## Shadows of Parental Dreams

My father firmly believed that I would face difficulty in life due to my colour. I was brought up with this drilled into my being. He constantly spouted the proverbial mantra that “It wasn’t enough to be just as good as the next man” —who, in his eyes, would invariably be a white man—I had to be better than the next man. If I was merely as good as the next man, then he would be the one to get the job, or opportunity, or whatever else we might have been competing for. He never ventured to mention how this might affect me ‘competing for girls.’ His focus was solely aimed at getting a good education to have a chance of getting a good job.

My dad considered his principal purpose as my father to be preparing me for adulthood and surviving in a white man’s world as a black man, emphasising constantly the importance of getting a good education. This was my driving force during most of my childhood and school life. As a result of his drive and insistence, I achieved the necessary grades at school to be accepted to one of Scotland’s most reputable and prestigious universities to pursue a Bachelor of Science Degree in Civil Engineering. My preference would have been to take a degree in Accountancy as I had a great aptitude for numbers, but I did not have high enough grades to be accepted for an Accountancy degree, so engineering it was, which as far as my dad was concerned was the natural and obvious path to follow since he came from an engineering background and my older cousin, David was about to complete his degree in engineering at the same University. And so, I was headed to Glasgow University to study Civil Engineering and my dad felt that his mission had been accomplished. Study hard, qualify in three years, get a good position somewhere in engineering. Job done. Or was it?

As I reached the end of my sixth and final year at secondary school, preparing to venture out into the big wide world at seventeen years old, as my dad had prepared me for ever since starting school as a shy five-year-old, the reality I encountered was far from what my dad had always and consistently predicted.

Within twelve months of leaving school, I experienced two life-changing events that flipped my dad’s fears and concerns upside down.

One of these events transformed my mindset from believing my colour would make life a constant struggle to seeing it as a differentiating characteristic from which I could thrive.

The other event really tested my ‘monkey on my back’ syndrome about meeting girls and constantly second guessing myself for reasons previously mentioned.

Both experiences, one for life and one for relationships with the opposite sex, made me realise for the first time in my life my colour could be viewed as an asset rather than a liability and that my ‘being different’ could be utilised to my benefit. By the time I was barely eighteen years old, officially an adult if you like, my world changed from what one of trepidation as to the struggle the life ahead of me was going to be to one where I stepped into the unknown world of Western society and life with newfound confidence and where the colour of my skin became a blessing not a curse.

## A Dance with Destiny

In the summer of 1980, just after finishing secondary school in June and anticipating university in September, I found myself at a unique juncture. At seventeen, I was a year younger than most of my peers, who were legally able to enjoy bars and clubs. Starting school in January, rather than the typical August, had consistently placed me a year behind throughout my twelve years of schooling. As we all prepared to leave school and step into adulthood, my classmates were eager to explore the nightlife—bars and discos—where grown women frequented, a prospect I couldn't legally partake in yet.

However, a resourceful friend from class came to my aid. He helped me create a student ID card that aged me up to eighteen. Suddenly, I was free to join my friends at the Red Bridge, a popular local bar and discotheque. That first night was both exhilarating and nerve-wracking as I navigated past the imposing doorman in his traditional black suit and bow tie, who exuded authority. Relieved to have gained entry, I followed my more experienced friends to the bar, who had been regulars for over a year, having started frequenting such places at seventeen themselves.

“What are you having to drink?” one asked.

“Ermm ?” I had no idea really. This was my first time on a licensed premises where alcohol was served. Noticing my uncertainty, he took control.

“We’re all having lager or snakebite.” he offered.

“What’s a snakebite?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s a mixture of cider and blackcurrant. It’s quite easy to drink.”

“OK,” I agreed.

A few moments later, I was holding my first alcoholic drink in my hand, this cloudy, light burgundy coloured concoction. I warily took my first sip, hoping that true to its name it wouldn’t actually bite me. It didn’t, thankfully. In fact, true to my friend’s recommendation, it was quite easy to drink.

The club was packed with patrons either milling around the bar or strutting their stuff on the dancefloor. The atmosphere was noisy but relaxed and friendly and as my first few sips of snakebite took effect, my own tension released, and I began to enjoy myself even venturing to the dancefloor on my own and successfully asking several girls for a dance. I even dared to venture onto the dancefloor alone, successfully asking a few older women for a dance. They looked a couple of years older than my seventeen years.

During one of my forays to the dancefloor, I caught the smile of a gorgeous blonde who looked about twenty-one years old. She was on the edge of the dancefloor with some friends, and each time I looked her way she would send a delicious looking smile back in my direction.

At least, I thought it was.

