

The Wife Is Always The Last To Know

by

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The bar instantly went silent when she entered.

The eyes of every straight male in the place crawled all over her, while each woman sized up the new competition and realized she had just fallen a notch in the pecking order. She had to feel the stares of everyone in the place on her as she strolled over to an empty stool at the bar of the hotel lounge in Pittsburgh, but if she noticed she gave no sign.

The talk and booze flowed again after she sat down. The two bartenders nearly collided in their hurry to get to her. She must have chosen the younger one because he gave her a wide smile while the older one grudgingly moved off.

I was sitting alone at a small table some distance away from the bar. When she received her drink she turned slightly to the side and despite the dim lighting and smoke floating in the air from numerous cigarettes, I could see why those two had nearly killed themselves in their haste to serve her.

Seeing her was like Pavlov ringing bell in front of one of his dogs and I nearly drooled. She wore an electric blue outfit that clung to every delicious curve of her luscious body and her lustrous blonde hair reached the middle of her back. She picked up her drink with an elegantly long hand that tapered down to two-inch nails painted to match her outfit. She slowly crossed one leg over the other, hiking up her skirt and revealing a wonderfully shaped thigh.

Her nose was upturned at just the right angle. Any more and it would have been too young for her face. She had full lips and impossibly high cheekbones. Her eyes nearly matched the color of her outfit and they sparkled even through the hazy atmosphere in the bar.

Shortly after she turned and started sipping her drink, the first attempt was made. A guy rose and approached her. He was a big guy and might have been well built at one time, but now was only fooling himself. He wore a sport coat, white shirt without a tie and dark pants. He sucked in his gut, stuck out his chest, swallowed some more confidence from his beer bottle and headed toward her. I could tell she spotted him approaching when she turned away from him and back toward the bar. If he caught the warning sign, he ignored it and parked himself on the stool beside her.

I was too far away to hear what he said, but through the air gray with smoke I could see him talking when he turned toward her. She did not turn toward him. He tried again, forcing a smile into the conversation, but that didn't work either. He wasn't a quitter, though, and tried once more.

Finally, I saw her turn toward him, say a few words and then turn back to the bar. The smile disappeared from his face and he slid off the stool looking like he was going to have a meltdown. His shoulders drooped and his stomach protruded again as he hung his head and walked away.

Next up at bat was a younger man. A jock or a more likely a wannabe, he wore his jeans so tight I wondered how he could walk. The sleeves on his green shirt were rolled up to reveal his biceps. I didn't know about her, but I found him fairly impressive.

He took the same stool as the first guy and immediately went to work. He beckoned the bartender over and raised two fingers, indicating two drinks. I could see her head shake, though that didn't deter him. The bartender came back with the drinks and sat them on the bar. He picked his up, pointed to the other drink and said something to her. She made no move to accept it.

The muscle head became more animated in his gestures, but she still would not take the drink. Animation gave way to annoyance and he moved closer. She turned, got close and said something that brought a grim expression to his face. He got off the stool, started to walk away, then reached back, got the second drink and marched off, red-faced.

I watched the process repeat itself twice more as each guy went into the breach, each more sure of himself than the previous one, and each left with his tail between his legs. They looked shell-shocked when they slunk away and I was willing to bet that none of them would score this night after she stripped away their self-confidence with just a few words.

So why was I willing to try after watching the spectacle? I figured I couldn't do any worse than those clowns. If I got shot down, who cared? I was only in town for a couple of days on business so it wasn't like I had to come back here if she sliced me up and left me in pieces. Though, this was my usual haunt when I visited Pittsburgh, I could easily find another with friendlier women the next time I came to town.

Nobody else seemed willing to risk verbal emasculation and the stool beside her remained empty until I sat on it. I swore the noise level in the place went down by several decibels when I sat down while they waited to see if I would be the next sacrifice to the gods of barroom encounters.

I didn't look at her, but rather straight ahead. The bartender came over and I ordered one Scotch. I still stared forward, fighting my urge to get a look at the lovely creature beside me.

The bartender delivered my Scotch and I took a drink.

"I'm not going to do it," I said as I looked into the mirror that was behind the glass shelves lined with brightly colored liquor bottles.

"I don't care how beautiful you are. I'm not going to embarrass myself hitting on someone obviously out of my league," I said.

