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ANNA QUINDLEN

AUTHOR OF *ONE TRUE THING*



BLACK AND BLUE

BLACK
and
BLUE

A NOVEL

Anna
Quindlen



RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Quindlen, Anna.

Black and blue / Anna Quindlen.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-375-50051-0 (acid-free)

I. Title.

PS3567.U336B58 1998

813'.54—dc21

97-25208

Random House website address: www.randomhouse.com
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

*For Quin Krovatin
From one writer to another,
with admiration and enormous love.*

BLACK
and
BLUE

The first time my husband hit me I was nineteen years old. One sentence and I'm lost. One sentence and I can hear his voice in my head, that butterscotch-syrup voice that made goose bumps rise on my arms when I was young, that turned all of my skin warm and alive with a sibilant S, the drawling vowels, its shocking fricatives. It always sounded like a whisper, the way he talked, the intimacy of it, the way the words seemed to go into your guts, your head, your heart. "Geez, Bob," one of the guys would say, "you should have been a radio announcer. You should have done those voice-over things for commercials." It was like a genie, wafting purple and smoky from the lamp, Bobby's voice, or perfume when you took the glass stopper out of the bottle.

I remember going to court once when Bobby was a witness in a case. It was eleven, maybe twelve years ago, before Robert was born, before my collarbone was broken, and my nose, which hasn't healed quite right because I set it myself, looking in the bathroom mirror in the middle of the night, petals of adhesive tape fringing the frame. Bobby wanted me to come to court when he was testifying because it was a famous case at the time, although one famous case succeeds another in New York City the way one pinky-gold sunset over the sludge of the Hudson River fades and blooms, brand-new each night. A fifteen-year-old boy

from Brooklyn was accused of raping a Dominican nun at knife-point and then asking her to pray for him. His attorney said it was a lie, that the kid had had no idea that the woman in the aqua double-knit pants and the striped blouse was a nun, that the sex was consensual, though the nun was sixty-two and paste-waxing a floor in a shelter at the time. They took paste wax from the knees of the kid's pants, brought in the paste-wax manufacturer to do a chemical comparison.

The lawyer was an old guy with a storefront in a bad neighborhood, I remember, and the kid's mother had scraped together the money to hire him because Legal Aid had sent a black court-appointed and she was convinced that her son needed a white lawyer to win his case. Half-blind, hungover, dandruff on the shoulders of his gray suit like a dusting of snow, the kid's attorney was stupid enough to call the kid as a witness and to ask why he had confessed to a crime he hadn't committed.

"There was this cop in the room," the boy said, real low, his broad forehead tipped toward the microphone, his fingers playing idly with his bottom lip, so that his words were a little muffled. "He don't ask none of the questions. He just kept hassling me, man. Like he just keeps saying, 'Tell us what you did, Tyrone. Tell us what you did.' It was like he hypnotized me, man. He just kept saying it over and over. I couldn't get away from him."

The jury believed that Tyrone Biggs had done the rape, and so did everybody else in New York who read the tabloids, watched the news. So did the judge, who gave him the maximum, eight to fifteen years, and called him "a boil on the body of humanity." But I knew that while Tyrone was lying about the rape he was telling the truth about that police officer, because I lived with that voice

every day, had been hypnotized by it myself. I knew what it could do, how it could sound. It went down into your soul, like a confessor, like a seducer, saying, "Tell me. Tell me." Frannie, Frannie, Fran, he'd croon, whisper, sing. Sometimes Bobby even made me believe that I was guilty of something, that I was sleeping with every doctor at the hospital, that I made him slip and bang his bad knee. That I made him beat me up, that it was me who made the fist, angled the foot, brought down a hand hard. Hard.

The first time he hit me I was nineteen.

I can hear his voice now, so persuasive, so low and yet somehow so strong, making me understand once again that I'm all wrong. Frannie, Frannie, Fran, he says. That's how he begins. Frannie, Frannie, Fran. The first time I wasn't your husband yet. You were already twenty, because it was the weekend after we went to City Island for your birthday. And I didn't hit you. You know I didn't hit you. You see, Fran, this is what you do. You twist things. You always twist things.

