

Charlie
Sixfold Fiction entry
January 22, 2018
1806 words

Charlie

The funniest thing I have ever seen, and even after thirty years it still cracks me up, was the time Charlie the raven drove his sharp, black beak into the sandy, blond temple of my friend Elvin Owens' head.

It was a sunny, frozen day in Germany, the kind where the rays of the sun behave like physical things that push themselves through the cold and give a warm massage to everything alive they touch. All the moisture in the air was crystalized so that the white snow and the blue sky and the various greens everywhere were crisp and intense. Owens and I were in the army together, down on a firing pad, guarding Pershing nuclear missiles, on a secret base in a clear-cut space, hiding deep in the Black Forest.

I was standing outside of my guard shack, which was like a phone booth thrown together from scrap wood and Plexiglas. I was facing up at the sun with my eyes closed, bathing in it, daydreaming about nothing. The pistol grip of my M-16 was tucked down between my ammo belt and my flak vest, and I was resting my hands on top of its stock and barrel. I was wearing lined mittens and a lot of layers.

Owens was about twenty-five feet away from me, across the red paver bricks. His shack was ten feet higher than mine, set into the blast deflector berm that circled us. I heard him say, "Charlie! Hey, Charlie!" Then he yelled, "Hey Neill! It's Charlie!"

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Our three missiles rested between us, horizontal on their trailer launchers in a long, zagged row. My shack was on the bricks, at ground level, and Owens' was half way up the berm that circled us. We were the only two people there.

I turned my face towards Owens' and opened my eyes. My respite was done. The three long rockets were still between us, nesting horizontal on their launching trailers in a zagged row. Snow was everywhere deep except for the pad. Owens was looking back at me like a fun house mirror, same shack, same sandbag hedge around it. I liked Owens. He was a small, white, Infantryman with a big panther tattoo on his arm and he had a shaggy mustache that sometimes made me think of Sam-I-Am. He was smiling like he just won something, because Charlie the raven was standing on the sandbags in front of him, almost face level, trying to look noble.

Charlie was nasty by then. He had been on CAS Site since the previous winter, when he abandoned the migration of his murder to eat the cookies that the guards brought down during their shifts. He slept on the warheads because they were warm enough that the snow didn't accumulate there, and this lifestyle he chose was catching up with him hard. He had just enough tail feathers to still measure about two feet long, and he still weighed a couple of pounds, but he was missing almost all of the rest of his feathers, and his loose, pockmarked skin was ashy on ink. His eyes were dull now, but his beak stayed polished from poking it through the snow and frozen ground to seek out grub protein.

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“That bird is gross!” I yelled at him. “Swat him away! He’s going to give you the plague. He’s fucking gross.”

Owens said to the bird, “Don’t you pay any attention to him, Charlie! You’re a good boy? Aren’t you a good boy? Yes! You’re a good boy! Yes, you are. Yes, you are.” He fumbled to open one of his ammo pouches, but he had to take off his gloves first. Then he opened it and took out a short stack of sugar cookies that were wrapped in a paper napkin from the mess hall. He said, “Hey Charlie! Guess what I got for you? You know what I got for you?” He drew in his breath like to blow out birthday candles, and lifted up the cookies to Charlie level and said, “Ta Da!”

Charlie stomped his claws and marched in place while Owens broke up the first cookie. They had a pink-glaze frosting that glowed in between this black void of a bird and the teenage boy bundled up in Olive Drab. Owens pinched chunks off it the size of coins and put them on the sandbag at Charlie’s feet.

Charlie defined ravenous. He bobbed and pecked down and swallowed each piece as soon it was there. His beak was finger sized so he could gobble up big chunks, but he had to stretch his neck straight-up every few pieces to swallow. “Check it out, Neill! He loves me! I got a new pet.”

“Smash him with your helmet!” I said. “Take him out of my misery!”

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“Not cool, Man! He’s our mascot. If you want to be infantry, you got to know: Charlie’s our Point Guard mascot. You got to love your mascot.”

“No. No, you don’t,” I hollered. “Mascots aren’t always good, and that one’s gross. Fuck that bird, I don’t want to be affiliated with him.”

