

Charlie Holloway and the End of Days

For Charlie...

I stand on the muddy shore of the Rusty Lagoon, fishing trash – old newspaper, food cans, and pieces of leather resembling giant strands of wet licorice – out of the water with a small net I rented from the shack at the edge of the woods. The acrid smell is terrible, but tolerable. I crane my neck towards the sky and see grey storm clouds merging overhead into dark malevolent masses.

The caretaker who runs the shack, Randy, expects me to do the entire perimeter of the lagoon, and anything of value I'm supposed to give to him. I do my best to comply with that order. He seems to have a sixth sense about that sort of thing. For instance, were to I make off with something like an old broken wrist watch, he'd stop and pat me down. A part of me thinks he takes pleasure in it. Not in a sexual way mind you. I think he just likes the human contact; god knows it's the only contact he gets, the miserable old cotter.

Don't really know why I decided to become a professional pond skimmer, other than to... cleanse my soul, I guess. Honest work makes honest men; at least, that's what my father used to tell me. Maybe I took the job just so I would have an excuse to come here every morning. This was Charlie's favorite place. It was his wonderland, his sanctuary. He would just stand there, on the small rickety pier, staring at the night sky. He once told me, pointing to the North Star, "there's the Colonel, on his way... after he orbits the planet, he'll return with the sacred knowledge." Usually, I would dismiss whatever Charlie was going on and on about, but for some reason I decided to humor him at that moment. With one eyebrow raised, I asked, "sacred knowledge?"

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A sense of wonder came over him, and his eyes widened. “The sacred knowledge to save humanity.” The way he said those words made me shiver. I always thought I had Charlie pretty much figured out, but what he said... it made me fear for him. The unsettling non-sequiters continued for months – talk of cosmic angels, beasts of havoc, the Harbinger, the Lost Scabbard. It had eventually become unsettling.

Three days Charlie’s been missing, and it’s hard for me to articulate just how his absence has affected me. Well, physically, I’ve been a wreck. My mouth goes dry every time I think about what happened, which is often. I’ve also been having heart palpitations, though I haven’t told anyone. Then, there are all the bruises, earned from my encounters with the shit talkers. If you want to drag my best friend’s good name through the mud, be my guest. If you want to call him a “freak” or a “weirdo”, eat your fucking heart out. But, if I happen to be in earshot, then you will be one sorry mother fucker. This one shit talker, named Evan was going on and on about how Charlie used to repeat himself over and over again and talk to people who weren’t listening, like he was “retarded or something”. I came up behind him and smashed his head against the water fountain; before being dragged away by Mr. Baumgartner, I could see Evan’s mouth overflowing with blood. That’ll teach him. I know fighting is foolish, but... it helps me cope with the notion that, perhaps, I may never see Charlie again.

Even though I’m not religious and never have been, I started praying, if not for Charlie’s return, then at least his wellbeing. Now that I’ve been suspended indefinitely from school, I’ve got a lot of time on my hands. I might as well use it for something. But, god damn it, I hope he comes home. I don’t know. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. From the moment this whole thing started, I could sense that, there was an unraveling of sorts going on in Charlie’s head.

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If only I had been there for him, like his mother had asked.

Charlie's unraveling began last summer, the summer he spent with his ninety year old grandfather. He was a man who went by the name Colonel Holloway, which was odd. Though he was indeed a military man, he had never once held the rank of Colonel. He was incredibly eccentric, intimidating, and possessed a kind of feral quality (you could say he was like a rabid dog). Still, he had one of the richest histories of any man I had ever met. He had fought in the Second World War when he was 15; apparently, he lied about his age when he enlisted. His commanding officer didn't question him, because at the time, he was fully grown, barrel chested, and fearless. After the war ended, the Colonel became a prolific inventor and would often retire to his garage to brainstorm or tinker, much to the chagrin of his wife. Some of his inventions, I'm told, were actually successful. Yet, the vast majority of his projects were fruitless endeavors; I can imagine the old man standing hunched over before the scraps of his creations, like a father standing before the tombstones of his children.

