

CAST

“I’m going to take a hammer to you,” his wife threatens.

Charles looks up from his book. Anne’s not after him, though. She’s already reaching to pull the plug on their ancient computer, the only way they’ve found to escape the endless spinning wheel.

“Frozen?” Charles asks.

“I better not have lost anything,” she warns.

“Where are you now?”

“Nineteen whatever. Joey, but not him yet. I’m focusing on my leg. That cast. Sort of the *idea* of casts.”

“It was ’78, I think.”

“It’s not good to always be right about everything,” Anne reminds him. She’d been talking about writing her memoirs ever since they’d put together a Memory Book for their son Joey, but had not actually begun until she’d found out her aunt had Alzheimer’s. Anne herself has always had a few wires crossed. When speaking (not when writing, Charles hopes), Anne substitutes up for down, here for there, hot for cold, tomorrow for yesterday. Every so often she invents a new expression. Last night it was “fork chops” for chopsticks. It’s not Alzheimer’s unless she’s always had it.

Typing resumes and Charles returns to his reading, but she’s got him drifting back to the house on Liberty Street, back when their daughters Margy and Becca were young girls and Joey, middle child, had just turned eight and was still fine. They’d lived across

the street from a retirement home for women, a three-story structure with a square façade and circular drive, set back on land that teemed with wildlife even within the city limits. In the mornings as he biked to the alumni office Charles would often flinch as he encountered unfortunate rabbits, raccoons, squirrels, the odd opossum, all lying rigid and bloody in the gutters of busy Liberty Street. Elderly women also emerged regularly from the tangle of trees to take their daily constitutionals, usually shuffling downhill a block or so to the mailbox and back. It was only natural that Margy and Becca had invented the game they called “old ladies.” They dressed up in Charles’s mother’s elaborate ballroom dancing gowns and trudged up and down the sidewalks clinging to each other.

And now Charles’s mind lands on that long ago Saturday in 1978 when Anne and Joey had been in the accident and he’d gone outside after the phone call to wave his daughters home, waiting as they straggled up to him in their finery.

“Your mother’s OK,” he’d told the girls, even though he didn’t know for sure and his daughters didn’t know what he was talking about. “We have to go to the hospital. Get your shoes.” Margy had shrugged the straps off her shoulders and the dress had pooled at her feet, revealing jeans and a sweatshirt. Just like Margy to be instantly ready.

He remembers staring at the rhinestones gracing the toes of Becca’s pale blue high heels, then crouching down to be at her level.

“Not those shoes, honey,” he’d said. “Get your real ones.”

Chapter 16: “The Cast”

As a child I’d always wanted a cast. My friends would sign it. I would get out of doing homework if I broke my right wrist. My older brother had had a sawed-open cast

that he kept on a shelf above his bed like a trophy. Even though it was quite filthy I would slip it on my own forearm and imagine all the attention I would receive if I were so fortunate as to break a bone.

I got my wish when I was 33 years old. I was driving back with Joey from the market out Zeeb Road when a cement truck made a left turn into our old VW bus. I don't remember being hit. I've tried many times to remember it. I really wish I could remember, but it's gone.

Apparently, according to the newspaper article, our car flipped several times and ended up in a field facing the road. I remember waking up and wondering why the road was tilted. Then I realized I was tilted. I had no thoughts about Joey in the back seat and do not remember any pain except for the pressure of the seatbelt holding me suspended. I did have a twinge about the groceries. I remember thinking I probably cracked the--

The book Charles has been reading, given to him by their daughter Becca as a none-too-subtle retirement gift, is about perfectionism. Being a perfectionist, he has learned, is in no way a good thing, as he'd vaguely and secretly supposed. Someone has to make sure it's done right, he has thought all these years, but no. The world does not need perfectionists in order to keep ticking along.

"Do you think I'm a perfectionist?" he'd asked Anne when he unwrapped the book. True, he'd noted that the paperback cover curled up at the lower right and one page corner had been folded. Becca had read it before sending it. Did that mean he was a perfectionist?

