

CHARLIE

1993

Charlie Dillard sat on the swing set top, his head in the wind. The swing seats swung side to side in the afternoon heat. Lazy and slow. Chains squawking in a tired way. There were clouds out over the Atlantic. Maine was drying out beneath its skin. The bark chips steaming. August sucking at the earth. Charlie had the sort of bones that would keep him young forever, like his daddy was.

Marie Anne Maddocks had folded her arms and folded her face and was glaring mean as she could up at Charlie on the rail top. “You're gonna fall, Charlie. You're a real dummy!” She gasped. A squeak. How her Ma did between words when she wanted to make a man listen. “You are! Ah, gosh. Ah, gosh! Jimmy, tell him!” She looked quick at the lopsided boy to her right and said in a way like she was older than them all, “tell him!” Little braid twisted up in a fist. Red between the brow like she had been since she was a baby. She looked up at Charlie, eyes howling. Charlie's hands were wet on the palms.

“Yah, alright. Go on home then. Christ!”

“I won't!”

“See if I care! Christ!” Charlie said. A gull flew by low, looking.

“Guys gotta do what he's gotta, Marie Anne,” Jimmy said. Give a boy enough sun, he'll get wise under the tan. They were all tan and full of summer wisdom. They all looked up at Charlie on the swing set top. Jimmy held his arms out at angles like he had seen the Terminator do.

There wasn't much Charlie couldn't see. The kids had worn paths from the tongue of red slide to the crow's nest. Tennis balls around the tennis court, grass growing up between cement cracks. The ground was all chewed-up around the crow's nest. Jimmy Nolan had fallen and broken his - something. Last year. His shoulder, Charlie thought. The see-saw that was made of wood until last year and then was just gone for a while and then was replaced by that purple and yellow thing. Some girl two years younger than Charlie had gotten hit in the tooth and after they'd sopped the blood off her third-grade chin they'd found that her lip had a neat hole in it and that tooth was more dead than alive. It had been a year now and the tooth was still grey or blue. Looked like it felt like either one.

Four scraped up hollows down there. Way down there, bark chip kicked up and flung up beneath feet that pushed swings and kicked and mouths that yelled,

I'll hit the dandelions!

Which dandelions?

That one! See?

And send a glob of spit some distance while the swing swung and feet kicked way up into the blue or white or black sky. Depending on the season. In the winter, the snow was sometimes too high and the swings sat silent inside the white ground that had risen up to hold all four slings of ice-rubber and chain. Patterns of footsteps running around and the Atlantic one big blanket of upside down sky way off that way. Salt air hit Charlie Dillard in the face. He gripped the swing set bar with ten oiled fingers.

Jimmy Nolan bit a thumb nail and chewed a plastic straw and wrinkled a nose that was sunburnt by August and the underside reflection of the crushing, leaping waves at Reid State

Park. He yelled up, “now get down! Bet you’ll fall! Bet you’ll fall, Charlie!” Four faces stared up at him. Four faces grinned and nodded, dyed lips and tongues of blue and purple and red.

Summer flesh.

“Screw you all. Buncha pussies!”

“Hey, he’s a tough guy, now ain’t he!” That was Galen J. Price, darker skin, darker eyes, striped shirt too small for his grown out stick arms. Dad owned Price Lumber and the Cumbies station down on Fordham Avenue. They’d all got ice Slurpies there and the syrup sugar was grinding their molars together.

He was the tallest of them all, Charlie was. Taller than anything in Rockland, right now, pretty much, from where he clenched his kid fists at the top of the swing set that was sliding beneath him. Hair that baby white blonde, blue eyes bursting out in the summer tan. All made out of elbow scabs and wire. Marie Anne and Tom Maddocks, the twins, younger than the others, were ogling him. Tom was looking scared in a small, painful way. His hand was twisting the bottom of his T-shirt into a rope of red cotton. Before Charlie had begun climbing, hand over slipping hand on the hot metal of the swing set pole, Tom had said something like,

Don’t go. Don’t do it. It’s way high.

But of course, he had to do it. Four faces watching and telling him he wouldn’t, shouldn’t.

Something was boiling up over the ocean, beating itself towards the children on the playground. Charlie teetered with the rail post beneath the bones of his rear, his hands trying to hold himself while the littlest breezes snickered, pushing him backwards or frontwards. The ground was far down there and none of the kids had necks from this angle. Just four faces tilted

up and tanned from a whole summer of Peak's Island and maple trees and lightning storms that came roaring up over the screaming roller coaster cars of Old Orchard. No necks, flat faces pasted on thin shoulders. They'd all be sitting in sixth or seventh grade classrooms in two weeks. A whole life to live between then and now. Except Tom and Marie Anne. They'd be in the fifth.

