

### Subby Says

Funny how the mind disengages at inopportune moments of need. She looked familiar. Standing in my office I couldn't place her. I asked my brain, *where do I know her from?*

It replied, *you're on your own, babe. She could be a customer, could be from a meet-up group, I dunno.*

I ticked her description through my psyche database. Blond hair, blue eyes, a little overweight, uh. Shit. She knew me by name. She didn't ask work related questions, so I knew she wasn't a customer. Chattered on about getting blood work for a new job...in the neighborhood...stopped by...blah, blah. Time for recognition was running out. Then I looked outside and saw her OSHA yellow soft-top jeep. Not many of those around. There we go, ding, we have a winner.

My brain dialed in after I did the investigative work and said, *Oh yeah; she's from the women's meet-up group the other night. Her contact info's in your cell phone.*

*Ya, way ahead of you, head.* I had covertly glanced at my cell phone under my desk, pulled up my most recently added phone numbers and there she was. Darlene Meetup. Bravo, slick retrieval on my part.

“Darlene, I'm so glad you stopped by. We'll have to get together soon.”

“How about tomorrow night? Let’s meet for dinner.”

*Did I like her?* Again, my mind left me empty, so I said, “Sure.”

Both divorced and over forty, we’re now three months into a loyal friendship. Darlene and I are fearless together. The type of female bond I’d been seeking. We’ve experimented with visiting a seedy comedy club to chanting at a meditation class and portals in-between.

Yesterday we were leaving an office supply store nowhere near the beach and in her outside voice Darlene said,

“This isn’t Daytona. You promised we were going to Daytona Beach, you lied to me.”

We bent in half giggling like twelve-year-olds as I pushed her out the door.

Subby, a.k.a. my annoying subconscious, raised an eyebrow, *juvenile*.

*Whatever. I finally found a fun cohort and now you want to give your opinion?*

Darlene and I met a couple of my casual girlfriends for dinner last night. Before arriving, Subby tapped me on the shoulder.

*What?*

*Do you really think Darlene will mesh with them? She’s an unpolished agate, definitely a variegated personality.*

I dismissed Subby’s concern.

We were the only patrons in the back room. A cute waiter wearing a badge that read, Tyler from Virginia Beach, appeared. Three of us flirtatiously babbled our food requests. Not Darlene. After she ordered, she cocked her head sideways and beamed at him.

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

He hesitated, “Have I waited on you before?”

“Nope. I know your mom.”

Subby mumbled under my breath, *Uh oh.*

The three of us ping-ponged their exchange astounded by the coincidence.

Darlene asked Tyler, “Did your mother enjoy her Hawaii trip?”

“My mom had a great time.” He said, clearly bemused.

Tyler kneeled at Darlene’s side taking the conversation more seriously.

“She got back about a month ago. What’s your name? I’ll tell her you said hello.”

Darlene broke into a toothy smile, “I don’t really know your mom.”

“What? Really?” Tyler looked at our gaping fish mouths.

Subby’s virtual mouth fell open too.

Tyler chuckled, pointed at Darlene and said, “You really had me going.” Shaking his head, he dashed to the kitchen.

I recovered first. “What the hell was that? How’d you know his mom went to Hawaii?”

“I didn’t. It was random.”

Subby bounced hard on my shoulder, *suspicious.*

We all marveled at Darlene’s uncanny intuition.

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I hadn’t seen much of Darlene lately because she’d been working overtime. Friday morning I texted her.

lunch on Sat? gonna be in yur hood

No can’t busy

Subby says, *Odd, she usually offers more.*

Ok miss you

On Friday night I texted her again.

Hey you still up?

No response.

Sitting inside my car after my Saturday morning meeting I text Darlene to double-check her availability. Still nothing.

Subby instinct, *something's gone wanko with this chick.*

I call her. A man answers.

“Is Darlene there?”

“Are you a friend of Darlene’s?”

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“This is Detective Kinsly of the Orlando Police Department.”

I’m sure this is a Darlene prank. “Can I speak with Darlene?”

“Darlene isn’t here. Do you know where she is?”

“Are you, are you serious?”

“Ma’am what’s your name?”

“Robyn.”

