

FOCUS

Glen Pourciau

BLAIR AND I WERE ENJOYING our favorite vacation spot, beautiful weather, nothing rushing us, nothing disturbing our peace of mind. I'd had a martini at a bar we'd visited on previous trips and Blair had an IPA that made him smack his tongue on the roof of his mouth. He paid the tab and we went out the door, on our way to a café down the street where I especially enjoyed the chicken piccata. But first Blair said he'd take a couple of bulky bags we'd been toting to the car, which was parked a block away. I settled into an Adirondack chair on the bar's porch and waited.

A woman with dark curly hair and a sleeveless flower-print dress was sitting in the Adirondack to my right, years of suntan on her face and arms. She flashed a smile, an aspect of persuasion in it, and leaned in my direction.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question? Do you think narcissism is a bad thing? If you're a narcissist that means you take care of yourself, doesn't it? Isn't taking care of yourself a good thing?"

It annoyed me that her question implied the answer she wanted to hear.

"I think it's better to be sympathetic to other people," I said.

She seemed to breathe my answer in and made a face as if what she'd breathed didn't agree with her.

"But don't you have to look out for yourself and not depend on others to take care of you?"

I had no desire to get in an argument, but her questions provoked me.

"You can't justify seeing yourself as more important than others. Other people's circumstances and points of view should be considered and respected."

I hoped my reply would make her sit back and drop the subject.

"For me," she went on, "I have to be the focal point. Is it realistic to assume I can see someone else's point of view as well as my own? Is it even possible, deep down, for me to value the well-being of people outside me over my own well-being? Does anyone else really see things that way? Do you?"

GLEN POURCIAU

“Some do.”

“Are you a religious person?”

“No.”

“I am religious. I am a creature created by God, just as you are, and he has given us his blessing by creating us. If we don't value ourselves as we should, we disrespect him.”

An uncomfortable silence grew between us. I feared she could get hostile and express further justifications for being narcissistic. She could be telling herself reasons to dismiss my opinion, muttering internally that I didn't love myself enough. I wondered if she had a husband or lover who criticized her for self-centeredness.

Soon I saw Blair nearing. He stepped onto the patio and smiled at her, and she gave him an assessing look. He helped me out of my chair, and we headed toward the café.

“You won't believe what that woman just asked me.”

I looked over my shoulder and saw her following us with her eyes. I filled Blair in as we walked and told him I'd sensed a stormy reaction inside her.

We were ready to change the subject once we were seated at the café. Still taking the place in, I glanced out the glass storefront and saw the narcissist come into view. She took a right turn through the front door, where the host greeted her and led her to a window table across from us.

“What a coincidence,” Blair said.

We tried to ignore her. I asked the server for a glass of red wine and Blair ordered a beer. Our drinks came quickly, and a few minutes later her server, the same as ours, brought her a glass of red wine. We enjoyed our drinks, my eyes drifting toward the storefront, apparently gazing out. She seemed occupied with checking her phone.

My dinner arrived, no eye contact having passed with her. I commented that the piccata was delicious as usual, and Blair praised his pasta dish. The server brought out her food, and I saw that she too had ordered chicken piccata.

“Tough bite?”

I'd stopped chewing.

“She ordered piccata.”

“You have no reason to fear her. You know almost nothing about her.”

“What I don’t know about her is what I fear.”

We discussed what we’d do the next day, determined not to let her disturb us, but underneath she stirred in my mind. At any moment she could move toward our table, and it occurred to me that I wouldn’t be using the café’s restroom.

When the server came to remove our plates, we said we’d loved the food.

“Interested in dessert menus?”

I shook my head.

“No chocolate cake?” Blair asked.

“Not this time.”

She signaled the server after he put our check on the table, and he went straight over to her. She handed him her credit card.

“After we pay,” I told Blair, “I want you to go get the car and come pick me up.”

“Are we on the run?”

“How do I know who’s nuts these days?”

“I’d be leaving you alone with her again.”

“Good point. Let’s walk out together.”

Blair signed the bill, and we stood. I stared at her, and she stared back. Blair took my hand.

She did not follow us.