

The Family Dynamic

“I sure as hell don’t know. What’re we gonna do? Kill the old man?”

The backroom filled with cigar haze, an overcast light through the window illuminating the meeting. Frank spoke to the group but sounded like he wanted to ask himself the same question.

Charles busied himself with billiards. The rich leather and felt held the only peace in the room, a ruby rectangle of calm and focus. Even the chaotic pattern of ricochets came more natural to him than idle conversation. He preferred to let his older brothers shuffle around like the balls on the table while he worked out the easiest solution in his head. The urgency of the problem pressed on them all, but Charles wouldn’t let it overpower him.

The time would come, and he would know it when he saw it.

“Jesus, Frank!” William said. “You can’t talk about Pop like that! Can’t we do this another time? I’ve got a party to get to...”

“You always stick up for him, Willie, for Christ sake,” Frank bellowed. “Just because he socked you one or two times less doesn’t mean he loved you more. He was just too tired by the time he got to you.”

William was the closest to their father—or at least wanted to be—loving him while hiding behind a fearful respect. Growing up as the second youngest during a prosperous period for the family, Pop well-established and coasting, William enjoyed the happiest upbringing of the four before their father’s decline into bad health and poor decisions. Pop’s rough demeanor developed a harsher whip with time; he never guessed his own mistakes might be his downfall.

The boys had no interest in going down with him.

“We all know Charlie’s the favorite, anyhow,” Albert said, interjecting from the corner and picking his nails with a knife. A cigar simmered between his lips.

Charles shrugged at being called the favorite. The title had turned out to be a double-edged sword and fell short of upending the traditional pecking order. Frank would still take over the business after Pop was gone, if there was still a business left to run. But Frank was doomed to continue the blundering Pop had started, his brash cockiness and lack of creativity only useful for deepening the same rut.

Outside the family, Frank held no real power. Inside the family, he held none either. But the boys humored him, or he’d lose his mind.

A whirlwind of change was in the air, inside and outside the welcoming tavern doors. Outside, the skies burned with smoke and coal dust, staining the world with an industrial black film. Inside, the brothers contemplated the consequences of mutiny, and of inaction. The turn of the century sped toward them like a precipice, threatening to hurl them into oblivion if they didn’t right the ship. Competitors hovered in the wings, waiting to swoop in and steer the city’s underworld into the twentieth century.

Charles had always questioned Pop’s ability to maintain control in a new age. Now his brothers were catching on too. The time for breaking tradition, no matter the cost, was now. The final hours of 1899 were ticking away, and Charles wasn’t the only one feeling the pressure to revolutionize.

“Yeah, yeah, as if Pop truly cares for any of us,” said Frank. The bitter tone practiced after three decades under their father’s shadow. “But his reign is coming to an end.”

Racking the table, Charles silently floated around in preparation for another solo match. The others were preoccupied with the issue in their own ways.

Frank paced around the table, alternating between smoke and drink as if he couldn't decide if wired anxiety or sluggish indifference would better help him think.

William chewed his nails, a routine habit whenever talk of Pop arose. He absentmindedly moved out of the way as Charles skirted by.

A hardened look swept over Albert's face, surely recollecting his own relationship with Pop, and he let loose an instant of concentrated irritation with a flick of his wrist. The knife trembled in the dark wood across the room.

Even with a millimeter-long fuse, Albert had strokes of momentary calm and insight when not consumed by the fires of whisky and ale. The brothers told him he couldn't liquor up before their meeting today, and held him to it. Or more like, held the bartender to it. An extra threat to the tavern owner kept the front door locked as well. A meeting this important required privacy, and they had the talent to ensure it. The factory whistle down the street blew an hour ago, but the Bailey brothers enjoyed the public message a locked door would send.

This town could use the reminder.

Charles knew where he belonged in the potential shuffle. He acted on impulse and advantage, creating gains where his older brothers couldn't. That initiative made him shine in his father's eyes. That, and the fact that he had taken beatings more frequently and aggressively than the rest, all with quiet acceptance. His father couldn't break him, but he had tried. In a twisted way, that earned him respect.

With a slam, Charles shot off the cue ball with a vengeful crack. Balls split in all directions. He calculated the best shot once they stopped but didn't let them rest for long.

A bang on the door shook all four men.

They weren't expecting a fifth.

Frank shuddered at the noise. Albert plucked his knife out of the wall in preparation of ambush. History taught the brothers to *always* be ready for anything.

From anyone.

“Open...this...door.”

A familiar voice and tone. Albert relaxed his stance but remained alert in the shadowed corner. Frank looked around at the other three questioningly before approaching the door.

Charles chalked his cue, waiting to hear what the old man had to say.

William began gnawing on his other hand.

Francis “Pop” Bailey huffed through the frame the second it opened, the balding barkeep on his heels in an apologetic wince. The patriarch of the Bailey clan stood a head taller than all the boys, and a foot wider. A barrel chest fit snug under his suit, and he chewed a ragged cigar turning to tobacco mush under his mustache. A man of few words, his commanding stature and disregard for the bitter burn of tobacco leaf generally sent a clear message to those that saw him, his sons included.

I'm in charge now.

“Terribly sorry, boys...” the barkeep stuttered, nervously wiping his apron, “I k-know you wanted no intrusions, b-but can't say no to your f-father you know...”

Pop turned to him, the barkeep taking the hint and hustling back out of the room. Pop stepped into the room with two deep clops of his leather boots. No words of greeting issued. He squinted at each of the boys, lingering on Frank an extra moment. Pulling a timepiece from his suit pocket, he barely took his eyes off his eldest son to check the hour. The excruciating silence somehow lasted only a few seconds.

