

The Message

By Chris Hadley

Joanna Parker headed towards her '57 Chevy as a thin drizzle started to set in amidst a hot, muggy summer night. Blonde, and dressed in a white button shirt, blue jeans and Keds, she turned the ignition, and pulled out of the driveway of her friend's house, where a friend's party had just taken place. As she drove down the road, the rain became more and more intense as the thunder rumbled, and the lightning flashed. Visibility was slim to none, and for Joanna, who had only held a driver's license for three weeks, this was the first major challenge she faced as a driver. She turned on her windshield wipers, in an attempt to try to find her way through the wall of water that streamed down her front window.

At the same time, her new husband, Charles, waited for her back at their new home, a newly built, five room love nest that was literally bought and paid for by his own physical suffering (he was once a construction worker). At this moment, he was working as an engineer in the brave new world of television, at the local NBC affiliate in town. He settled down to watch the late movie, as he briefly, though nervously, glanced at his watch. It was 11:26. Joanna said she would be back by 11:30.

Joanna slowly made her way towards the intersection. The thunder was deafening. Despite the windshield wipers' best efforts, the rain continued to obstruct her view as she drove. A bright clap of lightning, followed by the blinding glare of a distant vehicle, accompanied by the clarion call of its horn, threw the young driver off balance. The '57 Chevy slid through the wet roads like a track runner on ice. Then, as if to bring this terrifying symphony to its crescendo, the opposing vehicle charged toward the Chevy, with the devastating precision of a guided missile, sending the Chevy tumbling in the air, landing on its side. No one survived the night.

Twenty-five years later, Charles Parker looked out of the second floor window of his general manager's office at KPRT-TV, a rinky-dink UHF located on the outskirts of town. As he tended to paperwork, he turned his attention toward the TV in his office. "Right now, there is a severe thunderstorm warning for our entire viewing area, and there is the chance of possible tornadoes in addition to the rain and lightning, but the good news is that it should clear out by morning," said KPRT's capable meteorologist, Brad Bridges, a perfectly coiffed, brunette-haired stud, who suddenly, for some reason, reminded Charles of his younger self. Joanna used to tell him that he was a dead ringer for Clark Gable, with the dark hair, mustache, and bushy eyebrows.

They met, rather innocently, while working at a small, though powerful, 10,000 watt AM religious

station. She worked the switchboard, and he worked on the engineering staff. They had both graduated from college. In his eyes, she possessed the natural beauty and romantic charm of Marilyn Monroe, and the elegance of Grace Kelly. One day, after arriving at the station by bus, and expecting the station's offices to be open before eight, she found herself locked out of the office, and Charles, who just happened to arrive to turn on the transmitter at sign-on, saw her standing in the parking lot, dressed in a blue suit dress and high heels, shivering uncontrollably in the bitter thirty-degree chill of an ominous, overcast winter morning.

He opened the door for her, and accompanied her inside, as he turned on the office's rickety old furnace. As the day ended, and the night air grew even colder, he gave her his trench coat, and, considering that she did not drive, he brought her home. As he let her out of the car, she glanced at him, and smiled. "You've made my day," she told him. It would not be the last time that she would speak those words to him. They dated for a while, and then, after they went to see "An Affair To Remember" at the local theater, he popped the question to her. "Absolutely, undoubtedly, yes," was her reply to his asking for her hand in marriage. Less than a month later, they wed. It was only two months later that she perished, on the slippery road back to their home.

Now, Charles, his formerly Brylcreem-slicked hair, Clark Gable mustache and bushy eyebrows now a wrinkled, gray memory, watched the nearby television across from his desk. "An Affair To Remember" was the evening's late movie. As Cary Grant romanced Deborah Kerr, specs of static appeared on the screen. The specs grew in intensity, as the picture began to freeze and pop. Then, a strange murmur began to emerge through the interference. "Charlie...Charlie..." said a disembodied, female-sounding voice. He stopped, puzzled by the distant call.

