

UGH

///Stephen A. Geller

Charlotte ate at Holly's seafood restaurant more times than she could count. Annual gatherings with a dozen or so friends, beginning in their senior year of high school and still continuing as a few of them were starting menopause, even though none of them were fifty yet. A niece's graduation party. An occasional date. Holly's was convenient, the food was usually delicious and reasonably priced, the ambient noise didn't swallow their conversations, and the familiar view of San Diego Bay was always wonderful.

Leonard Smalley's wife died almost a year ago after a long illness. Leonard was a shy accountant who came weekly to review the financial records at the firm where she worked. Leonard asked Charlotte out and suggested they go to Holly's. He always wore a suit, white shirt, and tie and stammered a little when he asked her for the date, although she never heard him do that when he was with any of the lawyers. She told him she would respond next week when he came for another review of the books.

The last time at Holly's, just ten days ago, was awful, one of the worst dates Charlotte ever had. His name was Dan but she became accustomed to saying "ugh" on those initially painful, now laughable, occasions when she discussed him with her sister or friends; "Ugh" was how she now thought of him. Tommy, her best friend Maggie's brother, worked for Ugh and arranged for the date. Tommy told Charlotte, "He's a really good guy and a hell of a lot of fun."

"I'll meet you there," Dan said when he called. "Eight on the nose. Just stand outside and I'll find you." But it was one of those rare rainy days in San Diego, and by the time she got to Holly's, there was an uncommonly heavy downpour, with gusty winds making the palm trees sway frenetically. She ran from the cab and stood outside the restaurant under her umbrella for a few minutes, enjoying the rain until the dampness crept under her shoes and cooled the soles of her feet. Then she waited just inside the door so there wouldn't be any confusion when he finally arrived.

More than fifteen minutes late, he put his big spade of a hand out to shake hers. "You Charlie?" She nodded "yes" and waited for the usual lame excuse for being tardy, but there was none as he shook some drops from his jacket sleeves, sprinkling her ankles and feet. She assumed there had been a lot of traffic.

Head completely shaved, he wore white pants, a gray, ultra-suede jacket, and a blue-and-white striped shirt with the top four buttons open. She expected his chest to be ape-hairy but it wasn't, reminding her, instead, of a deeply tanned Chihuahua. *A big, bronze, muscular Chihuahua.* Then Dan—she had not yet renamed him—took a half-step back to look at her, head to toe and back again, slowing his stare to gape at her chest. *Oh, God, is this going to be that kind of evening?* He nodded, seeming to respond to her thought, his eyes slightly wide and his jaw pushed forward, lower lip protruding, as if he had just made a good deal on a tractor. *I should never have worn this dress*—a soft burgundy, with a scoop neck revealing the fullness of her breasts—*oh, lordie, don't let this be as awful as I think it's going to be.* He put his hand on her elbow and steered her to the maître d' stand. "Let's go, Charlie, I could eat a horse." He paused, a wide, toothy grin filling his face. "Or maybe a whale, since this is a fish restaurant," he said, cackling loud enough that people seated at nearby tables, a busboy, and even the bartender, who had been a taciturn presence at Holly's for years, turned to watch as they walked by.

She slowed her step, his hand still squeezing her arm, forced a shallow grin to her face, and said, "Charlotte, not Charlie."

"Yeah, good, whatever you say." He moved his hand to where the back of her bra was and pushed her slightly forward.

Holly's was well known for fresh-caught fish, but Dan ordered a gorgonzola-encased steak. "Make sure that meat is rare enough to moo, or you're gonna take the son of a bitch back." He stared in the waiter's eyes. "And I want Burmese sauce on the side."

He didn't ask what Charlotte wanted to drink but ordered two Heinekens, one for each of them, exhorting the waiter, "Be

sure those sons of a bitches are damn cold or they're goin' back."

She started to say, "Iced tea," but he didn't let her finish, and she was determined to get through dinner as quickly as possible. She sipped the beer once but mostly just drank water.

Dan reached over twice to taste her food. First a piece of the swordfish, then the vegetables.

"Nobody is this crude nowadays."

"Here, try this," he said as he pushed a piece of red beef, dripping a few blood-drops, to her plate. *Is this guy for real? Nobody is this crude nowadays.* She

kept reminding herself about Maggie's brother, Dan's employee, who arranged the date, and she told herself to be patient.

The restaurant wasn't crowded and they could hear each other clearly, but he still leaned forward to talk to her. She was sure he was doing it so he could look down at her cleavage. She tried to ignore his chatter about the Chargers, about how the city was better when Pete Wilson was mayor, about how much money he made, or about his new car, all of which he managed to stuff into one long, nonstop sentence. Every time he laughed, inevitably after one of his own "I just remembered" off-color jokes, he would reach under the table and pat her on the knee.

Twice she reminded him her name was Charlotte, not Charlie, but he just said, "Whatever" both times. He was a realtor—"makin' a goddamn bundle, Charlie, even when

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we had all the foreclosures"—divorced from "that bitch," whose actual name he never used, and he wished he could have voted for Giuliani for President—"That wop from the Big Apple could really fuckin' clean up this country, but I don't have any complaints with the Donald. I suppose you voted for crooked Hillary. Right?"