The Colonel wasn't very friendly. He barely acknowledged me when we met. To be frank, he was just weird. I'm told that, after his wife of forty years died, the Colonel became cold and withdrawn and would spend the majority of his time in his basement, writing, tinkering, and sitting in the dark. I have no idea what happened last summer, but I can tell you that it's the cause of Charlie's psychosis. I have to assume that The Colonel poisoned Charlie's mind somehow with his tall tales, convincing him that they were real. Charlie would have had to marvel at the stories, his imagination catching fire. I'd like to think, given enough room to grow; his imagination would have engulfed the entire world in flame. Anyways, the Colonel meant everything to Charlie; he was his greatest role model. Charlie almost deified him.

The Colonel died shortly after Charlie returned. During the initial months of the new school year, he began to exhibit strange behavior, like he was possessed or something. He had seen multiple doctors, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists. He seemed to be exhibiting signs of mild autism, but how could that have been possible? They were baffled. Charlie's mother, Martha was devastated. "How was he going to have a normal life?" She wept mournfully over the phone. I remember it vividly. She pleaded with me then, "please, Edward, please. You're his best friend. Don't abandon Charlie. If you do, the world will swallow him up whole." I did as she asked for the next year and a half, spending time with Charlie, doing my best to pacify him, and trying to understand his condition to the best of my ability. But, it was all pointless. I never understood what was happening to him, and I still don't.

Eventually, I started to spend less time with Charlie. But, I wasn't trying to avoid him. You see, I had fallen in love with Ally Macon. Just about everyone in our class had fallen in love with her, but who wouldn't? She was level headed and down to earth. She had raven black hair and pale white skin. Her tall form towered over everyone, and her graceful limbs were like smooth tree branches that swayed side to side as she walked. Every day, she wore jeans, a brass buckle belt tied around her waist, brown, leather slip-on shoes, and a red and grey striped sweater. Waiting for her by the bus stop each morning, I could always make out those red and grey stripes in the distance, and my heart would stop. We would then walk to school together. And after class ended, we would walk from school to the record store, where she worked.

"So, tell me more about this fantasy world of yours." She asked from behind the counter. Business was slow, but it was to be expected. Ally's eyes were like the eyes of a raptor, focused on me with predator-like intensity.

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“It doesn’t exist yet.” I said sheepishly. “It will exist, though, at the end of days.”

“Oh, really?” she said, her thick eyebrows raised.

“The dark angels will descend from upon high and swarm the cities and towns like locusts. The one at the head of the pack with the flaming sword, known as Josiah, will lead them in their fight against the beasts of Havoc, Did I tell you about the Beasts of Havoc?”

“Sounds like it could make a great metal song.” She said, her lips curved into a smile.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“How do you come up with it? These crazy ideas?” I searched my mind for a suitable answer. “I guess you could say I have an overactive imagination.” The lies escaped my mouth like trapped fireflies set free, illuminating the path ahead of me as I walked. Everything Charlie would talk about was nonsense, but you couldn’t deny that his apocalyptic portrait of the future was, in a way, poetic. And, that had value when trying to impress a girl like Ally Macon. In fact, I think it was the only way to impress her. Every time I would talk about the End of Days, the light would return to her eyes and her voice would swell with enthusiasm. Otherwise, talking to her sometimes felt like trying to engage with a wax statue. She would just stand there, reading from an old, vintage magazine, or tapping away at her phone. No matter how lifelike she seemed, she only ever truly came to life with mention of things like the Starlings of Fate and the Titan’s Frozen Heart. I never once thought that I was violating the sacred pact between Charlie and his grandfather, but now...

It had been at least a week since Charlie and I had spoken, and I should have figured that he would get restless without someone at his ear at all hours of the day. He left a message on my

phone, telling me that the next piece of the arcane puzzle had revealed itself in the throngs of a fever dream. He spoke frantically, as if in distress. I begrudgingly called him back and told him to meet me on the rickety pier of the Rusty Lagoon.

