

A dark, moody photograph of a wine glass filled with red wine. In the foreground, a piece of broken glass lies on the surface. The background is black.

DOUBLE BLIND

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Two beautiful women.
Two deadly secrets.

Geoff Loftus

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By

Geoff Loftus



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For Margy and Greg

double-blind *adj*: of, relating to, or being an experimental procedure in which neither the subjects nor the experimenters know the makeup of the test and control groups during the actual course of the experiments

*Webster's Third New International
Dictionary*

1

“You don’t know a damn thing about women,” Nina told me. “Not a thing.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m clueless about women. But does that mean we have to get a divorce?”

Nina and I were watching the sun set over Manhattan from the observation deck of the GE Building, which had been the RCA Building back in the ’50s when Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Jules Munshin danced atop it in the movie *On the Town*. From our perch hundreds of feet above the city, we could see the entire island achieve a pink-gold glow as the sun fired its final light of the day over the giant city. I leaned against the railing of the deck, looking south toward the Empire State Building and deliberately

avoiding looking at my wife.

Standing next to me, unseen but very much a presence, Nina spoke resignedly, “You are clueless about women. But my problem is that you’re clueless about me. You can’t give me what I want in this marriage because you don’t know what it is.”

“Tell me. Whatever it is you want, I’ll do it. Please, just tell me.”

“It’s too late.” She paused for a long moment, but I didn’t know how to respond to her. Finally, her voice sad and apologetic, she said, “I have to leave now.”

I turned to her, frightened because I knew she didn’t mean she was departing the observation deck — she was leaving me. Leaving our marriage. I desperately didn’t want her to go. I still loved her. “Please, don’t . . . ,” I said softly.

All around us, the city went dark. The unlit buildings were dark gray spires against the deep blue of the night.

“I can’t stay,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

She took a step toward the exit. I reached for her, clutching softly at her arm, hoping I could convince her to stay with me.

But instead of gently clutching her arm, my hand moved too fast, slamming into her shoulder. Nina staggered off balance, her feet scrambled for purchase, and then she tripped against the

railing at the edge of the observation deck. For a horrible instant she hung on the railing, trying to balance herself and regain her footing on the deck. It was no use — her weight shifted, and she toppled off of the building.

I screamed her name and lunged for her, my arm outstretched, grabbing for her. I caught nothing but air. Nina's face was turned up toward me, her eyes wide with fear, her mouth open but silent with terror.

Frozen, I watched as her body plunged out of sight —

I lurched awake in bed, covered in sweat, still screaming her name. For a long moment I sat upright, looking around my bedroom, trying to place myself. My heart was pounding, and it took me a few minutes to slow my breathing. I had to tell myself, over and over, mantra-like, "It's only a dream."

The dream woke me a little after 3 A.M., leaving my nerves in overdrive so I decided to get up and watch the overnight news on television. I wandered the short distance from my bedroom to my living room dressed in nothing but my boxer shorts. One of the little benefits of re-entering bachelorhood was that you got to dress any way you damn well pleased.

Without any real plan in mind, I tuned into one of cable

TV's 24-hour news channels. A nice-looking, baritone-voiced African-American was at the anchor. I caught him in mid-story: "It is believed that there is a link between the homicides and an ongoing Federal investigation into organized crime. All three victims were alleged members of Mafia families in New York and Philadelphia." The camera cut away from the live feed of the anchor and showed videotape of a night scene of police cars with their emergency lights flashing, surrounding what looked like two bodies on a sidewalk. The locator at the bottom of the screen said: Philadelphia. The anchor continued to speak over the video, "The killings follow multiple arrests made in the last three weeks in several East Coast cities." The anchor was back on-screen, saying, "A spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney General's office had no comment on either the killings or the arrests."

Enough of that, I thought, using the remote control to turn off my television. After the dream I'd just had, I needed no more deaths, even if it was a bunch of anonymous Mafiosos. I stood up from my couch and walked the length of my living room to the windows that overlooked West 75th Street. I had an apartment with a tiny bedroom but a very large living room with one wall stripped down to the brick and the best part: a working fireplace. It was cozy and comfortable and lonely. I looked out the window at the

brownstones across the street. Several of them, like my own building, had carefully painted doors and windows with flower boxes. The street was lined with trees that were heavy with spring greenery, their leaves rustling in the breeze, throwing irregular shadows from the street lights. At a few minutes after 3 A.M. everything was quiet, and the trees created a romantic atmosphere.

