

# **Charlie**

by Mike Paolucci  
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## Act 1

Steve was sitting in the break room at 10:15 AM. This was the time Charlie took his break every morning, without fail. Charlie was nothing if not reliable – you could set your watch by him. Steve was not there by coincidence; he was waiting for Charlie.

Charlie and Steve are in their mid-twenties and work for Alguma Software Systems as software developers. They had gone through Radison Technical Institute together, but that was where the similarity ended. Charlie graduated cum laude with a GPA of 4.0, and Steve squeaked by with a 2.0. Truth told, Steve was not very good with computers. But he had a fundamental understanding of human nature that always got him through. Charlie, on the other hand, could write software in his sleep, but he had no understanding of human nature.

Steve had classic good looks and always dressed like he was going to meet the girl of his dreams today. He was fit and his dark hair, combed back from his face, framed the shock of light blue eyes that caught your attention and held it. Charlie was the opposite of Steve – his clothes looked like they came from the Sally Ann, his shirt was always hanging out, and the messy crop of brown hair did nothing to help the squinting brown eyes that were hidden behind horn-rimmed glasses.

Steve sat hunched over a computer printout, shaking his head and making loud "tsk, tsk" noises. As Charlie filled his coffee cup he glanced at Steve and asked, "What are you looking at, Steve?"

"I'm looking at one of the toughest problems I've ever seen," Steve said. "I've been trying to find this bug all morning and it's just impossible."

"Aw, c'mon Steve, nothing's impossible. You know that." Charlie's optimism was eternal.

"I don't know, Charlie, this is a pretty tough nut to crack. I don't think that even the boys who worked on Enigma at Bletchly Park could figure this one out."

With his coffee cup full, Charlie walked over to Steve and looked over his shoulder at the printout.

"This is a mess, Steve. I don't know how it works at all!"

"Yeah, it could definitely use some cleaning up, that's for sure," said Steve with a mock sigh.

"But I don't want to burden you with this, Charlie. It could take you days to get this working."

"Days?! Are you kidding? An application as simple as this would take me an hour or two at most! I've got a couple of free hours before lunch, let me take a look at it and I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Charlie. You're a pal. I'll write the full path to the file on this printout so you can access it directly." Steve wrote the information on the printout and handed it to Charlie with his most charming smile. Charlie smiled back and for an instant Steve saw the glint of true friendship in Charlie's eyes. Feeling remorse for having duped his good friend into doing his work for him, yet again, and before he could stop himself Steve blurted, "How would you like to join Tracey and me for a drink after work today?"

In all the years they had known each other, Steve had never invited Charlie to do anything with him. Charlie was socially inept and everyone knew that, even Charlie. Charlie was not someone you socialized with; he was someone you got to do your work for you. That's how Steve got through Radison Tech, and that's how Steve kept his job at Alguma Software.

It was a toss up who was more stunned by the offer, but before Steve could retract it

Charlie beamed, "Sure, Steve! That would be great! Where are you going?"

Steve was committed now. Reluctantly he said, "We're meeting at Salsa de Verano on Fifth Avenue after work."

"I'll be there! You can count on me! Thanks, Steve. See you later!" And with that he power walked out of the break room. Steve stared at the empty doorway and thought, 'This was a bad idea.'

## Act 2

Salsa de Verano was a bar with a large dance floor and a live band that played salsa every night. For aficionados of salsa, this was the place to be. Steve wasn't particularly fond of salsa, but his girlfriend Tracey couldn't get enough of it. So Steve learned salsa to keep Tracey happy so that Tracey, in turn, would keep Steve happy.

Physically speaking, Steve and Tracey were the perfect couple – they looked good together. He was handsome and she was the quintessential blonde-haired, blue-eyed, beauty queen.

They were sitting at a five-foot high round table with bar stools around it. As Steve sipped his whiskey he watched Tracey watching the dancers and thought, 'I wonder if there's anyone I know who I *don't* manipulate? What am I saying?! Tracey's the biggest manipulator of them all! Why should *I* feel guilty?'

While Steve was mulling over this rare pang of conscience, Charlie suddenly appeared beside him.

"Hi, Steve. Wow, what a great place this is! I see why you like it – great music, beautiful women. This is great!"

"Uh ... Charlie, this is my girlfriend Tracey. Tracey, this is Charlie." Tracey gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Nice to meet you," she said.

To anyone with even the slightest ability to read body language it was clear that Tracey was not at all pleased to meet Charlie, and she wanted as little to do with him as possible. But to Charlie she was a goddess descended from Mount Olympus to bestow her graces upon the mortals. This was the first time a woman had spoken to him since he bought groceries last week and the cashier had asked him, "Will that be cash or charge?"

While Charlie sat star-stuck, Tracey leaned to her left, gazing past him. "Excuse me, darling," she said to Steve, "there's someone I have to say hi to." She stood up and walked to the far side of dance floor.

The object of her interest was a swarthy man with dark curly hair. His iridescent blue shirt was open far enough to see a couple of gold chains resting on a hairy chest.

"Tony!" she said with the brightest smile she could conjure and a sway of the hips. "So nice to see you again!"

