

Dear Charlie,

First things first. This is all true, kid, and not just *true* like your frizzy haired lit teacher probably taught you, in a grand, human, mostly bullshit way true. I mean this happened and I'm telling you now because you can bet both our asses that my days are most definitely numbered. You never know what can happen in here and lately it's felt like everything is heating up, about to boil over. Also, I have almost unlimited stationery I think, which unlike the food, is just as good as the paper on the outside. Maybe consider this a birthday gift, from your fairly shitty uncle. Know that I always thought you deserved better than you got. Also, I hope your mom is doing well.

When I was a kid I used to stare up at my dad and dream about what the world looked like from six feet up in the air. Then I hit puberty and by sixteen I was up there, and what do you know, same view as before besides a chance glance down a loose blouse. I had another daydream, where I was standing at a crosswalk watching the cars go by, and I was strong enough to reach out and flip the cars out of the way and cross whenever I felt like, and pretty soon, when people saw me standing there, they wouldn't dare get in my way. Instead, they would say things like "pardon me" and "whatever you say, sir."

Your dad and I did not have what you'd call a peaceful home life. Your grandpa mellowed in his old age, and I think you only ever met the sweater wearing, tea sipping, rocking chair version of him, placid as pie. But for the record, that man was a bastard. Maybe he changed, but he changed like when a monster truck runs out of gas. We were only 11 months apart you know, your dad and I, so your grandpa pitted us against each other every chance he got. I will say, he did not play favorites.

When Edward was twelve and I was thirteen, he made us perform Scarlatti's Sonata Pastorale in a recital for my folk's Christmas party that year. I don't think you know your father played. We practiced for 6 weeks, everyday, and by show time, I was sounding pretty damn good. Ed was the natural talent, and usually fearless, but he choked in front of an audience almost always. I went up first, mom and dad's friends standing around with their mulled wine and beers and cocktails, in their goofy red and green dress clothes. I remember Lou Hall, worked with dad at the high school, laughed uncomfortably and said, "Geez, Carl, making the kids work on Christmas?" and dad saying, "This isn't work, just a little recital," and Lou looked about like Ed looked, nauseous. The fact that I was in a room full of people who would be my teachers next year felt exciting, like I'd have this chance to make a big first impression. I'd walk into Lou Hall's biology class and take my seat, and then when he was scanning the room he'd spot me, and smile knowingly, welcoming this new talent into his classroom.

When my turn was over, the room of, as your grandma would say, "elevated" grown ups, whistled and applauded. I had hit every beat, impeccable timing, and even a dramatic little slump at the end as the final note rang out. I looked at dad and he nodded, "Not bad, Pauly." I grinned and walked away from the old piano back to my seat on the floor next to Ed, receiving a few hair tussles and back slaps on the way. I whispered to your dad, "You got it, Ed, just like you practiced." Ed swallowed and rose to his feet.

"And what will you be performing for our listening pleasure, Edward?" said Mrs. Boucher, grade 11 British Literature.

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“Ed’s going to play the same,” dad answered for him, with his classic self-satisfied squint.

“Oh? Oh, well excellent then,” she said, shining on a pretty good imitation of a smile.

I read the room as Ed sat down on the creaky piano bench, and more than a few of the party goers were looking down into their glasses, while others looked back at me, and at dad, some new revelation in their eyes. I was dreading this for Ed, but felt a certain vindication at the publicness of this mostly private world with your grandpa.

Your dad wiped his palms on his pants, positioned his fingers over the keys, and then launched into the most frenetic interpretation of Sonata Pastorale that had ever been conceived. He just went from zero to sixty, inventing new time signatures and moves the notation for which had not yet been invented, the musical equivalent of a runaway boulder smashing through an alpine village. I pictured Scarlatti not rolling, but spasming in his grave at this abortion of his masterpiece. When he was done, he just walked out of the room. Dad lead the applause and others joined in obligation, but also in awe, as this was truly an original moment to which they’d all borne witness. “Wow,” was all that Lou Hall had to say.

Later, when the party had died down and Ed and I were back in our room reading comics in our beds - I had decided to pretend that nothing at all had taken place - dad walked into the room.

