

## **Street Fair**

**by Ted Gross**

Charlotte got serious that Wayne was cheating on her when he called from Interstate 5 crossing the Oregon border and she asked him how the weather was up there and he said it was a trophy day, except she checked Accuweather when they hung up and they were having a freak snowstorm.

At that moment she could see herself going in the kitchen and selecting the right implement and calmly cutting off something of his.

So good thing he wasn't available.

There'd been signs. One was a phone call that came in while he was in the shower. Charlotte rarely touched his phone but they'd put a bid on a foreclosed cabin in Lassen County and he said he should be hearing from the broker that afternoon.

So Charlotte was excited when it rang and picked up and said hi.

The voice stumbled around for a second. "Oops, *I'm* sorry--I may have the wrong number . . ."

Charlotte said, “No, I think you’re good, if you’re looking for Wayne--is this about the bid?”

The woman clicked off, and Charlotte added the episode to the *Not Good* column.

Already in it were the business trip to Fresno where she couldn’t reach him overnight, and the 15-year high school reunion where he was too chummy with a couple women, even by high school reunion standards where admittedly everyone was trying to turn back the clock and get away with a little something.

Then Charlotte’s friend Mara had mentioned she saw Wayne in Union Square, a sunny Tuesday afternoon, sitting on a bench eating ice cream with a woman who looked about 22.

That though, Charlotte mostly dismissed when Mara described the gal, pretty sure she knew who it was, she’d met her at Wayne’s company Christmas party and she was a nice kid fresh out of Brown University working an internship.

A Lacey or Stacey she was thinking.

Guys *were* putting their hands on her a bit at the Christmas gig, everybody big smiles including her--

which deflected you wondering about your husband specifically.

Charlotte asked Mara what they were doing on the bench in Union Square and Mara said they were both on their phones mostly, but still, she didn't want to surprise Wayne and interrupt . . . just in case you might embarrass someone.

Which Charlotte could understand, stay out of people's business, especially during business *hours* . . . and each component probably added up okay if you isolated them one by one--the bench, the Fresno thing, the reunion--even the wrong number when Charlotte answered, maybe it was legitimate--people did screw that up, after all.

Except now . . . this bullshit with the weather.

To make sure, she logged onto Weather.com and re-entered *Ashland, Oregon*, and they were reporting the same blizzard-like conditions as Accuweather. There was a link to a TV reporter standing by the side of a road, a snowplow passing by and everything looking pretty darn white and her not looking comfortable.

It was like the reporter's lips weren't working right from the chill and she was having trouble enunciating, and Charlotte was angry at the woman for not handling her job professionally.

Which was a stupid kneejerk reaction, she knew it, and she closed the computer and thought *what next*.

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She woke up at 2 in the morning and was pretty sure that was it for the night, but she took some Calms Forte anyway and that didn't work.

Middle of the night TV wasn't a good option, it depressed her, so she tried the Stephen King book where the character goes back in time and attempts to stop Lee Harvey Oswald. The dental assistant recommended it and it kept your interest to a point, but now she was in a section that dragged, where the character is teaching high school in a small town in Texas. What could that possibly have to do with the storyline?

So she got up and made bacon and eggs, and coffee, the whole shebang . . . and tried to figure out if she really could hurt--or kill--this guy, and get away with it.

At quarter to six she decided to call him, why not, and whadda you know, he picked up.

“Hon, what time is it?” Wayne said.

“You sound groggy,” Charlotte said. “How’s tricks?”

There was a pause. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t you remember,” she said, “you used to use that expression. It was obnoxious.”

“So, that’s why I stopped,” he said. “Listen, what’s up, I’m not kidding.”

Charlotte said, “Someone called here and said they were a project manager and needed to speak to you. No idea why they would call our home phone . . . but there you have it.”

“Wait, they called the landline?”

“Fraid so. Do me a favor and tell your clients if they wake me up again it won’t go over smoothly.”

“Well . . . I mean, did they have an accent?”

“I couldn’t tell.”

“And . . . male or female, you’re saying.”

“The latter. Listen, I’ll talk to you later. Where are you?”

“I don’t know specifically . . . off the interstate, a Days Inn up here. Is that okay?”

“Someone told me the Super 8’s are your best bet on the road these days. Their opinion.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Wayne said. “Did the person leave a call back number?”

“Your client? No. That’s part of why I’m letting you know, in case it wasn’t legitimate.”

“It might not have been. Good idea on your part, thanks for the heads up.”

“How would you find out?”

“Huh?”

“If it was legitimate. Like who would you ask?”

“Oh, I’ll run it by the office, see if anyone else had the same thing. Lot of scams out there, needless to say.”