I looked in the mirror again and saw her eyes flick over at me.

"You're probably waiting for your stud boyfriend who makes everyone in this place look like Rodney Dangerfield. I'll bet you were laughing to yourself when the gnats started to buzz around your ears with their innocuous pickup lines."

No response but I plunged onward.

"You've probably been hit on more often than Arnold Schwarzenegger at a gay pride parade."

I thought I saw the beginning of a smile or was it a twitch of disgust in her lips? I had another drink while I decided whether to press on or give it up as a lost cause.

"I can see you aren't interested. I'll take the hint and go back to my table alone. At least I've still got my manhood intact. I'll be happy in the belief that you found me less annoying than those others you sent crawling away."

"You were more clever than the others," she said. "Slightly more."

She still didn't look at me, but instead talked to my reflection in the mirror. I replied to her reflection, fearing any attempt to talk to her directly would kill whatever chance I had.

"Thanks – I think. Are you here on business?"

"Now you're slipping into the mundane."

"Sorry."

"It's all right. You are a man. You can't help it. You aren't interested in conversation just for the sake of conversation. You see conversation as a means to an end."

"To what end would that be?"

"Please. If you are going to be stupid, I'm going to leave."

"Sor..." I caught myself. She was doing it to me, too. Any minute now she was going to lash out with her verbal bullwhip, lacerate my hide and leave me to lick my wounds.

"I'm here for a drink. That's it. A drink. Of course, men see a woman alone in a bar and just one thought enters their tiny minds."

She turned slightly toward me.

"You've got to admit dressing like that might lead us to jump to certain conclusions," I said as I turned and let my eyes obviously roam over her.

"Not conclusions. One conclusion."

"You're awfully cynical," I said.

"Realistic."

"It's a shame someone hurt you."

"What?"

Gotcha. Maybe there was a weakness I could use to melt this cool exterior.

“Someone must have hurt you badly if you feel like that.”

“What are you, a psychiatrist?”

“No, but I listen well.”

She gave me a hard look.

“I have to admit you are better than most,” she said.

“It wasn’t a ploy.”

She picked up her change from the bar and put it in her purse.

“Good-bye, Dr. Phil,” she said.

“Will I see you again?”

She began walking away. “Anything’s possible,” she tossed over her shoulder as she left the bar.

“Too bad. I thought you had a chance there, buddy.”

I turned around and saw see the bartender behind me.

I wondered. Did I or was I even in the game?

I returned to the bar the next two nights, but there was no sign of her. Each night the bartender looked at me and shrugged as I left. Thursday I returned home.

It was a nearly a month before business brought me back to Pittsburgh and then it was only because I pulled some strings at work to get sent back to the city because the trip wouldn’t have normally have been mine, but I had to find out. I had to know if she would be there and what might happen if I got another chance.

I had to admit there was some ego involved. I had been able to do what no one else had done that night and was able to crack the façade and see just a little of what was inside the tough exterior. I thought I had touched a nerve when I said she had been hurt. I

wanted the opportunity to follow up and try out my best sympathetic attitude and find out what might develop.

The same bartender was on duty the first night I returned. It took a little while to jog his memory and then he recalled my prior visit. It took much less effort for him to remember her.

“No, man, I haven’t seen her since that night and, believe me, I would remember something that fine,” he said.

“Any idea who she is?” I asked.

“Nope, that’s the only time I ever saw her and...”

“I know. You’d remember something that fine.”

“Hell, yeah. I suppose she could have come in on my night off, but I haven’t seen her.”

I thanked him, nursed a couple of beers and a Scotch for two hours and gave up. The next night I was back.

“Nada,” he said when I sat down at the bar.

Once more I had a prolonged session with Mr. Budweiser, looked at the door every time it opened and packed it in after a couple of hours.

The third night I sat on the same stool I had sat on the night I met her – hoping it would change my luck - and munched peanuts and pretzels while I waited. After an hour, I was ready to call it quits when suddenly it went quiet. I turned toward the door and there she was. She wore a red outfit with matching three-inch heels. The blonde hair and light complexion were a perfect contrast to her clothing.

Again every man in the place, including me, stared in admiration as she walked over to the bar.

“Hello, Dr. Phil,” she said to me.

