

Second Date Chuck

“Janet, come here!”

I shuffle down the hallway and into our old den, croaking “What is it, Charlie?” His tired lump of a body is sunk into his armchair, a side-table separating it from my own. That side-table came from Mexico City. It came from 1967. Its ashtray never left it. The ashtray came from Sweden – 1963. Once they mated, they mated for life.

“What is it, Charlie?” I say again.

“Have you heard the Orioles? Listen to this tune.”

The music crackling out of the ancient phonograph is beautiful. The song is “It’s Too Soon to Know” – 1948. I know it quite well.

“Yes, Charlie, it’s a very beautiful song. I like it very much. It reminds me of our -”

“Well then listen to it a second! How would you know you like it if you’re goddamn talking over it?”

“Charles, dear, I know the song. It’s a lovely song.”

Years ago, I gave away the entirety of our little old record collection aside from that one forty-five. Poor Charlie can’t possibly be expected to remember how important it is to us.

Poor Charlie.

I have no memory of the first time I heard it, but I do have a very clear memory of the time it became beautiful and important. This memory comes from 1958. It comes from Ashton, Massachusetts, where Charlie and I come from. We both come from Ashton, Massachusetts – 1939.

We were on our third date (Charles has since insisted it was our second – he says his friends gave him the nickname “Second Date Chuck”). We went to see a movie at a drive-in theater a few towns over. Charlie picked me up and drove recklessly the whole way, listening to Elvis or something. I never liked that music.

We held hands all through the movie – I think it was that James Dean flick – and that was quite nice. On the way back to Ashton, I asked him if I could pick the music, and remarkably, he said yes. I switched off the Elvis or whatever and found a station playing some older, sweeter music. Remarkably, he slowed down. He turned onto a dirt road just outside the center of town and found us a, well, a secluded area.

He kissed me and said he loved me, and the music had me amorous. We crawled into the back of that car and did something insane and wonderful that I had never done before. He made me his.

“I just made you mine.”

That’s what he told me. He also told me that his car was twelve years old and still ran like a dream. He called me a very lucky girl.

Then the Orioles filled the air.

We were married within months and moved into an apartment in Worcester. We had a child, Chuckie, on March 25th, 1959, born in a small, strangely lit room in a Worcester hospital. Chuckie died of pneumonia two years later in the same hospital. I am almost certain he died in the same cramped room he was born in, squinting and wincing against the same uncomfortable, orange light. Charles always refused to entertain the thought. It would come up in conversation sometimes between family and friends. It was like he didn’t even hear it.

So that must have been in 1961 I suppose. I was a wreck. The funeral came and went, and I was still a wreck. Charlie seemed fine – he just started drinking an extra afternoon martini here and there, and a few bottles of beer after work. He wasn't very helpful to me though, so my sister (who was married to a professor and living in Hartford) offered me her guestroom for two weeks. I asked Charlie, and he said that would be fine. A few days later he drove me to the bus station, stopped the car out front, letting the engine idle, and said "OK then," never taking his hands off the steering wheel. I searched his face for any indication that I could kiss him. There was none – I could not. He didn't even look at me. I stepped out of the car, pulled my suitcase from the backseat, leaned my head in and said "Bye, Charlie."

"OK then," he said.

I don't remember much about those two weeks. One thing I remember is a private, late-night conversation with my sister. We had split a bottle of wine with dinner, then another after dinner, which led to the only candid discussion of marriage I've ever had. It developed quickly:

"You know, Janet, I've been thinking a lot about your wedding a few years ago – you know Niles is an amateur musician, he has all these records you know – when you and Charlie danced, what was that song playing? It made an impression on me. At the time I was – and this is all so crazy and in the past – but at the time I was wondering if I had made the right decision in marrying Niles, and music can be so apt sometimes. And then I got to thinking about you and Charlie, and whether, you know. What was that song?"

"It's Too Soon to Know," I said.

Another thing I remember is that when I first arrived, I noticed a small hand-me-down from our father: a porcelain bowl, covered in hand painted chrysanthemums. I became aware of that bowl's existence around the same time I became aware of my own, so I suppose I've always

been familiar with it. I knew what chrysanthemums were before I ever saw actual chrysanthemums. I knew what they were well before I could name them. I think my father got that bowl in France in 1945.

When I got back to Worcester, Charlie wasn't waiting for me at the station, so I had to take a cab. When we pulled up in front of the building, the cabby took my bag out of the trunk and carried it to the steps. I dragged it upstairs and into our bedroom and – wouldn't you know it – there were two beds in there. I heard the television going, so I walked down the hallway and found my husband not so much watching the television as staring at it. He seemed a little drunk.

“Charles,” I said. “Charles, is everything alright?”

“It's too soon to know,” he said.

We've slept separately ever since.

I have mentioned, just now, my sister asking about Charlie and I dancing to that Orioles song at our wedding. Well, what really happened was this: it was late, and Charlie was nowhere to be found. I had put in a special request with the band to close out the night with the song. One last sweet dance with my husband on our wedding night. Only, a few minutes before I knew they were to begin, I realized he hadn't come back from wherever he'd slipped off to. The guitarist whispered out the opening chords, and couples drifted out to the dancefloor, moving really slow and close. My parents, Charlie's parents, my sister and Niles, cousins and spouses, boyfriends and girlfriends. I sat in a dreamy panic by myself, and no one seemed to notice or care. I was the only one subjected to any noticing or caring.

