



The Weekly Man

We Need To Talk

“We need to talk.”

Sure, dead three years and now she wants to talk.

“I mean it, Charley. We need to talk. We have unsettled issues. We need to settle them.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you, Susan. You’re dead.”

“You’ll be dead someday too. You’ll be here, where I am, Charley, and you won’t be able to get away from it. We need to talk now. Get this over with.”

“Why now? Why not when I’m dead?”

This was so much like her—bringing shit up right out of the blue, always taking me by surprise. But God, she’s still so beautiful, even in death, floating a few inches above the living room floor, long white gown billowing from some unseen breeze, long ink-like streams of...

“I’m doing this for you, Charley.”

“Sure you are Susan. Gimme a break. You never did anything for me. You were always about you. I can’t believe you want to do rat shit for me now. Why would I?”

“Because I’m dead. It gives you a new perspective.” She has that same old peeved look in her eyes, as though everything somehow pissed her off, as though the universe was constantly failing her. “Besides, that’s not entirely true. I did lots of things for you.”

“Name one.”

“I faked orgasms. A lot of them. Pretty much *all* of them. You’re not that great in the sack, Charley.”

“You can take off now, Susan. Go back to wherever and whoever you’re making miserable now. I’m over it. Over you.”

“No you’re not.”

“It’s been three years, Susan. I’m over you.”

“You’re still single. Haven’t dated in three years. You still love me. You always will.”

“You’ve been stalking me! You’re dead and you’re stalking me!”

“Charley, the dead don’t stalk. We haunt.”

I throw my arms into the air. “I’m not doing this, Susan. You’re dead. Gone. And I don’t still love you. I didn’t love you when you were alive and I sure as hell don’t love you when you’re dead. So stop haunting me.”

God, she has this...what? Sensual translucence in death. Or is this just the same lack of substance she...

“Go ahead, Charley, live the rest of your life in denial. But if you want me to stop haunting you, there’s a few things we have to work out.”

“When I’m dead. We’ll work them out when I’m dead.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“What d’you mean... ‘specific’?”

There she goes with the head-cocked-to-the-side-because-you’re-an-idiot look. “Dates, times?”

“You mean, when I’m going to die?”

“Duh.”

You’d think that three years of death would give a person some insights on the errors of their former lives, like the inherent evil of being a controlling, manipulative...

“Well?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

Ignoring me, she looks around the room and her eyes stop on the couch I bought just hours ago. “Where’s the red couch?”

“I sold it.”

“I loved that couch.”

“I hated it.”

“You owe me an apology.”

“A what?”

“You forgot my birthday.”

“What the hell are you...”

“You forgot my twenty-second birthday, Charley. Didn’t even buy me a card. No gift.”

“Susan, that was ten years ago!”

“No cake.”

“I’d just gotten back from a business trip. I was exhaust...”

“No flowers.”

Again, right out of the blue. I can’t believe this. “You didn’t say anything at the time. Why now, ten years later?” I throw my arms up. “And why now, when you’re dead?”

“I was afraid I might mention...” She puts fingers to her lips. She always did that when she pretended she’d let something out accidentally, but all she really wanted to do was tell me something she knew was going to piss me off. And I always fell for it.

“Mention what?” Still falling for it.

“You’ll just get mad.”

“Mention what?” Hook, line and...

“It was your fault. If you’d just remembered.”

“What, Susan?”

She floats over to the new couch. A dark brown couch. Second hand. Comfortable. Exactly the couch she would have treated like a flea-bitten dog and never allowed past the door. She sits and crosses her long, long...

“You went straight to bed. I went out, met Jerry, went to his place...and had sex with him.”

“You...?”

“Charley, drop the wounded face. It was only the third time.”

“You had sex with other men three times?”

“No...sex with Charley three times. Don’t even get me going on the others.”

“You cheated on me!”

“You didn’t give me flowers on my birthday.” And now she leans forward, deliberately letting the top of her gown fall enough to show those beautiful breasts that I used to spend so much time... “Besides, it was only sex. You had my heart.”

“You never had a heart.”

“Look who’s talking, birthday-forgetter.”

“You cheated on me.”

“Charley, we just covered that. Get over it.”

She’s winding my head up again, screwing my brain with her twisted logic, just like she did when she was alive. But, oh, those legs, those...what the hell am I thinking? She’s dead. “You have to leave, Susan. Get back to being dead.”

“Not until we’re finished, Charley. And we’re not finished.”