“You have interns and all, right? Who can get to the bottom of these things.”

“Sure,” Wayne said, “that’s one way. I really do have to get some more sleep. Be good, honey.”

A new thought Charlotte had, maybe don’t do anything, let him do his thing, collect the evidence, rake

the asshole through the coals in divorce court and clean him out.

The problem with that, whatever satisfaction would be superficial.

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There was a guy named Tex who worked at the tennis club. His title was *custodian* but Charlotte frequently noticed him fixing stuff, and she complimented him once when he'd jackhammered part of the asphalt entrance circle and was repairing a difficult looking pipe in the ground.

Tex smiled and said thank you and Charlotte said I hope they take care of you at Christmas, the money you're saving them if they had to call people out of the yellow pages.

Tex asked how her tennis game went, and she hadn't played yet that day but told him fine, she appreciated him asking. And pretty much that was that.

She saw Tex once off work, at the food court at the mall, with a woman and kids who didn't look like they were his, and he waved her over and asked her to please join them, though she didn't.

He was a nice guy, and smart, and there was likely a history. He had a couple old-school tattoos on his forearms, not the current beauty school variety, and a faint scar from his right cheekbone to the side of his mouth.

If Charlotte had to take a wild guess, he'd been incarcerated somewhere along the way . . . not necessarily anything major, but still.

Today he was behind Court 2, doing something with the drip system and roses, and Charlotte asked him what time his shift ended.

Tex absorbed it a moment, seemed amused and said 4.

“That should work fine then,” she said. “Are you free for a quick drink? Or no.”

“Sure,” Tex said, “I can always make time. You mean here?” Pointing to the clubhouse where they had a little set-up.

Charlotte lowered her voice and said no, somewhere different, it didn't need to be fancy. She realized it wasn't the greatest idea approaching Tex at the club, it



should have been a different way, but what are you going to do.

Tex said well he likes Kenny's, and Charlotte knew the place, it was in the strip mall behind Panda Express. Of course that meant they probably knew him in there, which also wouldn't be the greatest . . . but honestly, you could try to tend to every detail and it might not make a difference . . . so she said she'd meet him at Kenny's at quarter to five, and she appreciated it.

She picked up an extra fifty at the cash machine so if nothing else you compensated him for his time, and he was ten minutes late which was awkward, some weird guy already hitting on her sitting by herself.

"Sorry about that," Tex said, "the swim lessons, they were complaining about their eyes stinging in the pool."

"The chlorine levels then," Charlotte said. "But I thought that's why they invented the swim goggle."

Tex said, "You're a little bit a piece of work." He leaned back holding his beer and smiled.

"Meaning," she said, "you're as confused as I am what we're doing here."

“Unh-huh,” he said. “Not that it matters, although I had to cancel my golf game.”

“Really? You play?”

“I’m teasing you. Jeez . . . and pardon me if I’m overstepping, but you look tired.”

“That bad? Thanks.”

“I didn’t say bad. Don’t be projecting.”

“I’m sorry. My husband’s fucking someone else. I’m not sure who, but does it matter?”

Tex took a second and cleared his throat. “No. I don’t suppose it does . . . Wayne? That’s too bad. He’s one of my more pleasant members.”

“Oh yeah,” Charlotte said, “he can turn it on good. That’s how he duped me.”

“Okay let’s don’t maybe jump to conclusions,” Tex said. “The male species, we do make blunders. They’re not un-reversible.”

“Blunders. I love it. You guys are so full of shit.” She took a good-sized gulp of her gin mule.

“All’s I’m pointing out, it may not be worth a nuclear event.”

“I see. One and done, and we’re good . . . *My* problem, if I had the right sized cleaver I’m afraid I’d do damage.”

“So go see someone.”

“You mean anger management-wise? You’re a trip. That would only fuel the fire, someone telling me to calm down, even though *they’d* want to inflict something too, the shoe was on the other foot.”

“I’m talking together,” Tex said, “family counseling. It’s helped me various times, I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

Charlotte said, “I *would* like to pin it down, who he’s specifically screwing. There’s this 22-year-old kid at work. I wouldn’t entirely bet the house in Las Vegas, but she’s up there.”

“Fine, near the top of the leader-board. Except you just said, it doesn’t matter. The who, what, when part.”

“You left out how and why. You’re right though . . . do you have to be somewhere?”

“I’m okay.”

She signaled for seconds. “So years ago when I get out of school I’m working the front desk of a gym in LA.

There's a man comes in five days a week, same time, right on the button. He had something interesting going, a graphic arts studio that was tied in to the movies. Anyhow, trailing him by two minutes every day--also like clockwork--Meg, or Peg, or Gem or Jill, one of those, who was his top designer. Supposedly."