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Leaning over the rudimentary balustrade, I listened to Charlie ramble for about five straight minutes, interjecting now with an “um” or “oh really?” to give him the impression that I was listening. You have to understand. You might think that listening to someone wax poetically about a world of pure imagination would be fun, but trust me. After fifteen straight months of that kind of talk, you’d want to shut him up. After listening to Charlie recite the Ballad of Astrolabe, I decided to change the subject. “So, how has my day been?” I asked softly. “I’ve been seeing Ally Macon.”

“Oh yeah? Who’s that?” He said with rapid fire intensity. I could tell that he was physically irritated with me for taking up his time.

“She’s the girl I told you about last summer. Don’t you remember? She’s the girl I like.”

Hm. Charlie’s eyes darted back and forth in his skull, as if he was solving a complex math problem in his head. “Is she an angel or a monster?” He asked.

“She’s an angel Charlie.” At least, she was my angel.

“Monsters can be beautiful too.” Charlie said.

“No they can’t, Charlie. That’s why they’re called monsters.”

“They’re called monsters because they’re misunderstood. Like the frost giant...”

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Before he started going off on another wild tangent, I stopped him. “Charlie, you know this is all fake, right? Made up?”

“The Colonel knows all.”

“That’s great Charlie, but here’s the thing. Your grandfather was crazy.”

A cold gust passed over the pier, and I shuddered. Charlie stood still, his eyes narrow slits. “Is that so?” He said. For a moment, he sounded like his old self.

“Yes. I’m sorry to break it to you.”

He crossed his arms. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?” For the first time in months, he sounded normal. He no longer spoke with the stilted cadence or strange accent. I stood up straight. Had the spell finally been broken?

“If you want to know the truth.” he said, waving his hand. “Then follow me.”

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Charlie led me into his basement. The vast reaches of his lair smelled of old, rotting wood and moth balls. Charlie pulled a rope attached to a single bulb dangling from the ceiling. It cast a dim light over a disheveled work space. Scattered on an old mahogany desk were the works of a madman: charts, cosmic maps, a leather bound journal with a brass button sewed in the middle, strange rocks and other paraphernalia relating to his many wild theories about space-time, the end of days, and vast, undiscovered realities. It all belonged to his grandfather, and Charlie had inherited all of it. It occurred to me then that Martha wasn’t exaggerating when she told me that her father in law had become singularly obsessed with his fantasy world in those final years of his life.

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Charlie smiled at me with that earnest, innocent smile of his and reached for the leather bound journal. He sat down and opened it to a seemingly random page and started reading. Suddenly, he changed his posture. He transformed his voice. “Ever since those erstwhile days spent struggling to maintain my sanity aboard the *Hakusan Maru*, I had the mark of a mad man. You should have been there, then you’d know. The unbearable heat. The oppressive darkness. I would wake up each night, choking on the stench of death. Do you understand? But, when I finally blacked out, sweet relief! That’s when the world, like an egg, cracked open and the secrets of time and space were revealed to me: the plans of the archangels.”

I stood there, clutching the edge of the table. Charlie had read his grandfather’s journal so evocatively, that the effect was chilling. He put the journal down and stared at me blankly for a few seconds before asking, “Do you get it?”

“I get it.” I said, my voice shaking slightly. “Your grandfather was a hero.”

“He wasn’t crazy.” Charlie said. Then, in a quick motion, he turned off the light. The look in his eyes gave me the impression that he knew that I had abused his grandfather’s scripture. I sat there in the dark, for a moment, and then I decided; I would tell Ally the truth.

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“I didn’t come up with those stories.” My confession to Ally Macon had been quick and to the point, like a swift amputation to prevent the spread of gangrene. She yawned, then shrugged, as if the revelation wasn’t nearly as shocking as I thought it would be.

“Right.” She said, after a few seconds of silence. “So, where’d you get it from? A TV show? One of those creepy forum websites found only in the darkest corners of the internet?”

