

## Carl Mahoney, the Luckiest Guy in the World

### *Polka-Dots*

Charlene was lying on the couch, a pillow propped behind her head, hair covering her face. The ironing board was propped in the living room; a chicken thawed in the sink. He unplugged the iron and nudged her awake.

“Char, you okay?”

She brushed her hair out of her face, blowing out the strands that had fallen into her mouth. “I got tired.”

“I unplugged the iron. Why don’t you go upstairs and rest?” She was wearing a white dress with small black flowers on it. It was the dress she wore when they married in her parents’ backyard. The flowers were so small Carl had thought they were polka-dots.

“What time is it?” She reached to adjust the pillow behind her, but her arms dropped to her sides.

“Three-thirty.” He sat down next to her. He didn’t tell her that he took the next few days off, too. She wouldn’t know. “Slow day.”

Thick rays of sunlight slanted through the window like a playground slide. He lifted her head gently and moved the pillow onto his lap, running his fingers through her hair. He kissed her forehead as she murmured incomprehensibly. He ran his hands along her sides, her legs, her arms. She had not lost much weight. The only symptom was her fatigue, which only appeared recently. “When does Josh get home?”

“Five.” Her voice sounded like it came from the outer confines of a dream.

What would he tell Josh? He would have to tell the truth, but how much of it? She had only been diagnosed in October and she hadn’t wanted to distract him during school.

“I’ll make it to his graduation, and we’ll tell him next summer,” she said one night as they lay in bed. Carl didn’t say anything, knowing he was outvoted two to one, Charlene counting herself as mother and patient.

He held a glass of water up to her lips. She took a couple of labored gulps, her bottom lip sticking momentarily on the glass. He ran his fingers through her hair until she fell asleep. Her tiny chest raised and sank, breath hissing against his skin. Eventually, he fell asleep, too. He woke a couple of hours later from the coldness of her body through the blanket. The sun crept through the living room, a pale facsimile of its earlier glow. No breath against his skin. Her left hand stuck to his hip, her forehead clammy and cold against his shirt, faint smell of coconut drifting from her hair. He clutched his arms around Charlene’s body.

*It’s Hard to Dance with an Axe on Your Shoulder*

Divorced friends would ask their secret. Carl would make up a story about respect, not arguing too much, always doing what she said. Charlene would answer, “I let him go fishing on Sundays.” But they each knew what kept them in it. Joshua was ten years old now, and Carl suspected that Josh knew things weren’t right, that they probably never had been. Most of their time was spent apart, she in front of the TV, knitting or reading a book, Carl downstairs in the workshop, pretending to build things. There wasn’t an active dislike and they didn’t argue much. It was actually a relatively event-free marriage. They were just more like co-workers than husband and wife. They didn’t go on vacation, out to eat, or to the movies; they were very rarely seen in public without Josh, except for required events like company holiday parties. They helped Josh with his homework, took out the trash, and paid their bills on time. They averaged one love-making session a month. Afterwards they would talk about the next day, Josh’s soccer practice, if they were out of coffee, as if going through a checklist.

When asked how they met, Charlene would give a wistful look and say at a dance she saw this big man dressed like a lumberjack, with an axe slung over his shoulder. Other men wanted to dance with her, but this lumberjack scared them all away with his dirty looks and his axe. After no one asked her to dance, she walked across the room. “You going to ask me to dance or what?” He looked down at her. “Would you like to?” “Only if you get rid of that axe.” “Lady, I haven’t put this down in fifty years”—sometimes the number changed—“and I’m not going to start now.” “Well, then I won’t dance with you,” and she marched back to the other side of the room. The band started playing “My Girl,” however, and he leaned the axe against the wall and walked across the room. They danced all night.

Over the years variations were told, one where he held on to the axe while they danced; one where he accidentally dropped it and broke his foot, and she was there to mend it. In another version he was the prize at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box.

