

The Cost Of Doing Business

By Michael Penncavage

The wall clock with the round, wide, inlaid smile and gloved arms is pointing west and east, symbolizing the start of a new business day when Charlie Whitman, just like clockwork, hears the familiar *tinkle, tinkle* of the door charm. Charlie is facing the wall, restocking the cigarette sleeves after being plundered by the morning rush. But he knows who it is.

Just like going to the dentist, but on a daily basis.

“Morning, Charlie.”

He slams the last of the packs into the pocket and turns around. “Morning.”

Wade Brown gives his belt an affirming tug but his belly and sidearm have different plans and his pants sag back down pathetically. He walks over to the stack of donuts alongside the coffeepot. He picks up a chocolate-frosted, reconsiders, picks up a cruller, reconsiders, picks up a jelly, reconsiders, picks up a powdered, smirks and proceeds to eat it in three quick bites, just like each morning. The coffee comes next. He pours it into a large Styrofoam cup, leaving plenty of room for milk and sugar. Wade takes a sip and frowns. “This pot fresh?”

“Fresh enough.”

“Tastes like mule piss.” He chuckles like he always does, as if amused with his own jokes. “Though, that’s not to say I ever drank any.”

Charlie ignores the comment as he wipes off the counter. It’s spotless, as always, but his hands need something to do.

He wonders how much today will cost him.

Wade, coffee cup in hand, begins thumbing with fat, chubby digits through the magazine rack. “You get that new titty magazine in yet?”

“Not since yesterday.”

Wade casts Charlie a disapproving glance that a mother would give to a misbehaving child. “You’d best get on that distributor of yours. Tell them that there are eager fans waiting for Miss Fourth of July.” Wade grabs a Field & Stream and The Hunter from the rack.

Charlie watches as Wade begins to make his way towards the door and thinks: *Only ten dollars, I’m getting off easy*, when he sees the fat man bend down and pick up one of the boxed window fans that had just arrived earlier in the week.

“Weather man says it gonna be a hot one today. Summer’s almost on us.”

Tucking his magazines under his armpit, he picks up the cooler and shimmies through the door with the same *tinkle, tinkle*.

Charlie slams his hand onto the counter, causing the brass dish of Take-One, Leave-One pennies to careen up and crash onto the floor. He closes his eyes and tries to calm his temper before the next customer walks in.

It’s been six months since Charlie moved out of the city, leaving the pollution, congestion, and memories at the border as he passed into the country. In the city he

owned a convenience store also, but it was a twenty-four hour joint there, not a six-to-six. He ran it a little over twenty years, with the naïve belief that once you had handled your first crazy drunk you could handle any type of customer.

That is, except for the ones that came in coked-out and toting a ten gauge.

His wife, Betty had been working the register. Charlie had been in the dry goods aisle and could not hear what was going down, not until the robber screamed at Betty for not emptying out the cash drawer quickly enough. Charlie reached the front of the aisle to see Betty take a blast to the chest, point blank. He lunged at the kid, who was not a day over sixteen, and received part of the second blast to his leg, sending him careening into a rack of cleaning products.

It went dark after that.

He was discharged from the hospital two weeks later. Three more months passed and the store was sold, the apartment as well, and Charlie was transplanted four hours to the west and a world away. He found a nice town named Westbend, a bit off Interstate 79. It seemed like the ideal place to start over.

Or so he had thought.

It's during the grand opening week that Wade makes his first visit. It's an odd time of day. Charlie is in between wrapping the unused rolls from the morning crowd and prepping the meats for the early lunchers. Twenty years of dealing with people from the homeless to movie stars and everyone in between gives Charlie the knack of being able to instantly tell if a customer is going to be trouble.

And he doesn't like what he sees one bit.

Wade is in uniform but he's a mess. His boots are scuffed, shirt unbuttoned, pants wrinkled, and face unshaven. From the doorway, he's surveying the store like a building inspector trying to determine if it's up to code.

