

“Am I Blue?”

Bruce Coville

It started the day Butch Carrigan decided I was interested in jumping his bones.

“You little fruit,” he snarled. “I’ll teach you to look at me!”

A moment or two later he had given me my lesson.

I was still lying facedown in the puddle into which Butch had slammed me as the culminating exercise of my learning experience when I heard a clear voice exclaim, “Oh, my dear! That was nasty. Are you all right, Vince?”

Turning my head to my left, I saw a pair of brown docksiders, topped by khaki pants. Given the muddy condition of the sidewalks, pants and shoes were both ridiculously clean.

I rolled onto my side and looked up. The loafers belonged to a tall, slender man. He had dark hair, a neat mustache, and a sweater slung over his shoulders. He was kind of handsome—almost pretty. He wore a gold ring in his left ear. He looked to be about thirty.

“Who are you?” I asked suspiciously.

“Your fairy godfather. My name is Melvin. Come on, stand up and let’s see if we can’t do something with you.”

“Are you making fun of me?” I asked. After Butch’s last attack I had had about enough of people calling me a fruit for one day.

“Moi?” cried the man, arching his eyebrows and laying a hand on his chest. “Listen, honey, I have nothing but sympathy for you. I had to deal with my share of troglodytes when I was your age, and I know it’s no fun. I’m here to help.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I told you, I’m your fairy godfather.”

He waited for me to say something, but I just sat in the puddle, glaring at him. (It was uncomfortable, but I was already soaked right through my undershorts, so it didn’t make that much difference.)

“You know,” he said encouragingly. “Like in ‘Cinderella’?”

“Go away and let me suffer in peace,” I growled, splashing muddy water at him.

He flinched and frowned, but it was a reflex action; the water that struck his pants vanished

without a trace.

I blinked, and splashed at him again, this time spattering a double handful of dirty water across his legs.

“Are you angry or just making a fashion statement?” he asked.

I felt a little chill. No spot or mark of moisture could be seen on the perfectly pressed khakis. “How did you do that?” I asked.

He just smiled and said, “Do you want your three wishes or not, Vincent?”

I climbed out of the puddle. “What’s going on here?” I asked.

He made a tsking sound. “I think it’s pretty obvious,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Come on, let’s go get a cup of coffee and talk. All your questions will be answered in good time.”

The first question I thought of was “How much trouble is it going to give me to be seen with this guy?” With Butch and his crowd already calling me “faggot” and “fruit,” walking around with a guy who moved the way Melvin did wasn’t going to do anything to improve the situation.

The first question I actually asked was “Do you have to walk like that?”

“Like what?”

“You know,” I said, blushing a little. “So swishy.”

Melvin stopped. “Honey, I gave my life to be able to walk like this. Don’t you dare try to stop me now.”

“Don’t call me honey!” I snapped.

He sighed and rolled his eyes toward the sky. “I can’t say you didn’t warn me,” he said, clearly not speaking to me.

We went to a little cafe on Morton Street called Pete’s. It’s mostly frequented by kids from the university, but some of the high school kids hang out there as well, especially kids from the theater group.

“Not bad,” said Melvin as we entered. “Brings back memories.”

Things were slow, and we found a corner table where we could talk in private.

“Okay,” I said, “what’s going on?”

I won't relate the first part of the conversation, because you've probably read a lot of things like it before. I couldn't believe what he was saying was real, so I kept trying to figure out what this was really about—Candid Camera, an elaborate practical joke, that kind of thing. But after he instantly dried my puddle-soaked pants by snapping his fingers, I had to accept it: Whether or not he was actually my fairy godfather, this guy was doing real magic left and right.

"Okay, if you're real," I said, lifting my coffee (which had changed from plain coffee to Swiss double mocha while I was drinking it), "then tell me how come I never heard of fairy godfathers before."

"Because I'm the first."

"Care to explain that?"

