flight to Tokyo. He had arranged, instead to go to a Buddhist monastery located in a remote mountain setting in California. He needed to get away. He needed to both hide and face himself for what he planned to do.

The Surgery

Pacing had unlodged an answer. With every step, Dr Murado planned the surgery. He agreed to perform the surgery – in his office – dead of night with his trusted team and The Watcher.

The Watcher arrived first at 2 a.m. He never spoke except to say, in his native tongue, “They are here. Here is the gel. Are you ready?”

Dr Murado nodded and pointed the way. The couple, a man dressed in jeans, button-down striped shirt, casual loafers and a woman, dressed in blue pants and matching top, high-heeled shoes, and wearing a hijab covering her hair, neck and upper body. Della showed them into separate changing rooms.

Fred, the good-ole-boy anesthesiologist, didn’t ask any questions but he was certainly curious. He mostly worked days, assisting with tummy tucks, liposuction, eye-lid lifts and such. He liked his job. He had plenty of time off for fishing and tracking game. He waited for Dr Murado’s explanation about this surgery. He received none.

The patients were prepared. The woman was first. Fred and Della watched as Dr. Murado carefully lifted donor nipples and secured them on top of the woman’s own nipples. Fred thought it must be some sort of kinky stuff, but then he saw Della hand over a syringe of gel to Dr Murado, which he inserted into the new nipple until it was plump. This caused Fred to think “definitely weird” and he looked over at Della with a raised brow; she tightened her lips together to acknowledge his unspoken question and to convey a non-verbal agreement –“don’t ask.”

Dr Murado worked quickly. As soon as the woman’s surgery was completed she was moved to the side to recover. The Watcher monitored her and seemed concerned about her hands remaining still. Next, Dr. Murado performed the same procedure on the

man. Fred thought, “good thing the HIPPA laws prevent me from talking. This is a story to tell!”

Recovery time was normal and uneventful for both patients. Before daylight, The Watcher drove the patients away. Dr Murado should have breathed a sign of relief but he didn't. Maybe, if he had known that Della had switched the gel, he would have, but she couldn't risk telling him what she had done – yet.

Clarissa's Trip

Ever since Clarissa's husband, Jimmy, was convicted as a serial killer and sent to prison, she had suffered bouts of feeling angry and embarrassed. She constantly questioned herself about why she had not seen any clues about what her husband had been up to. She really was the last to know. She never wanted to feel that way again.

She had spent the last year researching behavioral specialists, how to read people, and understanding subtle body cues. She learned that El Al Airlines used behavioral specialists to interview passengers, looking for hijackers and terrorists.

What Clarissa didn't know was that U.S. Homeland Security officers had ramped up their training in a similar fashion to El Al's. Instead of interviews, they used technology and the eyes of trained experts first. If they spotted someone, they conducted an interview and sometimes a Marshall(s) rode on the plane.

Clarissa had signed up for a “Learn Body Language” weekend course in Carmel, CA. The lawyer she worked for told her he didn't see why she was hung up on learning this but he would support her. Heck, she could screen clients before they came into his office!

On the day of her flight, Clarissa arrived at the Louis Armstrong airport in New Orleans feeling light and excited. Always a people watcher, she especially liked to look at shoes. But today, maybe she would begin to “practice” body language while she stood in line to check her bag and to pass clearance. She scanned the people around her, labeling them “okay” and “not okay, look closer,” in her mind. She saw two women wearing hijabs, indicating they were Muslim. Scarves covered their hair, as well as their foreheads, shoulders, neck and breasts, leaving a small opening for their faces. They stood out in a crowd. Most people were wearing shorts and skimpy clothes on this hot day. She had chosen a pretty sundress for comfort and to set the tone for her trip. No professional office clothes today.

The women wearing hijab’s and long black skirts were in line in front of her, giving her full license to wonder about how they stood being covered up and the implications of womanhood in another culture. Clarissa mulled that had she been born in another part of the world that could be her, too. She was feeling rather sorry for them when she felt a visceral flinch. She noticed it but was distracted when she had to take her shoes off and remove her computer from her pull-on computer case. She noticed that the women were scanned and patted, but were not required to remove their hijabs.

As was her custom, Clarissa stopped by the ladies room. It was there that she noticed the ugly shoes the woman in the next stall wore. They were loafer-style shoes, old and worn. She even had on ugly socks. This reminder her of her friend who went into the men’s bathroom by mistake at the truck stop and then reported to everyone about the ugly shoes the woman in the next stall had on. It had become a funny story among friends.

However, Clarissa could see the hem of a black skirt and knew it must be one of the women she had observed earlier. Then she noticed not only was the woman wearing ugly shoes, her feet were pointed toward the commode and she could hear pee. “How did she do that?” Clarissa wondered. Clarissa tried to convince herself that she heard flushing and, after all, when she flushed, her feet pointed toward the commode. Right? Her gut flinched again.