When she wasn’t looking, I quickly glanced around to see if there was, in fact, another ‘beau’ to which her smile was aimed and that I had been wishfully caught in the crossfire, but there were no other guys around. Nevertheless, my doubts were abounded. Maybe it was the alcohol taking effect, tricking me into thinking this stunning older woman could be flirting or interested in me. I wasn't convinced, especially since she didn't make any effort to approach me. Why would she? A gorgeous woman like this, I expected would be used to fending off male attention, not chasing after it. Was I going to have the guts to risk approaching her and then be able to handle her rejection when she said “Sorry, no thanks sonny, you’re a bit too young for me,” or some sort of similar rebuff?

There was no doubt that every time I ventured my gaze in her direction, she caught my eye and smiled back. I even moved my spot a couple of times, to make sure it wasn’t just accidental, but sure enough she’d catch my eye and smile back. I had to give it a go, I encouraged myself, but still couldn’t draw on my confidence to approach her.

At that point, one of my friends sidled up to me. “Hey mate, how’s it going? Have you seen anyone yet that you fancy?”

“Oh yeah there’s loads of attractive women here. I’ve danced with a few,” I responded.

“Yeah, I saw you earlier with the bird in the green dress. Do you fancy her?”

“Oh yeah, she’s pretty tasty,” I responded but without too much enthusiasm.

“She’s nice,” He said “You should chance your arm, with her. I would, but I’ve got my eyes elsewhere.”

“Who’s that?” I asked

“The petite one in the white tank top,” he replied. Oh yes, I’ve seen her, she’s cute, hope you get lucky there,” I answered, quietly relieved that his eyes hadn’t been aimed at my smiling blonde.

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At that moment, she looked in my direction and smiled her gorgeous smile once again.

My mate interjected, “Oh mate, she’s a stunner and I think she fancies you, best you get in there pronto as girls like that won’t be in the shop window for long.”

He caught my hesitancy and at the same time viewed my now almost empty pint glass.

“Denzel, you need another drink, mate,” he said. “It’ll give you a bit of Dutch courage, you know what I mean. Then you need to get in there and ask her for a dance before it’s too late.”

I knew he was right, so we made a beeline to the bar. I bought us both a drink before taking a few gulps, rather than sips, from my new pint. I thought to myself, OK *it’s now or never. If you don’t do this now, you’ll regret it.*

And so, buoyed with ‘Dutch courage’ from having drunk almost half my pint in a couple of gulps, I picked out the distinctive flowing blonde hair in the crowd and headed towards her.

As I approached her, as if sensing my arrival, she turned to face me with that gorgeous smile. “Hi, I’m Denzel” I blurted out.

“Hi Denzel, I’m Cheryl,” she replied.

“Em, would you like to dance?” I said, a bit more confidently.

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation. “I thought you’d never ask, what kept you?”

Then, she took my hand and we headed to the dance floor.

The rest of the evening was a bit of a blur as I enjoyed the heady mix of the effects of my snakebite and this mesmerising blonde, dancing in front of me and only with me. We danced the rest of the night away and ended the evening with a couple of slow and sexy dances intermingled with a couple of delicious smooches, then the lights went up.

By this time, my confidence had soared and those couple of smooches buoyed my confidence sufficiently to have no hesitation in saying, “So, would you let me walk you home?”

“I’d be really disappointed if you didn’t.” she answered. “Let me get my coat.”

As we left, she slipped her hand into mine and I felt like a conquering hero as we walked out past the doorman who threw an admiring glance in our direction. I had little to no experience talking with girls, but Cheryl being that bit older, she was twenty-two in fact, made me feel relaxed and comfortable and did most of the talking for me.

Her killer line came when she confided “Denzel. From the moment I saw you walk into the club; I fancied you and spent the rest of the evening hoping that you would ask me for a dance and was thrilled when you did.”

“Really” I said as my heart strings popped “How come?” I asked, “You’re a gorgeous girl. You could pretty much have taken your pick of any guy in the Club. Why me?”

“You were completely different from all the other guys and just stood out. From the minute I saw you I wanted to meet you.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

At that moment, hearing that sentence and feeling the gorgeous woman’s hand in my own ‘the monkey on my back’ that girls wouldn’t want to speak to me because of the stigma of my colour, jumped off my back and ran away, never to be seen again.

If my colour and being different could be attractive to a gorgeous woman like Cheryl it could be attractive to anyone.

*Whoa!* I thought to myself.

Not only did I manage to 'get the girl' on my first real adult night out, even though I was technically just a boy, but Cheryl's words that night were also a game changer for my future interactions with women. Just as my dad's wisdom after the cup final had prepared me for life's challenges, Cheryl's advice set a new course for navigating relationships. The night ended with a beautiful kiss outside her apartment block, and we met several more times that summer, creating memories that would never be forgotten, at least not by me.