"Yes."

“Take your time, Anne. Think about it a little.”

“Yes.”

“The short answer,” he muses to himself now, studying the irritating photograph on the book’s cover. “Concise and to the point. In a word--”

--eggs.

In the emergency room the doctor told me I had shattered my kneecap, which would require surgery. He told me not to look at my leg, so of course I did. I saw bone. Well, I’m not squeamish. I didn’t really feel much pain until two days later, when the nurse told me I was going to get up and stand. Stand? It was impossible, but I suppose I did it and within a week I was hobbling five steps away from the bed, then back, several times a day. I could only use one crutch because I’d also broken my collarbone. By then, though, the worry was not about me, but Joey.

Downstairs, Charles brews a pot, watches water filtering drop by drop. Now he has all the time in the world, time to enjoy the gurgling and hissing of a coffee maker. Time to read *War and Peace*. He checks the temperature on the thermometer he’d moved just last week from its original spot by the kitchen window to the shade of the front entrance. The former placement had caught the afternoon sun, causing inaccurate readings. Anne was annoyed by the change because she kept checking the old spot and nothing was there. “Are you going to be like this for your entire retirement?” she’d asked.

For the record it is 45 degrees out, a pleasant October day, and Charles is futzing, puttering, luxuriating. Joey has been living in the new place for three months.

Independence has been the dream, the culmination of the years of work. They'll see him tonight, their Man About Town. Steam rises from Charles's coffee to fog his glasses as he takes a sip.

[put more here Joey]

He sees the phrase on the computer screen as he sets a mug of coffee on the desk.

"Why, thank you," Anne says, "Just what I need."

He settles back with the perfectionist book, relaxing in his armchair in the den. All he needs is a pipe. And a better book.

Casts these days look almost fun with all the bright plastic and black straps, like trendy camping or skiing equipment. My cast, though, was heavy white plaster, which soon became dingy gray, enlivened only by daisies drawn by our oldest, Margy. It stretched from the top of my thigh to my ankle, with a removable window cut at the knee for checking the stitches.

Not surprisingly, life with a cast was not as I'd dreamed. It was a lead weight that kept me from caring properly for Joey. I couldn't drive, and moreover I had to ride in the back seat of the car. Charles says this is when I officially became a back seat driver, and it's true, I was nervous about riding in cars for months afterward. At first the cast was too heavy for me to lift by myself. I would drop back onto the couch and Charles would hoist my leg onto the cushions. I ascended and descended stairs by sliding step by step on my bottom. Soon, this is how our girls negotiated stairs, also, with legs extended in stiff

imitation.

The perfectionist book has just informed Charles how to non-verbally communicate encouragement to one's child, lest that child become a fellow perfectionist due to rotten parenting. He runs through the list of uplifting gestures as he moves to the window, which is one floor up overlooking the back courtyard. A maintenance man is blowing leaves past a picnic table toward the northwest corner, where a second man with a rake and black plastic bag awaits the maelstrom. Charles doesn't miss doing yard work, not that he had kept an immaculate yard back when. (No one could say he was a perfectionist about lawns.) Condominium life is ideal for early retirees in need of downsizing; give yourself winks, hugs, whistles of appreciation, fancy handshakes, high fives, low fives, applause, thumbs up, OK signs, and big smiley faces--

“What are you doing?” Anne asks. “You look like you have whatever that is.”

“A big thumbs up on last night's dinner,” he says.

“That thing with tics.”

“I'm with you all the way.”

“For heaven's sake.” She puts the computer to sleep and starts to head downstairs. She returns for her coffee mug, which is still full, but gone cold. “If you don't like the thing, don't read it. You're not the only one Becca picks on. The other day she said I practically needed subtitles. I laughed, but it wasn't spoken in a nice tone. Come down for your sandwich. You know what I mean. Tourette's.”

He doesn't follow immediately but remains by the window. “I really appreciate it when you mow the lawn without my asking you to,” he says to the workers below. “I'm

so glad you enjoy botany.”