“Charlie...come with me,” he said, eyes still focused on Frank. A noticeable sweat swelled on the firstborn’s forehead, his confidence sucked out once Pop entered. Tensing his jaw, he diverted his gaze toward Charles. The look on his face said, *Better get going, Mr. Favorite. Don’t say a word.*

Charles hung up the billiard cue, clapped his chalky hands together and walked toward his father. He attempted to mask the group’s intentions with fabricated indifference.

“Guess I’ll catch you boys at the party.” Halting in front of Pop, Charles produced an innocent glance and said, “Shall we?”

His father looked him up and down, switched the cigar to the other side of his mouth, and huffed.

“Don’t be cute, Charles. C’mon.”

Closing the door behind them, Charles nodded to his brothers. If Pop was on to their scheming, it might be the last time he saw them. If not, maybe there was still time to prove who deserved to be top dog.

If he was lucky, he thought, being the favorite might finally pay off.

The carriage bounced across cobblestones and muck. Charles’ worried about their destination, but could tell they weren’t headed outside of town, a destination that signaled a much darker fate.

“Pop, what’s the occasion? Needing extra muscle for a squeeze?”

Pop stared out the curtained window, rubbing his jaw distractedly.

“You’ll see...” Pop muttered, and spit the tobacco wrappings out the window, “...damn cheap cigars...”

Charles hated these impromptu trips with Pop. He wished Pop would take William for once, someone who actually *wanted* to go. But it was always Charles, the “favorite”. Later, Pop would chastise him for something he did wrong, only to drag him along again next time.

The vicious cycle may be a sick joke, Charles thought, but he’d end that cycle one day.

Eventually, their ride lurched to a stop, wooden wheels creaking on wet stone. A tawdry building with a curtained window on the front awaited them. Reaching out of the brick wall was an ornate sign with a large tooth spinning in the breeze.

My god, Charles thought, he’s going to torture me.

“Chop-chop,” Pop said, and nudged Charles out of the carriage.

The office’s interior reminded him of a barber’s shop, a large metal chair with a red felt cushion inviting him to lay back and open wide. Confusing and alarming objects surrounded the chair. Charles noted the foot pedal connected to a pulley and drill. Instruments for poking and scraping sat out next to a messy spittoon and air canisters. He looked away in disgust.

The dentist had busied himself setting up for something and was not surprised to see Pop when they arrived. Charles wondered if his father really *did* know about the reason for the brothers’ meeting, or if this was his way of figuring it out. He quickly tried to remember if they had ever pressured a dentist into any jobs before.

His mind came up blank. He hoped that was a good thing.

The dentist—having finished his preparation—slapped the chair and brought Charles back to reality.

“Alright, Mr. Bailey, let’s get this over with.”

A flurry of adrenaline pumped out of every pore before Charles realized the dentist wasn’t speaking to him.

It was his father.

Pop lumbered over and plopped in the chair. Relief washed over Charles, and confusion.

“Keep an eye on the door, Charlie. Can’t be too careful these days. I’ll be a little...” Pop said, and looked over at the gas tank. “...incapacitated.” Pop slowly lowered back in the chair, then grabbed a handful of the dentist’s apron. “Pump me with the good stuff, doc. I don’t wanna feel *nothin’*.”

The doctor obliged, a thick tube soon running from the canisters to cover Pop’s nose. Pop inhaled deep, sucking in as much gas as he could. After a minute, his tight grasp on the arm rests loosened.

“I may need your muscle in a minute,” the dentist said as Pop drifted comfortably. “These rotted ones don’t like to come out easy.”

“Wh-what’s that now?” Charles asked.

“This abscess is fit to kill him,” the dentist said, enunciating slowly as if speaking to a child. “Tooth needs out, *now*. You may have to lean on him if the roots don’t give.”

Tired of their exchange, the doctor propped Pop’s mouth open with a clamp and started twisting about with his tools.

Charles stood in shock at the turn of events. The word “kill” floated through his brain, and he wondered if they could let the abscess run its course and solve their problem. Who knew how long it took for infection to drop a man that size.

Watching the doctor’s forearms wrench and pry, Charles felt odd seeing his father jostled about so easily. So out of control and powerless.

So...vulnerable.

Standing up straight, Charles took inventory of the instruments at hand. His luck had turned.

The scalpel glistened on the metal tray. Charles moved without hesitation.

“No not yet, I don’t need—MY GOD!”

The doctor bellowed and backed into a cabinet. A soft gurgle sent blood spilling down Pop’s slit throat, gas mask still attached to his face. He tried to sit up, mind fighting body, but his weakened state kept him strapped to the chair.

Trapped and dying, realization dawning.

And Charles watching, waiting for the last breath.

Motion in his periphery, Charles called out without breaking eye contact with his father.

A trait learned from the best.

“Don’t go anywhere, doc,” he said, enunciating slowly as if speaking to a child. “You’re under new employment now. And you’ll be cleaning this up when I’m done.”

He watched the life flow out of his father the way he watched many others flatten and fade. Taking care to avoid the mess, he searched the jacket pocket and relieved Pop of his timepiece. One always worn by the head of the Bailey family. He would wear it now, not Frank or Albert or William. *Three more obstacles to address*, Charles thought.

Later that night, as streetlamps switched on across the dark, smog riddled city, Charles watched the timepiece strike midnight and start counting up again.

Counting the first minutes of a new era.