

Back When I was Charlie

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I was having a Thursday's Thursday. Emails were sent for work. Plans were made for the weekend. I was just getting ready to leave my office. Then out of the blue, Davey texts me and Jason. I hadn't spoken either of them in years. "Rubin called. Spencer died. Cancer. He asked us not to tell you the diagnosis, Charlie. Sorry. I'll send the funeral info when I get it."

David Jones, esquire. David Jones, partner at so-and-so law firm in the so-and-so building. David Jones, family man. Before he was all that, he was just Davey, and I used to beat Davey in everything. I was the quarterback and the valedictorian, even though Davey worked out more and studied harder. I dated Mae even though Davey had loved her since third grade. Now, he's pulled ahead. He's the guy in the know.

I don't respond to the text. I don't know what to say. Jason responds right away though, and it's clear he's broken up about the news. It's been years, but we lost one of our own.

Everyone calls me Charles now, but back when I was Charlie, dubya was president. Culture was sticky, and we were all caught up in it. I wish we didn't say the things we said then. But, when I was Charlie, man, those were my glory days. It's not that I'm a total loser now, even if I haven't lived up to my parent's expectations. I'm doing okay. I've got a job at a bank in Sacramento.

The way I remember my childhood growing up in New Jersey, me, Spencer, David, and Jason were the four kings of my hometown. Orange sodas in my garage. Joints in the woods behind David's house. Co-captains of the football team, even if I was the kid everyone cheered for the loudest on Friday nights. During the summers, we chased sun-kissed girls on boardwalks that seemed to go on forever. I always got the prettiest one. I was happy then. I was Charlie. I wish I still saw the guys, but I don't. They mostly just exist now as smiling characters in the stories I tell my new friends.

During the drive to my apartment, David gives the when and where for the funeral. South Jersey on Saturday. He and Jason pledge to catch up when David flies in tomorrow. Neither comments on my lack of response. I don't know if I can handle seeing the look in their eyes when they realize I'm not what I once was.

Later, I can't sleep. I read the messages from David and Jason again. Spencer can't be dead. We are all still so young. Aren't we? His Instagram was all juice shots, smiling runs, and intentional shirtless photographs. The Spencer I knew was an all-conference running back. Cancer couldn't have caught him. But it did. We all get caught eventually. Whether I'm ready to or not, I need to go to the funeral. I sign the social contract by liking the message from David with the details and book a flight.

I leave work early on Friday. I pack and unpack half a dozen times. If I don't wear the right things—and my suddenly tasteless cufflinks and leather loafers just aren't cutting it—I will feel like an idiot for the entire trip. The last time the guys saw me, I was really me. I want to be that guy, not some Central Valley banker. At the very back of the closet, I find the black suit I used to

wear to every dance, every award dinner, every sweet sixteen back when I was Charlie. It still fits, barely and is hardly musty. Seeing it again, I think back in the day, I would have thought flying across the country in a suit with no bags to be just about the height of chic. Fuck it. I leave without bags. I'm awake and nervous for the last two hours of the flight. Growing up, I can't remember ever being nervous about anything.

The plane lands in Philadelphia. My dad picks me up even though I insisted I was fine getting an uber. He looks older than he did when we last video chatted. He's still driving the same white '01 Durango. We ride to the house I lived in when I was Charlie, and he fills me in on how the high school's football team is this year. Apparently, there's a kid coming for my records. The way he says it makes me think he wishes my records would have been higher.

At home, my mom hugs me and tells me how sorry she is about Spencer. She knows we had fallen out but is decent enough not to say so. My mom is the kind of woman that dreams of place cards.

"No bags?" she asks.

"I didn't bring any." It sounded smarter yesterday.

"I guess it's too much to ask for you to stay a few extra days with your mother. Didn't I buy this for you?" she asks as she thumbs the lapel on my suit.

"Oh, maybe," I say, wishing I had packed something to change into.

"I'll have to get you something new while your home. A man can never have too many good suits." I know what she really means. She means she thought I was doing well, but now she's not sure if I'm wearing some twenty-year-old suit. She means maybe she wouldn't have noticed if I were in better shape and it fit better. She means she doesn't trust my style so she will have to pick out something for me.