Downstairs, he thinks, sitting at the kitchen table, I can see you put a lot of effort into this interesting *interesting* bologna sandwich. The book advocates not praise, which is goal-oriented, but encouragement, which is process-oriented. Anne didn't have to make him lunch, in other words. Once on the only camping trip they'd ever taken, he sat down to their picnic dinner and said, “Where's the salad course?” It was a joke, not much appreciated by Anne. As Charles remembered, the girls already wanted to go home, having witnessed some boys down by the water cutting up live frogs to make “frog legs.” The legs would not stop twitching and the torsos swam in futile circles streaming blood, much to the boys' delight. Was Joey one of those boys? He couldn't remember.

“Have you gotten to Joey yet?”

Anne signals she's chewing, shakes her head.

“I'm curious how you're going to deal with him. Your memoir has such a light tone. The chapter I read, anyway.” Is he insulting her? The perfectionist book will drive him crazy. “I mean it's good,” he amends. “But I am wondering how he'll fit in.”

“Joey fits in. God knows I know Joey's important. People in my writing group appreciate the tone. I made a conscious decision to write episodes as if I'm writing stories. Beginnings, middles, ends. I wrap things up.”

It's inherently annoying, he thinks, that she needed to join a group to write her personal memoirs. “Accuracy comes second?”

“Don't pick on me.”

“I'm not picking on you. I'm trying to understand how you perceive--”

“*That* kind of accuracy comes second. You should hear this one fellow. He's a

nice man but he puts in everything. I want to tear out my hair. Besides, if you talk too much about what you're doing the wind goes out of your sails. My mother always said that. So," she concludes, "You can read about it later."

He finishes his sandwich and refills their water glasses. Excessive thirst is a sign of diabetes. Is he excessively thirsty? Leaves drift by the sliding glass door, skittering on the patio. In the autumn of life. The lure of the sea. Where do these phrases come from? A few weeks after the accident Joey had begun calling everyone—family members, invisible visitors—"Mister" in a gravelly yet groggy gangster voice. He'd worn a helmet-like device, bolted in place to protect his skull. A double row of dark stitches like railroad tracks began at his cheek, crossed the eyelid and traveled under the helmet, leading the imagination to an unspeakable destination. Will this be in her memoir? Why should he care what she puts in her memoir?

Charles is not going to suggest it, but it would make a good title for Joey's chapter: "When the Wind Went Out of His Sails."

The chapter Anne had allowed Charles to read, Chapter 11, was entitled, "White Knuckles." It traced events from the first meeting of Charles and Anne to their wedding day, and contained as a sort of running gag Charles's tendency to go freakishly pale when under stress. They'd met on an airplane on the way back to Detroit from Florida after spring break. Charles always had been seriously afraid of flying, which back then he would try to hide by feigning extreme motion sickness. She'd said, reaching under the seat for her purse, "I have one of those amnesia pills. You're supposed to take them ahead of time, but maybe it will work."

The word choice seemed possibly brilliant, something out of the Baudelaire he'd been forced to study for no good reason, a synthesis, so he'd opened his eyes to look at her. She had dark hair, two wings of it pulled back and fastened with an odd, cavewoman-like barrette, leather with two holes held by a bone-like stick. A few years later those barrettes were everywhere.

"What did I say?" Her hands, following his glance, went up to the barrette. "I can tell I said something dumb." She opened her purse and rummaged around.

"An amnesia pill would probably work fine," he answered.

"Did I say that?" She placed the pill on his palm. "Take it, and then I'll hold your hand."

When the swelling went down, the cast got loose. I held it at the thigh to keep it from chafing my ankle. We hired a maid for the eight weeks I wore the thing. Picture me in luxury, propped regally on my pillows, in command--with a straightened hanger as a scepter, trying to scratch unreachable itches. Worst of all, though, for eight weeks I had to take sponge baths.

"I just remembered in the hospital at first they wouldn't give me a mirror."