Clarissa opened the stall door and saw the women washing their hands. The shorter one turned to get a paper towel and bumped into the larger woman. A look passed between them that caught Clarissa’s attention. Maybe they are not supposed to touch. Maybe it was a cultural thing – she thought. Clarissa’s gut flinched again. She tried to ignore it.

Clarissa gave herself a once over in the mirror and liked what she saw. She had never considered herself homely or mousy until she saw her picture splattered on TV and the newspapers during Jimmy’s trial. Now, what she had considered a girly hair-do, had been changed to a highlighted strawberry blond cut fit for a talk show host. She liked what she saw.

She left the ladies room and found herself walking behind the two women. Something wasn’t right. The taller one held her arms away from her body and had an odd gait, rather lumbering for a woman. Maybe the ugly shoes didn’t fit well, she thought. The smaller woman walked alongside and didn’t catch her attention as much as the taller woman. Clarissa thought she was rather pretty, from what she could see.

Clarissa saw the women exchange looks. Maybe they were communicating to each other that they were at the gate. Clarissa realized they were waiting for the same

flight. Still “practicing,” she sat a little way back so she could observe them without them noticing her scrutiny. She looked more at the one wearing ugly shoes. She had course features, heavy eyebrows and she looked at her hands with her fingers bent toward the palms of her hands---like men do. Clarissa felt the sweat gathering on the back of her neck and blood draining from her face. She absolutely knew one of the women was NOT a woman, but a disguised woman.

Clarissa’s enthusiasm for her trip evaporated in a blink. She was scared. She told herself, “you can’t just sit here!” She impulsively decided that she would not get on the plane. She would wait for another flight but that sounded silly and paranoid. She got up and walked around the gate area, looking for a security guard all the while, feeling sick and a little crazy. Any other time there would be security all over the place, right? She imagined she looked a sight, sweating and, by then, panicked stricken.

Clarissa held her face still, hearing her heart beat in her ears, she wanted to bolt and run. She watched the women openly now.

Homeland Security

Earlier in the week, Dean briefed his colleagues Homeland Security agents Jack B. Bear and Sugar Cannon about his sister’s reports. Today, Dean, Sugar, and Jack B. were in the Homeland Security office watching monitors and holding a running chit-chat about passengers. Jack had noticed a pretty strawberry blond woman on his monitor screen. He would look away but found himself returning to look for her again.

He always found her trailing two women wearing hijabs. She walked behind them then sat behind them. She changed seats but it was to get closer to them. His initial interest graduated to concern.

Jack B. Bear, a seasoned behavioral specialist with Native American heritage, trusted his instincts, like a good tracker. His grandmother had named him Jack Brave Bear, but Jack told everyone the B stood for Bullet.

“Hey guys, look at that one. What’s your take?” Jack B said, keeping his voice under control.

Dean said, “Looks hostile to me. Maybe she has something against Arab women? You think she’s going to cause a scene? She’s agitated about something.”

Sugar poked her head between the men to see the screen. “No. She’s scared—to death.”

Sugar Belle Cannon, grew up in a series of Southern “white trash” trailer parks. As a girl she learned to watch everyone, including the guys who drove around in pickup trucks with mismatching colored doors and dog boxes in the truck bed for their hound dogs. She learned to read faces.

Jack spoke up again. “I’ve been watching her. She knows something. I’m not sure what the connection is to her and the two women – yet, but she knows.”

Dean, remembering the call from his sister, “Jack! They could be armed. My sister...

Jack remembered the security meeting. Jumping from his chair, he reached for his packed bag near the door. He was already vested. “I’m on the plane. Set your radio to my call. Call for backup. Be ready to lock down.”

Boarding Time

When the call came for “group 4” it was Clarissa’s time to board the plane. She told the agent, who stamped her boarding pass, that she needed to talk to a security officer; he looked up and said, “tell it to the steward on the plane.”

Dean and Sugar were quick and trained for this event they had hoped would never come. Jack B Bear strode confidently past all security officers, nodding “The Nod,” that meant keep working, be alert, follow the plan. A high 5 to the agent meant, “give me 5 minutes then lock it down.”

Jack made his way to the gangway and, without causing attention to himself, settled into his 1st class seat (always reserved) third row back, left aisle. First class, elderly, and parents traveling with children were already on board. He ignored the tension in his jaw, which he’d never been able to control. Purposefully, he tensed his leg muscles, as a sprinter would, ready to spring. Business-looking people, obvious vacationers, and two women with wearing scarves, were seated in first class.