"The heck are you waiting for?" Jimmy yelled. Grinning, squinting.

"Pretty nice up here." Charlie said down to Jimmy. He tried to breath shallow, but each word past his teeth sent him rocking and his hands clamped and clenched. Would it hurt? A gull came to sit on the far end of the swing set. Arrogant eye looking at him. The gull, perhaps, was waiting too.

The air clenched. It sucked deep. The afternoon storm was coming. It would shake the maple leaves and lightning would strike something, something far off, just close enough to matter. But never their own houses. Never someone they knew.

"Come down, Charlie." That was Tom's little voice. Through the nose and quiet.

"Fuckin' pussies!"

"It's gonna rain soon!"

"Yeah, whatever. Leave him up there."

"Screw you, Jimmy." He was fifteen feet up. And what was that? Three of him. Three times five equaled fifteen.

"You're being a-a real dummy," Marie Anne said.

"You're such a fuckin' *mother*," Charlie said. Marie Anne looked sideways at the gull. She pulled at her kid-thin braid.

"Whatever," Jimmy said again, "let's go." He kicked at the bark chips and turned about.

“Yeah, let’s *go* guys,” Galen J. Price said. On a fifth-grade capstone poster, his quaffed head in the middle, he’d written: I want to be: President of the United States. The air was slowing down. A breeze, hot at the edge, lifted sweat-damp hair off Charlie’s neck. Blonde stuff, like his dad’s.

Out past the breakwater there would be a mess of boats hooking buoys and reeling in pots. His dad’s buoys were blue and yellow, ‘9712’ painted white and clear on each. The bright things that bobbed at the wave tops and tied the skin of the water down to the floor, the bones of it, where lobsters moved silent and black haired mussels clung. Clamped shut in the air, but meaty, mucosal down there. *Ellen Oare* was out there somewhere. Dad and the deckhand - new that summer - pulling the meat up. Banding claws and the sweet metal scent of the rock bottom coast coming in the door of the house with them. Rotting pile of pots in the front yard by the ’93 Ford F-150, red, salt rust on all of it. Dad wouldn’t be home, not yet.

Marie Anne looked up. She said something quiet to Tom, and they both turned around to look up at Charlie, sitting up above them, trying not to swing his feet.

Marie Anne twisted her braid. Always was. “What happens if you fall?” Her voice was as little as her brother’s.

“I’m not gonna.”

“You might, Charlie.”

“I’m not gonna.”

“Dumb-head.”

“Go screw yourself, Marie Anne.”

She looked big-eyed up at him. He held onto the bar, both hands, and the sun was making a halo out of his head.

“I’m not gonna get your dad if you fall.”

“You better as hell not. And I’m not *gonna*.”

“Come *on*, Marie Anne,” Jimmy Nolan said. It was Marie Anne, then Tom and then Galen and Jimmy, strung out in a line, halfway held to Charlie up there on the swing set with the gull knowing more about the weather than all of them put together.

“See ya later,” she said.

“See ya never.”

“See ya later, alligator.”

“Hasta la pasta,” Charlie said, glad that Jimmy Nolan was too far away, maybe, to hear.

There was thunder chewing out the air, far off. Getting closer. The respiration of something blue and clinching, breathing and blowing and telling the kids:

time to run.

The gull shifted its two feet side to side. Charlie turned his eyes hard to the left and his hands gave an extra pump of sweat while his head turned, just so, minute. Jimmy Nolan’s back was to him. In fact, all four backs were to him. They were walking away. The gull opened its beak, and no sound came out. It was meant to stand on that swing set rail. That much was certain. Webbed claws clung on like nothing.

“Alright, fuckers. I’m coming,” he said. No one turned. The gull took a bumptious step towards him. Charlie scooted back to the V posts. He could slide down no problem, of course, if he just made it there. It was small Tom Maddocks that looked back. Charlie made the quickest

search of the face down there as he tipped back, easy. Tom had that wet, watery, wrinkled-up, pink look that said,

I'll cry, really cry, if you do.

It took a long time to fall fifteen feet.

1998

Time did what it would and sat still. Charlie Dillard and Jimmy Nolan, little Tom and Marie Anne Maddocks and Galen J. Price spun like clocks. They forgot about the swing set and playground and the way the bark chip could get into a shoe and really bug the hell out of a kid for a whole afternoon. They forgot what it was like to shove a pink tongue through the bloody socket of where a baby tooth once waggled by the last, persevering rags of gum flesh. Charlie's hair had turned a color. No longer that white-blonde. Just blonde now.