I can hear him in my head. And I know he's right. He didn't hit me, that first time. He just held onto my upper arm so tight that the mark of his fingertips was like a tattoo, a black sun with four small moons revolving around it.

It was summer, and I couldn't wear a sundress for a week, or take off my clothes when my sister, Grace, was in the room we shared, the one that looked out over the air shaft to the Tarnowski's apartment on the other side. He had done it because I danced with Dee Stemple's brother and then laughed when he challenged me on it. He held me there, he said, so that I couldn't get away, because if I got away it would be the end of him, he loved me that much. The next night he pushed back the sleeve of

my blouse and kissed each mark, and his tears wet the spots as though to wash the black white again, as white as the rest of my white, white skin, as though his tears would do what absolution did for venial sins, wash them clean. "Oh, Jesus," he whispered, "I am so goddamned sorry." And I cried, too. When I cried in those days it was always for his pain, not for mine.

As rich and persuasive as Bobby Benedetto's voice, that was how full and palpable was his sorrow and regret. And how huge was his rage. It was like a twister cloud; it rose suddenly from nothing into a moving thing that blew the roof off, black and strong. I smell beer, I smell bourbon, I smell sweat, I smell my own fear, ranker and stronger than all three.

I smell it now in the vast waiting room of Thirtieth Street Station in Philadelphia. There are long wooden benches and my son, Robert, and I have huddled together into the corner of one of them. Across from us slumps a man in the moth-eaten motley of the homeless, who smells of beer and vomit like so many I've seen in the waiting room at the hospital, cooking up symptoms from bad feet to blindness to get a bed for the night, an institutional breakfast on a tray. The benches in Thirtieth Street Station are solid, plain, utilitarian, like the pews in St. Stanislaus. The Church of the Holy Pollack, Bobby called St. Stannie's, but he still wanted us to be married there, where he'd been baptized, where his father had been eulogized as a cop's cop. I had never lived in one place long enough to have a real home parish, and I'd agreed. Together we'd placed a rose from my bouquet at the side altar, in front of the statue of St. Joseph, in memory of Bobby's father. It was the only memory of his father that Bobby ever shared with me.

The great vaulted ceiling of the train station arched four stories over us, Robert and I and our one small carryall bag, inside only toothbrushes, a change of clothes, some video-game cartridges and a book, a romance novel, stupid, shallow, but I had enough of real life every day to last me forever. Gilded, majestic, the station was what I'd believed the courtroom would be like, that day I went to court, when my husband took the stand.

State your name.

Robert Anthony Benedetto.

And your occupation?

I'm a police officer for the City of New York.

The courtroom in the state supreme court had been nothing at all like Thirtieth Street Station. It was low-ceilinged, dingy, paneled in dark wood that sucked up all the light from low windows that looked out on Police Plaza. It seemed more like a rec room than a courtroom. The train station in Philadelphia looked the way I'd always imagined a courtroom would look, or maybe the way one would look in a dream, if you were dreaming you were the judge, or the accused. Robert was staring up at the ceiling, so high above that those of us scattered around the floor so far below were diminished, almost negated by it. At one end of the huge vaulted room was a black statue of an angel holding a dead or dying man. I thought it was a war memorial, and under normal circumstances I would have walked across to read the inscription on the block beneath the angel's naked toes. But whatever the opposite of normal circumstances was, this was it. I shivered in the air-conditioning, dressed for July in a room whose temperature was lowered to April, my mind cold as January.

The statue was taller than our little house down the block from

the bay in Brooklyn, taller than my in-law's house or the last building where I'd lived with my parents, the one in Bensonhurst, where, in the crowded little bedroom, I'd dressed in my wedding gown, snagging the hem of my train on a popped nail in the scuffed floorboards. The sheer heroic thrust of the station made me feel tiny, almost invisible, almost safe, except that my eyes wandered constantly from the double glass doors to the street at one end to the double glass doors to the street at the other. Waiting, watching, waiting for Bobby to come through the doors, his hands clenched in his pants pockets, his face the dusky color that flooded it whenever he was angry about anything, which was lots of the time. I'd been waiting for Bobby to come through doors most of my life, waiting and watching to gauge his mood and so my own.

