

Cancelled or postponed?

By Brody Stewart

It must be 30 years or so since I last heard from her.

The reason for our breakup is still a matter of dispute, but our mutual cancellation of one another is not.

Still, I remember Candice Bell clearly. I first remember her sitting a few rows back in the lecture hall as Dr. Bigley, a terminally boring biology professor, droned on about the function of the human spleen or the workings of the adrenal glands. I snuck glances at Candice, a comely brunette who wore big round framed glasses, resting her chin in the palm of her hand and staring at the ceiling. *What was she thinking?* I wondered to myself.

One night at Gino's, a rustic little outpost popular with upperclassmen on the outskirts of Stevens Point, I spotted an opening beside her at the bar. Here was my chance.

"Hello Candice, I'm in your human biology class. Name's Chase Whitaker."

She gave me a friendly but skeptical look. She obviously was used to come-ons.

"Yes, I've seen you in class. Nice to meet you Chase." She extended her hand and we shook. I noticed her fingers were absent of rings.

"Kind'a boring class, eh?" I said.

"Kind'a? How about mind numbingly boring? How about cruel-and-unusually boring?"

"Enough to make someone's mind wander aimlessly," I said smiling. "Last Tuesday, I really struggled to pay attention. My mind was everywhere. In fact, I noted you staring off a few times."

"Only a few times?" she chuckled. "Mostly in that class I'm far away."

"And where's that?" I asked with a smile, sensing her warming to me.

"A place only three people know about. Me, myself and I."

"Your secret would be safe with me," I teased.

"No secret is ever safe if more than one person knows about it."

I couldn't argue with her logic.

Anyway, to the point, Candice and I grew friendlier as the weeks went by – so friendly that I began seeing her every day but Monday. And by Tuesday, I was ready to be with Candice again, to meet for lunch at Stan's Diner or sneak away for a quick beer at Gino's. My days back then revolved around Candice. I thought of her incessantly – at the bar, in class, flossing my teeth. To tell you the truth, it probably wasn't healthy.

But she was just as crazy about me! We talked of rings and marriage and children. I figured our futures were sealed.

Then along came Wally Sizemore.

It was a beautiful summer's night. I climbed the steps to her little apartment and rapped out my special knock on the aluminum screen door. She answered my summons with a nervous little smile. I gazed passed her through the doorway and saw a guy slumping on her couch.

She politely introduced us. "Chase, this is Wally." I instantly sensed something askew in my perfectly balanced, precise timepiece of a romance with Candice. Still, I thrust my hand forward in a gentlemanly manner. Sizemore hesitated before making a half-hearted response. His hand was limp and clammy, and he didn't do me the courtesy of looking me in the eye. He turned his attention instead to Candice.

"So Candi, where should we have dinner tonight?" he inquired.

Candi? What the heck was with Candi? She told me she'd always hated being called Candi. Said the kids always laughed and called her Candi Bar, Candi Corn and Candi Apple. She refused to let me call her that. She was downright militant about it. But to this guy she was good ol' Candi?

"Well Wally, I don't know that I can." She forced a smile, took my arm and held it close to her. "Chase and I have a date. Remember, I told you about him. Well this is Chase."

Sizemore looked me up and down, almost quizzically. He looked toward Candice and paused.

"Really?"

I could see his rude demeanor toward me was making Candice nervous. I decided to go 180 on good old Wally – knock him off his game.

"Yeah, that's right Wally. Every Tuesday evening Candice and I go to Gino's for a beer and a pizza. You two must be old pals or something, so why don't you join us. Our treat. Wouldn't it be great if Wally could join us Candi?"

She knew me well enough to recognize my insincerity. She knew I was highly irritated by the presence of Wally, enough so for me to address her by that hated, despised, detested name.

Wally studied her. I studied the two of them. I needed to know the dynamic here. Who was this idiot to her? She'd never told me about a Wally. Why was he there now?

"Sure, why not," Sizemore replied, though the question was not directed to him.

Dinner at Gino's was a brutal affair. Sizemore was preoccupied with my girlfriend. He behaved as though I wasn't there, shrugging or giving one-word answers to my questions, refusing to look me in the eye. I finally had had enough of the jerk and "accidentally" bumped my beer glass with my elbow and sent 12 ounces of Corona spilling over Wally's lap. He popped up from the table looking like he had just peed his pants. Somehow the lime from the rim of the glass managed to get hung up on his zipper. He shot me an contemptuous glare, called me a "stupid *#!&%" and stormed away, presumably to visit the men's room so he could attempt to dry his jeans.

"Who the heck is this guy?" I asked Candice as soon as Wally was out of earshot.

She hung her head and shook it back and forth. "He's an old boyfriend. He called me the other day and asked if he could come by and say hi. Only I think he wants more than to say hi. I think he wants us to get back together. That's why he's acting like such an ass towards you."

"Well haven't you told him that ain't gonna happen? If not, I'm happy to give you a hand. If you want to split right now, I'll set him straight when he comes back."

"He's going through some stuff right now," Candice said. "We were starting to talk about it when you came up. He's kind of vulnerable right now. This has to be handled right, Chase. He's not normally like this. Please just let me handle it. You know I love you. Just trust me on this. We'll talk and he'll be on his way. End of story."

Against my better judgement I acquiesced. I drove the two of them back to Candice's apartment and dropped them off. Candice blew me a kiss as they walked together up the steps to her place. My guts were tied in knots as I drove away.

I got home and tried to sleep, but it was no use. My thoughts kept turning to Candice and what was happening with her and Corona Crotch. By 2 a.m., I could stand it no more. I dressed and drove to her

apartment. I saw the lights off. The same VW Jetta that Sizemore had arrived in had not moved from the driveway. I took several deep breaths, trying to keep my rage from boiling over.

I slammed the car in drive, spun the tires and threw gravel as I tore away from there. I'd confront her in the morning.

I met her at a little coffee shop close to campus the next day.

"What time did Wally leave?" I asked, wasting no time with the interrogation.

"I don't know," she answered defensively. "He left when we got through talking."

"Did you talk all night?"

"What are you insinuating?"

"You know damn well what I'm insinuating."

"Are you accusing me of sleeping with him?"

"My question was what time did he leave?"

"I don't like your tone Chase."

"I don't like your evasiveness, Candi."

"You know I hate to be called that!"

"You don't seem to mind when Mr. Sizemore does it."

"You know what? I'm done here. When you think you can be civil toward me, give me a call. Until then, get lost."

"How about you answer my simple question. Let me know when you can reach back that far into your memory. I mean, it was a long time ago. Way back last night. I know a lot's happened since. Answer my question. Until then, I'll stay lost."

Suffice to say, neither of us budged from our entrenched positions. She never answered the question, and I took her silence as an admission of guilt. The days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months, and the months became years. Our estrangement became permanent. I saw Candice around town a couple of times. I'd see her here and there, usually from a distance. But I never stopped to say hello. At some point, I dismissed her from my life. At some point, she returned the favor.

Which brings me to today. I'm a divorced middle-aged man living in Fence working as a private forester. Life is OK. Not great, but OK. I dabble some with social media, and I guess my name got out to some of my old buddies from our days at UW-Stevens Point. My address apparently was posted on some university alumni site. Which brings me to the point of all this. I hold in my hands a letter – one that came inside an envelope delivered by snail mail – from a Candice Bell Hardy.

It says: "Dear Chase: I guess I've had ample time to consider your question from those many years ago. The answer is that Wally left my place that night shortly after you dropped us off. He left his car at my house because he had lost his key. He apparently emptied his pockets in the restroom after you spilled beer in his lap and left his key

See page 13

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