

## **Left Right Left**

**845 words**

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When he turned 54, Charles made a post on Facebook.

‘What can you do. I’m wishing myself a Happy Birthday. We used to call birthdays *Birf-day* and get a good laugh--but that’s all gone. You know why? Because none of my offspring has enough concern to recognize their old man this one little iota. You know why? Because their mom has monkey-wrenched their brains. Oh well. I’m headed to Applebee's by myself for dinner and a hot fudge sundae. If I bring a candle maybe they’ll stick it on . . . Congratulations to all the other (mostly) good dads who don't get similarly shafted.’

The post got two likes. One from his brother Fred in Arkansas, and one from this person Terri who friended him a few years back, who he wasn’t sure he knew.

Charles sent her a message: 'Sorry--you and I are connected HOW?'

She got back that they met at Christmas once at her sister-in-law’s in Half Moon Bay.

Now this was totally Twilight Zone, the only time he'd set foot in Half Moon Bay in a couple decades was the Mavericks big wave surf contest, and you got on this crowded bluff and the surfers were way out there—apparently--but with the glare you couldn't see jack.

No reason to correct Terri though, and he messaged her back: 'Well thanks for the support. I can't lie, it fired me up.' And to please stay in touch, and his cell for future reference.

Except 20 minutes later she called. They talked about the surprising avalanche situation at Squaw Valley--I mean and 2 in a row, who could comprehend *that*--also the Cowboys falling apart in the playoffs which they were both fine with.

She didn't bring up his family, which he appreciated, but Charles decided this was someone you could relax your guard with, even though he didn't know anything about her or where she even lived.

“So you think,” he said, “I have a leg to stand on? My rant? Or there's 2 sides and I'm cherrypicking.”

“Well,” Terri said, “it sounds substantial. Why did their mom monkey-wrench their brains?”

“You want the short answer or the long one?”

“Both?”

“Because she has a sinister side. She enjoys this. The longer one: because she was a cheerleader at Pepperdine and I lost my mind asking her to go to the movies. Which was Downhill Racer, with Robert Redford.”

“The ski one? You’re making that up.”

“Swear to God.”

“Okay, I don’t think I’m hearing the root answer.”

“Yeah well. I cheated on her all over the place. What are you gonna do.”

They were silent awhile and Charles could hear a soothing noise in the background, maybe a waterfall, maybe she lived in the country somewhere . . . but she could have been doing the dishes with the phone crooked in her neck.

He said, “What I got eating at me now, my oldest son--Gifford--he’s getting married Easter weekend. In Chico. I’m banned from the wedding.”

“It’s very hot in Chico in the summer,” Terri said.

“Yeah. Anything else?”

“It’s a true college town. There aren’t a ton of those.”

“Well . . . how bout you join me up there. We can crash the thing.”

“You have an active mind,” she said, and they touched on a few other topics and wrapped it up, but she didn’t

say no.

Charles booked 2 rooms in Paradise, the next town over from Chico, so he wouldn't run into any wedding people. It was crazy on multiple fronts but so what.

He confirmed with Terri the week before and she said she hoped to make it and they could have dinner, but she wasn't going to crash the wedding.

Charles drove up there and checked in early and lounged around the pool and put a couple observations together: This Terri wasn't coming to any Chico . . . or Paradise. And she might want something from him in the future. You deal with it.

The wedding was outdoors at Bidwell Park. Beautiful spot in a cedar grove. Gifford and his new wife--who Charles had never met--had a good eye. The reception was in an historic mansion off The Esplanade. Several of the guests said it was hands down the best one they ever attended.

Charles learned all this not from crashing it or sneaking up on it but from the videos on the wedding registry website a week later.

Instead Charles played poker all weekend and won 2300 dollars. They had a poker room on East 20th Street out by the fairgrounds. There were some easy

marks in there.

On the way home he stopped at a Black Bear Diner in Willows. The guy serving him never cracked a smile. When the check came Charles asked are you having a bad day, or you always like this.

The guy said plenty of both . . . and why, you got any better ideas?

Charles said a couple, but I haven't finalized them yet. The guy said when you do let him know.