"Looks a hell of a lot better than the old place." He finishes his overview and tips his hat to Charlie. "Wade Brown. Town Sheriff."

Charlie smiles politely and introduces himself.

"I see you got that smell out of here."

"Excuse me?"

"The smell," repeats Wade. "I don't think the fellow who ran this place before you was big fan of showers. Immigrant, I think. Skipped back to Japan with their relatives when they couldn't foot the rent."

"China. They were Chinese. And he moved back to Los Angeles to be with his parents," Charlie corrects. He can't believe what he's hearing.

"Whatever." Wade's eyes are bloodshot, as if he's been up all night. Still, they have an unnerving sharpness to them. "I heard you're from the city."

"That's right."

"Well, I think you'll find the people here a little more pleasant to deal with than the ones you're used to."

"That's...good to know." Charlie places the last of the wrapped breakfast rolls into the same wicker basket he used in the old store. He walks behind the meat counter and begins preparing some pre-made sandwiches.

“Yep, you’ll find a whole lot of things different here than in the big city.” A *tinkle, tinkle* sounds and Charlie looks up just in time to see him passing through the front door.

Impulsively, Charlie glances over at the wicker basket. It’s a whole lot more empty now.

It doesn’t get any better. The following day, again during the lull, the door *tinkles* and in steps Wade. Charlie had been up half the night pondering what to say to the man.

“Morning, Charlie,” he says, the same silly grin plastered across his face. “You got a pot of regular on?”

Charlie is auditing the morning receipts and nods his head. “Over there.”

“Fresh?”

“As always.”

“You gonna pour me a cup?”

Charlie looks up from the till and Wade begins to chuckle. “Just kidding. Wow - I wish I had a camera. The look on your face!”

Wade’s smile grows even wider as he grabs a Styrofoam cup and the coffeepot with his ham-hands. “Yes. That’s good. Nice and hot.” He prepares his coffee and begins the donut ritual again, manhandling them all until he invariably chooses the powdered. Charlie watches the big man inhale it.

“You know what today is?” asks Wade as he ducks down one of the aisles and out of view behind the soda and juice refrigerators.

“No. What?” asks Charlie as he makes his way around the counter to see what Wade is up to. He’ll be damned if he is going to get lifted again - sheriff or not. As Charlie reaches the aisle he almost collides with Wade. “Looking for anything in particular?”

“Just browsing,” replies the sheriff as he takes a sip of coffee. “Like I was saying, today marks the anniversary.”

“Anniversary? Of what?”

Wade motions with his index finger down the street. “It was four months ago today that Pete Mingers’ hardware store went up in flames. Burned right to the ground.”

“They ever learn the cause?” Deep down, Charlie isn’t sure that he wants to know.

“Fire Marshal, that’s my cousin Larry by-the-way, wasn’t a hundred percent certain. Being a hardware store, Pete kept a good deal of wood on hand. Hell, if you can burn down an entire forest with nothing more than a cigarette butt, I guess it wouldn’t take much to raze a store, now would it?” Wade shrugs his shoulders and removes a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He pats his shirt and then his trousers. “You wouldn’t happen to have a light, would you?”

Charlie stares at him for a moment.

“Wait. I found one.” Wade lights up and promptly pockets the matches.

“So, no official cause for the fire?” Charlie finds that hard to believe.

“Nope. I suggested it was an accident. Larry agreed,” answers Wade. “Ol’ Pete just sucked up his losses and moved back to the city - that’s where he was from

originally. Don't know what happened to him after that. But then, he was never the friendly type to start with." He tips his hat and heads for the door. "Well, got to go. See you real soon."

Charlie spends the afternoon pondering. Along with the store, the lease also includes the apartment above with roof access. On afternoons, prior to the pre-dinner-errand-rush, Charlie finds he can relax on the roof and get some sun while still being able to watch the storefront below. He can tell if a passerby will head into his store or not. Customers during that time of day have a concentrated, constipated look. No time for chitchat or lollygagging down the street. It's simply get in - make the purchase - and get out.