They offer to come with me to the funeral, but I decline. I say I'm getting together with the old crew and that seems to pacify them. There's nothing more natural in the world than their son hanging out with David and Jason. I know my mom wants to ask about David. I can see the questions bubbling on her lips. A valedictorian's mother always struggles when her child relinquishes their hard-earned lead in life. Even if our jobs were a tie, which they aren't, he gave his mother grandchildren.

Another set of texts from David and Jason let me know they've arrived at the funeral home. I borrow my dad's car and drive over. On the way, I pass the high school. It's a weekend, but sports teams are practicing on the fields ringing the long tan building. Everything looks so small. I wonder whether I could still sling it if I put the pads back on. I fantasize about a rule change that would allow alumni to come back and play for one more game. What I'd give for another night under the lights. My view of the fields passes in a blur.

I pull into the parking lot at the white funeral home across the street from the gas station where Jason used his fake I.D. to buy dip. None of us liked it, but we liked telling people we did it.

David and Jason are out front. They look like me, in that they are slightly older versions of themselves. They recognize my car and wave. Before I know it, I'm standing next to them. We've never really been huggers, but Jason hugs me, so David and I then become obligated to hug each other.

"How you doing, Charlie? It's been a while," says David. I search for condescension in his face but come up with nothing. It's been years since I heard his voice.

"Oh, you know, getting by. How are the kids?" I ask even though I've never met his kids.

From there, the small talk is in full swing. I get a verbal play-by-play of David's life that I already know about from social media. When he duffs an accomplishment to seem more relatable, I feel like vomiting. Jason shares details of his proud blue-collar life. Getting Cathy pregnant after prom hasn't slowed him down a stitch. He's the best electrician in town, and apparently, his boy plays the same position he did. Even wears the same number.

I don't offer much. Am I supposed to show these guys the folder of nude photos I've saved from women over the years? I realize about a minute into the conversation, outside of my Charlie stories, they are about all I've got.

David let's me know Spencer's partner has asked him to give one of the speeches. He says it as though it's a small thing. The big city might love him. College might have loved him. But this was never Davey's town. This was Charlie's town. There's nothing I can do though, so I just say, "cool."

We go inside. There's a line of people offering their condolences to Spencer's family. Jason and David get in line, but I excuse myself and find a seat at the back. Seeing the guys, that's one thing, but I don't want to make small talk with the supporting cast from my past. There are a few dozen people here from my high school class, and I'd be fine if I never talked to any of them again. I can't remember most of their names anyway. When they come up in the stories, I usually just make up a name. No one really cares whether the girl that cut my lip with her braces was named Natalie or Jennifer.

Sitting alone, I fire up one of the dating apps on my phone and swipe without looking at the photos. Modern dating is just a numbers game. Swipe right for everyone and sort out riff raff later. My thumb is well practiced at this and moves through well over two hundred profiles before Jason can make his way down the line and back to sit with me. I put away my phone.

"How are you really?" He asks me, eyebrows thick, gaze even, radiating the sincerity of a dad.

How did the boy I knew become a father? All I became was old.

"Really, I'm doing ok. Still swimming in babes," I say, flashing a vintage Charlie smile.

Jason nods. He's still got the thickest neck of any man I've ever met.

“Mae is here, just so you know.” He points with his eyes to the front left. David and Spencer knew I didn’t love Mae, but Jason always believed that I did. His job on the field was to protect me. He believed in me more than anyone. I wish we had kept in touch.

I don’t follow Mae on social media. It would be too awkward. I’m certain she won’t want to talk to me. She hasn’t since I broke up with her and went away to college. I wouldn’t know what to say to her even if she did.

“Maybe I’ll go say hi after this,” I offer.

“You should. She’s divorced. She actually lives somewhere out near you. Fresno, maybe? I’m not sure.”

Fresno isn’t really that close. The funeral director asks everyone to be seated. Jason pats my leg and gets up to go sit with David and the rest of the people from our high school class that turned up. He’s a good guy.

The director is a pro. The ceremony runs smoothly. Family gets up to speak. A pastor offers a psalm. A lot of people cry. I spent the entire thing looking for Mae, and when I find her in the crowd, I stare into the back of her head. I don’t know what I want from her. If she turns around, I’ll probably just look away.

“I understand that the family has invited one of Spencer’s old friends to say a few words,” says the director into the microphone. As he says it, Mae turns around to see who is going to stand up. We lock eyes and the way she looks at me, I feel like when I was Charlie for the first time in a decade. That’s my microphone. I stand up and walk down the center isle to the front of the room. David had been standing up slowly, but when he sees me walking, he sits back down.