"You had cuts on your face," Charles answers.

"Then I asked *you* to bring a mirror from home but you wouldn't."

"The doctor didn't want to upset you."

"It seems so--archaic. I wonder why I didn't throw a fit. What were you thinking? That I didn't know? I couldn't feel my own face?"

“We fellers protect our womenfolk.”

“Margy asked you to take a picture of the VW and you never did that either.”

“No help at all,” Charles agrees. “I wasn’t about to take a picture of it. It wasn’t a pretty sight.” Glass, moldering groceries and angry flies. Some of the apples were fine, though, not particularly bruised, so he gathered them up. Northern Spies: so hard you can throw 'em through a board.

And now we come to Joey. The first time I saw him after the accident, he was in a coma. He looked awful. Joey’s doctor told me not to worry too much, that a coma was just the brain’s way of retreating briefly to heal. “Like that leg in your cast,” he told me. The second time I saw Joey, the nurse wheeling me to the pediatric ICU told me he was much livelier than at first, that they were quite encouraged by his improvement in the past 48 hours. This did not prepare me for what I saw. This was the Joey who couldn’t keep still? However, I was grateful when a few days later he did seem to recognize me enough to squeeze my hand, although he didn’t speak and was still out of it.

Joey came home five weeks after I did. He stayed for one night, but then seemed to get the flu and became quite agitated. With head injuries, you never know, so the doctor advised us to return him to the hospital for observation. After five days, he was released again and thus began the initial period of outpatient rehabilitation.

Each day brought improvements for Joey. In the length of time I spent wearing a cast, Joey recovered his physical coordination and some language. In many ways, after a very shaky start,

The photograph on the book cover shows a family clustered together, sitting on a stone wall and looking outdoorsy in bright sunlight, with a glimpse of lake, mountains, and blue sky beyond. A few clouds stretch low on the horizon. The title floats above the clouds, above the heads of the parents and their three children, all of them grinning engagingly now that they have surmounted perfectionism. Their hands look placed, offering subliminal messages of solidarity. Of course these people are probably false—models—but they appear to be related. The oldest child, a girl, clasps her hands near her chin, her head is tilted coyly, she has a dimple. If these people aren't perfect, Charles wonders, where's the flaw? Most annoying to him is how he can't tell exactly where the photographed sky melts into the fake blue of the actual cover. He aims the book at the light, trying to spot a seam, and notices a dusting of white cloud in the upper right corner. Is the whole thing real sky?

“What are you doing? You're driving me crazy,” Anne says. “Read it or throw it out the window.”

“That's ‘you-speak,’” Charles informs her. “‘I-speak’ is the proper way to express anger.”

“How's this?” She swivels the chair to face him. “I feel like telling you to go run around the block a few times.” She makes that face to show she is joking but not really: fake smile, strained neck tendons, the momentary freeze.

“See?” Charles nods. “The book is right. We all feel much better now.”

In the length of time I spent wearing a cast, Joey recovered much of his physical coordination and some language. His doctor, the one who drew the connection between

the cast and a coma, gave me another phrase to think about. He described Joey's condition in the months that followed as having lost his memory of the future. If you don't have a past you can't project a future. Continuity is gone. Your expectations arise from your past, and your future is all expectation. But I am failing at my attempt to be true to the times. If I remember accurately, at the time I felt enormously hopeful because we had survived and all we had to do was work hard and concentrate.

“Maybe I will,” Charles says. “Go around the block a few times.”

