

Blind Man and the Bimbo

By Paul Anders

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Chapter 1

The smells of newly cut grass and horse dung from the track nearby mingle with the tang of Eucalyptus and the occasional heady whiff of pine. The air, for once, is free of tobacco fumes and the music, loud and raucous, promises heavy doings in the evening ahead.

The Big Hoss Dance Hall outdoors next to the Santa Anita Race Track is well worth the extra half-hour's drive, and I hoped by now Girl had regained some of her normal good temper.

"I want to dance," I said to her, "Who've we got?"

"Buxom blond, maybe too buxom, wearing stretch pants."

"You know how I feel about ..."

She pressed on ignoring me, "Foxy brunette, tall, slim ... no, forget that one, she and her partner are wearing matching outfits, probably married. Now here's an odd one."

Girl's hand shifted on my arm and I could hear the faint whisper of her fingers running through her hair. The sound was accompanied by the delicate odor of perfume, shampoo, and Girl herself. This odd one must be competition, and competition do make Girl nervous.

"The woman's in her mid-thirties, I'm guessing, short dark hair, her partner's just a teenager."

"Little short fellow?" My voice, deep as a nighttime disk jockey's, could have belonged to a news anchorman, but was just the speech of a once-upon-a-time professor of anatomy.

Girl's voice was deep too, for a girl, and resonant—she'd sung in a choir in high school, and still did when she went to church. "No, he's quite tall, towers over his mom. That's probably what it is, mother and son."

"Bad idea for her to dance with him. Give the kid an Oedipus complex—if he doesn't have one already. I'd better dance with her, give the child a chance to strike out on his own."

Girl laughed, amused rather than impressed by my logic. She continued with her summary of the passing crowd and, a moment later, called out to someone walking nearby. I stood mechanically as Girl took my wrist and placed a small feminine hand in mine.

“You’re...?”

“Brigitte.”

“I know a Brigitte.” I began.

“I’m the one,” Brigitte announced and giggled.

Yes, I knew a Brigitte all right: short, red hair—almost orange I’d been told; she smelled good, real good. But she giggled, wore too much hand lotion, and had no real sense of the music. Why had Girl stuck me with her? What had happened to the brunette? One dance, that was all I’d give this Brigitte.

“Oh, dance this next one with me,” Brigitte said, “you know I love the cha-cha.”

So do I. “I’d like to but I promised Girl.”

“Why do you call her Girl? Her name is Marci.”

“What’s the point of learning their names? They never stay around long enough, none of them have, not since the... explosion.” There, I could say the word now, didn’t really bother me anymore.

Brigitte’s temper was in keeping with her red hair. She raised her voice to tell me what I already knew. “Maybe they’d stay around longer if you were nicer. Maybe if you were really nice, you could find someone permanent to live with you, you wouldn’t have to hire a girl.”

Like you, I thought, with your permanent smell of honey, and hand lotion, and fresh salt air. And that dammed giggle.

We’d stopped on the edge of the dance floor to talk; the other dancers whirled by inches from us; the long skirts of one brushed my pant leg. For an instant, I felt an intense sadness.

I should have danced the cha-cha. Would have shut Brigitte up. Damned conversation with these women never leads anywhere.

“Get me a dancer this time,” I begged Girl.

“I’m trying.” she said, “Brigitte was a volunteer, she likes you. Some of the women find you ill-tempered, not her. Trouble with you is you’re so fussy, they’re always ‘too short,’ or ‘tries to lead.’”

“I’ll tell you something, Professor Anders. At this particular out-of-the-way dance place you insisted we come to tonight, ‘can’t stand the smoke,’ you said, ‘want fresh air,’ they’re either all married, or they don’t know how to do anything but line dance.”

“What about the brunette? The one with the kid?”

“So far she hasn’t let go of him. Wait, I see her doing Slapping Leather. A couple of minutes from now could be your big opportunity.”

“It will be if you get your big butt over there.”

Girl got; at least she got out of range of what remains of my poor vision. As always, I felt helpless when she was out of earshot.

“Redneck Girl,” went the tune. What other kind was there?

Returning footsteps and multiple silhouettes said Girl had been at least partially successful; I just hoped it wasn’t another damned Brigitte.

“This is Donna Clark and her son Greg. I’m going to dance with Greg, maybe you could entertain Donna.”

But I had already taken Donna’s hand and was leading her out onto the dance floor. What did I want to be introduced to the son for? He was probably as cute as a dancing bear.

Donna Clark said her son was only 13 and well on his way to being a competition dancer. “I spend most of my free time taking him to and from dance lessons. He taught me to dance, the west-coast swing anyway.”

Touch told me Donna wore a short-sleeved blouse with fringe on the shoulders, jeans with a braided leather belt, and boots. She was slim, each of her ribs sharp and definite against the skin, hips not much wider than mine; she smelled of sunflowers.

“You’re a good dancer,” she said, the light puff of her breath against my cheek suggesting she’d just been eating peaches.

Slow, slow, quick, quick, I said inwardly in time with the music. I took a deep breath, wondering what I could say aloud in reply. “It’s easy to dance with you, too. You’re so very light on your feet.”