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“Actually, a friend came up with it?”

“Oh yeah?” She asked, one eyebrow arched.

“Do you know Charlie?”

“Oh yeah.” She shifted her stance. “From school. Hm. Charlie’s really odd. He never talks to anyone, besides the teachers, and you. But, I hear he’s really smart. I mean, he’s got the best grades out of anyone.” She paused. “When do you guys hang out?”

“After school, sometimes, the woods.”

“Can I hang out with you guys?”

“Sure.” I said. I shouldn’t have let it happen. That night was a mistake.

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The three of us sat around a campfire, surrounded by the barren trees of the Murky Wood. It was silent, save for the crackling of firewood and the sound of crickets.

Charlie rose suddenly with determination. He stood, hunched over the fire, his arms outstretched, ready to proselytize like a southern Baptist preacher. He did always have a flair for the dramatic. “The end of days is near. I can feel it. It will come in three stages.” He held up three of his fingers. “The first stage: raging storms will swell. The second stage: nature will become untethered, and the beasts of Havoc will emerge. The third stage: light will be extinguished, and the dark angels will descend. “

I looked at him for a moment; then I turned to Ally. She was enraptured. Her eyes were so wide with wonder that I could see the flickering flames in her pupils. A pang of jealousy

struck my heart. Charlie had the power to dazzle people. He could have used his party tricks on anyone, but Ally Macon? I didn't care if Charlie suffered from a syndrome, or whatever; this charade of his had gone on long enough.

I interrupted his sermon. "Charlie, let me ask you something. Why don't the angels just come already? What's with all the spectacle?"

He didn't miss a beat. Snapping his fingers, he cried, "A warning, so people can prepare."

"And how are we supposed to prepare, exactly?"

He was now pointing at me. "You pick a side; are you a monster or an angel? Then, you close your eyes, and just let it happen."

"So, what happens after the darkness descends, Charlie?"

"Hey, Eddy, I thought you knew what happened?" Ally said, a tinge of mockery in her voice. I quickly became flush with anger and embarrassment.

"He's a nonbeliever." Charlie shook his head.

"Not everything. He won't tell me everything." I said.

"You don't ask."

"What happens after the darkness Charlie?"

"You have to wait and see." He leaned in close to me. Then, he lightly pressed the tip of his finger to the tip of my nose. "Boop!" he said. Boop? Boop? A volatile mixture of rage,

desperation, and humiliation swelled inside me. Charlie had succeeded, with that one, seemingly innocuous little word, to light my fuse. It was as if the son of a bitch had been playing an elaborate prank on me this entire time. Maybe he thought I was stupid. Maybe he thought I could be easily tricked. I turned to Ally. She was laughing at me. Why would he do this? Why would he make a mockery of his best friend?

I sat there for a while simmering, my eyes fixed on the fire. I could barely make out what Charlie was saying at this point, but I knew he wouldn't let up. I knew he wouldn't stop, unless someone made him stop. The apoplexy that had spread through my body was ready to burst. I stood up, and I screamed. "God damn it! Enough! Enough all ready! This is bull shit! No more, Charlie!" He backed up several steps. He was visibly shaken and scared. His eyes were wide like those of a wounded animal. However, I didn't let up. I took a step toward him. "Do you think you're being cute with your little stories? Do you think they're amusing?"

"Hey, let off of him." Ally shouted.

I turned toward her. "Oh I'm sorry. You seemed to be enjoying yourself. Well, I'm glad. I, on the other hand, don't really see what's so amusing about having your best friend suddenly act like an insane person for a year and a half. To suddenly stop being himself. Can you possibly know what that's like? I wonder." I turned back toward Charlie. There was still terror in his eyes. "You're faking it, Charlie. Stop faking it, and come back to reality."