Clouds have moved in. The wind rattles the dried pods on the ornamental trees lining the walkway. After one quick circuit Charles sits at the picnic table below their den window, shivering in his light jacket. The weather has changed entirely. It is obvious by now that he is experiencing one of those days when he must relive the essential truth that the real Joey, the potential Joey, *his* Joey, died way back in 1978. Once again, the still hopeful Charles carries Joey into the Big Room with its beach balls and CPR posters, its blue mats and gurneys and wheelchairs lined against the far wall, some occupied, some not. Joey but not Joey, Joey surrendered to that alternate universe as if into an incomprehensible sci-fi flick in which all the children had been replaced with alien counterparts. How often, back then, did Joey beg them to go skateboarding again? How often did they explain why he couldn't, only to have him ask again, immediately? And that term: *disinhibition*. Until Joey, he'd had no idea that inhibitions were so central to personality, even the meager inhibitions of an eight-year-old. Without them, minds are just primitive floods, primordial soup. It's true: You are what you aren't.

What really happened over the years? What should be in the memoir? A stranger

has grown into the body of the man Joey should have become. Joey is just a guy posed on the cover. Open the book and he's not inside. The story is all about somebody else.

Usually, a rough chronology works well for me as an organizing principle, but here I'm going to indulge the urge to skip ahead. I have the hardest time maintaining the integrity of the actual moment in time, as Charles might say. For some reason, though, I can't leave Joey suspended in that permanent present: age eight. He has done so well lately, we love him, and we are so proud of him.

Technology. That sounds as if there's some medical intervention that has made all the difference. Actually, I'm talking about how Joey has discovered technology. He has become quite the computer whiz. Jenny (combination housemother and miracle worker) said there's something about the instant feedback that is very satisfying to him. Well, I don't know about that, but the other day I e-mailed Joey about the computer crashing all the time. I told him I was ready to chuck the whole thing from the roof! He e-mailed back that I had to learn patience. I had to laugh. It was such a role reversal. Plus, now he's living on his own. It took some work, but the real Joey (albeit not the old

They pass through the living room with its circle of metal folding chairs and the dry-erase board with the group schedule, stopping by Jenny's office to see how things are going. It occurs to Charles that Jenny—dressed as always in something purple—might actually be the perfect optimist, not too sunny but relentless in that way positive thinkers are. Apparently, a recent trip to the movies didn't end well, they learn, but other than that, this week Joey has met his target behaviors for “independent supervised living.”

“But it wasn’t anything to worry about?” Anne asks.

“Untoward?” Charles supplies, smiling at this euphemism.

“Oh, no. Something about the van. Brad talked to him. He’s been fine.”

Joey’s room is at the top of the stairs, which have red carpeting held in place with brass rods at the base of each step, a weirdly elegant touch, Charles will be destined to think each time he climbs them. Joey’s door has a matching red star with his name on it. They had called Joey using the cell phone just before they arrived; even so, Joey appears momentarily surprised when he answers their knock.

On the inside of the door is a large mirror with a sign above it: Look at Yourself Before You Go Out. Not bad advice, followed by the list: Hair Teeth Shirt Pants Zipper Shoes Keys. Directly opposite the door is a framed poster of a jet aimed head on, seemingly flying right toward the room. Joey had made the frame in woodshop years ago and Charles, to his eternal regret, had helped him add a few extra pieces to make the thing look like a window, compounding the effect of imminent disaster. Joey, though, with that customary arbitrary stubbornness, has refused to get rid of it.

“You got a haircut,” Anne says, reaching up to touch Joey’s scarred temple as she gives him a hug. “I see some gray.”

“I see gray, too,” Joey says, pointing.

Anne laughs. “No kidding.”

“I’m an old man.”

“No, I’m the Old Man.” Charles heads for the dresser, where he resets the clock, which is five minutes slow. “What’s up these days? Your mother has been writing her memoirs and I’ve been reading a book full of important lessons given to me by your

thoughtful sister. It explains why you're the absolute perfect kid for me."

"For heaven's sake." Anne drapes her coat on the back of the desk chair. "Joey, we heard you saw a movie."

"I was playing a game."

"Do you remember the movie?" Anne touches his arm but he won't look up. "Did it have a good ending?"

"Wait, don't tell us," Charles says. "What if we want to see it? You'll ruin it."

"Charles." Excellent eye contact, he notes.

"So, Joey," Anne persists, "What happened at the end?"

Joey studies the computer mouse. When he turns it over its red beam slashes across his chin.