"Certainly. Once you buy the farm, you get some choices on the other side. What kind of choices depends on the usual stuff—how good you've been and so on. Well, I was going up and not down, and it was pretty much expected that I would just opt to be an angel; tracking system, you know. But I said I didn't want to be anyone's guardian angel, I wanted to be a fairy godfather."

He took a sip of coffee and rolled his eyes. "Let me tell you, that caused a hullabaloo! But I said people had been calling me a fairy all my life, and now that I was dead, that was what I wanted to be. Then I told them if they didn't let me be a fairy godfather, I was going to bring charges of sexism against them. So they let me in. You're my first case."

"Does that have any significance?" I asked nervously.

"What do you mean?"

"Me being your first case. Does that mean I'm gay?"

I didn't mention that I had been trying to figure out the same thing myself for about a year now.

He got that look in his eye that meant he was about to make another wisecrack. But suddenly his face got serious. Voice soft, he said, "You may be, you may not. The point is, you're getting picked on because people think you are—which is why I've been sent to work with you. Gaybashing is a special issue for me."

"How come?"

"It's how I met my maker, so to speak. I was walking down the street one day last year, minding my own business, when three bruisers dragged me into an alley, shouting, 'We'll teach you, faggot!' They never did explain exactly what it was they were going to teach me. Last thing I remember from life on earth was coming face to face with a tire iron. Next thing I knew, I was knocking at the Pearly Gates."

We were both silent for a moment. Then he shrugged and took another sip of his coffee.

“You’re taking this awfully casually,” I said, still stunned by the awfulness of what he had told me.

“Honey, I did a lot of screaming and shouting while it was happening. Afterwards too, for that matter. Didn’t do me a bit of good—I was still dead. Once you’ve been on the other side for a while, you get a little more zen about this kind of thing.”

“But you don’t want to go get one of those guys or something?”

He shook his head. “I prefer reform to vengeance. Besides, it’s against the rules. Why don’t we just concentrate on your case for the time being?”

“Okay, do I really get three wishes?”

“Sure do. Well, two, now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You used up the first one on that coffee.”

“I didn’t tell you to change it into Swiss double mocha!” I yelled.

“You didn’t have to. You wished for it.”

“I’m glad I didn’t wish I was dead!” I muttered.

“Oh!” he cried. “Getting personal, are we? Don’t you think that remark was a little tasteless under the circumstances?”

“Are you here to help me or to drive me nuts?”

“It hurts me that you could even ask. Anyway, the three wishes are only part of the service, even though that’s what people always focus on. I’m really here to watch over you, advise you, guide you, till we get things on track.”

He leaned back in his chair, glanced around the room, then winked at a nice-looking college student sitting about five tables away from us.

“Will you stop that!” I hissed.

“What’s the matter, afraid of guilt by association?”

“No, I’m afraid he’ll come over here and beat us up. Only he probably can’t beat you up, so he’ll have to settle for me.”

Melvin waved his hand. “I guarantee you he wasn’t offended. He’s one of the gang.”

“What gang?”

Melvin pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows, as if he couldn't believe I could be so dense.

I blinked. “How can you tell something like that just from looking at him?”

“Gaydar,” said Melvin, stirring his coffee. “Automatic sensing systems that lets you spot people of similar persuasion. A lot of gay guys have it to some degree or other. If it was more reliable, it would life easier on us—“

I interrupted. “Speak for yourself.”

Melvin sighed. “I wasn't necessarily including you in that particular 'us.' I was just pointing out that it's harder spotting potential partners when you're gay. If a guy asks a girl for a date, about the worst that can happen is that she laughs at him. If he asks another guy, he might get his face pounded in.”

That thought had crossed my mind more than once as I was trying to figure myself out over the last year—and not only with regard to dating. I would have been happy just to have someone I felt safe talking to about this.

“Is this gaydar something you can learn?” I asked.

He furrowed his brow for a moment, then said, “I don't think so.”

“It must be lonely,” I muttered, more to myself than to him.

