

BLIND SPOTS

Darlene Farr had prefaced our breakup with some 'friendly advise': my needing to learn about capitol investments, to develop more marketable skills than my job as a handyman, to get off my ass before it was too late (I was forty seven, she was forty three) . Well, that all stung. Stung because there was some truth, some denial of my disability (when I was eleven my father - drunk, of course - backed his pick up truck over my foot) and some hypocrisy (free of charge, I'd often helped deliver pies for her business).

That New Year's Eve, we both happened to attend this \$100 a head event at one of the local hotels. I was in a bachelor group of three. Darlene was with this tall man. Her being 5 feet 1 inch, I guess all men were tall, but he was 5 inches taller than me. I later learnt he was a cyber security expert, though I'm not sure whether to protect or attack.

A large maple wood dance floor divided the ballroom in two; at every table Mylar balloons and paper party hats announced '2012'. On the floor couples danced away what was left of the year. A few single women were present, but I knocked down the beers and pined for Darlene, spying on her at a table across the dance floor. After about an hour she joined a group of women on the floor for a line dance; Darlene was a hesitant dancer, as though afraid to let the music assume control, but even with little rhythm she could still strut that ass and

honey blonde hair. When the song ended she surprised me by giving me this low wave. She remained on the floor for a moment then went back to her table, gathered her clutch and walked out of the ballroom.

I followed her into the corridor between the ballroom and the hotel lobby. On seeing me approach, Darlene dropped her cell phone into her clutch and grumbled under her breath, “. . . Listen, I’m getting the hell out of here. So I have to get my coat.”

“You need a ride? . . . ” I asked.

“ I need a drink . . . But not in there,” She gestured disdainfully at the ballroom. “I had a fight with the guy I came with.”

Her little curvy body spilt out of this skimpy silver cocktail dress; she shimmered with silver sparkles and matching silver pumps and the honey blonde hair crown.

When I went to put my arm around her she gently turned away, like a school yard girl fending off a frisky classmate.

Perplexed, I said, “You gave me the c’mon wave inside.”

“Thought you’d come over and dance,” she said. Despite the re-construction of my foot and a slight limp, I’d mastered many types of ballroom dances.

I told her I’d escort her to the hotel lounge and took hold of her elbow before she could answer. In my inebriated eagerness, I pulled too hard. She fell onto my shoulder. Thinking she’d fallen against me on purpose, I pinned her against the hallway wallpaper trying to get my tongue down her throat. When she struggled to break free her heel gave out, causing her to collapse onto the floor. Some material in the back of her dress tore when I tried to break her fall.

Someone asked, ‘everything okay?’; a couple snide remarks about ‘not even New Year’s yet’.

Back on her feet, Darlene inspected the dress damage; then spat a few curses in my direction. She gave her coat check to some passing ‘Good Samaritan’ who promised he’d see her wherever she needed to go.

It was all a comedy of errors but, with her ripped dress and my bruised ego, no one saw the humor. Whatever opportunity I had been presented to win her back was now lost in a fog of mutual recrimination. Pointing inside the ballroom, my voice breaking, I said, “ I’m more than my financial worth . . . We could be out there dancing, having a good time if only you’d seen that.”

A few days later a \$95 bill for the dress arrived in the mail. I sent Darlene a check for that amount inside a card and wrote I'd be open to discussing the whole nasty business at her convenience.

The check was cashed. Much to my chagrin, I didn't hear back about my request to talk.

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Around Halloween, Darlene opened a restaurant downtown called '*Let Them Eat Cake*'. The restaurant served cake, pastries, crepes, and three French entrees. Despite all the bakery items being delicious (so I heard. I never ventured inside), and despite doing pretty well during the Christmas season, the restaurant only lasted five months. High rent, lack of a liquor license, confusion about the eatery's identity (not actually being a bakery and having very limited entrees), and overpricing (\$10 for a Napoleon) all contributed to its quick exit.

I was surprised to discover that I felt badly for Darlene. She was the only person I knew who took risks and didn't just blow hot air about wanting to 'pursue her dream.'

A couple weeks after her restaurant closed, I bumped into Darlene at a birthday party. Darlene avoided me as best she could until we found

ourselves seated beside each other in the parlor after the cake pieces had been handed out. That's when I told her how sorry I was to hear her restaurant had closed.

"Sure you're not secretly gloating like all the rest?" Darlene asked suspiciously. She took a bite of the birthday cake, put it down on a side table, then placed a finger in her mouth to indicate she wanted to gag.

"Everyone else is gloating?" I asked between bites of my own cake. She nodded, grimacing. Darlene had a bit of a high and mighty tone that did not endear her around town, particularly since she'd moved to our coastal shore line from the Danbury area. But I identified with her having humbler beginnings. Like me, not everyone in town lived in or came from the Skyline Drive or Old Town areas. She evidently accepted my condolences as sincere since afterward we went out for a drink at a sports pub.