To Josh, the story was that she had been stuck at the very top of a never-ending beanstalk growing through the clouds, trapped by an evil prince. She prayed and screamed for someone to save her. And one day the beanstalk was chopped down and as she fell through the sky, Carl caught her. He then took the beanstalk, with the evil prince still lodged there, and heaved it all the way into the ocean. All rainstorms were the result of the evil prince trying to get back at Carl.

### *Charlene*

Saturday was Little Joe Cook night at the Cantab: cheeseburgers, pool, and 50’s soul. Carl and his friend Jerry would take the train to Cambridge. Some nights, after a day of drinking at Foley’s, they’d walk the long way over the Longfellow to sober up before arriving.

After hailing the bartender for a beer, Carl made his way to the pool table. A short, skinny blonde with newscaster hair, a shiny purple blouse, and bulging blue eyes was grabbing a cue. Another woman, with a cigarette smoldering between her fingers, wearing a Mötley Crüe tank-top, was racking. “Your break,” she nodded to her friend.

Carl walked over to where his quarters still sat and watched the break. The cue ball barely nudged the triangle.

Crüe laughed and lined up the orange 13, promptly depositing it in the side pocket. “Enjoying the game?” she said to Carl.

He stared at the ground, then around the room for Jerry. “We had been waiting on the table.”

“Shoulda reserved it.”

“We did.” Carl pointed to the quarters.

Crüe shrugged, then sank another stripe.

“Enjoy your game,” Carl said. He and Jerry made their way back to the bar, Jerry’s head bobbing to “Little Red Rooster.” Their seats at the bar were still open.

Over the course of two more drinks and four songs, Carl listened to Jerry vent about the game, how they had been their first, and how after this next song he was going to march over and give them a piece of his mind.

Carl felt a tap on the back of his shoulder. He turned to see the woman in purple standing in front of him. “Your quarters.” She held her palms open, smudged blue from pool chalk, matching her eyes which refused to break contact with his.

He grabbed the napkin beneath his beer mug, and handed it to her, pointing to his palms. Sweat poured through his shirt. He fumbled for the cigarettes in his pocket.

“Charlene, it’s your shot,” Crüe said from the table.

Charlene didn’t turn around, still staring at Carl, her eyes getting wider. She shoved her hands in her pockets, dropping Carl’s change to the floor. “Do you want to play us? Doubles?” Her voice was quiet, timid, the opposite of her confident appearance.

They played four games total, changing the teams. No matter which team Carl was on, he lost.

During a slow cover of “My Girl,” Charlene walked Carl to the dance floor, resting her head against his sweaty chest, her tiny arms squeezing around his waist. Most women he knew smoked and drank as much as him, cursed enough to embarrass a boys’ locker room, and knew how to curve a cue ball. Charlene almost stained her fingers with chalk residue, tried to dodge cigarette smoke, and said, “Nuts!” with a light stamp of her foot each time she missed a shot. He placed his arms around her, one hand at the small of her back, the other between her shoulder blades. Her hair had a coconut scent that made him want to live there.

The next morning Carl woke to the sound of Charlene packing and spraying her pants with deodorant and hairspray. The eyes that had sucked him in the night before refused to make eye contact, shields repelling any glances. Her voice, perfunctory: “Good morning... I’m leaving today... Thank you... No, thank you... I had a nice time, too... Do you mind not smoking?... Okay... Bye.” Charlene kissed him on the cheek at the door, like a society party, and closed the door behind her. Carl walked down the steps into the light drizzle.

Six weeks later, he received the news.

*April 1, 1985*

At eleven thirty, Carl stirred more salt into his beer, just like his daddy had showed him. The only other people at Foley’s were professional drinkers and Billy Jessup, the wise old man

of professional drinkers. “Awfully dressed up today, Carl,” he said across the bar. He had a long, craggy nose that threatened to break off and fall into his mug. Billy was the only one who ever said anything to Carl. “Where’s the lumberjack suit?”