“We were finished when you died. When you...”

“You told me once that you would follow me anywhere. You swore you would, Charley. You said, no matter where, no matter what, you would follow me to the end of time. You broke your word, Charley.”

“Susan, you died.”

“So? Has time ended?”

“*Your* time did.”

“You didn’t specify what time; you said ‘the end of time’. That’s all time, Charley, *all* time.”

“You expected me to die...just because you died? That’s crazy!”

“No, Charley. That’s love. That’s commitment. That’s keeping your promise. You didn’t follow me.”

“You were cheating on me.”

“You didn’t know that.”

“But...”

“I told you, Charley, we already covered that. Get over it. You always get stuck on all the wrong details. A hug would have been nice. Flowers would have been better.”

“If I buy you flowers, will you go away?”

“It’s too late for flowers. I’m dead. Now, I have to settle for tormenting you eternally.”

“You’re going to torment me eternally because I forgot your birthday...just once...ten years ago?”

“You only turn twenty-two once, Charley. Just once. You never get to turn twenty-two again. You missed something that was going to happen just once in my life and for all eternity, and now I get to torment you...forever.”

“That’s just plain vindictive, Susan.”

“You only get one shot at twenty-two, Charley.”

“And besides, all you said was that we need to take care of some unsettled issues. You said we were going to talk, get this all over with. And now you’re talking about eternal torment.”

She thinks about this a moment. “I changed my mind.”

“You...”

“The dead’s prerogative, Charley.” She stands up suddenly. I step back. “You’re not afraid of me are you?”

“No. You just took me by surprise.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “Look, Charley, things didn’t turn out the way I expected.”

“I know. You died young.”

She squints her eyes. “You didn’t have anything to do with that did you?”

“Giving you a stroke? I don’t think so.”

She nods agreement. “What I meant is that things didn’t turn out the way I expected here...in death.”

“How so?”

“I expected clouds, halos, harps...flowers. But it’s not like that.”

“And just how is it?”

“It’s work, Charley, work. We have to take care of things like balances in the universe, making sure that the properties of the universe are all in working order. I saw a place about a thousand light years from here where they let gravity slip for just a few minutes. For a while, we were almost the only intelligent life in the universe, but we fixed it. These things take a lot of math. You know how much I hate math.”

“That sounds really tough, Susan. But it sounds like you get to travel a lot. You used to love traveling.”

“Do you have any idea how cold space is, Charley?”

“But you’re dead.”

“The view between galaxies is cold. It’s dark. Empty. Cold.” She runs her fingers from her cheek, down her neck to her chest as she says this with a faraway look. And suddenly snaps out of it. “But I’m doing something new now.” She looks relieved, almost happy. “They’re trying a new program, running a pilot project. And I’m in it.”

“Well that sounds good, Susan. I’m happy for you. What is this pilot project?”

“Well...you’re not going to believe this. I mean, when I heard, well, it just blew me away. The coincidence.”

“Coincidence?”

“Yes! Of all the people in the world, I got you.”

“Me?”

“You!”

“For what?”

“I get to be your guide when you die.”

“My guide?”

“That’s the pilot project! And I know, it’s an old idea, this whole thing about the long dead guiding the newly dead, but it’s never actually been done before.”

“And you’re going to be *my* guide?”

“Isn’t that wild?”

“But you just said that you’re going to torment me for eternity.”

She thinks for a moment. “I changed my mind. Now, we have to talk.”

“You can’t just keep changing your mind...”

“We already covered that, Charley. Get over it. Like it or not, I’m going to be your guide in the afterlife and before that happens, we have to settle a few things.”

“But there’s nothing more to...”

“Look, Charley, I didn’t ask for this. Luck of the draw. But it sure beats the math.”

I shrug my shoulders in frustration. "So what else?"

"Watch the tone, Charley. I'm going to be your guide."

"OK. What...other things do we have to settle?"

"You didn't tell me I was beautiful before we left the apartment for the one time you ever took me to a play."

"But..."

"I bought a new evening gown just for that. I spent hours on makeup and had my hair done."

"I never took you to a play, Susan. You're getting me mixed up with someone else...someone you met before me."

"Maybe I should just go back to eternal torment."

"I said you were beautiful when you met me for lunch that time in the bookstore."

She thinks for a moment. "Hmm. OK, I'll let you off with the play incident. That might have been someone else."

"Before or after we met?" I say this sarcastically. Susan frowns.