Oh boy, I thought, it's the middle of the night, and you've just had your umpteenth horrible dream about losing Nina, and now you're yearning for romance on West 75th. Give it a rest. Go back to bed and dream about the Giants returning to the Super Bowl.

But I couldn't go back to bed. It had been more than two years since we separated, a little over a year since our divorce, but I missed Nina — and I didn't want to take a chance on another nightmare. I turned away from the window and moved toward the large wall unit that ran almost the entire length of the room's exposed-brick wall. It had books and a stereo and the television, and at the end, built along the corner of the room, a desk with my computer and shelves full of note pads and reference books. I plunked down at the desk and stared at the dark screen of my computer. Sure I was feeling too crazy to sleep, but did I really want to turn on the computer and grapple with General Douglas

MacArthur at this hour of the night?

Despite my problems with Nina, I never had such deadly dreams about her until I started writing about MacArthur. Not that I blamed the General. If I hadn't been so damn successful with Dwight D. Eisenhower, I wouldn't have been offered the chance to write the story of the man who returned to the Philippines, of the man who invaded Inchon when it was supposed to be impossible, of the old soldier who faded away and lived his last years at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. But my book on Eisenhower had attracted a lot of attention: I hadn't written a biography of the man as soldier and president. Instead, I'd examined him as the chief executive officer of a large company — the Allied forces in Europe — and how he had managed that company. The book had been written as if it were an MBA case study, in a popularized style, of course, and had been a “crossover success” as it sold well to both business and history readers. I had even been interviewed on public television and done a few book-signing parties at bookstores. My agent saw the Ike book as the launching of a franchise and quickly worked out a publishing deal for a follow-up book dealing with MacArthur as CEO of the Allied forces in the South Pacific. I had argued that a book on George Washington, the first CEO of the constitutional government of the United States

was more interesting.

But my agent pointed out that “guys like Joseph Ellis and David McCullough have been writing a lot about Washington, lately. You should draw water at another well. You need to cement the success of the Eisenhower book and MacArthur is a logical second book. After that, if you want to take a look at Washington, be my guest.”

I had a feeling that when MacArthur was done, my agent would be pushing me to more books about World War II era CEOs like George Patton or maybe even Omar Bradley. But the logic of MacArthur as the subject of my second tome was solid, and so I spent my days toiling on a profile of Douglas MacArthur, CEO.

Over my desk was the famous photo of MacArthur wading ashore at the Philippines, striding purposefully through the surf. This was the quintessential image of the take-charge corporate executive. It was also a staged picture, and that too was consistent with my thoughts on the General: tough enough to get his organization back to the Philippines, savvy enough to exploit it for the media.

Sitting at my desk, with the clock moving ever so slowly toward morning, I looked up at that wily, rugged competitor. Did I

want to start waltzing around with the General at this hour of the night? After all, I was wide awake, maybe I should do some work for a while. But the last thing I wanted to do was spend my nocturnal hours hiding from my memories and dreams of Nina by immersing myself in MacArthur's management techniques. I had the sinking feeling that my nightmares weren't caused by my work, they were caused by my attempts to escape my past with Nina.

I never denied that we had been married or that it was painful to have been divorced. But I tried not to look at my life with Nina any more deeply than that. I felt a knot of sadness in my chest as I thought of her, but it was late, and I didn't want to get lost in the blues. There had been enough lost nights since we had broken up.

Well, since I was awake, I thought about making some coffee and breakfast, but that was just too pathetic. What about warming some milk and attempting to go back to sleep? Too lazy to warm the milk. What about a beer? Beer would make a tasty and paradoxically refreshing soporific. But alcohol at this hour of the night seemed, well, alcoholic.