Fifteen minutes later, as the band was packing up and the guests were leaving, Charles stumbled back into the hall bearing the stench of gin fumes and tobacco smoke. So my sister wasn't remembering correctly.

He never remembered that night correctly either, for a long time anyway. Let me tell you about the time I reminded him. It was some night not too long before our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary – it must have been the previous winter, because the incident occurred during a vicious snowstorm, a deceptively gorgeous night.

I knew he was to have an “important meeting” with his boss at the end of working hours that day. In the morning, he seemed nervous and, as always, reluctant to talk about his nerves, so I did the only thing I could think to do: I told him a warm meal would be waiting for him when he came home. He didn’t even know when he would be home, so how was I to time the preparation of that dinner so as to plop it down on the table right out of the oven as soon as he arrived? A great question. I do not have the answer.

He was quiet at breakfast, but that wasn’t necessarily out of the ordinary. I only noticed on this particular morning because he wasn’t reading his newspaper, which made the silence feel unnatural. After he finished his eggs, he just stared across the room, sipping his coffee and wiping sweat off his face. A few minutes passed, and he stood up more abruptly than usual, said “OK then” more forcefully than usual, and started to leave. I followed him to the door.

“Charles, dear, what’s wrong?”

He ignored me. I noticed his hands shaking as he reached for the deadbolt.

“Charles, what is this meeting all about?”

He was silent. He actually stared directly into my eyes, something he only rarely does.

“OK then,” he said, and he left.

I was so worried about poor Charlie, I did everything I could think to do in order to make the apartment comfortable for him. I mopped and scrubbed every square inch of linoleum and vacuumed every fiber of carpeting. I straightened every picture frame, dusted every piece of

worthless bric-a-brac, washed his robe, and shampooed his slippers. His favorite meal was boiled dinner – potatoes, carrots, cabbage, and smoked shoulder (not corned beef), and I had all the vegetables already, so I took a quick walk to buy the meat and stopped off for a bottle of wine on the way home. The snow started as I was walking back.

Dinner was ready by six, and I was beginning to fret about Charlie driving in the storm. Seven o'clock came fast, and it was getting really bad. I tried to clean more but I couldn't find anything else to dust. Then it was eight and my heart was racing, so I opened the wine. By nine half the bottle was gone. By ten what was left of it was in my glass. By the time I heard him opening the door I was in such a state of distress, I nearly sprinted down the hall to meet him. The door jerked open, and I was ecstatic – for a few seconds, until I noticed his glassy eyes and was almost knocked over by gin fumes and tobacco smoke.

I completely lost control.

“You're unbelievable, Charles!” I was in hysterics, yelling, heaving, crying. His face was blank. “Here I am, cooking and cleaning all damn day so you can feel at home after your secret little meeting, then it turns out that the whole time I've been going crazy with anxiety over the thought of your car upside-down in a snowbank on the side of the road, you were at a goddamn bar! Is this a damn joke? How'd your meeting go, Charlie? Are you feeling better now? Bloody-eyed and boozed up, just like our goddamn wedding night!”

He started to mumble something about the lord's name, but I interrupted him viciously: “What the hell do you know about the lord's name, huh? You're too drunk to know your own goddamn name!”

“...wedding night?”

“Yeah, our wedding night, we’re married, I’m your wife, remember? And at our wedding I had the band play a song that’s very special to us, so I thought, and you were off somewhere taking a gin bath. Nothing’s changed in twenty-five years – you’re still a lousy, deflated half-man with a flaccid personality!”

Now he was looking at the floor, scratching his head in slow comprehension.

“What do you want me to do, Janet?”

“Go to hell, Chuck,” and I smashed the half-full wine glass on the wall behind his head and stormed into our bedroom, then barricaded myself in with a chair and fell asleep.

The glass was part of a set of four purchased in Galway, Ireland, 1973. We still have the other three.

On the evening of our twenty-fifth anniversary, Charles took me out to a nice restaurant downtown. After dinner, we came right home, and he led me to the den and very sweetly asked for a dance.

And would you guess what record he put on the phonograph?

That was the very record we are now listening to, bought at a used record store in 1983, though renewed interest is quickly wearing down its grooves. Same phonograph too, and Charlie is sitting in the same den, in the same apartment, in the same small city as all those years ago.

I’m standing, and an idea now occurs to me.

“Charles, dear, would you like to dance?”

“Hmm?” he starts. It looks like he dozed off for a little.

“Would you like to dance, dear?”

“Oh, not now, I’m exhausted.”

So am I. The song finishes, the needle lifts, and the record stops spinning. I waddle back to the kitchen and return to my paperback. Within minutes I can hear him laboriously uproot himself from his armchair, scuff across the carpet, and restart the song. Before I even turn a page, he's shouting again: "Janet, come here!"

Poor Charlie.