"I'm not sure, Charley. Do you really want to know?"

"Is there anything else we have to talk about?"

"Lots of things. And we have to settle them quickly. After I guide you..." She puts a finger to her lips and looks at me as though she's just let something slip out. Once again I fall for it.

"Yes? After you guide me...?"

"Well, I suppose I can tell you since we already covered that...and you've gotten over it. After I guide you, I'm going to be guiding Jerry."

"Jerry? You're going to guide Jerry?"

"Charley, I only slept with him three times. Get over it."

"But Jerry's in the hospital with cancer. He only has a few days to live!"

"All the more reason to get things settled quickly, Charley."

"Susan! If he only has a few days to live and he's going to outlive me, then I only have a few days to live!"

"There you go again, Charley. Jumping to conclusions and focusing on all the wrong things. You always did that."

For a moment, I think I see a bright spot. "So...you mean that Jerry's going to live longer? The cancer's going to go away? He's going to live a long life?"

"Probably not. The cancer's really advanced. I'd be surprised if he lasts more than a day or two. His own fault though. I told him to quit..."

"So when am I going to die?"

She looks thoughtful. "I don't know. Soon, I suppose. I just know that I'm supposed to guide Jerry after I guide you. So, how do you feel? Any pains, dizziness, rumblings? Anything that might be fatal?"

"I was feeling fine until you showed up."

"Headaches? Nausea? Bowels OK?"

"Susan!" She looks at me almost startled. Good. "When are you supposed to guide Jerry?"

"That's confidential information. Besides, I just know that I'm supposed to guide him after I guide you. They didn't give me any dates. Do you have any premonitions? Some people just know when it's their time."

"No! No premonitions. And I'm pretty damn sure it's not my time." A hopeful thought comes into my head. "How long does it take to guide me?" I'm thinking that, if it takes a long time, then Jerry's on his way to...maybe some kind of miraculous recovery.

“Not long.”

Damn.

“Just a few basics: the math of maintaining creation, time management—eternity’s a long time, you know—some yoga. The basics.”

“So...exactly how long does it take. I mean, you’re the guide.”

“It’s hard to say, Charley. Time is different when you’re dead. You suddenly have lots of it. And there’s no real day or night, no seasons. Besides, Jerry’s a goner...soon. And you’re a goner before him. Live with it.”

“Susan, I’m not ready to die. I have things to do, places to go.”

“Like, what and where?”

“Well...you know...things...places. All that stuff you do before you die.”

“You’re never going to do any of it, Charley. You never do anything. You work, you watch TV, you sleep. If your life were a restaurant, the menu would fit on a thumb tack.”

“But I have...”

“I just remembered...there’s a flower shop right by where you work. You could have stopped in for a few minutes. You could have bought me flowers.”

“Susan! I’m going to die! Soon! And you’re still going on about the flowers?”

“Look at the bright side...you won’t be dying alone. I’ll be here with you. How about numbness? Blurred vision?”

“Come to think of it, my throat feels a bit tight.”

“Now we’re talking. Difficulty breathing?”

“No! My breathing’s fine. You almost sound like you want me to die.”

“Charley, I’d like to start my new job sometime this century. You can be really inconsiderate, you know. Feeling any hot flashes, or anything?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Susan, but no...”

“What?”

“My chest.”

“Your chest?”

“It feels weird. Like it used to when I was a kid.”

“You mean when you used to get allergic reactions?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t had one of those in years.” I start coughing. My throat feels like a vice is clamping in on it.

“Charley, when did you buy the new couch?”

“Today. Why?”

“Charley, did you get a second hand couch?”

“What does that have to do with...”

“You bought a second hand couch.”

“I got a good deal.” I’m coughing non-stop now and wheezing.

“It’s probably full of fleas.”

“Fleas?”

“You told me you almost died as a kid from an allergic reaction to fleas.”

Suddenly, I can’t breathe. I start gagging. Susan claps her hands together and smiles.

“Susan, do something!”

“I am.”

“What?”

“Waiting to start my new job.”

Some more gagging, some reddening of the face, and it's over. I look at Susan and she's beaming. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

I look at my body lying on the floor, spittle dripping from my mouth. I look irritated. "That's me."

"That *was* you." She extends her hand to me. "You said you had things to do, places to go. Well, you were right."

"But I meant..."

She wraps her fingers around my hand and tugs lightly. "Time to go, Charley. But, before we begin the, let's say...orientation...we need to talk."