

The Therapist

“Are you still having bad dreams, Charlie?”

Today I’m playing a new game with my therapist, Ms. Wendy. I’m wearing baggy shorts even though it’s cool out for March. Even for L.A. But I’m freeballing because my foster mom didn’t do laundry over the weekend, so I’m sitting, bouncing my knees and crossing my legs to see if Ms. Wendy will notice. It’s not that anything is showing – these are, like, board shorts – but I want to see if she’s pervy enough to look.

Ms. Wendy is a nag. She just wants to know, yes or no, am I still having bad dreams, what are they about, and then she’ll make notes about them in her notebook. One time when she got up to refill her brown mug (“Therapists Do It Thoughtfully”) from the water cooler down the hall, I snuck a look at her notebook and she had underlined “persistent nightmares” and “uncommunicative.” I know I don’t talk much; I don’t have much to say to her.

“Charlie? Bad dreams?” She repeats. She’s so annoying.

“I guess so.” I cross my arms so I can scratch my elbows, and just sit and look around her drab office and out the window at the traffic on Centinela Boulevard.

I see Ms. Wendy once a week, which is fine with me. It gets me out of school for an afternoon. I wish she had one of those psychiatrist couches you can lie down on like you see on TV, but instead I’m fidgeting in this large uncomfortable wooden chair with a footrest across from her desk in her dimly lit room while she sits facing her laptop which has her calendar and emails up and I feel like I’m an interruption in her very busy day. Her eyes darted between her laptop and her notepad as she checks something online and then writes down more notes. The monitor’s reflection on her glasses sort of makes her

face look like a weird Halloween mask with glowing eyes. She keeps scribbling down notes that I just know will get me in trouble with my caseworker.

I know how the System works. I just turned fifteen but I know if I say too much to Ms. Wendy, her notes will screw up my future. And the more notes she makes means the more she'll be blabbing to Linda, my caseworker, and the fewer chances I'll have to get adopted.

Her desk is surrounded by tall wooden bookshelves and her wall of degrees and certificates which I guess is her way to remind everyone that she's smarter than you. It's stuffy in here. It smells like old paper and cheese. Her office has this stupid gray ceiling fan, which turns very slowly like the second-hand on her wall clock. What good is a ceiling fan that doesn't go faster? I've got to put up with her for forty-five minutes though it's still better than school. I'd much rather check out the miniature doll house sitting on the floor or play with the Viking chess set than say too much to her. I could even put on a freak show with the anatomically correct Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls but I know she'd chew me out and scribble more notes.

Ms. Wendy has drawn-in eyebrows that make her face look not quite real, like a Chucky doll. She always wears black to camouflage her fatigue but it only makes her look like a big black bear balancing on a unicycle (I saw that at a circus when they took a bunch of foster kids). She ends our sessions exactly at forty-five minutes, even if I'm in the middle of trying to tell her something important. I'm just a checkmark in her calendar: "Appointment with Charlie Kenter." So we both are clock watchers.

I hate Ms. Wendy. I know it's not good to hate people, but she represents the System, and I don't have a problem hating the System. I think I've hated her since the

first time I saw her drive into the clinic parking lot in a dark blue BMW 535—all the kids at school say that people who drive BMWs are douches.

I still miss my old therapist, Ms. Beverly, who was always so eager to listen to me or play stupid (okay, they were sort of fun) board games with me that she sometimes lost track of time or forgot to write anything at all in her notepad. I liked Ms. Beverly a lot. She was someone I could talk to about my worrying, my nightmares. She taught me relaxation techniques, breathing tricks with a paper bag—they helped me when I'm having anxiety attacks. I thought she cared. Unfortunately, one afternoon I told her that I loved her and she calmly put down her pencil and told me that it was “inappropriate for a boy to become attached to his therapist.” She referred me to Ms. Wendy the next week. Just like that, she didn't want to see me anymore.

Just to be clear, I didn't mean “love” like in “I want to go out with you.” I meant that she was like a mom to me.

Ms. Wendy is still taking notes, her eyes occasionally darting at me over the rim of her glasses. Her pencil is practically tearing into the paper. I'm wondering what she's writing when I'm not even saying anything. My ass cheeks are itchy and falling asleep so I keep shifting in the hard wooden chair.

“Tell me about your most recent dream, Charlie.” Ms. Wendy sounds bored.

“I dunno.”

“Your foster mom says that she hears you getting up in the middle of the night. Are you still worried about earthquakes?”

Finally I go, “I have dreams all the time. Some are nightmares. Like anyone else, right?”