At the podium, I look out to the room. Everyone looks delighted to see me, just like the old days. Spencer’s partner Rubin, David, and Jason are notable exceptions. Particularly, Rubin looks distraught, but he’s never met me, so I bet I can win him over.

I start my speech by thanking all our old friends for being here. They seem to be getting a kick out of old Charlie back in the saddle. I see some smiles, some nods. I’ve got my shot under the lights. I’ve beat out Davey once again. I know what the people want— Charlie’s greatest hits, Spencer edition. The time we flipped Jason’s dune buggy in the woods or when used seventy-five rolls of toilet paper on mischief night to decorate some girl’s yard or when we hired a mariachi band to march around the school’s halls for the senior year prank. If I know one thing, nostalgia can dam up sadness, at least for a little while.

“We all loved Spencer. I loved him, and I’m so sorry he’s gone,” I bow my head and step down. I feel like a million bucks.

Then, as I walk by Rubin, he grabs my arm, and his grip stops me in place. He forces me to look at him. He’s a handsome older man. Anger looks unnatural on his face, one with smile lines by his eyes and mouth. He eviscerates the fake smile I offer up. Like a silent needle, he plunges shame into me, demanding I know that he knows the truth. When he releases me, I find my seat

in the back. When Mae looks back, I know she wants me like she used to want me, but all I can think about is Spencer. Not Spencer from the greatest hits. Spencer from the last day I ever saw him.

As soon as the ceremony ends, I push through the doors and move towards my dad's car. I hear people calling my name, but I ignore them. I don't want to be Charlie right now. I just want to leave. I pull the door open and heave myself onto the worn cloth seat. Then the other door opens, and David sits in the passenger seat. He slams his door closed. Before he says anything, he unbuttons his suit jacket, as if to declare for one and all that he is civilized.

"What the fuck was that, Charlie? Seriously."

"I thought everyone would want to hear the old stories."

He exhales and rubs his eyes. His nails are manicured, which is obscenely adult of him.

"No. You didn't. You just wanted the spotlight."

I start to respond, but I'm his witness now, a hostile witness that the judge will let him pummel into dust.

"Did you even think about how Rubin would feel?"

"I, well, I thought he might like to hear the old stories too."

"The old stories where you forced Spencer to chase girls? The ones where you called him a f... you know what you called him, if he didn't do exactly what you said? Those stories?"

"Now hold on a second."

"I know what happened, Charlie."

I don't know what to say to that. I don't know how to process being Charlie again and not liking the feeling.

"I know why Spencer didn't speak to you anymore."

"We grew apart," I lie with the effectiveness of a boy punching a wave to stop it.

"He told me about how he tried to come out to you."

"No."

"How you rejected him. How you made him feel like the smallest person in the world."

"No!" David Jones isn't the Davey that would listen to my commands.

"How it took him years of distance from you to finally have the confidence to love Rubin. You never called him after that conversation. You never reached out. You crushed your best friend and abandoned him. That's who you were. That's the only story that matters."

What am I supposed to say to that? He's right. God damnit, he's right. If Charlie was bad, and I'm half the man that boy was, what does that make me?

"I'm not a bad guy," I scramble to think of an example, any example, to redeem myself even an inch. "I voted for Bernie Sanders." It's the only thing I can think of and it falls flat. I want David to know I don't hate gay people, that I don't know why I said those things, that I don't know why I never called Spencer to apologize.

David won't even look at me.

"You should have called him. It broke his heart," says David, tears budding in the corner of his eyes. "God, I can't remember the last time I cried."

"I was just a kid." But wasn't I more than that when I was Charlie? Wasn't I really me?

"You haven't been a kid for a very long time, Charlie. You've had years. Years! Fuck, man. You should have called him," he pauses, words working their way up from deep down, the kind of words that are permanent. "Look, I know we go way back, and I'll always love you, but for those times we shared, but I think this is it for us. I don't want to be friends anymore. I know we haven't really been friends for a long time, but I just had to say it. Good luck with everything."

And just like that, Davey Jones is gone. Spencer is gone. I don't think I'll see Jason again either. I'm alone in the Durango. Texts from Mae light up my phone, chasing the ghost of Charlie from the stories. He isn't here anymore. I want to cry, but I don't. I just sit and feel fat in my old suit.

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