He pushed fingers through this blonde, blonde California surf blonde stuff and shook out the front. Looked around through through the cut blonde ends of it. Might rain in Rockland soon. His dad saw him last month. On a Monday night, or Tuesday. Saw him in the bathroom with the pink sink, staring deep at the mirror, running faucet water and Marie Anne's purple comb and fingers through the front. Looked pretty good.

The fuck?

What?

The fuck did you find a comb?

Bought it.

You're a *fag* now?

Marie Anne's.

Who the-

This was a familiar alley.

Charlie had been walking it his whole life, pretty much. Tucking in from Congress street, dodging traffic. Ducking the eyeballs that watched, bulged, flicked around inside skulls. When he was a kid, playground-brat, he'd look up, way up, at the guys wearing aprons. They smoked their cigarettes and leaned in the garlic steams of the back stoops of restaurants, the brick walls of the buildings rising up out of the edge of the Atlantic.

Now, the kid was old. He'd become one of those guys.

Or at least he'd sprouted the first elfin hairs on the pale drum skin of his ribbed chest. And he'd gotten laid more times than he could count on one quick fingered hand by three separate girls. Four, if you counted Marie Anne Maddocks. That blowie on the park bench on the promenade at two in the morning last Tuesday. She'd been all tucked up and vicious but Charlie was proud and victorious. With his knob in her mouth he'd watched a slick-eyed derelict dig through the trash, exhuming cans with the reverence of an archeologist excavating the family plot.

Mark Pelletier looked up at the roof tops. It was warmer in California.

Calvin Jay said, "you want this, yeah?"

"What d'you think I paid you for?" Charlie said.

"Where's a kid like you get money?"

"The fuck d'you mean kid like me?"

“Ah, gee. Alright.”

There were three of them in the alley, and down the way a door had just closed. The last billow of succulent steam was cut off and dissipating. Two men and Charlie. And Charlie got closer to manhood every time he paused in the chipped-up mirror in the Rockland High bathroom with the scratched-in ‘SCREW YOU’, initials and dates - as if a record of time in a person’s reflection would make it last forever. Make time stop and turn around, look at the scratched-in scars in its mirror-skin. He got closer to manhood every time he peeked in the store windows, Dom’s Barber Shop, Houston-Tuttle, Hattie’s Chowder House, walking by with resolve, watching the way his arms looked out the corner of an eye. Looked good, wire poking out the cotton sleeves of a Hanes T-shirt.

The men in the alley were Seniors at Rockland High when Charlie was a freshman. Cal Jay and Mark Pelletier. They’d been out in the world a whole year and Mark Pelletier had gone to California and back. He said he thumbed the whole way. Whole span of impassible planet, Maine to California, and Mark Pelletier thumbed it. Charlie was holding up a green lighter with the Tasmanian Devil grinning on the side, thumb paused over the sparker and a black twist of cylindrical pipe stuck to his lips.

“I know how to fuckin’ do it, alright?” He was focusing, frowning down, blue eyes nearly crossed, pointing in at the arrangement of hand, lighter, glass.

“Shit. The kid’s a man,” Cal Jay said, shorter, strong like a pit, grey face waxed as if he’d just got done spewing up something fierce. He was bouncing, orbits of his eyes shining, the balls too large for the face, whizzing around. These bouncing too, off all the surfaces of the alley. The crows sidestepping. The brick walls looming tunnel-like. The closed doors, behind which a

hundred feet danced and parried and chopping blocks felt the impact of blade and the separation of a cow's flank from bone.

The pipe came out of the lips. "Fuck off."

"Do it then, if you're gonna," Cal Jay breathed, breathless, bloodless, boneless. Mark Pelletier, yellow haired and quiet, shoved his hands in his pockets, nose like a scythe and eyes mean as the crow's clicking on the bent wire top of the alley fence. Mean as hell. Like a dog that'd been kicked young and chained too long. Thumbed all the way to California and back. He shot his eyes up and down. It would rain soon.

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, alright, alright, baby," Cal Jay said.

A lighter flicked, flashed. "Kid can't even light a fuckin' lighter! Shit, kid, how old are you, anyway?"

"Seventeen. Fuck you. I'm not a kid," the kid said, though he was fifteen and knew fifteen was old enough for anything.

The lighter flicked, flashed, caught, flame sitting pretty. The pretty ice in the bulb of glass hissed mean and bubbled brown and from it grew a white snake and this bulged and billowed and looked Charlier dead in the throat.

"Shit, kid, smoke it! Don't just watch that shit burn!"