The voice grew in intensity. "Charlie...Charlie! You must...you must!" He knew the voice all too well, its crystalline, sultry, distinctive tenor emerging through the noisy din of the static. "Joanie!" he cried in amazement. Then, as quickly as it came, the picture suddenly returned to normal. He glanced over at the slightly faded picture of his wife that hung on his wall. He picked up the phone. "Dave, Charles Parker. Listen, about five minutes ago, my TV started going haywire." On the other end of the phone, Dave Rutledge, the chief engineer at the station, responded. "Charlie, that TV of yours is always going haywire. Everything's fine over here." "Listen to me. I think it might be something more than just common interference. It might be, I don't know, something beyond anyone's explanation." "What's beyond explanation is why you haven't gotten that damn TV fixed. Why don't you bring it into the shop so I can take a look at it?" he said, unconvinced of Charles' unusual predicament.

"I'm just going to tell you this once. Make of it what you wish. I think my wife is trying to contact me...through the TV," Charles said, as he hoped for a sympathetic ear. "Charlie, I'm just going to tell you this once, pal. I think you've been watching too many "Twilight Zone" episodes. Get some rest. If anything happens we'll let you know. Gonna be a long night," said Dave. Unable to convince anyone of his plight, he hung up the phone, turned off the lights and the TV set, and headed for the downpour that awaited him. It would be a long night, indeed.

He rode down the street in his now-vintage '57 Chevy, which he bought several years ago at a classic car show. Like the one Joanna and he shared all those years ago, it was a Bel Air Hardtop Sport Coupe. He didn't buy it merely because it was a collector's item, nor because it was his favorite brand of car. He bought it as a means of remembrance, as a means of not only coping with her sudden loss, but to also honor her memory. He never married after the accident; he engaged in several flings with other women, either friends of hers, or people he met elsewhere. Somehow, it seemed that no one would ever replace her, and up to this moment, no one did.

Charles finally headed home, soaking wet from the rain outside. He headed towards his bedroom, and after a shower, got into his pajamas. He took two aspirin, for a re-aggravated back injury, and slipped into bed. He flipped on the TV set, and as was his custom, watched his station. Right now, "All In The Family" was on the air. He snickered as Archie Bunker, the working-class conservative, once again went toe to toe with his daughter Gloria's husband, the liberal hippie Mike Stivic, a.k.a. "Meathead", all the while telling his long-suffering wife Edith to "stifle herself" for the hundredth time. A commercial break. Charles drank from his usual glass of water.

Then, with the same slow build-up that had occurred previously, the screen started to freeze and twitch. The dog food commercial gradually began to disappear in a fog of fuzzy distortion and noise. "Charlie...Charlie..." He snapped to attention. The water dropped from his hand and spilled onto the carpet. "Who's there?" he said, as if an intruder had suddenly interrupted his TV viewing. "Charlie...Charlie, I love you..." His eyes grew wider, as if he had come to a shocking realization. "Joanie...Joanie...where are you?"

"Charlie...you must do something...you must save Elizabeth..." said the disembodied voice. He paced around the room. This can't be happening, he said to himself. I must be out of my mind...maybe Dave is right, maybe I am losing it, he thought. "No! You're not real! Elizabeth is fine! Who are you? Why the hell would she be in trouble?" he screamed in agony. "Charlie...I warned you about her...she is in danger!" she cried amidst the TV noise. "You...you're a damn voice! What have you done with my wife?" he roared,

angrily demanding an explanation.

“Listen to me, Charlie...you have got to get a hold of yourself...Elizabeth is in danger! You must save her!” she bellowed. “Where is she? Tell me! Tell me now!” He turned around toward the set. Like the snap of a finger, the Bunkers had returned to the air. He walked to the bathroom, removed his shirt, and did his best to recover from this momentary detour from normalcy.

As morning broke, Charles arrived back at the station, having barely slept four hours since the bizarre events of the previous night. He walked into his office, to find that his papers had been arranged neatly, as if a meticulous janitor had somehow gotten a key into his office and volunteered to do the cleaning. A cup of coffee, decaffeinated and piping hot, awaited him, along with a handwritten note: “Hope you have a nice day. Don’t forget about Lizzie. Love, Joanie.” He sunk back in his chair, stunned at the increasingly unworldly situation that was unfolding.