I walked back over to the window and looked out at quiet, romantic West 75th Street again. My whole problem, I realized,

was that I was lonely. I didn't mean lonely in the cosmic, "I'm divorced and I am all alone" sense. I meant in the moment-to-moment sense: I had too much time to think about my work, too much time to worry about my social life. I needed to go out a bit, meet some people, shake up my routine, and get out of the "poor me's." Yeah, so how was I going to do that? It wasn't as if I didn't know anybody. It just seemed, at 3:43 in the morning, that I didn't know one attractive, available woman to ask out. There were women who were good buddies, and women who were relatives, and women who were total strangers, but the world seemed devoid of appropriate single women for me to spend time with.

Maybe it was time to go back to bed after all. Just the thought of dating had worn me out. I hit the sack and went right to sleep.

In the morning, after I got out of the shower, I looked in the mirror. It was a long, hard, assessing look. I have to confess that whenever I was feeling blue, and after *every* Nina dream, I always gave myself the once over in the mirror, hoping that what I saw would eliminate the blues. The once over revealed the same thing every time: not bad. Not bad at all. A guy still in his prime at 35-years old. Just under six-feet tall, brown hair, solid jaw, straight

nose, and the best feature: blue eyes. Yup, not bad . . . at all.

Concluding the morning once over, I went into my kitchen, poured a cup of coffee and trudged to my desk. I saluted the General as he waded ashore at the Philippines.

The next couple of hours were spent transferring a few days worth of research at the library into my computer. I often spent days digging through books or interviewing experts and then going home and rewriting my crimped, handwritten notes into the computer. This process not only straightened out the notes' content but helped me sift through the information, deciding what was important and what was merely interesting detail.

Lunch was looming on my horizon when the phone rang. The phone was within easy reach, but I waited for the third ring to answer. I didn't want the world to form a picture of me as a lonely writer desperately grabbing the phone on its first ring. "Hello," I said.

"Hi," a woman's voice, strong and confident, "is this Peter Galligan?"

"It is. Can I help you?"

"I hope so," she said, sounding way too strong to need any help from me. "I'm Sharon Kimball, a friend of your sister Jeannie."

“Oh, hello,” I said with more than enough warmth to be encouraging. I always tried to be nice to my sister’s female friends. Most of them were pretty nice themselves.

“This is out of the blue,” Sharon said, “but Jeannie was telling me about you, and you sound pretty interesting, so I asked to meet you — and here I am calling.”

I was caught off-guard. Less than twelve hours before, I’d been experiencing another dark night of the soul brought on by the divorce blues, and here was a totally unexpected call from an attractive woman asking me out. And why did I assume Sharon was attractive? What was there about her voice that led me to that conclusion?

“Listen, I don’t mean to be denser than a block of granite,” I said, “but are we talking about going on a date?”

“Yes,” she laughed, “assuming you don’t hate the idea. I’m asking you out to dinner. I guess I didn’t do that very well.”

“You probably don’t have much practice. You sound like someone who gets asked a lot more often than she asks.”

“You’d be surprised,” she murmured, her voice low.

I didn’t know where to go with that comment, so I asked, “What did you have in mind for dinner?”

She suggested the next night, Thursday, at a midtown

restaurant. The next night at the particular restaurant she mentioned was very agreeable to me, and I said so enthusiastically. We both laughed and agreed on a time to meet.

“Let me give you my phone number,” she said. “It’s unlisted, so if something happens you’ll need it to reach me.”

“Nothing will happen.”

She laughed again and gave me her number. “I’m really looking forward to meeting you.”

“It’s mutual. Just so I know it’s you, what do you look like?”

She waited a moment, then, “Don’t worry, you’ll know.”

I had a feeling I would know the second I laid eyes on her. “Care to hear what I look like?” I asked.

“Jeannie’s already described you to me.”

“Great,” I said. “Not that I mind plunging headlong into the unknown, but shouldn’t we exchange a little personal information before committing to a date?”

“Your sister already told me enough to get me to call.”

“I don’t mean to sound timid, but I don’t know a thing about you.”

“That will give us something to talk about at dinner.”

“Oh.” I felt outmaneuvered and intrigued at the same time.

“You’re a mystery woman.”

Sharon laughed again, “Sounds dangerously intriguing, doesn’t it?”

“Now you’re a *dangerous* mystery woman.”

“You have no idea,” she said, her voice going a little bit hard. Then, in a softer tone, “See you tomorrow.”

“You certainly will,” I said, and we hung up.