Carl usually wore a red and black or a white and black plaid shirt, jeans, and work boots. He began wearing it as a tribute to his dad after he passed away. After a while, Carl just got used to the look. In between sips he pulled at his collar, scratching the nape of his neck, yanking at the knotted tie underneath. He re-laced his boots, finger-combed his hair to the right, and pulled the chain out from under the sweater, resting the cross against his chest. After a minute, he tucked it back under his t-shirt. Outside the wind clattered against the windows, rain thundering in the street.

“Got a hot date, do ya, Carl?”

“Not exactly.” He finished the beer and adjusted the tie again, pulling out the chain then putting it back under his shirt. He covered up the tongue of his work boots with the hem of his pants, zipped up his jacket, and walked out into the driving rain.

Carl had never won anything. Not a scratch ticket, a card game, a hand of poker, a coin toss, anything. When he was a kid, his mother implored his older brother and sister to let him win a game every once in a while. The more they tried to let him win at Monopoly, the more he rolled into jail. In Scrabble, he’d get all vowels and never a triple word score. Stuck at a red light in a rural neighborhood at four in the morning, he drove through and was pulled over by a cop waiting around the corner. And here he was, walking half-drunk in the rain without an umbrella to the birth of his son on April Fools’ Day.

He sprinted across Kneeland Street, the “Walk” sign having stopped blinking just as he got to the corner. A car skidded, its honk punctuated by a giant splash that further drenched his

back. He thought about turning around. His shoes were pregnant with water, clothes weighing him down with every step he made to the hospital. He hadn't seen Charlene for two months, since he had driven off during the meet-the-guy-who-knocked-me-up dinner. Not showing up was what they all expected, for him to abandon her again. He was going to be there for his son.

He pulled his jacket collar over his head, and there on the ground sat a penny. Carl was not a superstitious man and had a near disdain for the coin. It was a worthless item, something fathers had their kids roll up when the jar overflowed. Salvation Army volunteers ringing their Christmas bells knew he was just trying to clean out his car. And he certainly never used the take-a-penny tray at the register. Pennies were nothing but a gimme to the zinc companies and the fat cats running them, something Carl had heard from one of the blowhards at Foley's, and he was shocked to find himself thinking like this more often lately.

He stood on the sidewalk until his t-shirt clung to his skin and his slimy feet slid around in his socks. He couldn't tell if it was face up, but he picked it up anyway, hoping this penny would bring his son the good luck he never had.

### *Marbles*

Carl's face pressed against the glass. To the left: toy carousels, stuffed dogs, freckled dolls with curly hair falling over blue dresses in rocking chairs. To the right: a giant rocket, its tip pointing directly at a moon that swayed each time the door opened. On the front door a red and yellow sign: "50-75% off EVERYTHING." Carl stared at a goblet large enough for him to sit in filled with marbles. "Guess how many marbles in the goblet. Win them all!" read a plaque resting on an easel.

"Dad! Can I look?"

“We’re running late.” Carl Sr.’s hands were plunged into the pockets of his blue flannel. It was just the two of them that day: Teddy and Brenda had gotten too old and had taken part-time weekend jobs. He needed to be home promptly at five o’clock.

In the back of the store were kid-sized doll houses, telescopes, rocket ships, hula hoops, baseball gloves, basketballs, bicycles of different sizes. But Carl kept returning to the goblet. He had never seen a glass so big before. He had been surrounded his whole life by glasses. His father’s life was constructed of them: empty, half-full, frothing at the top, pilsner glasses (at age eleven, Carl knew what a pilsner glass was), steins, wine glasses, littering the house as if each were a structural beam.

“Can’t we just go in for a couple of minutes?”

His father stared through the window, hands contorting in his pockets like a squirrel trying to escape from a bag. He puffed out his chest, pulled a gnarled hand from his pocket, blackening his chin with the grime on his fingers. He pushed up his left sleeve to look at his watch. Carl had learned to read these machinations. If his father meant no, he wouldn’t have bothered with his watch; He would have just said, “No” and grabbed collar by his jacket collar.

“Ten minutes. That’s it. Or your mom’s going to kill not just me, but both of us.”