Sitting together in a booth, Darlene repeated a story she'd already told me about her first business venture- a Crafts for Kids store back near Danbury - where she had to drive to the Foxwood Casino whenever her partner (a married man) wanted to meet. She then spoke about her recent dealings. Evidently at that New Year's Eve dance she'd asked the cyber man for the startup money he'd promised for her restaurant. Refusing, he'd called her a whore and a gold-

digger. Her latest setback came when her *Let Them Eat Cake* investor, despite having been taught how to cook professionally by Darlene, withdrew his financial support when she declined his proposal to move in with him.

“Your pie business thrived without any help,” I reminded her to soften the blow. Soften the blow on me also as all this talk about money was intimidating.

Darlene directed her eyes squarely at me as if I had dusted off an old yet dear trophy from her showcase. She commented, “True - but that was a tiny kitchen business. Most people can’t picture themselves outside of a totally secure financial mind frame. They’re happy walking into a place like this,” she gestured around the sports pub, “to have drinks and dinner after working all week to pay their bills. Not me! I want to valet park my Mercedes at the Saybrook Point Inn and have people stare in envy when the Maitre’d escorts me to the best table. I can’t wait to see the look on certain smug faces around here when that happens. . .”

Her barracuda smile (barracuda because of an erotic toothy over-bite) insisted on this future triumph but her glassy green eyes did not share this insistence. An air of discontent swirled around her which she attempted to dissemble by perusing a menu. She sarcastically read off, “ ‘poppers, mac and cheese, nachos and wings’ - how original!” About an entree, she proclaimed,

“this is actually impressive - pork osso bucco. Though I guess with enough Bud Lights in their customers, who cares how excellent the braising is.” Even in the dim booth lighting the rich thickness of her honey blonde hair shone lustroously against her black lace-up top. Her tight little body was ogled by every man in the bar who passed near our booth, several repeating their passage. After limping into various bars hoping a woman wouldn’t pre-judge me, it felt great to be envied for a change.

All the LED flat screens showed March Madness basketball games but I barely noticed because I was mesmerized by again being so close to her. Her barracuda teeth were bared, pretending to smile, but looking more like they were about to slice into her glass of Chardonnay. Yet the erotic mouth and the honey blonde hair falling across her black lace-up top overrode her downcast mood.

Despite countless self-cautions to keep from making any passes, I let slip about her having inspired me to take a couple business classes at a local college; then, as I continued to drink, my breathing became heavier: “OMG, would I love to un-lace that sexy top of yours!”

But she only laughed off my remark and then encouraged me to continue my classes and really make something of myself. When we parted she gave her usual salutation, 'Have a great night and even better day!' This always sounded like an Olympian goddess pouring her blessing over my fate. We went out for lunch a couple times afterward. I hoped that we might be rekindling our relationship, so it took me by surprise when, maybe two months later, she asked me to come over and, in exchange for a home-cooked meal, help with her preparations to move to Maine.

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Darlene met me at the door. Her honey blonde hair was pulled up into a thick pony tail and she wore an apron over her blue jeans; an aqua off the shoulder top tilted invitingly.

"I'm still frying the potatoes but I got the grill started outside," said Darlene. She handed me a computer printout of about ten items and instructed me not to be afraid to ask questions.

Not having been inside her condo for nearly two years, I was anxious to revisit it, but the open cardboard shipping boxes in the living room unnerved me. Plus the old cracked beige vinyl love seat where we'd often fooled around

was gone: either already on its way to the Pine Tree State or - painful to even consider- resting in some landfill.

“Put some music on if you want,” she said and then headed toward the kitchen at the back of her unit.

I fumbled through a drawer in her entertainment console. Darlene hadn't bought a new CD in years as she believed you should spend discretionary income on advancing your business.

I preferred old songs anyway so I selected Rick Astley's *'Together Forever'*. I then had the same old difficulty with her 5 disc player, the available slots rotating away automatically, preventing me from placing a disc inside. The frustration sent me marching into the back kitchen.

“I don't know how many things we can get to on this list,” I complained.

“Which ones did you already do?” She asked.

“I've been fooling around with the damn CD player. It keeps shuffling away before I can place a CD inside.” I nearly smiled, here at least was an old familiar discussion.

“Could you start with the computer and its shelves?” she said with her usual positivity, turning over some potatoes in her heavy frying pan. Her kitchen still looked like a small restaurant with its brass pots and different basket designs and wine racks.