Owens looked back at Charlie. He raised his hand up to reach over and pet the bird, but Charlie flinched and he dropped it. He said, “He’s just jealous, isn’t he? He’s jealous. Yes, he is.” He was breaking up the second cookie. “Isn’t he jealous? Yes, he is.” He was eating the last half of the cookie himself, taking bites from it as Charlie choked down his last pieces and crumbs. Charlie finished what he had and looked back into Owens’ face just as Owens put the last bite of his cookie into his mouth and chewed it, smiling back at the bird.

Charlie started to squawking louder than a human scream. Owens laughed at him. He looked over at me and yelled, “You believe this shit? He’s pissed off at me for eating my own god damned cookie. Ungrateful little shit!”

“Now’s your chance!” I yelled, “Smash him with your helmet!”

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Owens started to yell something back at me, but Charlie went quiet and hopped neatly from the sandbags onto the top of his helmet, so he froze still and quiet. His face was full of surprise and that warmed to a delighted smile. His eyes were rolled up as if he could see the bird, and his arms raised up from his sides like he was a surfer balancing underneath it. He yelled, “Look at me! I am the Chosen One!”

“Chosen one? You look like a junk yard Rolls Royce!” I dogged him, but this was a pretty cool surprise. The guards always tried to get Charlie to eat out of their hands, but he would never do it. No one had ever touched him. Owens really was the Chosen One.

He started to yell at me that I was jealous again, but Charlie stepped over to the side of his helmet and clamped his talons into it and bobbed his head down fast and hard to peck his beak into the side of Owens’ head, halfway between his right ear and right eye. Owens let out a shriek that was louder than a raven’s scream. He batted at the side of his head, but Charlie was already on his left side, pecking down into his ear and eyebrow. Owens waved his arms around his head and knocked his rifle out of his belt and it fell past the sandbags down into the snow. He was panting out short screams and groans and buried his nose and eyes into the inside of his left elbow. Charlie dug in and was pecking down with an almost rhythm from just out of reach, over the outside corner of Owens’ left eye.

I was laughing like it was the end of the world. I laughed so hard the cold air hurt my lungs. It was worth it. I said, “Dude, just throw your helmet off!”

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“He’ll get my eyes! He’ll get my eyes!”

“Don’t be a pussy!” I said. “You want me to shoot him off?” I made to shoulder my weapon but I never raised the barrel.

Owens’ helmet popped off and over the sandbags and rolled down the hill. Charlie flapped off of it and floated down into the snow. All went quiet. Owens was standing fetal. I could see his head over the sandbags, he was leaning against the guard shack, still hiding his face and waving his arm. He peeked out when I yelled at him that Charlie was gone, and then he stood up and looked around. Blood was clotted into his left eyebrow and splattered all over the right side of his face. His face was still an expression of panic, when Charlie jumped back up onto the sandbags right in front of him, and the way he recoiled from the bird made me laugh out loud at him again.

Charlie cawed and screeched at the young soldier until he stopped cowering from him and stood up straight at attention and accepted this punishment of an ass-chewing. The raven abruptly stopped, then ran his beak through his wings and the long feathers left from his tail, then hopped down off the wall and marched away.

I yelled, “Dude, you have blood all over your face! You want me to call Sergeant Sounds?”

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“No! No report!” He screamed at me, “Don’t you tell anyone about this! Swear!”

“Okay, Okay. I won’t.”

“Swear it!”

“Okay, I swear, I swear.”

Owens scrambled over the sandbags to get his weapon and helmet and climbed back up and over them while he yelled at me. He knocked the snow out of the gun’s nooks and divots and checked his magazine to ensure that his bullets were still dry. Then he started rubbing snow on his face to get the blood off. The snow barely melted, but turned pink in his hands.

After a few rounds of that I yelled, “You’re good,” and he turned to show me the different sides of his head and under his neck and I confirmed that he was clean and he dried his hands under the armpits of his parka and put his gloves back on.

Owens closed his eyes and faced back into the sun and let the physical presence of the rays warm his face and return his calm. I watched him fall back under the spell of the boredom and the cold and the light and just when his face went slack I took a deep breath and went “Caw! Caw caw caw!” and watched him jump out of his skin and I started laughing at him again.

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He yelled at me, “Fuck you! Fuck you, you fat fuck! Fuck you!”

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