

The Matching Game

By Anne-Valerie Prosper*

Black. Woman. Immigrant. Harvard Law School. Which one of these is different? I suddenly feel as if I have returned to elementary school where I have silently fallen behind. In order to keep afloat, to catch up, to break through this feeling of paralysis I need to first decide who I am here in law school or rather who I need to be. The person I was before is no longer enough.

Students in law school often find themselves with the daunting and burdening task of negotiating their identities--especially if they have embarked on their legal journey directly from college. This seems even truer at Harvard Law School, where the expectations of others far supersede the expectations that we have for ourselves. We arrive at Harvard Law bright eyed-- filled with fear and anticipation. We have seen *The Paper Chase* or are at least aware of what it suggests. We have certainly watched *Legally Blonde* while skimming over *One L*. We fearfully awaited the cold call. Those before us warned that the experience would be terrifying, that it would change the way we think, and that it would change the way that we see. But no one told us that it would change the way we are-- at least, no one told me.

I did not expect the very fabric of my being to be altered. I did not expect to have to question everything that I had once known about myself, including the way in which I

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had previously defined myself. There is a special skill offered by the legal profession which enables us to see others and ourselves in a unique manner. This way of seeing proffers a power that simultaneously exposes us because the journey to arrive at this end requires us to first become undone. After our metamorphosis we become makers of rules, those who structure the labyrinth of our society. The price we pay for this power is heavy. The struggle is almost entirely internal. Our first year of law school, and what follows is emblematic of this truth.

There is also a kind of elitism and weight that comes when one holds this place in society. The problem for me always was that my identity does not fit with the identity of our forefathers-- of the men who came before me and built this system. In a country where a 1704 Constitution is still the Supreme Law, where we look at the intent of the framers in interpreting that law, someone like me has a hard time finding their place. Black. Woman. Immigrant.

I believe that when the framers wrote, "all men are created equal," they really did mean men. Actually they meant white men. Although our Constitution has been amended and slavery abolished, the very fact that we hold Constitutional intent as sacred displaces certain people. Even though we ignore the fact that the Constitution did not mean to include an entire host of people who today proudly call themselves Americans, the awareness of intended exclusion is powerful and omnipresent

Many people of color, indeed many women of color have made huge strides in changing the law through protest, law suits and resistance-- but very few have been a part of shaping the law from the inside out. That is what drives me. Subliminally, paintings of older white men strewn around our campus has forced me to grapple with seeming contradictions within my identity. Grapple with joining a 'justice system' that continues

to target people who look like me, and was built on historic disenfranchisement. What does it look like to negotiate one's identity within that system? What does it look like to both be true to oneself, and a servant of the profession that we are joining? Joining the legal profession, and especially the field of litigation, is tantamount to giving your field the implied consent to use you — not just your skill, but you.

In my Legal Professions class, we once debated the question of whether or not to accept a case despite the knowledge that you are being chosen for your racial/sexual/gender/class identity rather than, or in addition to your innate skill. In other words, should you accept the role as a defense lawyer for a large company accused of racial discrimination even though you know that the only reason you were specifically assigned the case is because you are a person of color? In the world of law our intersecting identities are sometimes a benefit, sometimes a burden, but never irrelevant.

So here I am, at the end of three arduous yet fruitful years at Harvard Law School, studying for the bar, and learning the laws written by people who look nothing like me while preparing myself to jump into this profession feet first. It is an honor, and a heavy cross to bear.