A finger of sweat traced my spine and slid into the cleft where my underpants began. The cotton at my crotch was wet, summer sweat and fear. I'd been afraid so many times that I thought I knew exactly what it felt like, but this was something different altogether, like the difference between water and ice. Ice in my belly, in my chest, beneath my breasts, between my eyes, as though I'd gulped down a lemonade too quickly in the heat. "Brain freeze," Robert and his friends called it when it happened to them, and they'd reel around the kitchen, holding their heads.

"Wait on the bench by the coffee kiosk," the man had said. He had driven us from New York to Philadelphia in total silence, like a well-trained chauffeur. As we got out of the old Plymouth Volare in front of the train station, he had leaned across the front seat, looking up at me through the open passenger door. He had smelled like English Leather, which Bobby had worn when we

were both young, before we were married. Bobby had worn it that time when I was nineteen, the first time. Or twenty. I guess it was right, Bobby's voice in my head; I guess I'd just turned twenty, that first time. Maybe he was testing me then, to see how much I could take. Maybe he did that every time, until finally he had decided that I would take anything. Anything at all.

"What?" Robert had said, looking up at me as the man in the Volare drove away to wherever he came from, whoever he was. "What did he say? Where are we going now? Where are we going?"

And there was the coffee kiosk, and here was the bench, and here we were, my ten-year-old son and I, waiting for—what? Waiting to escape, to get gone, to disappear so that Bobby could never find us. I think Robert knew everything when he saw me that morning, cutting my hair in the medicine-cabinet mirror, whispering on the phone, taking off the bandages and throwing them in the trash, putting all the recent photographs in an envelope and addressing it to my sister, Grace, so that Bobby wouldn't have good pictures to show people when he started to search for us. "Where are we going?" Robert had asked. "On a trip," I'd replied. If Robert had been an ordinary ten-year-old he would have cajoled and whined, asked and asked and asked until I snapped at him to keep quiet. But he'd never been ordinary. For as long as either of us could remember, he'd been a boy with a secret, and he'd kept it well. He had to have heard the sound of the slaps, the thump of the punches, the birdcall of my sobs as I taped myself up, swabbed myself off, put my pieces back together again. He'd seen my bruises after the fact; he'd heard the sharp intakes of breath when he hugged too hard in places I was hurt. But he

looked away, the way he knew we both wanted him to, my husband for his reasons, me for mine.

It was just that last time, when he came in from school and I turned at the kitchen counter, his apple slices on a plate, his milk in a glass, my face swollen, misshapen, the colors of a spectacular sunset just before nightfall, my smile a clownish wiggle of a thing because of my split lip, that he couldn't manage to look away, disappear upstairs, pretend he didn't see. "Mom, oh, Mom," he'd said, his eyes enormous. "Don't worry," I'd replied before he could say more. "I'll take care of everything."

"Mom," he'd said again. And then maybe he remembered, remembered the secret, remembered all those mornings after the horrible sounds and screams, how his father would sit at the table drinking coffee from his PBA mug, how I'd come in from running and go up to shower, how everyone acted as though everything was just as it should be. So the wild light in his eyes flared, flickered, died, and he added, "Was it an accident?"

Because that's what I'd said, year after year. An accident. I had an accident. The accident was that I met Bobby Benedetto in a bar, and I fell crazy in love with him. And after that I fell further and further every year. Not so you'd notice, if you knew me, although no one really did. On the outside I looked fine: the job, the house, the kid, the husband, the smile. Nobody got to see the hitting, which was really the humiliation, which turned into the hatred. Not just hating Bobby, but hating myself, too, the cringing self that was afraid to pick up the remote control from the coffee table in case it was just that thing that set him off. I remember a story in the *Daily News* a couple of years ago about a guy who kept a woman chained in the basement of the building where he

was a custodian. Whenever he felt like it, he went down the concrete steps and did what he wanted to her. Part of me had been in a cellar, too, waiting for the sound of footfalls on the stairs. And I wasn't even chained. I stayed because I thought things would get better, or at least not worse. I stayed because I wanted my son to have a father and I wanted a home. For a long time I stayed because I loved Bobby Benedetto, because no one had ever gotten to me the way he did. I think he knew that. He made me his accomplice in what he did, and I made Robert mine. Until that last time, when I knew I had to go, when I knew that if I told my son I'd broken my nose, blacked my eyes, split my lip, by walking into the dining-room door in the dark, that I would have gone past some point of no return. The secret was killing the kid in him and the woman in me, what was left of her. I had to save him, and myself.