Carl ran to the doorway and waited for his father before pushing open the door.

The store whizzed and whirred: model airplanes buzzed on strings spanning the length of the ceiling. Kids cranked up toy robots, held boxing gloves by the strings and tried to hit each other with them. A man with balding gray hair and a red sweater stood next to the cash register looking at everyone suspiciously; a woman who looked just as joyless sat behind the desk flipping papers from one pile to another, punching an oversized calculator. Girls on the other side of the store screamed as their mothers said, “One doll or none.” Two kids sat at a wooden



table gluing wings onto a bomber plane. Carl ran up and down the aisles, eyes, head, hands wanting everything the store had to offer. His father stood a few feet inside the entrance and off to one side, hands back in his pockets, shaking his head at giant boxes Carl held up in the air. He looked at his watch and spread five fingers. Carl hoisted a microscope. His father pulled out his wallet, pointed to it, and spread out five fingers again. Carl searched the box for a price tag: \$25.

“Store closes in five minutes,” the old man yelled in a raspy voice.

A chorus of whines and sighs echoed in the store.

The old man snorted through his nose.

Carl had to get one more look at the marble-filled goblet. They were different sizes, colors blending into a refraction of infinite possibilities. “Excuse me!” he yelled to the man behind the counter.

The man turned his head slowly, his gaze piercing a hole through his glasses.

“Can we know what the other guesses are?” asked Carl.

The man lowered his head, bushy eyebrows reaching out like flames. “No. One guess. If you guess the same as someone else, you split them.”

Carl grabbed a piece of paper and pencil from the stack on the easel. “1958,” the year he was born. Bags of marbles sat in baskets at his feet. He grabbed two large bags in blue mesh netting. He held them up to his father with finality and walked to the register. If he bought these, they could serve as luck, channeling his guess to the goblet.

He would find out later that his guess was wrong.

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### *Bowling*

Carl had been building a new dresser for Josh. The groove he had cut for one of the drawers didn't look straight. On makeshift shelves—boards hanging on stud nails—sat a pencil sharpener, a picture of Josh, a vise grip, a can of screws, and two large bags of marbles. He pulled out a small one and rested the bag on the workbench. If the marble didn't roll, then the groove was straight. If it slid, he had cut it wrong. The marble slid down the groove, gaining speed until it fell off the table. He tried it a few more times with different sized marbles, each sounding like a bowling ball careening down a gutter.

He thought of the last time he had seen his dad. Carl had just graduated from technical college, a two-year engineering program. His dad was now living in a trailer in Palmer, “way the fuck out in the woods,” as his mom called it. He was the only family member who still visited. They sat on the steps leading up to the trailer. Carl tried to share his sandwich; his dad was having a liquid lunch.

“This is my boy, Carl Jr. College grad,” he'd say to anyone walking by. Some yelled congratulations, but most kept moving without lifting their heads.

There wasn't much to do in Palmer, but his dad wanted to celebrate. They went to the bowling alley, the only place where “those damned kids wouldn't be hellin' up the joint.”

Over the years Carl had learned there was a short interval between averting disaster and watching his dad do something stupid. More than once he'd had to bail his father out of jail. Just as Carl released the ball, his dad yelled at a guy sitting at the bar, “Weeb, you motherfucker!” The ball bounced and thudded into the gutter. His dad was marching over to the bar, unbuttoning the top buttons of the blue flannel, pushing up his sleeves. “Fifty bucks, you cheap bastard!”

Weeb had wheeled around on his stool and pulled off his hat, the strap leaving an indentation on his bald head.

Carl ran over and braced his father by the shoulders. He turned to the bar patrons behind him, “Don’t worry. We’re leaving.” His father sputtered obscenities, but Carl held him in place. “We’ll buy a six-pack and order some pizza. How’s that sound?” He ushered his father out, swaying along with his dad’s staggered gait. Carl Sr. died two weeks later, all his blood and muscle replaced by booze and smoke.