"Is it?" said Tony, more like a statement than a question. He turned sideways to her and cast his eyes on the dance floor, as if looking for someone.

"Of course it is, Tony. You know you're my favorite partner."

"Yeah? Well I'd appreciate it if you found another partner. I'm tired of your cat-and-mouse games."

Tracey feigned shock, opening her mouth and her eyes as wide as she could.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He looked her full in the face and said, "I mean I'm sick and tired of you teasing and leading me on, only to find that you're really not interested in me at all. I'm some sort of amusement for you. You want to play your games? Play them somewhere else. I'm through with you."

"You can't end it like this, Tony! We've know each other for so long. Give me one last dance, Tony. One last farewell dance." Tony thought about this for a few seconds, then gave her a curt nod and they stepped onto the dance floor.

Tracey had no intention of making this a 'farewell dance'. She reasoned that if she could get him on the dance floor and show him her moves, one more time, he'd fall under her spell again, and once again she'd have him hooked.

Tracey is the kind of person who feeds off people's emotions. Male attention and male lust are what give Tracey energy.

What makes a good female dancer depends on a lot of things including good moves, panache, and a flair for the dramatic. What makes a good male dancer is just one thing: a strong lead. Tony was furious with Tracey, and that fury translated into the strongest lead Tracey had ever felt. Tony was tossing her around like a rag doll, but instead of trepidation Tracey felt exhilaration – her eyes widened and her smile broadened with each turn and each staccato blast from the trumpets. Their dancing was so aggressive that little by little the space around them opened up until they were the only couple on the dance floor. Everyone stood along the border of the floor watching in awe at some of the most exciting salsa they had ever seen. Tracey was in heaven as she consumed the envy and admiration of the crowd.

When the music stopped, Tony and Tracey were in the center of the dance floor, and with the last beat of the music Tony turned Tracey in toward himself until they were nose-to-nose. Tracey was breathing heavily from the excitement and the exertion, and in the silence of the moment Tony very calmly looked into her eyes and said, "Goodbye, Tracey." Then he turned and walked off the floor, and out of the bar.

When Tony walked away and left Tracey standing alone on the dance floor he might as well have slapped her in the face and pushed her to the ground. It was about as rude an insult as he could give her without getting arrested, and everyone knew it. Even the band sat in mute shock at the scene.

As the full impact of the situation sank in, Tracey blushed a bright crimson. She had completely misjudged Tony and now she stood humiliated in front of a group of people who had known her for years. It took all the strength she had to walk back to her table with her head down.

"I'm so sorry," Steve said when she sat down. "I never would have expected that from Tony. Did you say something to upset him?"

"No, I didn't say anything to him," she said as she stared at the floor.

"What?" said Charlie. "What did I miss?" Just then his phone went off and he answered, "This is Charlie. Oh, hi Roger. No, I'm at a bar on Fifth. Yeah, Steve's here, why? Okay, I'll tell him. Thanks, Roger." Charlie hung up and looked at Steve.

"That was Roger from Operations. He's been trying to get hold of you for over an hour. Where's your cell?"

"Probably in my desk," Steve said, "I'm not married to my phone like you are," he said with a smirk of derision at Charlie's dedication to work.

"Well, that report you put into Production yesterday is causing all kinds of havoc in the system. Management's pretty steamed about it. They told Roger that if you want to keep your job you'd better fix it tonight."

Steve grimaced at the thought of doing anything even resembling work when it was 'play time', but he wanted to keep his job, such as it was. He put his arm around Tracey, who was still staring at the floor, and said, "Sorry, honey, but I gotta go." Then he kissed her on the cheek and left the bar.

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Tracey was devastated. She had wanted passion and desire from Tony but she got rejection and humiliation instead. Her emotional fuel cells were saturated with negative energy. She needed a positive jump start, like booster cables to get a car running when the battery is dead. She slowly lifted her head and smiled at Charlie who was ogling her like a kid in grade school who's just seen the pretty substitute teacher for the first time.

"Dance with me, Charlie," she purred as coyly as she could in her weakened state.

"Gosh, I don't know how to dance, Tracey!"

"It's easy, Charlie, just follow my lead." She took his hand and lead him to the crowded dance floor. Tracey was such a good dancer that she could do her part and lead Charlie at the same time. Charlie turned out to be a quick study and was thoroughly enjoying himself in short order. After a couple of songs she walked back to the table with Charlie and picked up her purse.

"I'm sorry, Charlie, but I have to leave now," she said smiling sweetly. She really didn't have anywhere to be, she had simply gained enough confidence from Charlie to go out and find a real man now. "Thanks for the dance," she said. She touched his cheek with her fingertips and watched his eyes light up like the Fourth of July. "So long," she said, and she was gone.

Charlie sat down heavily and looked at the table top. "She likes me," he said. Then he finished his drink with a quick swallow and walked out to the parking lot.

## Act 3

Charlie had driven half way home before he realized his blunder.

"What a fool I am!" he said to himself. "She really likes me. Why would she ask me to dance with her if she didn't like me? She touched my cheek so gently, she was trying to tell me she wants me! And like a dope I just let her walk away.