Charlie hears the faint rattling of a doorbell, followed by two voices. He glances down and sees Wade stepping out of the bakery a few doors away, licking his fingers. He begins walking towards his squad car before stopping and turning around. He's sporting that mischievous grin again.

Charlie hustles down the turret staircase that leads into the store's backroom. With his lame leg, it's not nearly as fast as he would like. He steps out on the store floor just in time to view Wade pocketing a pack of batteries. Suddenly, Charlie has reached his limit.

"Three seventy-five, Wade."

"What would that be?"

"The AAA batteries that you just dropped into your jacket - they're three seventy-five per pack."

The sheriff looks at him narrowly. "Well, it's a good thing you told me the price then! Three seventy-five's a bit steep for batteries don't you think, Charlie? Especially when I can go over to Multi-Mart and get them for a buck cheaper." He places the item back onto the display, giving it a little pat as if to keep it in place. "What do you think about losing a customer though?"

"I think I'll live," Charlie replies.

Wade glances over at the grill that is used to cook breakfast sandwiches. "Can I get a pork roll?"

"Sorry. Grill's closed." The last thing Charlie feels like doing right now is handing out free food.

"Damn. That's a real shame."

A *tinkle, tinkle* sounds as a customer walks in.

Wade tips his hat and begins walking over to the exit. "Well, off to catch me some criminals. Be seeing you, Charlie." And with that he is gone, leaving Charlie with clenched fists and a face full of frustration.

A shotgun blast goes off and the box of canned corn Charlie is holding strikes the linoleum floor, sending cans off in all directions. He races to the front of the store to find Betty slumped down behind the register. A growing pool of blood surrounds her. Blood

covers the products displayed on the shelves behind her, and still more drips from the ceiling tiles in large globs. Somehow she is still alive. She points an accusatory finger at him. "Your fault," she mutters, coughing up blood. "All your fault."

Charlie wakes up with a start, heart pounding, clothes covered in perspiration. With his thumb and forefinger he rubs the sweat from his eyes and tries to erase any lingering images from the nightmare. It's been a week since the last one. Possibly a new record. For the longest time it had been a nightly occurrence.

Charlie stops gulping the air and inhales through his nose and tries to relax, just like the yoga class he took with Betty. Instead of helping him settle down, it makes him immediately realize that he has a very big problem. There's a heavy smell in the air - one that he immediately recognizes and almost causes him to soil his shorts.

The bedroom window is open, but the night air is still and it's not doing much to ventilate the apartment. Charlie moves slowly through the pitch-black room. His bare foot smacks against the corner of the dresser and he winces in pain but doesn't dare turn on the ceiling light.

He gropes for his keys and cell-phone on the dresser and slides them into his pocket. Slowly, he makes his way out the backdoor of the building. He uses the fire escape to reach the alley below. It is only then that he dials 911.

Five minutes later the firemen show up. A minute after that, a police cruiser arrives. He half expects it to be Charlie, but it's not. Instead it's some deputy he's never seen before. Probably someone who had gotten on Wade's bad side and was banished to the graveyard shift. A guy from the Gas Company shows up next. He chats with the firemen for a moment and then drives off.

One of the firemen walks up to him. "We'll have the gas line shut off in a minute. Once we get the call from Fred Stevens, that's the gas man, we'll wait it out, just to make sure nothing happens."

"Thank you," replies Charlie as he stares at the building. One of the firemen is propping the door open with a brick.

"Consider yourself lucky, sir. From the amount of gas in there, one spark would have not only taken the building out, but probably the whole block. Going forward, you should make a checklist of things to do before you close up each night, such as checking that griddle."

"Good advice," says Charlie, not caring to point out that he has such a list tacked to the backroom wall, next to the phone. *Inspect Grill* is item five, right after *Turn Off Coffee Maker*.

It happens at the end of the day this time.

"Afternoon, Charlie."

“Afternoon, Wade.” He doesn’t bother looking up from his ordering form, but instead watches him from the corner of his eye.