"What, I don't." He was clearly confused. Things were all jumbled up in his mind. I should have quit then, but I had to stay the course. I just wanted my friend back. It was all that old man's fault, for roping his grandson into a crazy one man cult, trying to warp his sense of

reality and judgment. Who knows what could have gone on in that house? I shuddered just thinking about it.

“Come back to reality Charlie! I just want my friend back.”

“I know not what you mean.” He said in that bizarre cadence of his, a mix between a proper Englishman and a Martian. “You’re upsetting the changelings.”

I slapped him. Hard. Then, I pulled him by the collar and started to shake him. Suddenly, I could feel myself being pulled away, and then, thrown to the ground. Ally stood over me, her arms crossed. “Lay off him!” She said in a thunderous voice. “Let him be who he wants to be! Now, apologize.”

“Maybe he should apologize.” I said, looking at the ground.

“Yes.” Charlie said softly, his head held down. “He’s right.” He then looked directly at me. “I’m sorry.” He said.

There were tears in my eyes. I felt paralyzed. Suddenly, Charlie took a step back into the darkness. “Charlie.” Ally said.

“I’m sorry you can’t see the truth, even though it’s right in front of your own face. He clenched his fists and grit his teeth. “I’m no charlatan.” His voice cracked slightly when he said it. In that very moment, it started to rain, and the camp fire was extinguished. “The rain prism.” he said. He instantly became alert. His eyes went wide, and he turned his head skyward. “It’s been activated.” He then spun on his heel and sprinted into the woods. Ally went running after him. After struggling to regain my balance, I followed suit.

We searched for at least an hour, but Charlie left no trail. It was as if he had vanished.

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The sun was beginning to set, which was good, because I was just about finished with my work. The storm clouds had since parted, as if by some miracle, and the murky water of the lagoon shimmered in the golden light of dusk. Before calling it a day, I noticed that there was something unusual floating in the water. It caught my attention for a moment. So, pulling back my sleeves, I ducked down and picked it up. It was a leather-bound journal with a brass button sewn into the front cover. It was Colonel Holloway's journal. It dawned on me that this was possibly a sign that Charlie had returned. Perhaps, he had finally come to his senses and thrown the accursed journal away.

"Hey boy!" Randy cried as he approached the water's edge. "What do you do there?"

"Nothing." I said, letting the journal fall into my pocket.

"Come on now." He said, crossing his arms. "Give it up." For some reason, I desperately wanted to keep it. It had this strange power over me, even though I knew that its contents were the ravings of a lunatic. I considered handing it over, but a part of me resisted. Maybe the journal was cursed? What other life would it claim with its dark magic? "Do you want it?" I asked the caretaker. "Go get it!" I tossed the journal like a Frisbee into the water, where it immediately dipped below the surface. I turned back toward Randy who at this point was making his way back toward the shack. Apparently, scolding me would be too much trouble for him. "Good luck showing up tomorrow." he said, his voice filled with malice. Perhaps, I thought, it was for the best.

After getting home and washing the acrid smell of pond scum off of my body, I decided it was time to see Ally. We hadn't spoken since the night Charlie ran away, as I had assumed she

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was angry with me, but I thought, “maybe if she understood our history.” I still liked her. Charlie’s disappearance hadn’t changed that, but it may have destroyed any chance I had to be with her.

On my way to her house, I decided to call Charlie’s mother. I flipped open my phone, hesitated, and speed dialed her. The phone rang three times, and I was convinced that no one was going to answer. Then, Martha was on the other end of the line. “Hello.” There was a deep sadness in her voice.

“Hello, Mrs. Holloway. Its Eddy.”

“What do you want, at this hour?”

I thought maybe that Charlie had returned. “Any news?”

“My boy is still missing,” she said impatiently.

“I thought, maybe... I found his grandfather’s journal in the lagoon.”

“That’s because I put it there. It was the source of Charlie’s obsession. The source of his madness. It needed to be thrown out.”

“I see.” The phone slipped slightly in my hand.