He was from Youngstown, Ohio, but "I sure as hell am never goin' back to that burg. Right?"

She wished she had worn her Hillary button and hoped he wouldn't say anything about Obama because she knew she wouldn't be able to refrain from responding. Or even walking out.

As his coffee and the dessert-she-didn't-want were served, his hand patted her knee more than once and then stayed to rub the top of her kneecap until she gingerly reached her own hand under the table and, thumb and forefinger on each side of his wrist, moved his hand back to his own knee. Her little finger was crooked high as possible, as if she was transporting a three-day-dead, rotting and stinking mouse from under the kitchen sink to the trash. Each time that happened, four more times in as many minutes before he seemed to get the message, she wanted to rush to the ladies' room to wash her hands, but she was afraid she would sense him staring at her backside and she didn't want that; she briefly shivered just thinking about it. When dinner was over she twice offered to split the check but he twice ignored her.

It was no longer raining. Waiting in the crisp night air for the valet to bring Dan's car, menacing clouds still filling the sky, she said, "Thank you for dinner. It's been very interesting to meet you." She extended her hand to shake his. "I'll just take a cab home."

"Hey, what do you mean a cab? That sure as hell wouldn't be very gentlemanly of me, would it?"

"No, it's okay, I'll just walk a little and get a cab. I need a little fresh air, and I can get a taxi down near the convention center."

"At this hour? You kiddin' or what? It's gettin' chilly and I have a nice cozy Beamer. Real comfy."

"I'll manage. Thanks." And then a little louder, "Really."

"Hey, look at those clouds. It's gonna rain again."

Then, as if he had ordered it, the downpour resumed just as the valet brought the car up from the garage. The drops were large and full, plopping noisily on the roof and hood of the car, and in only a few seconds, the ground was again very wet and the sky completely dark. Walking around to the driver's side, he tipped

the valet and said to Charlotte, "Don't be stupid. Get in." The valet stood there staring at his hand while Charlotte gaped at the now black sky and then at her umbrella before getting into the car.

Later she told Maggie that no one made an effort to help her get into "the Beamer." Ugh was sitting there, grinning up at me as if I was his next gorgonzola steak. The poor kid who brought up the car stood there looking at whatever measly amount Ugh had tipped, having no reason, no incentive, to run around to open my door."

By the time they got to her house, the rain was stopping, and she was furious with herself for not walking out, for not telling him what she thought of him, for not getting a cab or an Uber. "I'll just come in for a minute or two," he said. The living room light had gone on with the timer, and she was grateful that she remembered to also switch on the front door light.

"Maybe some other time," she murmured.

"Come on, baby, how 'bout a cup of coffee. It's damn chilly out here," and he winked at her.

"No, really, I have an awful headache. I don't usually drink beer." She had only taken two sips.

Now he leaned toward her. "Just a quick cup. To warm me up for my lonely ride home. Be a pal."

"No, really," she managed to fashion what she knew was a sad excuse for cheerfulness on her face. "Really, not tonight. It's a very bad headache, a migraine, and it's getting worse."

"I can fix that real well," he said, winking again.

"No. Not tonight," and then more forcefully and more loudly, "no," looking directly at him.

"Come on, baby," and he leaned forward to kiss her ear. Ugh was a big guy, tall and muscular, middle-aged former-football-player-size, and, for a moment, she felt threatened. Then she said, "I never had a worse evening. You are barely a step past a Neanderthal, or maybe not, and I never want to see you again. Ever. If you come any closer, I'll scratch your eyes out."

His jaw fell slightly, a little saliva trickling from one corner of his mouth. Otherwise he barely moved. Then he barked, "You

fuckin' with me, baby? I gave ya a good time."

"Yes, well, I'm not planning to give you a good time, baby," she stretched the "y" out into a long "eee." Then she quickly left the car, half-ran to her front door, key already in hand, and went in. She tried to make the sound of the bolt locking as loud as possible.

Before taking her shawl off, she went to the kitchen cabinet and poured herself a half-tumbler of Glenlivet. Bolting it down in one quick swallow, she poured another one, this time even fuller, spilling some on the counter, and then gulped the second one down.

Later, standing in front of the bathroom mirror brushing her teeth, she absentmindedly pushed a finger through one of the holes in her worn cotton pajamas, the roses and buttercups almost colorless from many washings, and whispered "disgusting" and then "ugh." She chuckled and said it again: "Ugh." The warmth from the scotch was circulating through her body and her cheeks were flushed.

I guess I've been pretty lucky. There haven't been too many Ughs over the years, not like this one. "No more Ughs," she whispered, pushing her lower lip forward and squinting at the Charlotte in the mirror. Raising the half-full paper water cup she had used to rinse the toothpaste, she toasted herself. As she shook her head side-to-side, a small half-smile forced itself to her face, and, now loudly, she again said, "No more Ughs." Then she went to bed and tossed and turned for some time, considering whether or not she should give up on dating.

She eventually drifted into her usual deep sleep after murmuring, "Leonard seems like a sweet man."

THE END