Charlie put pipe to lips, caught the snake and swallowed it live. Tasted like exhaust in the streets and the thing bit his teeth as it went down fast, mean, hard and made a nest right in the thick of his skull as if it had been there since it hatched from its crack crystal shell. The world of the kid sped up.

The world slowed down.

A crow was cackling on the fence post, five dumpsters lined the alley. The day was dirty, the air ripe with rain fallen and rain still to come and the smell of it all a soup of the greases that ran with the rain from the dumpster corners and the salt in the harbor. A high, hot, bite to edge of the breeze. The last gasp of New England, bracing for its bitter winter. The crow was looking right at him. Charlie stood and turned. His heart was beating beatifically, and that crow was eyeing him, that beak clacking and snapping and the black throat gargling. It was all he could see, for a moment that lasted the length of the alley.

Mark Pelletier took the pipe, burned the crack and slipped his own snake of smoke through the lips, down the throat. His dead face came alive, the mean eyes got meaner.

“I’m gonna - I’m gonna fuckin’ kill that thing,” Charlie whispered. His eyes were blue and hot, burning, pupils quivering open like geysers, shooting right out at the black body, talons clutching fence post.

Him and that crow, that’s all it was, him and that crow, that crow and he’d chase it till it burst, chase it till it died, the black eyes quit and he’d beat it, twist its lizard legs, popping open the white bone in the glossy cartilage, twist it in his fingers full of strength he’d never known, and just - just - to hell with that bird.

“Let’s go, kid,” that was Mark Pelletier’s voice, coming in from the left.

What crow?

“Alright. Let’s go. Let’s go, let’s go, alright. Alright!”

Eyes all wide and young and they shone with fire and the last years of youth he pushed away and shoved away and clawed out of himself with nail and tooth and the hard grit of the pavement.

They walked. They walked, eyes shifting side to side. They walked past the feet of humans sleeping, they walked through the tides of the tired and the tides of the dead walking, and his shoes were shit things, soaked through, ankles of his jeans soaked, head soaked, but they walked and he ground his teeth but it was the best damn day he'd had, the best he'd known, the strongest he'd known and like this he could - he knew he could - claw and climb out of - out of. Salt air hit him hard, racing up Fielding Hill, snapping the water to grey metal down at the breakwater and he saw faces staring out at him from the corner store, beady, angry little eyes, and they, too, braced for the bitter winter.

In another hour, Charlie shook at his dad's kitchen table.

Mark Pelletier and Cal Jay had split off sometime around the back side of the Atlantic Baking Company.

Gotta go kid.

Yeah, we gotta go.

Where we going?

No.

Nah.

Yeah, whatever, fags.

Mark Pelletier's eyes had cinched down to yellow lines. All of him yellow. Charlie might have seen Mark Pelletier was scared if he knew how to look.

The fuck?

Charlie hadn't seen the scared, but he'd seen himself about to get hit and he ducked out onto the street, where people walked. All the galleries shut up for the season. Summer tourists and summer money would have to wait.

He shook his knees and he clenched his fists and then he stood and whipped himself around the table to do - to do - to do something and sat back down and clenched his knees and shook his fists in fingers tight in his lap and - and, right - he was gonna call Marie Anne.

She was half-way pretty, though he didn't think much about this. She was only Marie Anne. Marie Anne. She was half pretty, might have been prettier had her hair not been half gone, balding or born bald - he didn't know - and she left him those sickly sweet little notes in his pathetic little locker in the pathetic school full of *kids*. Marie Anne said Connie Littleman said everyone thought they were the cute couple. Guess that made her his girlfriend. He shook. He shivered. His teeth ground, his fists curled strong.

Outside, a car flared its horn, and the sound spun him around, shocked him, jumped his heart so hard he put a hand to it, nails grabbing the skin of his chest just to see if it was still there. He gripped the seat with his free hand, holding on for the ice ride.

What school? What girl?

He was gone.

Out the door, again, out walking. Walking too fast, feet almost like a blur. Could almost run. Stop. Walk. But the sanguine thump of his too-strong heart, that licking white snake inside, lashed him on.

He was heading for the breakwater before he knew what his feet were doing. Just walking. The lighthouse out there, open mouth, waiting for him. November was eating at the rocks. Barnacles and bird shit, making white patterns on the granite slab. The wind was fierce, scooping Atlantic salt and shooting it west, always west, smacking his chin where a few hairs were growing. Too thin, too blonde to see, but he was letting them grow all the same.