“That was a helluva thing, Ed, passionate, original,” he said, and he looked like he meant every goddam word.

“Paul, you played very accurately. But it was all craft, no art. Think about that next time,” and he meant every word of that too.

I never know where to start when I try to write about these things. I never know where to end, to make sure I don’t leave out anything significant. You ever get that? A feeling that you might know more than you know you know? So, if there’s gravel mixed in with the gold, keep sifting, I guess.

You know how your grandpa was a high school history teacher? Well, we didn’t, not until the summer after that Christmas party. See, dad worked at the high school already, as a janitor. He was good at it, the faculty and students respected him for running a tight ship, and it didn’t bother us in the slightest. That whole area was pretty blue collar back then anyway, and every kid’s dad smelled of work, had thick, hard hands, and wore a shirt with their name on it. Only once did anyone talk shit to us about his being the janitor, and of course they said it to your dad, the sensitive, younger and smaller one, the one least likely to do anything about it. Little did they know. It happened right after this kid named JD made a joke about having biscuits and gravy and how our dad was probably covered in his shit from the resulting desecrated toilet. I will never forget the awe I felt when I saw Ed just reach out, normal speed, grab JD’s finger and snap it straight back. Then Ed spit on the ground and said to me, “Let’s go,” I swear. When we’d rounded the corner block I grabbed his collar and with a finger in his face said, “That was a pretty stupid fucking thing to do. What about when he and his buddies come back and break some of your bones, huh?” Ed shrugged and looked so legitimately unconcerned that I laughed out loud and we kept walking. “Also,” I said, “That was the most badass thing I’ve ever seen,” and that’s still true to this day.

I digress. What happened is that dad was a janitor, and then he was my high school history teacher. I knew he’d done community college, but then mom got pregnant with me, then

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with Ed, and then dad just worked any way he could because what else can you do? But for the last few years, he'd been taking classes, some down at State and some by correspondence, and then all of a sudden he's a teacher. I had no idea at the time why he kept it secret from everybody besides mom. Obviously now it's obvious. The school respected him, but they were still people, and people prefer everyone in their proper place. We only like those Cinderella stories in the movies. In real life, the grass that sticks its head up gets mowed down.

That summer your dad and I also found out that he would be skipping the 8th grade to go into freshmen year with me. Your grandpa pushed him to take the necessary exams, pulled some strings, and just like that Ed and I were colleagues. First day of school, when Ed and I sat down in dad's world history class, Ed leaned over and said, "This is bullshit." "What do you mean?" I said with a smirk, "We get to see our dear father 24/7 now."

Did you know that grandpa had some serious, what they would call today, "anger issues?" I don't think you know that, certainly wouldn't have heard it from your dad. It was never as bad as some kids in the neighborhood had it, never fists to the face or anything, but he'd shove us around, kick us, and he wielded his belt like a Roman centurion. It wasn't all the time, and he wasn't a sadist. It would happen when he thought that A) we were not trying as hard as we could or B) we were mocking him. Coincidentally, a class full of freshmen assholes provided the perfect conditions, like low-pressure systems and tornadoes or something, for dad, Mr. Maly, to lose his fucking mind. The worst part about this was that dad was very skilled at controlling his temper in public, and the boiling over would be reserved for later that evening. We would watch as his face turned red, just barely perceptibly, when kids would lie to him about why their work wasn't done or flash him the shit-eatingest grin when he turned back from the chalkboard, not quite catching them in whatever act they were up to. Usually he could channel his anger into the detentions that he handed out like candy.

It was some Tuesday in early December. I've racked my brain, but I cannot remember the exact date, though I should. And this is maybe the whole reason I wanted to write to you. This is the only time I ever saw dad do anything remotely physical at school, when he slammed his fist down on the desk right beside fat Frank Gilbert's sleeping head. Frank jolted back to a full and upright position, wild eyed, and started crying, as if that kid didn't have enough problems already. Everyone was real quiet for the rest of that class period, as dad lectured on European imperialism and something about colonial exports. Later, out in the hallway, Ed was joking with a few of our buddies by the lockers, "How dare you sleep in my class, you miscreant!" as he pounded the metal locker door. He kept at it, getting more animated, and we were cracking up because Ed always looked a lot like dad and the impression was just spot fucking on. Then, like out of a movie, I see dad come around the corner right at one of Ed's theatrical crescendos. It was too late, there was no warning him and no way he could spin it into something other than the parody it was. He watched, turned, and walked away. Ed turned around just in time to see dad walk back around the corner. He looked back at us, tugged on his collar in a mock "yikes" kind of gesture, and we all dispersed.