"I'll make it up to her. I'll let her know my true feelings. I get her some flowers. Women like flowers. There's a flower shop not far from here that's open late.

"But I don't know where she lives. C'mon, dummy, think! You're a smart guy! Wait a sec. I can find anything online. When I get to the flower shop I'll use my smart phone to search for her address while they're putting the arrangement together."

Forty-five minutes later, Charlie was standing in front of Tracey's door with a bouquet of flowers. It was a bungalow in an upscale neighborhood. The house was dark but Charlie rang the doorbell anyway and waited patiently for a few minutes, then rang the bell again. When there was still no response he walked back to his car where he'd parked it on the street. He got in and settled down to wait for her to return.

He didn't have to wait long. Fifteen minutes later a red convertible pulled into the driveway with Tracey at the wheel. Beside her sat a handsome man who looked like a younger version of Steve. They quickly got out of the car and walked briskly to the front door. Tracey pulled a key from her purse and opened the door. They stumbled through the doorway, giggling as he tickled her. Then the door closed and there was silence.

Charlie sat dumbfounded as he tried to make sense of what he had just seen. The woman who had expressed her desire for him an hour ago was now with another man. How could this be? Then the answer dawned on him: She was so distraught by his lack of response to her affections that she sought solace in another man's arms. All he needed to do was to affirm his affections for her and all would be well. Yes, that's what he had to do.

Charlie got out of his car and walked to the door with his bouquet of flowers. He rang the doorbell.

In the bedroom, Tracey and her new friend Bob were in a state of partial undressing. When he heard the doorbell Bob froze and stared at Tracey.

"Who's that? Do you have a boyfriend or a husband who forgot his key?" Bob asked. Tracey was equally distressed because she couldn't imagine who would be calling on her at this hour. Steve always calls before he comes over, so it couldn't be him.

"I have no idea," she said. "I don't want to go to the door undressed like this so late at night. Would you answer the door and send them away? Thanks, sweetie."

Bob pulled his pants on and walked to the door. He opened it and when he saw the flowers he smiled and asked "Are those for me?"

"No. No, these are for Tracey." replied Charlie somewhat annoyed.

"Who is it?" inquired Tracey. Her voice was faint because the bedroom was at the back of the house. When Charlie heard her voice he put one foot over the threshold and tried to peer

around the corner to see where her voice was coming from.

"Tracey? It's me, Charlie. I have something for you." Bob put the palm of his hand in the middle of Charlie's chest and pushed him back against the door frame.

"Where do you think you're going, pal?" asked Bob.

"I'm going to give these to my girl, now get out of my way, jerk." As Charlie said this he pushed Bob back with a shove to the middle of Bob's chest. Because Bob was standing barefoot on a throw rug on a tile floor, he lost his balance and fell backwards. He bumped the back of his head against the wall and slid to the floor, unconscious. Charlie stared at him, not sure what to do.

"What's going on out there?" shouted Tracey from the bedroom. Her voice snapped Charlie out of his reverie, and he walked through the living room toward Tracey's voice.

The house was dark except for the bedroom light that framed Tracey in the bedroom doorway. When he was about 10 feet from her, the light illuminated enough of Charlie's face that should could see him clearly.

"You!" she shouted, pointing at him. "Get out of my house!"

The words did not register in Charlie's brain; they were inconsistent with his view of the situation. Not knowing what else to do, he raised the bouquet in a gesture of giving.

"These are for you," he said.

"Keep away from me. I'm warning you," Tracey snarled through her teeth. Her eyes were now resolved into a steely defensive glare. She backed away from the doorway deeper into the bedroom as Charlie advanced holding the flowers in front of him.

"These are for you," he said again.

Tracey had backed up to the far wall of the bedroom and was standing beside her dresser. She slid open the top draw and pulled out a small caliber pistol.

"I'm not going to tell you again. Get out of my house! Now!"

"These are for you," Charlie said as he took one more step toward her.

The room exploded in shower of stars before his eyes. As he lay on the floor, the last thing he heard was a woman's voice chanting, "O my god. O my god. O my god."



## Epilogue

Steve sat on the light-green carpeted stairs, the third step from the bottom. He was wearing a dark suit and tie. He sat with his elbows on his knees, idly contemplating the beer bottle in his hands.

Another young man in a dark suit and tie approached Steve from an adjacent room. He stood in front of Steve with his hands in his pockets.

"I'm so sorry, Steve. I know you and Charlie were close. You guys go all the way back to Radison Tech, don't you?"

"Yeah, we do. I can't believe he's gone," said Steve as he averted his eyes to the side.

"I don't understand what Charlie was doing in Tracey's house. Do you?" asked Jim.

"No, I don't, Jim. And we may never know."

"You know, Steve, I don't mean to speak ill of the dead, but we all know Charlie was a little odd. He should never have been in her house; in her bedroom. We have laws to protect people like Tracey from people like Charlie." Jim was looking sideways at Steve, trying to determine how Steve was going to take this criticism of his friend.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right, Jim – we have laws to protect people like Tracey from people like Charlie. It's just too bad we don't have laws to protect people like Charlie from people like Tracey."

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"We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown."  
-- T. S. Eliot