

Blindsided

Ever since Zach Worthman took the assistant professor's job at a college twenty miles distant from our home town, I had tried to goad him into the Drive Off prank. I was mostly idle that year, rather directionless after we'd both finished up at the university downstate, and I would sometimes drive over to meet him for lunch. Zach and I had been friends since we were boys growing up together in a factory workers' neighborhood.

His office was on the east side of the campus in an ancient looking building often featured in the college's fanciful brochures. The PR department evidently wanted prospective freshmen to believe the campus dated back centuries. In truth, the building everyone called "Old Main" had been built around 1910 by a medieval minded spiritualist, who became wealthy communicating with the dead relatives of the city's elite.

Zach's tiny work space in the basement of the Old Main building always reminded me of a dungeon. The dank air and windows set high on the wall behind his desk had on more than one occasion inspired me ask when his Dominatrix was due to arrive.

"Turn the goddamned lights on," I said as I knocked once and kept coming through the door into his office.

"You need clarity more than light, Bert" he said.

"What're you, blind?" I asked him, probably for the thousandth time in our lives. In fact he was sightless, and had been for almost ten years, since that awful trail bike accident.

"You ought to teach Rover to clean your office." I said. "Even in the dark, this place is a mess."

"Rover", said Zach, "is about to bite you in the ass, aren't you Pup."

Pup was a full grown male German Shepherd guide dog, who spent his office hours under the small library table placed in front of Zach's desk to extend

its surface. Visitors often sat at the table unaware a large canine lurked in the dark cavern just beyond their toes, until Pup nosed around the guest's ankles. Or higher. Julie Dartbonger had flipped over backwards in her chair when Pup nosed upward the day before she was installed as assistant Dean of Instruction. Pup really likes women. Julie says the feeling is not mutual, but I'm thinking if she hasn't found a steady date by the end of her first year at the college, she should reconsider.

"Next time I come over, let's do the Drive Off," I said to Zach. "It'll put some fun in your life."

"Won't work if the cop recognizes you," he replied.

"I'm working on a really great disguise," I said.

The streets winding through the campus had limited parking, as well as lots of drivers who didn't give a damn about where they parked or for how long. The Campus Security Patrol constantly walked up and down the sidewalks, writing tickets and waving off cars without the correct green stickers. But my visitor's pass allowed me into the block of spaces marked with paint along the curb just outside Zach's office. In this crowded scene, two apparently blind men driving away in a convertible would certainly turn a few heads.

The following Tuesday we stood like two kids at the windows in Zach's office, while I described the scene outside to him and noted there were plenty of security cops out roaming the sidewalk. Any one of them could be our target. I pulled my floppy fishing hat down tight on my head and donned the raincoat and dark glasses.

"Are you ready?" I asked. Zach handed me a white cane.

"Where did you get this?" I said. "You never use one."

"The Society hands them out for free. I took five or six. They're good for tying up my tomato plants."

Out on the sidewalk, we walked along arm in arm as I tapped my stick, getting the tip caught on the sidewalk twice and ramming myself in the stomach. We stopped when we came to my rusty old VW convertible. Within moments a member of the Security Patrol came strutting our way in his crisply pressed uniform.

"Not this guy," said Zach, "it's McAllister. I

recognize his walk. He's too shrewd."

Soon, another security guard approached.

"Patrolman Farley," said Zach. "Perfectly gullible. He's got new shoes on, too."

"Excuse me, m'am or sir," I said to Farley, trying to contain my mirth, "is there a yellow convertible around here somewhere?"

"Hello, sir," said Farley, "and good Morning to you, Dr. Worthman. Where's Pup?"

"Well" said Zach, "Dr. Dartbonger told me to get rid of him.

"What"?

"So Mr. Smith, here, has replaced him."

"Excuse me, sir," Farley said to me, "aren't you ... uh ... visually challenged?"

"As a bat," I replied. "But I smell better than Pup when I'm wet."

Farley looked me up and down and nodded his head.

"So, is there a yellow convertible around here?" I repeated, beginning to feel uncomfortable. This prank was starting to get wobbly.

"Farley," said Zach, "Smith here really isn't a guide dog and Pup is back in my office, under the table as usual. But we need to find his car so we can drive off and kill ourselves."

"Geez!" said Farley. "What you wanna go and do that for, Dr. Worthman?"

"We're lovers, and our wives just discovered us." Zach turned, threw his arms around me and planted a big smacker on my ear before I could pull away from him.

"Stop that, Zach!" I said. "Officer, is there a yellow convertible here or not?" I asked, putting my hand out and leaning on my yellow VW convertible.

"Why yes, Mr. Smith, you're standing right next to it." Farley reached to the passenger door of my car and opened it. "Step right in, gentlemen," he said.

I looked at Zach in surprise, but of course he didn't look back. Instead, he stepped through the opened

door while I clumsily felt my way around the vehicle and let myself in the driver's side. Julie Dartbonger walked up just then, pointed at me and said, "Officer Farley, arrest that man!"

"For being Zach's lover?" asked Farley.

"No, he's kidnapped Pup," she said.

"We never got to that part," Zach said to Julie.

"You're under arrest!" Farley addressed me. "For kidnapping a dog and his man."

"Thank God, I'm saved!" cried Zach. "We were going to my bank for the ransom, and if I write one more bad check"

Meanwhile, I was angling out of the parking spot and aiming down the street. Instead of leaving astonished bystanders behind, Farley and Dartbonger were laughing and waving us goodbye as we drove off.

"God damn it, Zach," I said as I ripped off my hat and threw it in the back seat, "how did they guess?"

"Do you know how many times that stunt has been pulled by students?" said Zach, between his bursts of laughter.

"No," I said, "I was under the impression I thought it up."

"I couldn't resist Julie's suggestion to turn the joke on you," he said.

"So, now you got one over on me, huh?"

"Yup," he said. "And you just got blindsided by a blind man."

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