

### Charlie's Outburst

The corpse of Mr. Charles E. Cox – Charlie for short – lay cold in an open casket of wooden veneer. Susie was forbidden by her mother to enter the room containing the body of her grandfather, but if she were to have gone up to Charlie and hold his hand one last time, she would have been surprised to feel that the hand was gummy but stiff, like veined rubber. She would have been tempted to touch the face of her grandfather, to trace his smile lines with her fingers. She would have examined his chest, donned in a handsome navy suit, for the slight rise and fall of breaths – just to make sure. Susie would not have felt sadness – after all, she was only five years old, and she had barely seen her grandfather at all when he was alive.

When he was alive, Charlie Cox was rarely around. He'd leave his one-story home in Port Huron, Michigan for months at a time, off working as chief engineer on beastly black steel boats – the Cambria and the Lebanon. His job consisted of metal and mechanics, but mostly of bossing people around, which takes a toll on a man. So when he returned home, it was only natural that he preferred a shot of Jameson to a hug from his granddaughter.

Little Susie didn't know that, though. The last time she had seen him while he was still a breathing, talking, God-fearing man, she had ridden her bike through the November chill, avoiding ice patches with the skill and finesse of a year-round bike rider, and arrived at Maple Park in order to scan the lake for Charlie's steel boat. She watched as the Lebanon slowly made its way through Lake Huron, approaching the harbor cautiously but persistently like a shark intruding on a sleepy school of fish. When the ship finally docked, it was impossible not to recognize ol' Charlie – tall and thin with a pile of matted flame-red hair, he was a man who commanded attention.

"Grampa Charlie!" Susie had cried out, dropping her bike and chasing after him in a pair of denim overalls and a yellow jacket too thin for the weather.

"Pumpkin, how are ya," he had said with a forceful pat on Susie's head. There was no hug; in fact, he hardly paused, continuing swiftly toward town, his long legs crossing continents with each step. Susie trailed on her bicycle, a yellow blur following an orange target, until finally Charlie reached the first bar he could find – Rosco's – not quite a hole in the wall, but nothing special. Dartboards, Guinness on tap, walls of wood veneer much like the kind that would later enclose Charlie six feet under.

Susie followed him to the front of Rosco's, but of course she wasn't allowed in. He paused at the door.

"Why don't you go over to your Gramma Anna's for dinner?" Charlie said. "I'll meet you there."

It was already 5:30, and Susie and Charlie both knew that Anna Cox served dinner at exactly 6 o'clock every night of the week. Typically, to be late to dinner was to not eat dinner at all.

Charlie's wife was Anna Volanski – Anna Cox, after she married Charlie. She was a petite Slovak woman who would rapidly gain weight upon the death of her

husband – not out of depression or mourning, but out of the freedom of widowhood and old age. She had met Charlie in Ohio – specifically, on the muggy, mosquito-infested streets of Cleveland. She was eighteen, still living at home with her parents, and had gone for a walk that night to have a smoke. She didn't really smoke – and was forbidden to do so by her parents – but something in the heat of that night inspired her to leave the house if only for the satisfaction of disobeying her parents with a cigarette.

Charlie, age thirty, had finally been kicked out of the bar, and was making his way back to the house of his buddy Howard, also a bachelor. Nursing several pitchers of Guinness in his stomach, Charlie watched mesmerized as the streetlights began to quiver and divide into twos while alcohol continued to seep into his mind.

"What a time to be alive!" he had said out loud, stepping into a puddle left over from the rain that afternoon, when he smelled the sharp stink of a freshly lit cigarette. Charlie loved to smoke, but only when he was drunk – which is to say, Charlie loved to smoke. Turning rapidly, his soft blue gaze locked with Anna's walnut eyes as she, without faltering, blew smoke out the side of her mouth and smiled with her mouth closed. She was sitting on a bench, wearing a modest button-down dress and thin black stockings that clung to her crossed legs. Oh, it really was a moment made for the movies.