Amazed and terribly pleased that she remembered me, my scintillating reply was, “Hello.”

She sat on the empty stool beside me.

“Buy a girl a drink?” she asked.

“Well, er, yeah, of course.”

I signaled the bartender, who rushed over when he saw who was sitting beside me.

“What’ll it be?” he asked with a smile and a wink.

I looked at her and she said, “You are such an empathetic guy. Tell me what I would like.”

I wondered what kind of test this was, thought for a moment, and said, “A martini. Make it two.”

“Very good,” she said. “Now tell me why.”

“It’s a coolly elegant drink, like you. Cool and elegant.”

She smiled and said, “I knew you were better than most.”

I wanted to take her by the hand, drag her off and show her just how good I was, but my experience told me that would never work with her. She enjoyed intellectual stimulation as much as physical. If I could reach the mind, the body would follow.

When the drinks arrived we clinked glasses and said, “Cheers.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Toni,” she said.

“Robert,” I said and extended my hand to her.

Her hand was warm when I took it in mine and we shook. I held it for a few extra beats and she didn’t try to pull away. I knew then I had a shot.

“What are you doing here, Robert?” she asked.

“Waiting for the perfect woman.”

“Haven’t you found her yet?”

“I may have now.”

“Flattery only goes so far, Robert. You’re going to have to be straight with me.”

“I’m in town on business.”

“Lucky you. You don’t have to live here.”

“Pittsburgh isn’t that bad.”

“As long as you’re visiting.”

“So what do you do?” I asked.

“I’m an actress.”

“Really? I can see why you find Pittsburgh limiting.”

“Limiting. That’s a good word for it.”

“So move. New York is only a few hours away.”

“I don’t think I could do it.”

“Why not? Is your family holding you back?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you do it?”

She stared into her drink.

“I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Of course you are.”

“How would you know? You’ve never seen me act.”

She had me there, but I was going to tell her whatever she wanted to hear.

“I don’t need to see you act. I can tell by just looking at you. You have a presence about you. It’s what makes the stars different from the rest of us. When they walk in a room people notice. You have that quality.”

She looked at me and searched my eyes.

“You really think so?”

“Yes! I know you could be a star.”

“I don’t know.”

“Listen, I have some contacts in New York. I could talk to some people, see what develops.”

Of course, I had no such connections, but she didn’t know that.

“Would you?” she asked, face lighting up.

“Sure.”

“Thank you, Robert. Maybe I was wrong about you.”

“Not all men are the same, you know,” I said, looking as sincere as possible.

“Okay, maybe you are right. Look, I have to go, but I would really like to talk to you again. Can I give you my card?”

“Certainly. I’ll make some calls and let you know when I’ll be back in town.”

“Thanks again,” she said and took my hand. She leaned forward and I prepared for a kiss, but she took my chin in her hand and said, “You are sweet.”

My lips unpuckered and I let her walk away.

I waited a week. Too soon. Another week. Not yet. I didn't want to seem too anxious. I wanted to wait one more week, but by Wednesday of the third week, I cracked. I called her.

"Hello, Robert," she said.

"I'll be in Pittsburgh next week. We should get together and talk."

"Did you talk to your friends in New York?" she asked, voicing rising with excitement.

"That's what I wanted to talk about."

"Wonderful!"

"Let's meet in the bar."

"Oh, yes!"

We arranged the details and said our good-byes.

The following Monday we were back in our usual spot in the bar. She looked even more spectacular; wearing a low-cut number that I hoped might indicate better things to come.

"What did you find out?" she asked anxiously.

"There is some interest. They're always looking for fresh faces and you qualify," I lied.

"That's great!"

"They did want to see some photos so I brought my digital camera along. It's up in my room. We could go up there and, ah, try some things," I said and reached out and touched her arm.

"I have photos back at my place. Why don't we go back there?"

“That’s an even better idea.”

I couldn’t turn down that offer. We took her car and drove to the Mt. Washington section of the city. She piloted the car up the hills and through the narrow streets to a small house that sat back from the street.

“Here we are,” she said as she unlocked the door.

“Have a seat. I’m going to get more comfortable and find those photos,” she said and disappeared down the hall. I heard a door close behind her.

I started to sit in the chair and changed my mind. I wanted her to sit beside me on the sofa. I heard the door open.