"I get the picture," Tex said.

"There's rumors but little naive me I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt. Then one evening he's in with a pocketful of cigars, passing them out. He's a father, he announces."

"And meanwhile Peg or Meg is bringing up the rear as per normal."

"Right. So it hit a nerve with a few people and when the two of them finished their workout and left, a woman coming out of the locker room says: Tonight of all nights, she can't lose the Frederick's of Hollywood get-up? . . . You know what I'm talking about, right? I think they're out of business now, but the lingerie place."

"Yeah," Tex said, "and that's . . . out there, for sure."

Charlotte said, “You know something? You don’t ask a lot of irrelevant questions, which I admire. There was one of those radio psychologists--since you brought up the field--she’d always ask the gossipy questions. Like a woman would call in and mention her boyfriend was abnormally endowed, and the psychologist would ask *how* abnormally.”

“Okay, but Jesus.”

“Yeah but you get what I’m saying. Maybe that’s not the best example. There was Dr. Laura who was obnoxious but never strayed from the issue at hand, and then these other radio gals, where I’m going--are you fricking *kidding* me?”

“They went for the juicy stuff.”

“I mean how is the girlfriend’s problem going to be solved by knowing the guy’s specific inches?”

“Oh boy . . . any way you could lower your voice just a tad, here?”

“And I know what *you’re* thinking. I’m doing the same damn thing, I’m all over the place.”

Tex said, “And I’m in violation for asking, but what was the final update on Peg-Meg and the graphics guy?”

“Interesting you ask. We ran into her years later at a street fair in Costa Mesa. Meaning Wayne in the picture by now. She remembered me, gave me a big hug. She was married, at least I’m assuming, they had rings.”

“Might have been back in the day too.”

“Sure, why not. Wayne’s talking to the guy for a second so I ask her whatever happened to so-and-so. It was frustrating, I couldn’t think of his name. Which I remember now clearly, Dante.”

“Yeah?”

“She turns heavy-duty red, I swear, not exaggerating. So I can’t resist--I say, well, back at the gym we heard you dressed for success.”

Tex smiled and said, “You got some definite devil in you girl.”

“She interrupts Wayne and the husband and they move along. It was an opportune time because there was like a fire eater starting up, distracting things.”

Tex lit a cigarette. It was the kind of place no one cared and he offered her one and she waved it off, but then took it and lit it off his.

Tex said, quieter, “Coming full circle here . . . you venting? Or you want someone to talk to Wayne?”

“Ho-ly shit,” Charlotte said. “You’d do that?”

“Funny you're surprised,” Tex said, “seeing as how you brought me here . . . but no.”

She said, “Have to say, your eyes look . . . a little colder. Right as you said that. The no you wouldn't talk to Wayne.”

“Deadpan? It’s something you can practice. Comes in handy occasionally. Can diffuse a situation, though it slips out wrong sometimes.”

“Except, I’m pretty sure, you *would* talk to him . . . Just have to weigh what makes sense. On my end.”

“So there we go.”

“What would you say to him?”

“Hypothetically? I’d say, Mr. Gabbert, none of my business but please take it from me, whatever might be going on, it ain’t worth it.”

“Gosh . . . and that would work, do you think?”

“How should *I* know. It’s your baby.”

“Well what would be . . . the next rung on the ladder . . . if necessary?”

Tex said, “You always cross that bridge when you come to it. Easier than all that, why not go after him different? Turn it around.”

Charlotte said, “You’re not looking at me a certain *other* way now, are you?”

“Nope.”

“I believe you. I thought of that the last couple days. Not for me.”

“Well,” Tex said, looking at his watch, “if there’s nothing else.”

“Whoops, almost forgot,” and she handed him the fifty. “This’s been kinda fun, I’ll admit,” she said.

He said, “Buddy of mine up north, he was pulling a Wayne, big-time. One weekend he can’t reach the wife, and it grinds everything to a halt. She was at a spa with a girlfriend was all, but he didn’t know that. And she never set him straight.”

“So the bad boy got jealous, of the female who wasn’t floating his boat.”

“Yep. Emotions’ll run you down a strange road . . . or why not just kick him out?”



“Wayne? That’s sounds simple, but I could see it turning complicated. Not sure how I’d work it.”

“What you do, you change the cylinder to the front door. That’s how. I can do it for you now, you like.”

“Really?”

“You said yourself, I’m handy.”

“Wow . . . And if that didn’t do it? And Wayne, I don't know, broke back in or something?”

“Then we’d have a situation,” Tex said.

“I like the we,” Charlotte said.