## The Lone Zebra

Soon after I was starting my first term at university, which involved a daily commute of about ten kilometres by bus and subway from Gartcosh, the village where I had lived since, I was four years old to the west end of Glasgow. I immersed myself quickly into university life attending all my classes and diligently studying, whilst still playing football both for Eastercraigs and the University team.

As my first term ended, the summer of 1981, I had to find a job, to sustain myself for the summer and give me some spending money for clothes and nights out. I applied to work at a new lounge bar that was due to open at the east end of Argyll Street in Glasgow called Vicky’s Lounge Bar. I was open and honest on the application and said that I’d never worked in a bar before, but if given a chance, I felt I could do a good job.

A few weeks later, I was thrilled to have been chosen to interview. There were several other applicants sitting waiting when I arrived. We were seated at the bar, and greeted by a friendly woman called Joan, who was part of a husband-and-wife team who managed the bar. Her husband, Peter, meanwhile was downstairs in the office conducting the interviews. When my turn came, I headed downstairs to meet the husband and go through my interview. A few days later I opened a letter saying that I had been accepted for the job.

The opening night was only a couple of weeks away and there was a lot of work to be done getting everything ready, unpacking and polishing all the glasses, getting all the spirits bottles connected to the gantry and connecting and testing the beer barrels. Our only training was about thirty minutes or so, shortly before we opened. Then we were open, people were arriving and thronging around the bar ordering drinks and for about the first hour I felt like a rabbit caught in the headlights.

At one stage, early in the evening, I had poured a round of six or seven drinks and placed the last drink on the bar in front of the customer. They looked at me expectantly and asked, “How much is that mate?”

“Oh shit!” I responded. “Sorry mate, give me a couple of seconds.”

I then retreated to the cash register (or “till”, as it was called). In my haste to complete the order correctly and not spill or drop anything, I had forgotten to add up the cost of each drink. I managed to remind myself of all of the drinks that had been ordered and price them up on the till before returning apologetically and a little embarrassed to collect the cash from the customer.

“Sorry about that,” I offered as I returned his change.

“No worries, mate, I couldn’t do what you do, it’s jammed in here, you’re doing a great job.”

“Cheers mate, I appreciate that” I responded as I turned to serve the next customer. But deep-down, I was wondering if I might be fired by the end of the evening.

As it turned out, I needn’t have worried. The rest of the evening passed by in a heartbeat and as far as Peter and Joan were concerned it was a smash hit. After the last customer had left and we cleared the tables, emptied and washed the ashtrays and placed the used glasses in the dishwasher, we were invited to join Joan and Peter for a drink at the bar. They told us all (there were six of us) how delighted they were and what the ‘takings’ had been for the evening, or in other words, how much money the customers had spent.

Joan leaned over to me and said, “Don’t worry you’ll be just fine, I was watching you and you did fabulously for your first night with that many customers, after only 20 minutes of training. Well done. I never doubted you would be ok.”

“Thank you,” I said as my face broke into a smile, part in satisfaction, part in relief.

She continued, “I shouldn’t really be saying this, but do you realise that when you showed up for your interview, I decided on the spot that you were going to be offered a job, even before you went downstairs to be interviewed by Peter”

“Really?” I responded somewhat taken aback by this revelation.

“Why was that?” I asked.

“As soon as I saw you walk in, I knew I wanted you behind my bar. Do you know that we interviewed over two hundred applicants for just six jobs, but out of all the people that I had seen, walk in, you were something different, completely unique. You stood out and I knew I just had to have you working behind my bar.”

“Oh, I see,” I bemusedly replied. “I had no idea, but I’m obviously delighted that you did, I hope I’ve justified your confidence in me”

“Oh yes, Denzel, there’s no doubt about that, I thought you would be a great asset behind my bar and tonight proved I was correct,” She responded.

As I left the bar a short while after to catch the late-night bus home, I reflected on what I had just experienced. I had turned eighteen, a few months earlier. I was now officially an adult, a man and here I was in the big wide white man’s world, there hadn’t been a single black or coloured person in the bar that night. However, instead of what my dad had prepared me for all these years predicated on my colour being a burden, a shackle around my ankles to be carried around throughout my life, here I had been selected from six out of two hundred applicants because of my colour and not despite it. This was the opposite of what I was brought up my entire life to believe where the colour of my skin as I entered the big wide world would prove to be an advantage, not a disadvantage. A blessing not a curse. Together with Cheryl’s words the summer before and now these words from Joan, life suddenly looked bright and full of opportunity rather than dull and lacking in opportunity.