“*Still* having nightmares,” she says triumphantly as if she’s made me confess doing something wrong. She makes another note.

Ms. Wendy knows how bad my dreams can be. They’re in my file in T.M.I. detail. She knows all about my recurring nightmares: the ones where the Big One, the great earthquake, is destroying L.A., and I have no family to run to, no family to save me. Those nightmares are so real, so scary, I’d have to force myself to wake up, oh shit thinking I’m covered in blood, then realizing it’s just sweat dripping from my face. It’s scary thinking about being alone during a disaster.

I don’t want to be alone.

I’ve been in and out of foster care for almost five years, so I’ve developed my own checklist to improve my chances of getting adopted. Number one is *be clean*; potential parents always sniff for B.O. and see dirty clothes or fingernails or hair as problem areas. I’m really clean because I take a lot of showers (I jerk off in the shower). Number two, *don’t swear*; say “shit” or “fuck” in front of someone and they’ll choose another kid. (I’m working on that). Lucky for me, I had no problem with number three: *don’t be a Damien*. Seriously, guys named Damien never get adopted. My caseworker, Linda, told me that “Damien” was the name of an adopted kid from an old horror movie I had never seen (not that I ever watch horror movies anyway). And number four, *don’t talk about your nightmares*. I couldn’t have anyone thinking that I was nuts. It didn’t help that I knew my file must have lots of notes about my nightmares.

The main thing against me was my age. We’re like dogs at the rescue shelter. Everyone wants puppies—the cute and cuddly babies—and then the cute and wobbly toddlers. No one wants a fifteen-year old dog (or kid) because they’re afraid we’re too

old, we're troubled, probably damaged beyond repair. We have "issues." And when we hit eighteen, the System will bail on us.

A couple months ago, I had to do one of those Wednesday's Child videos for the local TV station. That's where once a year a foster kid gets a whole sixty seconds of television time to beg for a home, but of course you can watch that Sarah McLachlan commercial for kittens and puppies for hours late at night, every night. I know because when I can't sleep, I sometimes watch TV and that's all that's on. If you ask me, people worry more about dogs and cats than they do about kids.

On my Wednesday's Child video, I said that I'm a pretty cool kid, that I'm a good person and you just have to get to know me. I'd love to have a mom and dad and a brother – people who'd give a damn about me. Oh, and I really want to have my own bedroom someday. I've had to share a bedroom in every placement. My current roomie, Bryan (or is it Ryan?), is a year older than me, doesn't bathe or use deodorant, grunts in his sleep, and is starting to grow a beard. It's like rooming with a goat.

Everything I own fits in one duffel bag because when you move to a different foster home every six months, you have to be ready to go. I like Converse shoes, flip-flops and I like wearing big baggy t-shirts – whatever Goodwill or the nearest church is giving out. I have my 'soup shirt,' which is a humongous black t-shirt that I wear if I'm eating soup or spaghetti. On my right wrist, I wear maybe five different color wristbands for maybe five different charities and causes that everyone at school supports (of course we all threw away the yellow one).

I didn't really think much about my looks until after the *Incident* last year. I know I am skinny (but it does make my abs show). I seriously need a tan, and with my

dark hair and bushy slashed eyebrows and the shadows under my eyes from lack of sleep, people keep thinking I'm so Emo or walking dead. Most guess I'm older because I used to smoke so I have a raspy voice. (I really want to try vaping.) I don't like people staring at me. I don't like to be laughed at. And, after the *Incident*, I'm always afraid people don't respect me, thinking that I'm some lowlife. Ms. Wendy and my caseworker, Linda, are always telling me that I need to improve my communication skills. "Smile more, Dimples!" Linda likes to say. But my mouth is sort of crooked after an accident I had when I was a kid (stitches, damaged nerve endings), and I'm really self-conscious because of my chipped front tooth. I hate dentists.

The Incident. If only I could erase that from my file and start over again. See, my mom was never around. She dated some really terrible guys over the years which is why I'm always in and out of foster care. A couple of these guys beat on me because they were drunk or tweaking and I was pissing them off somehow. One guy picked me up and smashed me into the wall. Another guy threw me into a Dumpster, calling me a failed abortion. *That* time the neighbors called the police. The police brought in Child Services. And Child Services freaked when they found out that I slept in my mom's bedroom closet. She told them that she couldn't afford a two-bedroom apartment earning what she did with her job at a twenty-four-hour gas station in Venice. After that, she lied to Child Services and told them that I slept in the bedroom while she slept on the couch in the living room.