There was a pregnant pause on the other end of the line, I could feel it. A part of me hoped that she was going to say something comforting. Then, finally, she spoke. “I want you to know something, Edward Sand. You should be ashamed of yourself.” That was the last thing she said to me before she hung up the phone. I never spoke to her again.

When Ally's house came into view, draped with the branches of a weeping willow, I took a breath, then stopped. I walked up to the front door. The bell was broken. Someone had removed the little switch to trigger it. So, although it was considered rude in these parts, I rapped on the door three times. Through the window, I could see a squat elderly woman approaching. "She'll be right out." She said. I went over to the front steps and sat down. Behind me, I could hear her light footsteps. Then, her soft voice. "Hello Eddy."

She sat down next to me, but I kept my eyes forward.

It wasn't as though I decided to start talking. The words just started pouring out of me, like tiny cascading waterfalls. "Charlie and I were supposed to see the world together, before you know... We would talk about it constantly. I wanted to go to New Zealand; he wanted to see Morocco. But, when Charlie returned last summer, he started having panic attacks in class. Maybe you remember. He said that he was trying to "repress his thoughts." I was always there to comfort him." I took a deep breath. "Eventually, the panic attacks subsided and gave way to long-winded, incessant babbling. Everyone stayed away from Charlie, but I stayed. A melancholy seemed to hang over him like a light fog. Back then, I would have done anything to lift that fog, even if it meant getting lost in it. But, the night he left, I was just desperate... desperate for him to be normal again."

She didn't say anything. She just stared out in front of her with a thoughtful expression on her face. She then raised her right hand and pulled her eyelids apart. She touched the tip of her finger to her eyeball, pulling out what appeared to be a contact lens. Like magic, the color of her irises went from dark brown to white, almost translucent. After extracting the other lens, she proceeded to remove the fake moles, the fake eyelashes, and finally, the black wig, revealing a

mane of silver hair. “Whose to say what’s normal?” she asked. “Change can be difficult sometimes, but you have to accept people for who they are and try to love them all the same.” I didn’t respond. I just sat there, staring at her for a few seconds, trying to process the change. Ally had albinism.

“Why have you never told anyone?” I asked. She didn’t answer for a time. Perhaps, she was struggling to come up with a decent answer. Ultimately, she just shrugged, as she usually did. It was her response to most things.

“Do you think Charlie will ever come back?” I asked.

“That’s difficult to say. All you can do is believe and hope for the best.”

I was still awestruck. “You look like the frost giant.” I said.

She stood up suddenly, turned, and pulled her fist back, ready to strike me. “What did you say?”

“You never looked more beautiful.” I continued to stare at her. The ghostly white figure towering over me blocked out the sun. She put her hands on her hips and was smirking.

“I know.” She said.

...

Later that night, I struggled to fall asleep. The rustling of the tree outside my window was so violent; it was as if the wind was trying to shake it until all of the leaves fell out. The rustling kept me awake. But, there was something else. A presence in the room. And then, a whisper in my ear. It was Charlie’s voice. “It’s beginning.” It said. The voice was tender. Soft. Feverishly, I

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jumped out of bed, ran downstairs, and fled into the night. I ran into the Murky Wood and kept running. “Charlie!” I yelled. “Charlie!” It was no use. I continued wandering deeper into the wood and could hear strange murmurs emanating from all around me. Was this the moment, the moment when the forest becomes untethered, as Charlie said? Will nature become the breeding ground for the Havoc? Have they already emerged?

I felt my body grow weary after a while. I felt like I would pass out in the forest, yet I continued onward. That’s when I saw them: two silhouettes standing in front of me. They were tall with outstretched wings. They stood in judgment of me. I stumbled backwards and fell into the mud. Shaking, I lifted my hand and reached toward the sublime vision. “The angels will descend.” I thought. Every fiber of my being was ready to embrace Charlie’s prophecy and bow down before the angels. I closed my eyes and let the end of days wash over me.

After a few minutes, I opened my eyes. The silhouettes were gone, replaced by twisted tree branches, disturbed by the light of the breaking dawn.