"Excuse me," he said, taking care not to slur. "Could I have a cigarette, too?"

Anna obliged, somehow understanding that something important was happening in that moment, and they finished the pack of cigarettes together.

Soon after, of course, they fell in love and moved to Michigan.

Inexplicably, Anna had failed to smell the beer on Charlie's breath, and had failed to notice that the man was in an absolute stupor that night. It's doubtful she would have continued to entertain him for as long as she did – let alone marry him – if she had noticed. He was talented at hiding his drunkenness, or rather converting it into what some people may perceive as a sense of wit and boyish humor. Combine that with sharp cheekbones and an above average height, and Charlie, at times, seemed even more attractive when he was drunk than sober. He was almost charming.

Raised by an alcoholic father herself – a brawny man who drank pilsner for breakfast and Slivovitz for dinner, Anna was disgusted by drinking. Anna – ladylike but fiery in spirit – could never quite accept that before there was a wedding ring on Charlie's finger, there was a shot glass in his hand.

So, when hosting one of the first Christmas dinners after they had gotten married, Anna saw Charlie pour himself what must have been his sixth glass of eggnog, she locked eyes with him like she had done on that fateful August night they first crossed paths, and said, "No."

Anna had a sweet voice, no louder than the clinking of glassware, but when she delivered her one-word command, the whole dinner table seemed to pause, waiting for his response. Even the dog paused to raise its ears and turn its curious wet nose toward Anna's direction.

Charlie had grinned, had given Anna a flash of gleaming teeth in a strange smile. It's said that dogs rarely look each other in the eyes because it might be taken as a threat, and it's also said that one way a dog signals aggression is to retract its lips and bare its teeth, and perhaps, curiously enough, wag its tail.

Charlie chuckled. He was always a pleasant drunk to be around, and it was Christmas after all. Conversation and the tinny scratching of forks and knives against plates continued on, and the table exhaled a collective sigh. Uncle Paul continued his long-winded anecdote where he left off. His wife, Aunt Katherine, left to reapply her lipstick in the bathroom, where she would stare at her face in the mirror for slightly too long while she resisted a sudden, unexpected urge to cry. Bridget and Margaret, the daughters of Anna and Charlie, continued to draw in a composition notebook they shared between the two of them. Anna went outside to smoke a cigarette before serving dinner. (She had begun smoking regularly after marrying Charlie; his cigarette habit had lingered even when he was gone working, and had eventually been passed on to Anna.) And Charlie, dabbing his lips with his napkin and removing any eggnog that had gotten caught in his beard, excused himself for a moment.

Charlie moseyed to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of eggnog, which he downed faster than Anna could have uttered "No." He glanced back toward the dining room, then moved swiftly to the oven, where a plump Christmas turkey sat browning on a tray. It looked comically vulnerable to Charlie, and, stooping over as he pulled it out with a pair of oven mitts, he had to laugh.

Darting to the basement, he retreated to where a sturdy, dark coal bin stood brooding in the corner and, without a second thought, plopped the turkey into the bin—gently, as if tucking it into bed. Charlie straightened his bowtie and returned to the basement stairs, dipping his head on the way up so he wouldn't hit it on the rafter, and continued to the guest bedroom, where he knew he would have to sleep that night anyway after what he had just done. He fell fast asleep, fully dressed and atop the untucked comforter, and the Cox family did not have turkey that Christmas.

Not for lack of trying though. Once Anna had returned inside to find the turkey missing, she had scoured the house for the elusive poultry while the rest of the family waited, bemused, for her to return to the table, sipping on their own respective drinks. When Anna finally returned to the table, her family had begun to work on the green bean casserole and a pile of quickly cooling rolls.

"Would you like to have a drink, Annie?" her sister-in-law asked—perhaps in some sort of guilt-inspired truce on behalf of her brother; perhaps as a joke; perhaps both.