"Where are we going, Mom?" he whined in the station, but he did it like any kid would, on any long trip, and it almost made me laugh and smile and cry, too, to hear him sound so ordinary instead of so dead and closed up. Besides, he knew. He knew we were running away from his father, as far and as fast as we could. I wanted to say, Robert, baby, hon, I'm taking you out of the cellar. I'm taking you to where there won't be secrets anymore. But that wasn't exactly true. They'd just be different secrets now.

There are people who will do almost anything in America, who will paint your house, paint your toenails, choose your clothes, mind your kids. In Manhattan, at the best private schools, you can even hire a nitpicker if your kid gets head lice. And there are people who will help you get away from your husband, who will find you a new house, a new job, a new life, even a new name. They

are mysterious about it because they say it's what they need to do to keep you safe; when she goes on television, their leader, a woman named Patty Bancroft, likes to say, "We do not even have a name for ourselves." Maybe that's why I'd felt I had to whisper when I talked to her on the phone, even though Bobby was long gone from the house: to keep their secret, my secret. There are people, Patty Bancroft had said, who will help you; it is better if you know no more than that.

I looked down at Robert, hunched over on the bench, bent almost double over a little electronic game he carried with him everywhere. Ninjas in glowing green lunged forward and kicked men in black masks; the black masks fell back, fell over like felled trees. The ninjas bowed. The number at one corner of the screen grew larger. Robert was breathing as though he had been running. I ran my hand over his dark hair, cut like a long tonsure over his narrow, pointed skull. My touch was an annoyance; he leaned slightly to one side and rocked forward to meet the ninjas, take them on, knock them down. He was good at these games, at losing himself in the tinny electronic sounds and glowing pictures. My sister, Grace, said all the kids were, these days. But I wondered. I looked across the station at a small girl in overalls who was toddling from stranger to stranger, smiling and waving while her mother followed six paces behind. Even when he was small Robert had never, ever been like that. Grace said kids were born with personalities, and Robert's was as dignified and adult as his name. But I wondered. When Robert was three he sometimes sat and stared and rocked slightly back and forth, and I worried that he was autistic. He wasn't, of course; the doctor said so. "Jesus, talk about making a mountain out of a whatever," Bobby had said,

reaching to lift the child and never even noticing the way in which the small bony shoulders flinched, like the wings of a bird preparing to fly, to flee.

“We’re going on a trip,” I’d told Robert that morning.

“Where?” he’d said.

“It’s kind of a surprise.”

“Is Daddy coming?”

Not if we’re lucky, a voice in my head had said, but out loud I’d replied, “He has to work.”

Robert’s face had gone dead, that way it does sometimes, particularly the morning after a bad night, a night when Bobby and I have gotten loud. “Is that why you’re wearing glasses?” he said.

“Sort of, yeah.”

“They look funny.”

In the station he looked up from his video game and stared at me as though he was trying to figure out who I was, with the strange hair, the glasses, the long floaty dress. The ninjas were all dead. He had won. His eyes were bright. “Tell me where we’re going,” he said again.

“I will,” I said, as though I knew. “In a little while.”

“Can I get gum?”

“Not now.”

Around the perimeter of the station were small shops and kiosks: cheap jewelry, fast food, newspapers, books: the money-changers in the temple. The voice of the train announcer was vaguely English; there was a stately air to the enterprise, unlike the shabby overlit corridors of the airports. No planes, Patty Bancroft told me when we first talked on the phone two weeks before. Plane trips are too easy to trace. The women she helped never