“Robyn, I’m Detective Calvin Kinsly. Are you related to Darlene?”

“We’re best friends. Why do you have her phone?”

“A Lowe’s employee found Darlene’s phone, her driver’s license, and a few other personal items behind a dumpster when they opened this morning. We’re trying to determine her whereabouts. Do you know where she went last night?”

This is real. My stomach knots, the back of my throat feels gritty, and the phone shakes in my hand.

“No, I... I haven’t heard from her since yesterday morning.

“Is your friend’s name Darlene Sue Wharton, date of birth May 17<sup>th</sup> 1968?”

“Don’t know her middle name. I guess that’s her birthday.” Brain blanked.

“Do you know where she works?”

“She works for a, uh, home health company.”

“We have a Jeep registered to her with a Virginia address. Do you know where she lives?”

“She lives with her dad in Deltona. I’ve only been there once.” I’m forcing breaths in and out of my mouth. I vaguely hear the Detective speaking.

“What did you say?”

He slowly repeats, “Do...you...know...her...father’s name?”

*Come on brain, remember. Come on, come on, shit.*

“I only met him the one time. He’s on disability. I think its Frank, Frank Wharton.”

“You say you’re best friends with her but you don’t know her birthday, where she works or lives. I’m looking up Frank Wharton and... there’s one in DeBary, Longwood, none in Deltona.”

“Well, I’ve really only known her a few months.”

Subby sneers, *you don’t need this drama, just hang up.*

The silence amplifies my ignorance.

“I’m in the area; I’ll try to find the house. I’ll call you back.”

Somehow I find the street from memory. Before I make the turn I appeal aloud, “*if her yellow jeep is in the driveway, she’s there and she’s okay.*”

It’s there! I let out a whistle of relief. I sprint to the front door and my knuckles rap urgently.

No answer.

Knock louder and faster than my pounding heart. No answer.

I run to see if anyone’s in the backyard. Empty.

Pace in the driveway. Subby hisses, *leave now.*

Knock on the front door again. The door opens slowly. Her dad is holding the wireless house phone to his ear.

Upon sight, Subby says, *now I remember, his name's Phil.*

Phil motions me in. He says, "Hold on, please" into the receiver.

With his hand over the mouthpiece he slumps into a chair. "Good Lord."

"Where's Darlene?"

Phil's ashen face squinches in anguish. "I'm not sure. I-I'm talking to the St. Joes or Johns Police Department. C-c-can you take over for me? Please."

I reach for his phone as he tells the officer to give me the information.

I can't assimilate the information so I call Detective Kinsly hoping it makes sense when I replay it for him.

"I'm with Darlene's father, Phil, not Frank. I spoke to a Sergeant Murphy up in Georgia. Apparently, Darlene took her dad's car this morning and drove to the Florida-Georgia border. When they pulled her over for speeding she refused to speak or get out of the car. So they called an ambulance, forced her out of the car and Baker Acted her into a Jacksonville Behavior Health Hospital. It doesn't explain why her things were in Orlando, but that's all I know."

I wait while he digests the meager details. He sighs, "Okay, give me the Sergeant's phone number. Ms. Wharton's belongings will be in Evidence at the Orange County Jail."

Out of duty, friendship, and curiosity, I drive Phil to pick up his car. Phil confesses right away.

"I just knew Darlene went off her bipolar meds about week ago. I saw the signs. She's done this kind of stuff before. I thought she had learned her lesson. I didn't even know she took my car until the officer called."

I listen while trying to focus on the interminable 156-mile drive. My mind plays back our relationship. I had no clue of her mental illness, but Subby suspected.

Phil's metallic blue Buick Lacrosse is innocently parked on the shoulder of Interstate 95. The deafening noise of the traffic mutes as we view the contents of the car. A to-go coffee cup sits empty in the front seat holder, and a box of white donut holes are strewn across the front passenger seat and floor. *Curious*. Phil opens the trunk to three ambiguous items screaming from the spotless gray interior, a blue candle, an alarm clock and a butcher knife.

We both stare into the cavernous trunk for what seems like an hour. My mind scavenges for meaning.

Subby says, *you ever gonna listen to me? Time to go back to the drawing board for a new best friend.*