Anna responded with, "I think I will." She made herself a drink with *crème de menthe*—sucked down a couple glasses, actually—and that was the first time anyone ever saw Anna drink. But she didn't like drinking, and only did it once more in her lifetime after that night.

Charlie awoke the next morning around noon with the five-second bewildered panic of waking up in a foreign bed, realized that he was in the guest bedroom, then remembered the turkey incident.

"Shit," he had mumbled, pushing back his hair, which had gathered in a series of tangled curls overnight.

And so Charlie spent Wednesday, December 26, 1930 moping around the house, sheepish and mostly silent, and didn't touch a drop of alcohol – not even a shot to get rid of the hangover.

Anna would tell the neighbors about how she had finally found the turkey after the dog had given its hiding spot away, sniffing insistently at the coal bin, tail sticking straight up like an exclamation point. The neighbors would laugh in response – "typical Charlie," they'd say. She left out the part where, upon finding the turkey, she had picked it up and wandered out to the river dressed only in a skirt, button-down shirt, and pumps, and had tossed the turkey in and watched it bob downstream, bouncing against snow banks in clumsy zigzags along the way until its pale pinkish body vanished into the day.

After Charlie entered the pub to celebrate his return from the Lebanon, Susie took off on her bike, pedaling over to her own house to tell her mother that she would be eating at Gramma's house, then continued on for a block and a half to the one-story home of Anna Volanski – Anna Cox after she married Charlie.

Anna had answered the door prepared for an all-encompassing hug accompanied by a tender kiss, and was at first taken aback to see little Susie staring at up at her, but had of course invited her into the house nonetheless. The house was warm and infused with the scent of paprika.

"I made goulash," Anna said, grabbing an extra set of dining utensils for the dinner table. "I suppose I could make some cookies since you're visiting. Would you like that?"

Though Anna was only in her mid-fifties, she had already adopted a grandmotherly soul, always prepared to ply visitors with food and love. Susie sat at the dining room table alone while Anna cracked eggs into a metal bowl in the kitchen and mixed the ingredients, the spoon clanking against the metal in a patient rhythm. Susie did not feel alone at the modestly sized dining room table; Anna and Charlie had a modestly sized house, and a modest lifestyle in general. The couple did not have a lot of money, and Anna was used to frugality and unimpressive living. When she and Charlie first began dating, they'd often drive out to the movies, and she would always insist afterward that he drop her off a block from her house, too embarrassed for him to get a glimpse at the lack of money by which she was raised. Charlie, on the other hand, made a decent living, as did his father, but of course it disappeared quicker than the grass under the snow come wintertime, when he'd drink it all away. And anyway, Charlie was gone for months at a time, leaving Anna with an empty house, so she had no need for extra space – no more of a reminder that she was, despite her self-assurances otherwise, alone in the world.

Susie peered up at a yellowing clock on the wall. It ticked steadily toward six o'clock, and she began to feel slight unease, despite the guarantee of goulash in the near future.

Charlie, perched atop a bar stool, leaning across the sticky surface of the bar, gave a stranger a hug, and took a shot with him.

At six o' clock, Anna scooped steaming chunks of deep red goulash into a glass bowl with floral trimming in front of Susie, who dug her spoon into the stew and, blowing on it to cool it off, looked up to make sure it was okay to eat without Charlie. Anna nodded, and returned to the oven to check on the cookies.

The goulash tasted perfect to Susie – thick and filling and a little bit too salty. She was halfway done with her bowl when Anna joined her at the table to have some herself. They ate mostly in silence – neither Anna nor Susie liked to talk much when they ate – it distracted them from enjoying the food, and they took their time eating, partly because they were both slow eaters in general, and partly in the hope that Charlie would arrive on time to join them.

Once they finished their bowls, Susie stayed for cookies. Recognizing her lack of competition for dessert, she ate three cookies, all of which she dipped into a glass of milk until pieces began to crumble and descend into the glass like sinking ships in a frozen white lake.