Economy boarding began. Clarissa moved slowly as though she were walking a gang -plank. She told herself “I’m just making things up.” She could see daylight between the gangway and the open door to the plane. “Okay, this is all going to be okay,” as she entered the cabin dragging her computer bag behind her. As she got the bag centered to roll down the aisle, she glanced up and saw the two women. Their eyes locked. Suddenly, it was clear. They knew that she knew.

Jack bolted from his seat, and grabbed Clarissa. He pushed her backwards with such force, she almost fell onto her computer bag. “Out! Out! Get Back! Get Out!” he said to her in a forceful low voice that only the few, now worried and curious passengers, could hear.

Clarissa backed up. The stewardess halted passengers to help Jack and Clarissa get off the plane. As soon as they were off the plane and over to the side, Jack said, “What do you know?” Almost hyperventilating, Clarissa managed to blurt out, “ One of those women is not a woman.”

Chest Pounding

A mixture of screams coming from inside the plane stopped Jack and Clarissa’s “conversation.” The steward was helping passengers deplane in an orderly fashion. Some passengers tried to run but most walking fast, with a dazed look on their faces, phone to ear. Everyone was calling someone, it seemed. The screams continued inside the plane.

Jack pushed his radio call signal and ran into the plane, weapon drawn. He saw the two women, standing, beating their chests and screaming loudly. They looked at each other with a frightened and surprised look on their faces.

Dean and Sugar arrived and boarded the plane. In Arabic, Dean said, “come with me.”

Jack B Bear walked back to Clarissa. He wanted to know more about her. She had captured his attention with her looks before he noticed her stalking the two women. He whisked her up the private elevator to his office.

“Are you arresting me?” she asked.

“No, I’m protecting you from the media and I have a few questions for you. Name? “

Clarissa filled him in on who she was, where she was going and why. Dean and Sugar joined them. They were talking on phones, texting on others; stopping

conversations, starting another in rapid fire. Other agents glanced away from their monitors to give a “thumbs up” sign. No one dared look away from the monitors now.

But Sugar said to Jack, “Jack Bullet Bear, well done”

Bullet? Clarissa asked.

Jack blushed a bit and Clarissa, still learning body language, tactfully asked “maybe that’s not the whole story?”

“Brave. My Native American grandmother named me Jack Brave Bear,” he said.

“What?” Dean and Sugar said.

“Don’t start, Jack said.

“I love it”, said Sugar. “Your grandmother knew best.”

A call came in. Jack said, “Okay, let’s re-board the plane and get out of here!”

Starting Over

Rounding up the passengers was not hard. They had clumped together like day-lily bulbs; stuck together and hard to separate. An aviation crisis team had arrived to take care of them, which included giving them frequent updates and assurances that they would soon get to their destinations. When the crisis counselors informed them to prepare to re-board the plane, they began to move away from each other. Some were silent, others over-talkative due to anxiety. Everyone chose to re-board. It was either re-board or face a sea of media cameras, microphones, and people. Instant messages and calls went out from cell phones not turned off yet in the plane when the slightest hint of something wrong was noticed. You’ve heard of viral video?

Media descended upon the airport like early morning fog. Already they were reporting what they “knew” from passengers’ eye-witness reports about two women pounding their chests hard, and yelling something they couldn’t understand.

The fact that one of the two was not a woman was not revealed and, of course, the reason why they were beating their chests was not revealed to the public. That information went into security files and was now added as yet another thing to screen for. For agents, a new field for investigation became a priority – plastic surgeons.

The pilot messaged Jack B. Bear, “welcome aboard.” Clarissa boarded the plane with Jack Brave Bear. It turned out Dr Murado, whose tan-skin had paled in the last hour, was her seat mate. Jack Bear’s cover was blown now and everyone knew he was with Home Land Security. Dr. Murado, fearing that he already knew it was “him,” sat quietly waiting to be arrested for his role in the would-be suicide bombers.

Finally, Dr Murado saw Jack B Bear lean over. He braced for the words, “you’re under arrest,” but what he heard was “ good to meet you. I work with your nurse’s twin brother, Dean. It’s a good thing hair gel doesn’t explode.” For the first time, he learned that Della had switched gels that night. She should probably get a raise!

Dr Murado laughed and signed relief at the same time. If anyone else had to know what he’d been through, it was good it was Jack B Bear. He heard Jack say, “ Want some company at the monastery?” I think we’d both need a time to reflect on how our paths crossed.”

Jack B Bear looked over at Clarissa in the window seat, and said, “And you, Miss Clarissa, how about you giving us a ride on your way to Carmel? How did he know, she wondered, but quickly let that go. He seemed to know everything.

“Wouldn’t miss that opportunity for the world.”

She could only imagine how she would record this day in her journal. But, she knew the beginning: Ugly Shoes.