Elizabeth was Charles’ youngest sister, and also, his best friend. As they grew up over the years, they shared practically everything, except for each other’s toys. They shared their deepest and darkest secrets, their own personal hopes and fears, and their ambitions. They went to the same high school, and then, the same college. While Charles studied electrical engineering, Elizabeth studied fashion design, and designed her own dresses. Everyone, though, including Charles, admired her natural beauty, and it was Charles who persuaded her to enter a regional beauty pageant. She not only entered, she won the entire competition.

After winning the contest, she decided to try her luck as an actress. She went to Hollywood for a screen test, but was never considered for even a bit part, so she returned back home, and began a career as a copy writer for a local advertising agency. While she and Charles remained close over the years, she became more of a social butterfly than ever before, all while attempting to find her one true love. She met Gil at a party on New Year’s Eve, 1980, just as he began working at the Port Phoenix Press. After a brief courtship, they married six months later. Unbeknownst to Charles, Gil posed the biggest threat to her.

No sooner than he could lift a finger, Gil arrived. “Hey, we’ve got the Allied Auto account. They want to know if we can use the studios to tape five spots on Wednesday.” Charles barely looked up from his coffee. “Fine. Okay,” he said, completely distracted. “Charlie...you okay?” asked Gil. “Tell me something...have you ever been contacted by anyone?” he asked. “What do you mean?” asked a perplexed Gil. “I mean, has anyone contacted you from ‘beyond the grave’, so to speak?” Gil looked at him, as if he was from beyond the grave. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t talk to dead people.”

“Try to think about this. If your wife died in a car crash, and somehow she hasn’t seemed to cross

over like they say, and she contacts you in some way or another, like talks to you, what would you do?" asked Charles. "I don't know what you're talking about, and quite frankly, you're scaring me. Now how do we schedule Studio A for—" Charles was delirious. "Listen to me, dammit! Nobody has ever talked to you? You don't know anyone who died who hasn't tried to reach out to you?"

"No! Will you please stop it?" cried Gil. "Look, I think you'd better see a shrink about this. Maybe he can help you," said Gil, rather condescendingly. "A shrink. What the hell would he know about anything? Certainly he hasn't seen a ghost before!" sneered Charles. "Believe whatever you want to believe, sir. Personally, I think you've had one too many Jack Daniels," said Gil. He exited the room, as Charles struggled to come up with a comeback at this unnecessary insult. He couldn't.

Charles closed the door, and picked up the phone. "Dave, it happened again last night. The signal got screwed up," he said. "I'm telling you for the last time, it's your set. Now, unless you know a way of getting these wires out of here, I think you'd better mind your own business," said Dave. "It's more than that. I think my wife is trying to contact me," said Charles. "Oh, come on. Through the TV? Where the hell did you come up with that?" asked Dave.

"My wife died twenty-five years ago. We were just a bunch of kids back then. She's trying to tell me something but I don't know what it is. Last night, she talked to me. She tried to warn me about my sister. I begged her to help me out. Then, she was gone," said Charles. "You know what, Charlie? You've finally done it. You've finally gone over the edge this time. You know what you need? You need a lady. You need to move on. She's gone. She's in the past. You can't stay neutral like this," said Dave. "Go to the 50/50 Club. I'm sure you can get some action."

"Is that what you think? You think some dime-a-dozen whore is going to cure my problems? For someone who claims to know all about the ladies, I doubt you've ever been in love to begin with," Charles snapped. "Fine. Go on. Do what you have to do. Just don't blame me when you end up in a strait jacket," said Dave. Charles slammed down the phone and exited his office. As he walked out of the building, the once shining, powder-blue skies ominously faded into gray. A light drizzle started to trickle, as Charles pulled his '57 Chevy out onto the road.

As he drove down the highway, the rain slowly became more steady, thus obstructing his view. He tried to turn the windshield wipers on, to no avail. Then, a burst of radio static filled the air. "Charlie... Charlie... Elizabeth is in danger... the boy is going to hurt her..." said Joanna, as she struggled to be heard over the static. "How? How is he going to hurt her? Tell me!" Charles yelled, while trying to concentrate on the road. "The car... the car... you must stop him..." she said. "What car? What car?" he asked. Silence. The

windshield wipers suddenly began to operate. The rain began to ease up.