"Joey. I'm asking you a question."

He drops the mouse and brushes past her, causing her to stumble backward. She ends up by sitting on the edge of the bed. The extra little jounce she gives the mattress is oddly girlish. Calmly and deliberately she crosses her legs, as if it has been her intent all along to land in that precise spot. Will *this* go in her memoir?

Charles has already gripped Joey by the shoulder, turning him. "You have to be *careful* of people." He gives the shoulder a squeeze to show he means business. Beneath the shirt he can feel the tensing muscle and beneath that the solid bone. Flesh and Blood. He's face to face with Joey—sees right through him—and what he sees is a vision of Joey's brain, all those neurological pathways flooding like rivers careening down a mountainside, plucking up trees along the way, torn loose then log-jammed, which causes Joey's eyes to darken and fill with tears. There's the smallest downtick to the corner of

his mouth, so Charles lets go.

The restaurant is not crowded.

“How many?” the hostess asks in a thin, bored way.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Anne answers.

Charles holds up two fingers behind Anne’s back. As they are escorted to a table he figures out Anne actually had been responding to that old question, “Smoking or non-smoking?”

“You know what I’ve been remembering?” Anne flattens her napkin, always her first move at a restaurant with folded cloth extravagance. “I’ve been remembering what that whatever—baby doctor, what are they called?—said to me before Margy was born. Have I told you? I didn’t know anything and I was worried about the pain. He said as far as he could tell, being a man, the pain of childbirth was roughly equal to that of a broken leg.”

“Was he right?”

“That’s not the point. The point is that every so often someone says something so idiotic that it sticks with you for the rest of your life.”

A busboy has arrived with water. Anne removes the lemon slice from her glass and hands it to Charles. “Do you remember when you bought me those opaque nylons?”

The busboy hurries away, pitcher sloshing.

“Give me a hint,” Charles says, “Which chapter?”

“Pantyhose. Dark tights. For Joey’s graduation party.”

“Admit it, Anne. No one ever really graduated from that place.”

She gives him a look. “I was upset, now that I think about it, because you got the right size.”

“Do you mean wrong?”

“No, I mean right.”

“Well, I would think that would make you happy.”

“I remember sitting there on the bed with this package in my hands, realizing. I knew I’d be forced to wear them, probably forever. The great cover-up.” Suddenly, she laughs.

“What?”

She shakes her head, smiling.

They order. Anne’s smile lingers.

“What?” he asks again as soon as the waiter leaves.

“The benefits of senility.”

“The benefits of senility.”

“You always underestimate the seriousness of my frivolity. Hey, I should write that down. Here’s one. I’m never bored by my own conversation because I can’t remember what I’ve said. Here’s another. My memoir reads like a mystery because I don’t know what’s going to happen next. That old joke: I’m always meeting someone new.”

The benefits of senility, Charles thinks, just might make a good title.

Anne raises her glass. “To senility. It’s not all good. I mean bad.”

My doctor demonstrated on his own arm how the saw he was using would not cut skin, but still Charles looked ill. The doctor began cutting, raising a cloud of plaster dust,

and I sneezed. "I feel like a log at the windowsill," I said, and Charles translated automatically, as he has for years, "Sawmill."

Soon, the doctor cracked the cast open, lifted my leg free, then leaned the spent cast against the cabinets. The leg was pasty white, scrawny, flaky and hairy. I had the absolute certainty it was not my leg at all and never would be.

"Beautiful, just great!" The doctor kept exclaiming as he examined his work. He touched the scar, which stretched like the dumb red smile of a drunk across my lumpy knee.

"Wait a minute!" I wanted to protest, "I want the cast back!" But I didn't say what I felt. Instead I turned again to Charles, who remains to this day incapable of the cheerful subterfuge required to get through life's bad moments. He was by then taking deep breaths and supporting himself against the wall. My poor, poor, brave, pale man. God love him.

"Well, Charles," I asked, "When do we go dancing?"