Sometime after seven o'clock, Charlie burst into the front door and declared "I'm home" in a voice that filled every crack in the room it could find. He strutted in, not appearing overtly drunk so much as goofy, walking awkwardly as if his legs had suddenly grown three inches taller overnight. Stooping down to Anna's height, he planted a meaty kiss on her goulash lips, which is when she, of course, smelled the stench of alcohol.

After he pulled away, Anna crossed her arms. "Welcome home, Charlie – goulash is ready." She nodded toward the pot on the stove.

"Don't mind if I do! I feel like I haven't eaten real food in months." He wandered into the kitchen, his thinning orange hair skimming the bottom of a light dangling from the ceiling, and scooped a few ladlefuls of stew aggressively into a glass bowl lined with floral print like the one Susie had. He poured himself a glass of milk, leaving the carton on the counter, and slammed the glass onto the dining room table.

"Susie, so glad you could make it for dinner. It sure is nice to be back in Port Huron, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Well, eat up!" Charlie said. In front of Susie stood the glass of milk with cookie remains and a shallow pool of warm milk.

"I'm full, Grampa," she said.

He shrugged, and got to work with his own bowl, nodding with the first bite and uttering a low growl somewhere deep in his chest with satisfaction. "Delicious as always."

After several hungry gulps of goulash, he picked up the bowl and held it eye level for a moment, before deciding, "We need new bowls, Anna."

Anna, who was beginning her after-dinner cigarette at the opposite end of the dinner table, raised her eyebrows.

Charlie picked up the glass, milk sloshing inside leaving creamy trails on the sides, and held that to eye level, too. "New glasses, too. These look cheap."

Anna shook her head slightly and sucked in her cheeks slightly. "No we do not, Charles. Our bowls and glasses are fine."

He slammed the glass back down on the table before she could finish. "Anna, I just got back from being out on the lake for almost eight months, making money to support us. We can afford to live a little. It's embarrassing when Susie comes over and has to drink out of glasses like these!" He motioned across the table with an outstretched hand, massive in comparison to the slender glass.

"They are fine." Anna blew smoke to the side, and stubbed her cigarette in a silver ashtray on the table.

"Fine, fine," Charlie said and looked back down. He finished his goulash slowly, without talking anymore, in an almost meditative manner. He placed his spoon in the bowl, downed the rest of his milk, then stood abruptly from the table, the chair scraping suddenly against the tile, making a noise that reminded Anna of the time she had dropped her violin in the sixth grade (her parents had screamed then wept at the cost of damage).

"I'll do the dishes tonight." Grabbing Susie's glass along with his own, he headed toward the kitchen and began to wash his bowl, scrubbing extra hard along the inside, the sink faucet pouring out a strong, steaming stream of hot water against the bowl. The lemony-sweet scent of soap began to mix sickeningly with the savory goulash smell that lingered in the room. Shutting the faucet off, he dried the bowl tenderly with a wash cloth, handling it as if it were a newborn baby, and, turning toward the dish rack, brought it down suddenly and forcefully. *SMASH*.

"Charlie!" Anna looked up from the table.

He rinsed his glass out quickly with cold water, turning to the dish rack once more. *SMASH*.

Leaving the faucet running, he filled Susie's glass with water, dumped it out—*SMASH*.

He opened the cupboard doors, and began grabbing at plates. *SMASH, SMASH, SMASH*.

"God damn it, Charlie!" Anna stood up from the table, but did not approach the kitchen. She appeared tiny, incomparable to the force of Charlie, like someone watching cautiously from the front porch as a springtime tornado tears through the distance.

He flung a mug sideways. *SMASH*, against the wall.

Grabbing another mug hungrily with his other hand, he flung it in the opposite direction, where it flew straight into Anna's abdomen, and everything became silent.