A few minutes later, Charles pulled in to his driveway. The rain had stopped, and the sun was slowly starting to peak out from behind the clouds. He walked in, and headed for the phone. He remembered an old friend of his, who just happened to be knowledgeable in all things relating to his situation. "Clarice, Charles Parker, do you remember me? Yes. Listen, I was wondering if you could help me with something. My wife is trying to contact me, she's trying to warn me about my sister, Elizabeth, being in danger, but she's doing it through the TV and now through the radio. It's very strange, and I was wondering if you and I could set up something..."

That evening, Clarice and Charles met, at her house. Her living room was lit by candles, with the stiff aroma of incense in the air. "It's been a long time since I've done this," she said. "Please don't worry about it. It's the least you could do. I just want to get to the bottom of this," he said. She closed her eyes. "Right now, Joanna is looking at your sister. She is very worried about her, because her spouse is not exactly a person of good character. Joanna is worried that he will hurt her somehow. He is impatient with others. He does drugs. He acts violently towards others." Charles looked at her, stunned.

"Joanna has been trying to tell you about this, because she thinks that unless you try to stop him, your sister could be in real danger," she said. "Why? Why do you think that'll happen?" he asked. "Tomorrow is his birthday. He is relying on her to plan everything, but they've been fighting lately, over their work, over their money, basically everything that couples argue about. Yet it has become more and more intense. She has been abused, and she has no way of standing up for herself. You must help her."

Realizing what he had to do, Charles left Clarice's house, and headed back to his house. He picked up the phone. "Lizzie, I need to talk to you," he said. "Sure, what is it?" she asked. "Please forgive me if this is a personal question, but...has Gil ever tried to hurt you?" Elizabeth paused, suddenly puzzled by the question. "That's none of your business." she said. "Yes, it is my business. I want to know if he has hurt you in any way, because I am worried about you. Someone told me that he's a very dangerous person and I--"

Gil walked in. She immediately hung up the phone. "Who was that?" he asked. "Wrong number, dear." She smiled, as she sliced lettuce on the kitchen counter. "Listen, did you get the Corona Light for tomorrow?" he asked. "No. I didn't get a chance to go to the store, I had a very busy day today," she said. "What do you mean, you didn't get to go to the store? I left you a list of all the stuff to get for my party tomorrow night, and you tell me you didn't have time?" asked Gil. "I had to work late, I had a deadline to meet. What did you expect?"

By now, he became enraged. "I don't care! You could have found time to get the damn groceries!"

Why is it that every little thing I do around here has to be my responsibility? You don't think I work hard enough already?" Elizabeth was shaken. "Look at me! Look at me!" He pushed her against the wall, as he screamed. "This is your damn fault! What the hell are you doing to me?" "Stop it! Stop it! Please!" she cried. "Shut up!" he yelled. He stormed out of the kitchen, and headed to the bedroom. She sobbed, as she tried to cook the evening's dinner.

The next evening, the house bustled with activity, as Gil's birthday party was underway. The guests were mainly co-workers of his, along with some of his college buddies and friends from childhood. Some of them gathered in the living room to watch the Cowboys play the 49ers in the primetime game of the week, on Gil's new twenty-one inch Zenith set, that he got with his latest raise. His gifts were wrapped neatly, and were placed firmly on the kitchen table. Various snacks and beer were scattered throughout the house.

Charles parked within a few blocks of Gil's house, due to the massive amount of cars in the driveway, and then entered the house. As he headed for the kitchen, he struggled to make his way through the mass of humanity that crowded the TV set, before finally arriving at his intended destination. Elizabeth walked in, smiling as she saw him. They exchanged hugs and pleasantries, before he finally accompanied her to one of the quieter areas of the house, the study. Then, he finally got down to business.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked. "What do you mean?" asked Elizabeth. "Do you believe in life after death?" he asked. "What are you getting at?" she asked, befuddled. "Elizabeth, I know that this is going to sound very creepy, very strange to you, but I just want you to hear me out. My wife... has been trying to contact me," he said. "What do you mean? Like, from beyond?" asked Elizabeth. "Yes. She has been trying to warn me about something that may or may not be happening to you right now. She tells me that you are in danger." He paced around the room, nervously.