Wow, I thought, a dinner date with a mystery lady in a little more than twenty-four hours. I was a light mood as I made my way into my miniscule kitchen for lunch. I was in the middle of spreading mustard on my bread before the thought occurred to me that my sister had some gall giving my number out to a stranger without asking me first. Even a pretty stranger. Even a pretty, sexy and willing stranger. Even . . . enough, I thought. Sharon might be a spectacular and mysterious woman, but my sister still needed to be straightened out regarding the handing out of my number.

“Hey, Pete, what’s up?”

“Well, I know you’re concerned about the solitary state of my life and all, but don’t you think you could have warned me before giving my number to someone?”

“What?”

“Sharon Kimball just called me.”

“I didn’t give her your number. But Sharon’s not the type to wait on something she wants. Although she sure doesn’t have to rush to get on your social calendar, does she?”

“Nice. Thanks,” I paused, “Anyway, Sharon said you told her about me and that you were going to set up an introduction.”

“I was, but since I hadn’t had a chance to ask you, I didn’t give her your number. I was going to call you today and see if it was okay.”

Maybe I should have been bothered, but what had Sharon done other than look up my phone number? I grunted, “It’s okay. From the sound of the lady, it’s very okay.”

“Really?” My sister managed to pack a large amount of curiosity into that short word.

“Really — what?”

“What’s up with you and Sharon?”

I smiled, “We’re going out for dinner tomorrow night.”

“You’ll like her.”

“What’s she like?” I asked, waiting for the usual answers: nice, attractive, and available. “Nice” translated as recently and unfairly dumped, “attractive” was a standard-issue description (after all, no one ever suggested that you date someone “ugly”), and “available” meant that the woman was still hurting from being

dumped but ready to try again. Since the women on these dates were always “nice, attractive and available,” it goes without saying that I had never found blind-dating to be a good way to meet an eligible woman. After an evening of stiff but courteous interaction, there would be a polite goodbye and then no further contact ever again. This was a two-way process — as a blind date, I probably ranked as less entertaining than sitting on the couch, eating a frisée salad and watching the Food Network on TV. So, when I asked my sister what Sharon was like, I didn’t expect much.

“I don’t know her very well . . .” here it comes, I thought, my sister’s about to write this off — Jeannie continued with, “. . . but she’s smart and funny and *very* good looking. You’ll be . . .” Jeannie’s voice trailed off as she searched for the right word, “*enthusiastic*. Sharon’s *very* sexy.”

That sounded considerably better than the “nice” and “attractive” I had expected.

My sister continued, “Sharon’s not the type you could spend the rest of your life with —”

“I’m not looking for that —”

She brushed past my interruption, “You won’t be bored.”

“Well, on that happy note, thanks for thinking of me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“How’d you meet her?”

“She moved into my building a few months ago. I met her in the laundry room, and we talked as we folded clothes.”

“Nothing like the smell of freshly washed cotton to get people talking,” I said. “So, what does she do? Does she have a job? Is she divorced? What’s her deal?”

Jeannie laughed, “I have no idea what her deal is. None whatsoever. You’ll have to ask her.”

“How can that be? She’s your neighbor for crying out loud.”

“I told you, I hardly know her. I don’t know where she’s from or what she does for a living or her past romantic status. I do know that she uses fabric softener and folds her laundry very quickly.”

“She could be a black widow, or, worse, she could be a professional bowler.”

Jeannie ignored me, “Look, we’ve talked over our laundry for a few minutes. By the time you finish your dinner date, you’ll have spent a lot more time with her than I have.”

“And with that alarmingly flimsy security check, you’re palming off this woman on me?”

“Here’s what I can tell you: She’s intensely sensuous. And assertive, almost aggressive.”

“You can tell that she’s aggressive by watching her fold laundry? What the hell does she do to her delicate washables?”

“You’re a big boy. If you’re frightened, you can always cancel.”

We both laughed. “Okay,” I said. “Thanks again.”

“I want all the lurid details after your date.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure . . .” I said, and hung up.