“It doesn't have to be,” he replied sharply. “If gay people hadn't been forced to hide for so long, if we could just openly identify ourselves, there would be plenty of people you knew that you could ask for advice. Everybody knows gay people; they just think they don't.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen, honey, the world is crawling with faggots. But most of them are in hiding because they're afraid they'll get treated the way you did about an hour ago.”

I took in my breath sharply. Melvin must have seen the look of shock on my face, because he looked puzzled for a moment. Then he laughed. “That word bother you?”

“I was taught that it was impolite.”

“It is. But if you live in a world that keeps trying to grind you down, you either start thumbing your nose at it or end up very, very short. Taking back the language is one way to jam the grinder. My friends and I called each other 'faggot' and 'queer' for the same reason so many black folks call each other 'nigger'—to take the words away from the people who wants to use them to hurt us.”

His eyes went dreamy for a moment, as if he was looking at something far away, or deep inside. "I walk and talk the way I do because I'm not going to let anyone else define me. I can turn it off whenever I want, you know."

He moved in his seat. I couldn't begin to tell you exactly what changed, but he suddenly looked more masculine, less... swishy.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"Protective coloration," he said with a smile. "You learn to use it to get along in the world if you want. Only I got sick of living in the box the world prescribed; it was far too small to hold me. So I knocked down a few walls."

"Yeah, and look what happened. You ended up dead."

"They do like to keep us down," he said, stirring his coffee. Suddenly he smiled and looked more like himself again. "Do you know the three great gay fantasies?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I said nervously.

He looked at me. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Skip the first two. You're too young. It was number three that I wanted to tell you about anyway. We used to imagine what it would be like if every gay person in the country turned blue for a day."

My eyes went wide. "Why?"

"So all the straights would have to stop imagining that they didn't know any gay people. They would find out that they had been surrounded by gays all the time, and survived the experience just fine, thank you. They'd have to face the fact that there are gay cops and gay farmers, gay teachers and gay soldiers, gay parents and gay kids. The hiding would finally have to stop."

He looked at me for a moment. "How would you like to have the sight?" he asked.

"What?"

"How would you like to have gaydar for a while? You might find it interesting."

"Does this count as a wish?" I asked suspiciously.

"No, it's education. Comes under a different category."

"All right," I said, feeling a little nervous.

“Close your eyes,” said Melvin.

After I did as he requested, I felt him touch each of my eyelids lightly. My cheeks began to burn as I wondered if anyone else had seen.

“Okay,” he said. “Open up, big boy, and see what the world is really like.”

I opened my eyes and gasped.

About a third of the people in the cafe—including the guy Melvin had winked at—were blue. Some were bright blue, some were deep blue, some just had bluish tint to them.

“Are you telling all those people are gay?” I whispered.

“To some degree or other.”

“But so many of them?”

“Well, this isn’t a typical place,” said Melvin. “You told me the theater crowd hangs around in here.” He waved his hand grandly. “Groups like that tend to have a higher percentage of gay people, because we’re so naturally artistic.” He frowned. “Of course, some bozos take a fact like that and decide that everyone doing theater is gay. Remember, two thirds of the people you’re seeing aren’t blue.”

“What about all the different shades?” I asked.

“It’s an indicator of degree. The dark blues are pretty much excluding queer, while the lighter ones are less committed—or maybe like you, trying to make up their minds. I set it up so that you’ll see at least a hint of blue on anyone who has had a gay experience. Come on, let’s go for a walk.”

It was like seeing the world through new eyes. Most of the people looked just the same as always, of course. But Mr. Alwain, the fat guy who ran the grocery store, looked like a giant blueberry—which surprised me, because he was married and had three kids. On the other hand, Ms. Thorndyke, the librarian, who everyone knew was a lesbian, didn’t have a trace of blue on her.

“Can’t tell without the spell,” said Melvin. “Straights are helpless at it. They’re always assuming someone is or isn’t for all the wrongs reasons.”