It was difficult mustering the motivation to pack anything. So while taking apart the computer shelves I did not place them in the packing box for secure transport; rather, I placed them so as to conveniently be withdrawn and re-assembled as soon as possible. While I obviously knew Darlene could be very stubborn once her mind was made up - like breaking with me - I still believed that deep down she'd be receptive to a persuasive approach to stay. So when she called me outside for dinner, I was eager to make my pitch.

Her tiny back patio had a high white vinyl fencing, gas grill, little flower pots growing herbs, glass-top outdoor table and a self-circulating automatic water fall. A May evening breeze announced itself from time to time, like a waiter who also had other tables to serve, tilting our candle's flame with each breezy arrival. A burgundy bottle of a Sonoma County Pinot Noir was plopped center table beside a big wooden plate with the grilled pork and veal. Darlene spoke in her usual frenetic way, pouring out ideas as though she could arrange them together on a plate then ship them off to potential investors. After a soliloquy on the costs of restaurateur table ware, she talked about opening a pastry shop in Maine.

“Why go all the way to Maine,” I said, savoring the slices of grilled pork and veal and the heaping of fried potato and salad dressed in balsamic vinaigrette.

“Can’t you just open another restaurant or shop around here?”

“ . . . I’m not going through another catastrophe where I have to look at all these smug faces pretending they sympathize with my situation when they were all too happy to see me fail. . . ”

“They’re happy because they never attempt anything original themselves.”

“Well, I’m finding someplace where people want to see someone succeed.”

“ I want you to succeed. I know you don’t think much of my handyman business but it’s been successful for over twenty years now . . . Plus I’ve been taking business classes.”

She paused, drank from her glass of Pinot Noir, looked around as if ready to summon a waiter or at least a fresh breeze to cool my ardor; finally she said, as politely as possible, “ . . . Your business doesn’t involve big inventories or other employees and the like.”

I agreed but suggested we all have to start somewhere. I also advised her that there were many intangibles about customers that I'd learnt from working with them so long. I said I'd begun scouting around for places where she could create her next business, asking my customers for suggestions and advise. At some point she stated that she was not taking on another partner, unless someone with real vision offered a significant investment. After we'd been off the subject awhile, I took a desperate new tack; I said I'd never been to Maine but would consider coming up if she needed a hand with anything, reminding her how I could handle most skills.

She joked that she'd send me a postcard. She began clearing off the dishes. I stood up but my foot was bothering me from being on my feet all day so I sat back down and had another beer. From the kitchen Darlene asked where had I left her computer printout list and could I do a couple more quick items before dessert as she had to turn in early to bring her car into the shop tomorrow morning.

"Give me a few minutes," I called back, "my damn foot's bothering me . . ."
My foot was aching but I also had zero motivation to pack anything else.

After finishing my beer, I gathered the salad bowls and the wooden plate with the remains of pork and veal and took them inside the kitchen. We

waxed about having shared past meals at her place and I said how sad it was to think of her leaving, but she preferred to mark this night as the beginning of a journey toward running a brand new business.

“You’re lucky,” she chortled, scraping the salad remains into a silver kitchen pail. Her pony tail bounced as she stepped nimbly between sink and pail and refrigerator. “ You can rest when you want at your job . . . Not in a restaurant, not when the customer wants something now. This minute!”

This struck me as condescending but her humor always had a touch of cheerful cruelty and a little truth - in this case, I did like doing things at my own pace. Still, I’d bristled at her earlier lines about having to go to bed early or her offering to send me a post card. I imagined Darlene scribbling on a card from Maine : ‘Have a great life and an even better after life!’ . . .

I went back outside, remembering her occasional lectures about how focusing on the negative only brings negative results. The yellow bug light above the backdoor cast an ominous glare on the little patio. I stared up at it, wanting to see a bug prove or disprove the light’s effectiveness. Darlene returned outside and handed me her computer print out list. As my eyes were still zapped by the bug light, I handed her back the list and sat down, complaining that I had a blind spot.

She remained standing, reading from her list. My eyes were a little watery: maybe the bug light, the booze, who knows? I concentrated on her. She was such a dazzling sight: hip out, curves posed, honey blonde pony tail bobbing, all that radiant positive feminine energy glowing beneath the bug light like a blinding oracle sent down from heaven. This was my fantasy of real Gold Coast living: a beautiful sophisticated wife and me pouring our energies together to truly 'have a great night after a great yesterday and a great today.'

My reconstructed Talus bone still ached so I changed its position from under the table, sticking the foot out in the open patio. A moth appeared overhead and started beating against the bug light and the surrounding vinyl siding. I became distracted by the moth. The creature hurled itself again and again in a mad circle. Why wasn't the bug light repelling the moth? Did the bug have some genetic deficiency or had it been unable to find another light? Between sips of beer, I watched its small brown wings beating furiously, hearing its insistent tapping against the siding, wondering how long it would bang against the light before flying away.

END