My sandwich, fully assembled and ready for consumption, awaited my attention. What to drink? Normally I have water or a soda with my lunch, but I was feeling quite chipper and decided to celebrate with a beer. After all, I’d put in a very good morning’s work on the General and an exciting, sexy woman had asked me out on a dinner date. I grabbed a bottle from the fridge, opened it and poured it into a tall Pilsner glass, something I almost never used. But since this lunch felt special, I might as well make an occasion out of it. Things had improved immeasurably since my lethal nightmare about Nina. I now had a dinner date with a bona fide hottie.

After a few bites of my sandwich and some very satisfying sips of my beer, the phone rang again. For a second, I thought Sharon was calling to inform me that she had changed her mind and was herewith canceling our date. Then I realized that I was

being ridiculously paranoid, even by my post-divorce, insecure standards.

I picked up the phone and said, with confidence and conviction, “Hello.”

“Hello, am I speaking with Peter Galligan?” A woman’s voice — smooth if a bit formal in tone.

“Yes, I’m Pete Galligan.”

“I’m Annie Wilder,” she said. “I’m sorry to call this way without warning —”

“No need to apologize unless you’re a bill-collector. Or an IRS auditor.”

“No, I’m neither,” she said, with the slightest shift in her voice, as if she was smiling. “I was . . . I was calling to invite you out for dinner.”

“Really? Wow . . . what a surprise,” I said artlessly then regrouped, “what a really nice surprise.”

“I’m sorry. I’m a friend of Paul Aguirre — we went to Stamford together — and he was telling me about you and what a great guy you are and said I should call and arrange a dinner date. Was that a mistake?”

“No, no, not at all. Paul Aguirre, huh? Now my editor is farming me out on dates?”

“Not exactly. We were talking about history, and I mentioned your book, and Paul said he knew you. One thing led to another, and here I am calling.”

“Wow, this is the first time someone’s wanted to meet me for my book instead of my bod.”

There was an uncomfortable pause on the other end of the phone.

“Just kidding, Annie, a pathetic attempt at humor,” I said, trying to ease the discomfort. “Sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“You didn’t, I . . .”

“Listen, if I promise to keep the stupid humor to an absolute minimum, would you still like to get together for dinner?” I asked quickly. After the misfire on the joke, I was a wee bit desperate to renew negotiations for dinner. “It’d be nice to meet you.”

“It’d be nice to meet you, too. You can even make a joke, if you like. Once I’ve had a drink, that is.”

“I’ll contain myself at least through the martinis.”

“Pinot Noir.”

“Whatever.”

I thought I heard the softest chuckle on her end. “When would you like to get together? Would this Friday work for you?”

“That sounds fine,” she said, and we exchanged information

on time, place and phone numbers “in case something came up.”

“It might come in handy,” I said as we were wrapping up our plans, “if you described yourself so I don’t wander around the restaurant searching for you. I wouldn’t want to disturb the other dinner patrons.”

“Heavens no,” she said, and I thought I heard a smile in her words. “I’m five-feet-five-inches tall, shoulder-length brown hair, and blue eyes.” She paused for a second then added, “I’ll wear a blue dress. That should make spotting me a little easier.”

“Okay,” I said as if reading a recipe, “Five-feet-five, brown hair, blue eyes, blue dress.”

“Don’t worry,” Annie said softly, “for a lawyer, I’m actually kind of cute.”

For a second I hesitated then laughed gently. She laughed too, and I found her flash of humor infectious. Our dinner date seemed full of potential.

“You’re a lawyer? I guess I should give you the rundown on me —”

“I know what you look like from your picture on the book cover.”

“Maybe it’s not a good likeness.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she said, and we both laughed again.

“Well,” I said, “I guess I’ll see you Friday.”

“See you then.” Annie wasn’t quite finished, “Peter?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad we’re doing this.”

“Me, too.”

We hung up on that pleasant note. I mulled over calling Paul Aguirre to get the scoop on Annie the way I had called my sister to find out about Sharon but decided the heck with it. Let the mystery of Annie’s character add to the experience. After all, what did I really learn about Sharon from my sister?

I finished off my sandwich and beer, realizing that I had gone from famine to feast in both the literal and metaphorical senses in the space of a half-hour. From no social life to two dates. From a nightmare about my ex-wife to two encounters with mystery women. Okay, they were both blind dates, and blind dates had a way of being high on expectation and low on fulfillment, but the odds favored me — at least one of them would probably be nice.

If only I had known what was coming.