We were in the library because Melvin wanted to show me some books. “Here, flip through this,” he said, handing me a one-volume history of the world.

My bluevision worked on pictures, too!

“Julius Caesar?” I asked in astonishment.

“Every woman’s husband, every man’s wife,” said Melvin. “I met him at a party on the other side once. Nice guy.” Flipping some more pages, he said, “Here, check this one out.”

“Alexander the Great was a fairy!” I cried.

“Shhhhhh!” hissed Melvin. “We’re in a library.”

All right, I suppose you’re wondering about me—as in, was I blue?

The answer is, slightly.

When I asked Melvin to explain, he said, “The Magic Eight Ball says, ‘Signs Are Mixed.’ In other words, you are one confused puppy. That’s the way it is sometimes. You’ll figure it out after a while.”

Watching the news that night was a riot. My favorite network anchor was about the shade of a spring sky—pale blue, but very definite. So was the congressman he interviewed, who happened to be a notorious Republican homophobe.

“Hypocrite,” I spat.

“What brought that on?” asked Dad.

“Oh, nothing,” I said, trying to figure out whether I was relieved or appalled by the slight tint of blue that covered his features.

Don’t get the idea that everyone I saw was blue. It broke down pretty much the way the studies indicate—about one person in ten solid blue, and one out of every three or four with some degree of shading.

I did get a kick out of the three blue guys I spotted in the sports feature on the team favored to win the Superbowl.

But it was that congressman who stayed on my mind. I couldn’t forget his hypocritical words about “the great crime of homosexuality” and “the gay threat to American youth.” I was brushing my teeth when I figured out what I wanted to do.

“No,” I whispered, staring at my bluish face in the mirror. “I couldn’t.”

For one thing, it would probably mean another beating from Butch Carrigan.

Yet if I did it, nothing would ever be the same.

Rinsing away the toothpaste foam, I whispered Melvin’s name.

“At your service!” he said, shimmering into existence behind me. “Ooooh, what a tacky bathroom. Where was your mother brought up, in a Kmart?”

“Leave my mother out of this,” I snapped. “I want to make my second wish.”

“And it is?”

“Gay fantasy number three, coast to coast.”

He looked at me for a second, then began to smile. “How’s midnight for a starting point?”

“Twenty-four hours should do the trick, don’t you think?” I replied.

He rubbed his hands, chuckled, and disappeared.

I went to bed, but not to sleep. I kept thinking about what it would mean when the rest of the world could see what could be seen today.

I turned on the radio, planning to listen to the news every hour. I had figured the first reports would come in on the one-o’clock news, but I was wrong. It was about twelve thirty when special bulletins started announcing a strange phenomenon. By one o’clock every station I could pick up was on full alert. Thanks to the wonders of modern communication, it had become obvious in a matter of minutes that people were turning blue from coast to coast.

It didn’t take much longer for people to start figuring out what the blue stood for. The reaction ranged from panic to hysterical denial to dancing in the streets. National Public Radio quickly summoned a panel of experts to discuss what was going to happen when people had to go to work the next day.

“Or school,” I muttered to myself, which was when I got my next idea.

“Melvin!” I shouted.

“You rang?” he asked, shimmering into sight at the foot of my bed.

“I just figured out my third wish.” I took a deep breath. “I want you to turn Butch Carrigan blue.”

He looked at me for a moment. Then his eyes went wide. “Vincent,” he said, “I like the way you think. I’ll be back in a flash.”

When he returned he was grinning like a cat.

“You’ve still got one wish left, kiddo,” he said with a chuckle. “Butch Carrigan was already

blue as a summer sky when I got there.”

If I caused you any trouble with Bluesday, I’m sorry. But not much. Because things are never going to be the same now that it happened. Never.

And my third wish?

I’ve decided to save it for when I really need it—maybe when I meet the girl of my dreams.

Or Prince Charming.

Whichever.