The sheriff makes his way to the candy, manhandling a dozen different bars before shelling and shoving a Snickers into his mouth. “Heard you had a bit of pickle here last night.”

“Nothing too serious.”

“Problem with the stove?”

“It’s been taken care of.”

“Can I get a pork roll?”

“Grill’s closed for the day.”

Wade lets out a grunt. “You run a crazy establishment here, Charlie. The stove’s off during the day and on at night. You keep that up and it’s only a matter of time before you either lose all of your customers or end up burning this place to the ground. I, for one, would just hate to see that happen.”

It’s the sarcasm in his voice with the last sentence that makes Charlie stop what he is doing and look up at the man. But Wade has said his piece and before Charlie can reply, the sheriff is out the door.

Charlie doesn’t sleep much that night. He lies in bed, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about his old store. His thoughts go to Betty for a while, thinking about their honeymoon, their anniversaries, their years living in the city. Happy times.

But mostly he thinks about Wade.

He’s right on time the next morning.

And the next.

And the next.

In at 9:15. Out by 9:25. It’s rare anyone else is in the store and Charlie realizes Wade likes it that way. Makes it much easier to wreak havoc.

“Glad to see the building still standing,” remarks Wade as he looks around.

“Must be the checklist,” replies Charlie, as he stands behind the counter, trying to keep focused on the crossword puzzle that he never seems to start.

“Funny thing about checklists,” says Wade as he fondles the donuts again before devouring, like always, the powdered. “They’re never as complete as you would like them to be. There’s always that one extra thing you forget to write on the list, and that’s the one that always bites you in the ass,” he says, laughing. He grabs a cup and pours himself some coffee. “Goddamn, Charlie” he gasps after taking a sip. “This is some nasty shit you brewed this morning!”

“I’m using a different blend,” Charlie answers, using his pencil to point to a canister on the shelf. “Thought I’d give it a try.”

“Tastes like you pissed in it!”

“That’s because I did,” Charlie answers, not bothering to look up from the crossword.

Wade looks at him for a moment before breaking out into laughter. "That's a good one. Good to see you're finally getting a sense of humor." He frowns after taking another sip and drops the cup into the wastebasket. "But switch back to the old stuff."

"Once I use it up, you'll be the first to know."

"Better do it quick," says Wade. "You'd might lose a customer."

Charlie doesn't reply.

"Say, where's your antacids?" Wade asks, clearing his throat of some phlegm. He spits into the garbage can.

"Same aisle as the toilet paper."

The sheriff disappears for a moment. Charlie can hear him cracking open one of the plastic bottles. "My wife's cooking," he says, walking back around the bend. "I keep telling her to lay off the spices. She says she is, but I don't believe her." Wade makes a fist and taps his chest as if trying to burp. "Ugh. Damn heartburn. Been popping these suckers for the better part of a month now. Doesn't seem to be doing much good."

"Maybe you should go see a doctor?"

"Hell, no," replies Wade. "Bastards charge me a hundred bucks and give me a prescription that's no different than this crap," he says, placing the antacids in his pocket.

Wade adjusts his hat and pulls the door open. "See you tomorrow, Charlie."

Charlie doesn't reply as he continues staring at the crossword. As soon as he hears the door *tinkle* closed, he walks over the plate of donuts, and, like every morning for the past three months, tosses them into the garbage. He glances at the clock. 9:17. A shelf life of 15 minutes. Three dollars a day for a dozen donuts that he buys from a round robin of donut shops from surrounding towns. If there's ever an investigation, they'll never be able to uncover a pattern. Plus, like all of Charlie's regulars know, he hasn't sold donuts in months. He looks down at the pile of sweets in the bin. A waste, he thinks, but it's the cost of doing business.

At least the rat poison that he sprinkles onto the powdered donuts he buys at wholesale.

A month later there's a cover story about a beloved small-town sheriff who suddenly, tragically, succumbs to kidney failure. On page ten, at the bottom, is a small blurb about the local convenience store and its expansion plans.