### *Q and No A*

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Carl focused on the road in front of him. He had wondered it many times himself, but he had expected a different setting when Josh asked. He imagined Josh confronting him in a more dramatic setting, more tears, maybe a door slamming or two, like in the movies. Carl had never been a dramatic man, but neither was his son. He had only seen Josh crying twice in the past week, and he himself had only cried once, in the shower, where no one could see him.

Carl yanked at the tie, tugging it back and forth, unbuttoning the top of his shirt. He couldn’t wait to put on some real clothes. He pulled the pack of cigarettes out from his front pocket. “You want one?” Carl had seen Josh smoking a few times. He wasn’t eighteen yet, but he would be in a week.

“No thanks,” he said, as if declining an open seat on an empty bus.

Carl squeezed Josh’s shoulder, reaching his giant hand across the expanse of the seat. Josh’s shoulder bulged out of the ill-fitting suit, like an overstuffed sausage. One day Josh would be taller than him, a thought Carl always viewed with pride, until recently when this thought

caused both fear and disappointment: fear that Josh wouldn't forgive him or Charlene; fear that he couldn't convince Josh that his awkwardness was not due to a lack of respect or love; and fear that, as a result of these, Carl would have to literally look up into the eyes of his son's disappointment.

“Dad? You didn't answer me.”

Carl removed his hand from Josh's shoulder, unsure if he was providing comfort. What should he say? That they didn't believe he wouldn't notice his own mother's losing energy and graying color? That they didn't respect him enough with his own emotions to handle them along with school? He lit the cigarette and inched down the window. He watched as the white lines in the center of the road grew larger and then dissolved past like faded memories, trampled under the truck tires.

The rest of the drive home was quiet. Houses blurred by as they sped down the road. Kids ran outside in t-shirts and shorts, darting in and out of the road on bikes, staring as the truck pulled down the street. In the side mirror, he could see them still staring as they drove on. Carl had always wanted the world to continue moving, to remain indifferent to your problems. He never realized how much perceived indifference felt like pity.

No one came over after the funeral; he hadn't wanted anyone to. As they straggled up the driveway, he stopped for another cigarette. The smoke drifted up like spindly fingers grasping for something just out of reach. He didn't want to go inside. From outside the house looked the same, but he knew it was a new house. Same pictures on the walls, same plates in the cupboards, same bed, but each would now have a different meaning. What happens now? Before when there was a lull in a conversation, Charlene or Josh would pick up the action. Now there was nobody to run interference, nobody for Carl to hide behind when he had nothing to say. The silences he

used to think of as comforting would be redefined as awkward. When would the first lull between them seem normal and not an indictment on his inability to talk, to connect? When would what's missing stop feeling like it was missing?

He leaned against the truck, the moon rising against the gray roofs, a plane crossing in front of it, the sun sinking on the day, shadows inching down yawning towards the horizon.

"Dad, are you coming in?" Josh had changed into a Red Sox sweatshirt and backwards hat. He held a beer aloft as enticement.

Carl pitched the dead cigarette and walked up the steps. He still hadn't answered Josh's question.

### *Rummyfish*

Empty beer cans and discarded cigarettes sat between them. A cool breeze blew out the match Carl held in his jittery fingers.

"It was your mom's decision," he said. Josh continued to rearrange his cards. Carl couldn't tell if Josh was ignoring him or absorbing what he just said. He wished he knew who Josh blamed more, Charlene for dying and not telling Josh she was sick, or Carl for still being alive. "Got any queens?" Carl had none in his hand.

"Go fish. Got any sevens?" Carl handed over two. "Dad? We don't have to keep playing."

Carl rearranged his cards in numerical order. "Got any twos?"

Josh grabbed a cigarette from the pack between them. His fingernails were jagged, chewed up, and the skin around the knuckles puckered and wrinkled, the fingers of a seventy-year old man, not one of seventeen. Had his hands always looked like this? He wondered how long Josh knew about Charlene's illness. If Josh had figured it out, how would you raise that

question to your parents? At first not telling Josh because of school seemed reasonable; later Carl went along to cover up his own guilt.