“I can’t wait to see your photos,” I said.

“Hello, Bob.”

I froze. My mouth suddenly went dry and my heart began pounding. I knew that voice, but it couldn’t be!

I heard footsteps on the hardwood floors as she came around from behind the sofa. I hoped that maybe I was hearing things; misled by guilt into believing it was Mary’s voice, but after 15 years I should have known better.

It was Mary. She had a gun and it was pointed at me. I realized then why people who are confronted by someone with a gun rarely remember what type of gun it is. All I could see was the hole in the muzzle. It was a big hole.

“Mary, I…”

“Save your breath. You’re going to need it.”

“I know what this looks like.”

“Wait. I know. Oh, yes. It looks like another one of your tawdry affairs!” she said, sarcasm dripping from every word.

Surprise must have been evident on my face.

“You didn’t think I knew about those, did you? How stupid do you think I am, Bob? How many times did you think you could get away with it?”

What could I say?

“Yes, poor naïve Mary. You thought I was too obtuse to know what was going on. You thought you had it made. You thought you could go out of town, screw around and come back to your nice comfortable home and your nice comfortable wife and nobody would be the wiser.

“Guess what, Bob? You were wrong!” she said angrily.

“I can explain,” I said.

“I’m sure you can. Just like you could explain all those things over the years: shirts reeking of perfume, hairs I knew weren’t mine, even lipstick on your handkerchiefs after you wiped it off your face.

“For God’s sake, you must think I’m a moron if you thought I believed that crap!”

“Mary, I don’t think you are stupid or a moron.”

“Then what do you think? Tell me, Bob. What do you think of me? Come on, don’t be afraid. What do you think of your little Mary?”

“I think you are great for putting up with me all this time.”

“Oh, God. I should shoot right now after a line like that,” she said and raised the gun, causing my heart to skip a beat. “Here I am holding a gun on you and still you try to win me over with your patronizing bullshit.

“Face it, Bob! It won’t work anymore. I know who you really are and it just won’t work on me.”

“I’m not feeding you a line.”

“Please! But you know what the best part of this may be? You thought your silver tongue worked on Toni. Pretty funny, isn’t it? You thought you were playing her when all along she was playing you.

“You have to admit, it was a great plan and you fell for it. I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist the challenge of a beautiful and seemingly unattainable woman. It was so entertaining hearing the pickup lines you tried on her. It had to be a hell of a boost for your ego when she turned away all those other men, but allowed you to approach her.

“You must have been flying high when she came back just to see you. Well, Bob, it was all part of the plan: My plan to catch you red-handed.

“You followed my plan perfectly and here we sit. Now all that’s to be decided is what to do with you.”

“You don’t have to do anything with me.”

If she heard, she paid no attention.

“I could shoot you right now.”

“You can’t do that. There’s a witness.”

“Not anymore. She’s gone.”

“Toni!” I shouted.

There was no answer and I broke out into a cold sweat.

“She’ll know. If you shoot me, she’ll know. She’ll go to the police.” I said.

“Bob! Think about it. If you simply disappear, nobody will know and there will be no untidy loose ends, like a body. You were in town on business and then you went back home. Except you never arrived.”

“Somebody will look for me.”

“I’ve accounted for all that. I’m going back home and in a few days I’ll report you missing and when the police come, I’ll say you probably ran off with one of your playmates.”

“No one will believe that.”

“Of course they will, because I’ll have proof. Bob, this is not a spur of the moment thing. I’ve been planning this for a long time. There will be all sorts of evidence of your affairs that will turn up and when they see that they won’t bother looking for you.

“You see, men do this all the time and you’ll just be another statistic. It’ll be like a fairy tale and I’ll live happily ever after.”

“You’ll never get away with it.”

“But I will. It’s all been planned.

“You can’t shoot me here. It’ll leave too much of a mess.”

“I’ve been cleaning up your messes for years. One more won’t make any difference.”

“Please, Mary...”

“What are you going to say? You’re sorry? That’ll you’ll change? It’s too late for that.”

“God, Mary! Don’t do this. You are a better person than that.”

“I was a good person, but you’ve changed me. Now I’m as cold as you are,” she said and pointed the gun at my chest.

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“Mary, no! Please!”

The gun roared.

Over my dead body

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