He'd been out here with Marie Anne last summer. A rain storm was coming in hot, hard. They kissed out back where the brick met the granite and smelled the collision of cold rain on hot rock. Sunset like on the post cards you could buy at any one of the tourist traps on Main Street. Orange and teal, like a watercolor, and the lighthouse showing off. The postcards didn't show the beer cans in the rock cracks, the bird's shit and those mean bird eyes. Not up close. Everything looks better far off. Not so many patterns to pull a head apart. Marie Anne had said,

I love you.

Yeah, baby?

Say it back.

But now it was fall, and the winter would come roaring in like the tide with a full moon slung over the cold surf. The people parted on the sidewalk, and he was the stone in the current. In the limbs of trees was the mirror of the black tar cracks, and beyond the grey dome of a nothing sky. The rain had eased to fog that hung around the harbor, split by the train passing, hissing. Sifted around the feet of all those that rushed, head down, of all those that slept in the shadowed corners of the driest parts of those wettest sidewalks. A man was pissing sumptuously, limp flesh hung spurting over waistband, two bones of the naked rear indifferent to the milieu of

the world that had passed him by. Charlie could smell the fear in the warm urine. He, too, passed by.

It was night, suddenly. Dead dark. City streets all quiet in the little hours, those blackest bits of morning. There was a space in his skull. It was full of a painful sort of nothing. A soft slowness, a hand pressed just so over his lungs. His breath came heavy. Outside, it rained. Of course, it always rained.

He was standing in his bedroom. His cotton socks were soaked. He sat, slow, hard, tired, down onto the bed. Stripped the socks off like a layer of skin he'd be better off without, slopped them down to the scarred up hardwood that creaked as loud as the trees in the forest. Shoved his jeans down, these damp too, kicked them off with feet like wood, and fell back inside the blankets, shivering, body abandoned, emptied of the youth he spurned. He slept a dark sleep.

“Charlie.”

Fuck off.

“Charlie.”

Fuck you.

“Get the fuck up, Charlie.” A hand grabbed the blanket and snatched it off him.

It was a watery morning outside. Charlie looked up at Charles Sr., a blue eyed bull glaring impassively down. He smelled like lobster and the tar on the pilings in the harbor and the whiskey stale and seeping in his sweat. He looked like all those things too.

Inside, however, inside the putty of his father's face and the sag of his whiskey gut and the skin that bulged in bags around his eyes, he had the bones of the son. A fine face, once strong, now soft, cushioned, blurred about the edges, swollen in the periphery. Blonde hair, stuck like straw, blue eyes that once pierced now pilled gum in the corners. Eyes that looked out and saw only what was painted within.

"You goin' to fuckin' school or what?" All the vowels through the nose like his father's father and the rest that pulled their worth from the Atlantic's rock bottom.

"Fuck off."

The hand came back, thick fingers that had been frozen and thawed and beat to pulp inside gloves and saltwater snaring him by the arm and hauling him out of bed to the floor. He lay there, the sky squatting and pissing meek against the window, the traffic tired but slicing through puddles, the seagulls spinning and eating trash and putting their cruel beaks through crabs. A meaty, tired indifference hit him. Drained him like a hunger.

"Get the fuck up." The older, drunken, fatter Charlie looked down at his son on the floor, turned around, turning wide like a boat in the harbor, swayed and sauntered out the door. Took three steps towards the kitchen and then the kid was up behind him. He pushed aside the pathetic lethargy, pushed himself up with a hand on the bed, rage like the worst misery a fire in each twist of young muscle and swung a fist and hit the head with half its hair and sweating whiskey beads and the fist made a noise like a hammer on meat. The father swung round roaring. Smacked the fist away with his own club-like hand, and flung the fiery little body and the kid was on the floor once more, suddenly, the shreds of carpets in his elbows, the dirt stuck into his skin. Outside October was beating itself into a sad froth and the tide was going out with the wind. The steps

between the fist swung and the floor found already muddled and lost in a black swamp of spleenful pain.

He heard his father snap the kitchen door shut, his boots stomping down the apartment hall. He slid up to sit, to lean against the side of his bed, looked around and didn't see anything. Not the Michael Jordan poster smacked up to the ceiling with duct tape, not the pile of wet jeans and socks gaining musk on the floor, not the dismal death of the rain on the sidewalk.

Discomfort, a nervous, sick, sad kind pooled. Something like he'd never felt. Like a hunger, but not. Like a loneliness, but not. Like anger, fury, fear of the crawling thing inside the shadows, waiting beneath the bed. There was something there, not really alive, bitterly not dead. It was breathing on his spine. Living in the dark part of his skull. Maybe it had been there all along. He didn't know.