Anna bent over, wheezing slightly as she clutched at her stomach. She stood there, leaning against the table for a few minutes, catching her breath as her body stood twitching, expanding and contracting.

Charlie froze, staring at her with his mouth in a perfect O.

"Get out," she said, looking down. Charlie hurried to the front door, shouting in a high-pitched tone before he slammed the door: "It was an accident!" Susie couldn't place exactly what she heard in his voice, but she would later recognize it as panic and regret.

Susie helped Anna scoop the shards of glass into the trash can. Anna held in her tears until after the little girl left the house. Charlie wouldn't come back until the next morning, a box full of sparkling white dishes in his arms. Three weeks later, before the last hidden splinters of dishware had been swept off the floor, Charlie would have a heart attack and die.

Susie, skinny and freckle-kissed, was forbidden to approach the body of Charles E. Cox. Her mother, Margaret, dressed in thick heels and a plaid pea coat, had shooed her out of the room with a flick of her gloved hand. "Just sit out here," she had said in a stern voice.

So Susie waited in the hall, sitting Indian-style as they called it. She had been dressed that morning in a black, wool dress, although underneath she wore a pair of shorts in order to expedite the process of going on a post-funeral bike ride later that day if there was time. She traced the maroon walls with her eyes. They were lined with various nondescript paintings – pastel flowers, a barn, a young girl. Her brother and sister were allowed to approach the casket and give their final goodbyes, but Susie, according to her mother, was too young to experience the peculiarity of a dead body inches from her own breathing flesh.

Bored, she began to eavesdrop on adult conversations. In hushed tones, she heard balding, gray-faced, polite strangers discuss Charlie's kind soul, his golden heart and pure intentions. And, of course, his sense of humor – always getting into "shenanigans." Susie was only able to pick out a few key words from conversations, but she held onto them as her final memories of her grandfather.

Anna Volanski – Anna Cox, still after Charlie died – stood in the corner of the room, talking with Susie's mother, out of earshot of Susie's snooping. Anna had had a glass of wine that day – completely unlike her, but the decision to have a drink that morning seemed obvious to her. She rested her hand on Margaret's shoulder.

"Marge, your father really was a good man," Anna said. Margaret nodded. Her makeup was impeccable as always – her lips precisely coated with a matte plum-tinted red, her hair pulled back tight in a shiny bouffant, but her face seemed to slump downward in the unmaskable disbelief at the death of a parent.

"Well-loved – everyone loved Charlie," Anna continued. "And we raised you and Bridget well. Two wonderful young ladies."

"Yes you did, mom," Margaret said, her voice flat.

"But, I'd be lying if I said I wish I would have never married him." Anna shrugged. Margaret, unsure of how to respond, simply dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief she always kept in her coat pocket, and Anna turned away sharply and walked outside to have a smoke, passing Susie as she sat bored in the hall.

Outside, the sun was still creeping upward in the sky, casting a weak glow over the funeral home's courtyard, its light filtered through skinny tree branches as the remaining stubborn leaves of December fell silently. Their little yellow and orange corpses would soon brown, then dampen and shrivel, eventually crushed back into the

earth. *I'll join them too, someday*, Anna thought as she exhaled hearty puffs of smoke. *But that day won't come soon.* She closed her eyes and felt the sun on her face.

Charlie's embalmed body was lowered six feet into the ground with a final thud, his head shaking slightly inside against the velvet lining. The coffin had been sealed shut, nice and tight – a little too tight, in fact. Soon, Charlie began to decompose in his wooden box, filling the space, not with his booming voice or hearty laughter or charismatic charm, but with bodily gases, which pressed against the sides of the coffin – pushing harder and harder. The wood continued to creak and expand against the moist enclosure of soil, filled with worms that squirmed around and explored the coffin while it continued to bloat. Finally, ol' Charlie exploded from the pressure – *pop!* – and his body rested in a peaceful slurry-like mixture of flesh and blood.