The day after New Year's, while Josh was out with friends, Carl and Charlene went to their bedroom. Basking in their post-passion glow, Charlene leaned over to Carl, straightening his chest hairs.

"Baby?" Her voice wavered a little. "You remember when I went to the doctor in October?" The word *doctor* hung in the air like an infected balloon.

"Yeah, you said nothing was wrong." Carl moved her hand from his chest. The figure-eight pattern of her fingers suddenly felt irritating, like a bug crawling on his skin. He reached for his shirt lying on the floor.

The doctors had told her the tumor was so advanced her body wouldn't handle treatments, which is why she didn't tell him sooner. She tried to run her fingers down his arm, but he kept moving it off. At last, he let her hand rest on his forearm.

Carl put his cards down and gripped the edge of the table, too nervous to grab Josh's hand. He traced a circle with his finger on the table. He breathed in deeply to through his nose to bury the tears that forming, then breathed out through his mouth. "Your mom thought she could make it until your graduation. She was going to tell you then."

Josh pushed his chair back and walked to the fridge. The shelves were organized labels out, food separated by color, citrus from apples and pears, green vegetables from tomatoes and carrots, liquids all on the same shelf.

Carl recognized his own stubbornness in his son, his sense of admiration suddenly replaced by guilt at how pleased he was that Josh was trying to avoid having a serious conversation.

“When did she know?” Josh no longer bothered to hide his tears.

Carl closed his eyes and breathed deeply. For months he had wondered whether he was setting a strong example for Josh by holding in his grief, pretending nothing was wrong. It was a game against Josh, an opponent unaware of the game’s existence. “October.” Each salty tear wended through his beard to the corners of his mouth, tasting of expired regret.

“When did she tell you?” He laid his palms on the table, thumbs touching each other. He didn’t look up from the table.

Carl swallowed, leaned back avoiding eye contact. “New Year’s.”

He didn’t know who reached first, but their arms arched over each other’s shoulders like a bridge, the tops of their heads touching because they couldn’t reach further. They broke apart after a couple of minutes, wiping their eyes with their sleeves. Josh pulled his chair in, straightened his back, ran his fingers through his frizzed hair. Carl rubbed the tears clinging to his beard.

They played a few more turns, a hybrid of gin rummy and go fish they had invented years earlier. Soon they each held two cards, Carl with queens.

“Got any sixes?” Josh asked. The air filled with false determination, two drunken men trying to not finish a child’s game, each holding in a smirk.

Carl shook his head. “Go fish.” There was nothing left to draw from the center deck. “Got any queens?” Carl couldn’t crack Josh’s expression.

Josh smiled and slid both cards across the table, face down.

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*Eggs and Bacon*

Moonlight reflected off her perfume bottles, her jewelry box, and, dangling from the corner of the vanity, the heart pendant he had given for her thirtieth birthday. She had worn it only twice but never moved it away.

At the first sound of birds he crawled out of bed. He moved his shoes to the closet and hung up his suit, tossing the pants into the laundry bin at the edge of the bed—organizing as she would have wanted.

Josh was still asleep, head buried where the seat cushion met the back of the couch. Carl sat in his boxers and t-shirt, sipping coffee, newspaper on his lap. Playing cards, beer cans, and coins and covered the kitchen table. He swirled a can and thought about finishing it. The screech of car tires, the rumble of the morning trucks, the muffled screech of the planes landing at Logan: it all sounded incomplete. Charlene usually had the TV blaring, reminding him not to forget his lunch, if he woke up earlier he could iron his own things, and it was fifty outside, bring a jacket.

He lined up eggs, cheese, and bacon on the cutting board, and threw out Charlene's moldy oranges and rotting fruit. While the butter melted in the pan, he pushed the cards together and cleaned off the table. The lucky penny sat in Josh's pile of coins, Lincoln's face obscured by a rusted coating. Carl plucked it out like a large splinter, effortless, and slipped it into Josh's pocket, being careful not to wake him.