“Thank you,” she said and rested her head against my shoulder for a brief intoxicating moment. “I’ve seen you before,” she confided. “In Cahoots in Fullerton.”

“I’m a Wednesday night regular; Saturdays too, if I haven’t got a date.” Slow, slow, quick, quick.

“I usually go Saturdays,” she said.

“Be there tomorrow?” I asked, trying to sound calm and unemotional.

“I might be.” She sounded uncertain rather than flirtatious; not at all the commitment I wanted her to make. “I should go check on Greg. My son,” she added when she saw his name was still a mystery to me.

She left me, and I wished my eyes could follow her across the floor. I wondered if I’d dance with Donna again.

I danced with Girl; we dance well together—she stands at 5’11,” an inch taller than I am, so we truly dance cheek to cheek—but her heart is never really in it. As with my own daughters, she seems distracted, as if her eyes are

constantly darting about the room appraising, searching for someone her own age.

After making sure that I had the retaining wall of a planter at my back and was out of the way of traffic, Girl drifted away on some mysterious errand. Probably she had found that someone, or at least someone who would do for a dance or three.

I waited patiently, not dancing, as cooler air crept down from the San Gabriel Mountains. It was getting late; we probably should be on our way. "Girl!" Where the hell was she anyway? Someone about Girl's height stood a few feet from where I sat by the planter, had been standing there for some time. I'd assumed it was Girl. Then, why didn't she answer?

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"Me, Sir?" An adolescent's voice, unsteady, oscillating between a boy's and a man's.

"Yes, you."

"Greg. I'm Greg. I was looking for my mother. She was dancing with you earlier."

"I thought she'd gone home."

"We were supposed to half an hour ago; I can't find her," the kid said, whining. Grow up kid. Life is tough.

"Check the rest rooms. I could send Girl to look. If she were here that is."

"I am here," came that fresh young voice from off to my right, "and the name is Marci."

"Girl," I snapped.

"Marci. But don't worry; you'll get it right sooner or later, Professor. You want to go home I suppose."

"No, I'm planning to spend the night. First, we'll find the young man's mother."

"I thought you two were together," Girl said to Greg. He kicked the side of the planter with his foot, hesitated. "I was dancing with Barbara; she likes to do the west coast swing. When I came back my mother was gone. She said this would be the last dance." The boy's voice descended in an instant from suave maturity to helplessness, and finished on a note of despair.

"She's got to be here," Girl said, "They're shooin' people out toward the gates."

"I'll find her," I announced, and started back across the dance floor. We couldn't all afford to be helpless.

"They've turned off the lights."

“Not a problem.” For me it wasn’t a problem. Not anymore, I was always in the dark now.

“Where are you going?” Girl called out behind me as I started up the stairs to the racetrack proper. The answer should have been obvious, though I forbore from telling her so. If the boy’s mother wasn’t on the dance floor and wasn’t in the rest room, then she had to have gone out to the track. I often do when I find a willing female; the darkness is romantic as hell, and the San Gabriel Mountains in the background seem to have an erotic effect.

I could hear them clattering up the stairs behind me. A man’s voice cried out, “You can’t go in there. Closed.” Ignoring the voice, I continued to thread my way across the linoleum floor. For an instant, I lost my balance—I’d stepped on a discarded racing program, but then I was back outside again, with only the track and the mountains ahead of me.

I had to be careful now; the occasional stair interrupted the ramp leading downward. Behind me were the sounds of a generator. Off to the right: voices, two men and a woman. Not a conversation, an argument.

A figure loomed ahead of me out of the darkness; I stopped, giving him or her a chance to go around me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a man’s voice challenged. “We’re trying to be alone here.”

“Tell him to fuck off,” a second male voice, deeper than the first, instructed from the shadows.

“Donna?” I ventured. If I were wrong, I’d just have to fuck off; if I were right, well, hopefully, Girl and the boy were right behind me.

From ahead of me in the darkness by the railing, Donna’s clear resonant voice asked, “Professor? What are you doing out here?” She sounded relieved rather than inquisitive.

“Greg sent me to get you.”

“Thank you. I was just telling Frank, Greg would be worrying about me.”

“Both of you shut the fuck up,” the deeper male voice, Frank’s, instructed. “Professor, whoever you are, go away. We got business to discuss. Tell the brat his momma will be there when she gets there.”

The shadow of the other man pushed against me, and I’d just locked his arm and elbow in a push-me, pull-me hold when Girl, Greg, and a puffing security person finally arrived. Why do sighted people have so much difficulty getting around in the dark?

“Put on the damn lights,” puffed the guard who’d been chasing us.

“We’re not supposed to,” whined a fifth person, a custodian presumably.

“All of you get out of here,” Frank said.

The second man, still bent over in the half-crouch where I'd twisted him, tugged on his arm. I let go of him and a grunt announced his hitting the row of chairs behind. He lay on the concrete for a moment, rubbing his arm, presumably, and muttered something about that “damned blind man.”

Donna chose that moment to link her arms with Greg and I, and to march us away from the discussion. I felt eminently proud of myself. Donna's breath, redolent of peaches, was again in my ear. “Thank you.”