But the actual *Incident*? Fuck My Life.

Last summer at the apartment complex where I was living with my mom, two drunk women were hanging out one night in the community Jacuzzi in the corner of our

building's courtyard. They were tourists from Europe visiting a friend. They saw me, waved a big bottle of booze and told me to come over and join them. Somebody called the cops just as I was having the best time of my life (seriously, the first time anyone except a doctor touched my unit). Next thing I know, we end up standing around dripping wet at the police station; then there's an article in the *L.A. Times* about the women getting charged for "unlawful copulation with a minor;" and then there's court where everyone was laughing at me looking like a dumb ass holding up three anatomically correct Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls. Then, I ended up being court-ordered to see a therapist.

Nothing ended up happening to the tourists because their lawyer pointed out I had a tattoo on my arm (Transformers, not my best decision) so of course they assumed I was over 18. My mom finally lost her parental rights because she was out on a date that night and she didn't pick me up from the police station until the next morning.

And if I wasn't already considered to be the lowest scum of Culver High School, The Incident made it worse. Everyone made a big deal about it. Everyone thought what happened was gross.

The funny thing about the Incident is that I think it literally made me grow faster. I used to be shorter than all the guys in my class, but since the Incident, I've been getting taller and leaving shoe sizes behind like crazy so I hope I'm going to be over six feet. My caseworker, Ms. Linda, calls it a "growth spurt" which makes me smirk because of that night. But I know better than to joke about the Incident to Linda because she makes this 'pity face' and tells me I'm a brave young victim of abuse. I'm sure on the very front

of my file, someone from the System has stuck a sticky note with “Incident = Big Issue” and that’s why no one wants to adopt me.

“*Charlie!*” Ms. Wendy snaps her fingers to get my attention, “Are you’re still worrying about earthquakes? School shootings?” She flips back a couple pages in her notebook. “Uh, zombies? Terrorists? Alien invasions? You tend to worry about every little thing.” She’s trying to suppress a smile like she wants to laugh at me.

“I guess so.” I keep squirming in the chair to find a comfortable position.

“You’ve started the intruder training at school?” she asks.

“Yeah, we have it every two weeks.” Thanks for reminding me, Ms. Wendy.

“We’re doing the ADD survival training thing.” I repeat what we were taught. “AVOID the intruder by running away. DENY the intruder access by locking doors behind you and hiding in utility rooms and closets. And if all else fails, DEFEND yourself.”

“See? That’s good, Charlie. ADD is supposed to give you confidence so you’ll know what to do.”

It’s also giving me more things to worry about. “We have the monthly earthquake and tsunami preparedness drills, too, because our teachers say that the Big One is definitely coming. It’s a matter of math and they say the odds increase every day.”

Ms. Wendy scrunches up her nose likes she smells a fart (not me). “Well, that’s not helpful, is it?” She shakes her head. “The training is all about preparedness. So you won’t be surprised. Humans have a fight-or-flight-or-freeze mechanism. And what that means is that if you’re faced with a dangerous situation, you can react quickly. Some people freeze up – and that can be fatal in a dangerous situation.”

I press on, “I noticed the security guards at school now all have guns—no more Tasers.” Every time we heard about a shooting at another school, I just kept thinking that a major disaster was just around the corner. Any day now. I could feel it. I could see it in my nightmares.

“Preparedness, Charlie. That’s a good thing. You can’t keep worrying about earthquakes and natural disasters and terrorists and things beyond your control. Learn to relax and accept each day as it comes.” Ms. Wendy looks up at the clock. I look up at the clock. We’re done for today.

I’m not sure what to say. You can’t tell a worrier not to worry and expect him to stop worrying, just like that. I’m sitting up, hugging my knees to my chest. It’s the only position that stops my ass cheeks from falling asleep.

“Well, Charlie. I hope you’re sleeping better.” Ms. Wendy makes more notes. “I’m going to let your caseworker know that you’re still having nightmares.”

“Okay.” Great, I still have issues. I get up to leave. My back is sore from all the sitting.

“Oh, Charlie?” Ms. Wendy doesn’t even look up from her laptop. “Do you take Latin at school?”

“What? Um, no.” Seriously, Latin?

She then swivels to look at me. “Here’s a fun phrase for you to remember. *Semper Ubi Sub Ubi*. Always wear underwear.”

My face goes beet red. I want to key her car.

“Don’t worry so much, Charlie. Have a good week.” Then she turns back to me as I stumble out the door.