"You have every right not to believe me, but she thinks that Gil is trying to hurt you," he said. "Lizzie, about what we talked about last night, I want you to tell me honestly, and truthfully, has Gilbert ever tried to hurt you in any way?" "Yes," she said, quietly. "He got on my case last night...about the beer. He wanted a certain kind, I told him I was busy, and he just blew up," she said, as her jaw quivered. "What did he do to you?" asked Charles. "He shook me. He yelled at me. Then again, he's done this before. He thinks that he should leave everything to me. He refuses to take responsibility for anything, and he blows up at the smallest things."

"Who the hell are you talking to?" asked Gil, as he walked into the room. "I've got a better question. What the hell are you trying to do to her?" asked Charles. "Are you off your meds again, Charles? Your

little games have gone far enough, and I'm sick of them! Elizabeth is perfectly okay. Isn't that right, Liz?" She looked at him, stone-faced. "Right?" he asked. "I'm sick and tired of you treating me like garbage, Gil. Every night, you come home and complain about how the food isn't hot enough, or how the pillows aren't fluffy, or whatever crap you think isn't good enough. The day I married you, I thought I was getting someone who would love me for who I am. I was wrong. The only person you love is yourself!"

She ran out of the room. "You know something, you may think I'm crazy, you may think I'm a maniac when I talk about my wife talking to me, but she was right about you. Leave my sister alone, or I'll make your life a living hell!" yelled Charles. "Shut up, old man! She's not a little girl anymore!" The two men came to blows. Gil came at him with an upper cut to the chin, then Charles responded with a glancing blow to the rib cage. For a split second, Gil appeared to lose balance, but quickly got back up to his feet. Charles then knocked him out with a left hook, then proceeded to head for the kitchen. He dashed out of the room, and headed toward the door.

"Let's get out of here!" yelled Charles, as he saw Elizabeth sobbing uncontrollably. They headed for the '57 Chevy. Gil, struggling to recover from Charles' glancing blow, staggered toward the kitchen. "Elizabeth!" he cried, repeatedly. She was nowhere in sight. As he continued to look for her, Charles struggled with the ignition, as Elizabeth trembled. Gil then stumbled out of the house, and headed for his car. Like magic, the '57 Chevy roared to life. Charles pulled out of his spot. Gil would not be far behind.

A light drizzle could be felt in the air. Then, a low rumble of thunder. Charles pulled out onto the road, all the while unaware that this was the same path that his wife took on that fateful night so many years ago. "Just relax. It'll be okay. You're safe now," said Charles, as Elizabeth sobbed. The rain began to pour more steadily, almost obstructing his view of the road. He turned on the windshield wipers. Again, as before, nothing. He then tried the headlights. Still nothing. He was on his own, from here on out. Then, Gil's Toyota Tundra appeared in the rearview mirror, though far off in the distance.

Like an oncoming train, Gil powered his way through traffic, barely stopping. He weaved left, then right, trying to get at the distant '57 Chevy. Then he was stuck behind a storage truck, with two cars blocking his attempt to pull back into the left lane. Undeterred, he turned his truck into a guided missile, running the two cars off the road. Now, he had a clear view of Charles' car. He pulled up towards him. The two cars bumped briefly, then Gil collided with Charles, who hit back. The rain was relentless, the thunder deafening. Both cars headed up towards the bridge.

Both cars struggled to maintain control. "Hold on, we're almost home!" cried Charles. Elizabeth clutched Charles tightly, as he tried to maneuver his way through the rainstorm. A blinding light flashed,

followed by a deafening horn. One car slid off the road, and made its way toward the Chevy. Thinking quickly, Charles turned left, out of harm's way, and saw a clear path down the road. At last, they were safe. Gil, distracted by the light, the noise, and the rain, collided with the car, crashing into a tree. Later, Gil's car and body were recovered, and the autopsy determined that a steady flow of drugs and alcohol were in his system during his ill-fated getaway.

Just as soon as they pulled into the driveway of Charles' house, the rain stopped. "Will he ever bother me again?" Elizabeth asked. "Something tells me he got what he deserved. I don't know what it is, but I bet you and I won't ever have to worry about him again. Come on sweetie, let's get inside." Charles parked the car, then opened the door for Elizabeth. They walked inside, both exhausted from the evening's events. As they arrived at his house, Charles saw a note on his desk. It read, "Charlie, now I am free. Love, Joanie."

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