After school, Ed and I made the long trek home. Dad drove himself to school everyday, but would only give us a ride if it was, by his estimation, a true blizzard. Otherwise, we walked,

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and built character. I'd been feeling anxious since that afternoon in the hallway, but as the house came within view my stomach churned double time. The garage door was open, the perfectly polished and waxed 1959 Buick Electra in Glacier Green taking up most of the small space on one side, and dad on the other organizing his workbench. He never left the door open, especially in December, and there was nothing that needed organizing because his belongings existed in a state of perpetual organization.

"Come here boys," he said, when he saw us walking up the drive. "That was very disrespectful today in the hallway, undermining me like that."

I looked at the ground, while Edward just stared back at him.

"Maybe you shouldn't bully sleeping fat kids," Ed replied, "he works a job after school to help his mom. That's why he's tired."

The color in dad's face rose, "What did you say to me? Come here, Paul."

I cursed Ed under my breath and stepped forward.

Dad began taking off his belt. No way is he going to do this out here, garage door open, in full view of everybody coming home from school. No way, I thought.

"Drop your pants, Pauly," dad said, completely flat.

"What...?" I couldn't believe it. But you know what, I did it. That's how under his control I was. Standing there in the garage in my whitey tighties, my ball sack retreating from the cold, I just wanted to get it over with before the whole neighborhood got wind of the spectacle. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ed ball his fists.

"Stop it," said Ed.

"Like it or not, you are your brother's keeper, and he's yours. Also, an eye for an eye, remember? It's the way the real world works," dad said, finding justification in his selective sense of Old Testament justice.

The first blow of the belt to my ass nearly knocked me on my face. I grimaced in silence. The second one didn't hurt as bad as the first, but made an incredible thwap that echoed through the garage, and, I imagined, down the street and around the corner and into every household. Dad was starting to breathe heavily.

"Stop it!" Ed said again. To my dismay, a couple of boys I knew from school walked past on the sidewalk, gawking. At least they kept walking, mercifully.

"Do you have something to say, Edward?" dad asked.

"Excuse me," Ed replied calmly, "Mr. Maly, I apologize. It will never happen again."

Dad stopped and looked unblinkingly at Ed, this formal tone throwing him way off.

What happened next, you just have to take my word for it. I have no reason to be making this shit up, after all.

As dad was saying, cautiously, that he accepted Ed's apology, Ed walked toward dad's red, rolling toolbox.

"What are you...," dad started to ask, putting himself between Ed and his tools, raising his belt. Ed shoved him to the ground with an insane amount of force. Dad sprawled backwards, literally, heels over head. He scrambled to gather himself, but in the few seconds he was on the ground, your dad, 5' 7" wiry Edward Aleksy Maly, lifted that toolbox to his shoulder. Was it 200 pounds? 300? I have no idea, but what I was witnessing, standing there in my underwear like a jackass, I did not believe.

"Edward!" dad shouted, but Ed was in another zone. He tottered forward a few paces with that toolbox on his shoulder, and with a slight lift in his knees, dropped it straight onto the windshield of that pristine '59 Buick.

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You could say that this is the crux of our family history, BB and AB, before and after the Buick was executed. The aftermath, well, I will spare you the drama, but nothing was ever the same. Obviously, your grandpa didn't kill Ed. But he was no longer my little brother, he was mythic, like my father, and I was still Pauly. Still am. I don't know where your dad is at this moment, but if it's any consolation, I don't think he knows either. I hope he is somewhere learning to live with himself after what happened. God knows it was an accident. God knows we were just greedy pricks there for the money and nothing else. Also, God knows, and I want you to know, that your dad stood up for me in the garage that day in an impossible way. That's who he is, if in fact you do not know that. Believe me.

Your Uncle,
Paul Feliks Maly

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