

1. Charlie and David

Even before Nora and the power died, Charlie's and David's lives were mixed up together like pigments on a palette.

Charlie and David lived on two sides of the same lake, Horizon Lake, which wasn't a real lake but a man-made reservoir. Horizon Lake was three miles long and one mile wide and marked the center of Westtown. There were mansions along the west bank, trees along the east. The biggest mansion belonged to the Suns. It was a four-story glass palace, split down the middle like a dollhouse so that the family inside was always visible. At night the Sun house, true to its name, blotted out the stars, tossing its white shadow across the water.

The west-bankers had long ago bought the land on the east bank, so they'd have no ugly houses to mar their view.

The only lot they couldn't buy belonged to a botanist and his wife—Charlie's parents. The land had been in the family for years, and they refused to give it up at any price. The Nuvolas kept an old map of Westtown on their den wall. Charlie had once calculated that if he folded the map in half, Egg Lake in the south and Olive Lake in the north would lie one on top the other, and he liked the natural symmetry. If he folded the map the other way, Charlie's and David's houses would come together like button and clasp.

David and Charlie attended the same all-boys Catholic school on the other side of Route 290. Saint Sebastian's ran from sixth grade through twelfth. Charlie was one of the odd ones who transferred in freshman year, breaking up a homeroom that had been constant three years running. Saint Seb's lauded alternative teaching methods. Rather than moving from room to room throughout the day, students stayed at one desk, taking Web-based classes on personal computers, progressing at their own pace. It was all part of the headmaster's directive to "prepare young men for the modern virtual workplace."

The school was named for Saint Sebastian, who survived a thousand arrows. Sometimes Charlie could relate.

"Here comes Charlie Freak."

"Hey, it's Mr. Magoo! Hey, Magoo!"

"Gnarly Charlie. You get those glasses off an old lady or what?"

Charlie Nuvola was weird. He looked weird; he acted weird; he was interested in weird things. Worst of all, he didn't seem to know or care that everyone else thought he was weird.

Charlie was an early bloomer. The summer after eighth grade, his upper lip was dotted with stiff, greasy hairs, and by freshman year, he tottered over his classmates. From his mother, Charlie inherited a frilly mass of dark hair that loomed like a storm cloud when he leaned in to describe—in his low, rumbling voice—a *fascinating* strain of arti-choke just discovered in Guam.

At lunch, Charlie sat alone, reading the latest issue of *Botanica* or one of his dog-eared Danny Houston novels (a series from the sixties about a dashing boy who solves crimes from a helicopter). Boys at the nearest table competed to land the most French fries in Charlie's hair before he absently swept them away. David Sun was the reigning champion.

The only person who encouraged Charlie was Coach Brackage, who presided over the school's miserable basketball team. Charlie was recruited for one season, and though he was tall, his shots were wild and halfhearted. "Focus, boy!" Coach yelled. "Keep your eyes up! And don't run like you're wearing flippers, for God's sake!"

When basketball season ended, Charlie was glad to have his afternoons back. He liked to follow the brambled path behind the school, away from the bright parking lot where David Sun and his friends lolled half out of their

cars, music booming through their walleyed speakers. The path lead into the woods. This was where Charlie fit. His big feet stepped easily between the rocks and knuckled tree roots, and the branches started just high enough for him to pass under without stooping. The clumsy bee making the lily dip, the lazy blink of a sunny patch when a cloud rolled across it, the distant mutter of dragonfly wings. Every branch, bug, and pebble was connected in a grand plan. This was Charlie's utopia—a world without people.

David Sun fit in by instinct. He had two best friends, John Pigeon (called Clay) and Artie Stubb. Clay, Artie, and David had sat together since sixth grade. Their row shifted from term to term, but the Pigeon-Stubb-Sun phalanx was never broken. The freshman-year arrival of Charlie Nuvola and another boy, Paul Lampwick, threatened to strand Clay in the back of the second row, but a last-minute transfer restored the natural order. Even so, the trio still resented Nuvola and Lampwick, who weren't lifers like them and who were both at Saint Seb's on pity scholarships. David, whose father's monitors topped every desk in the building, especially despised scholarship kids.

Girls liked David. He'd had a girlfriend—a beautiful blonde a year older than he, the star of every school play—until she dumped him on Labor Day. He'd cheated on her. It happened on Nantucket, which to David's mind was out of bounds and therefore fair game. It hadn't been satisfying. The girls on Nantucket were wild dancers, but tight

as clams when he got them alone. Two were steamed open with weed he bought from the local hippie, but he still came home a virgin. They wouldn't even let him past third base. Later, he bragged to Clay and Artie, only to discover the base system varied from region to region, and in western Massachusetts, David had barely rounded second.

"Ah, don't sweat it, Little Dog," Clay said, putting an arm around David's shoulder. Clay, despite being overweight, somehow always had a girlfriend and liked to dispense advice. "See, you've got to make her want it. You've got to run your hand up and down her side, see, and then you kind of graze your thumb . . ."

"Jesus, Clay," Artie said, grinding out his cigarette. "You want to make me sick?"

"I'm trying to tell our boy how to get some boob. . . ."

"Some boob?" Artie held his hands as if cupping a bowl. "Boob is not a substance you can have *some* of. You can't quantify boob."

David laughed, but Clay just shook his head. "So what? You have *fewer* boobs?"

"Right," said Artie, laughing too. "You have *fewer* boobs, and *less* ass."

That killed all three of them, and they actually rolled on the sidewalk outside the Pavilion like a bunch of bums. It was a good night.

Then came the afternoon in September, two weeks before the power outage. Charlie biked home from school, leaned

his rusty ten-speed next to his father's, and pulled open the whining screen door.

Charlie lived alone with his father, Thaddeus, who was a professor at Clark University on a sabbatical of undetermined duration. Thaddeus's passion was New England flora, and he spent hours in the backyard, pondering plants. Like Charlie, Thaddeus was tall. He had a long beard and bushy eyebrows that reminded people of the kitschy wax candles carved to look like tree-spirits. Absent-minded by nature, he would crouch in a patch of poison ivy for hours with his field book, then come inside, muttering to himself, "Where did I put the Dr. Burt's?"

Charlie dropped his bag by the door. There were coffee dregs in the sink and pencil shavings on the table. Charlie deduced his father was home and had probably been doing the crossword. He put his hand to his chin (just like Danny Houston) and pondered what called him away.

The flushing toilet solved the mystery.

"Hey, pal, what's new?" Thaddeus said, emerging from the bathroom with the paper under his arm.

"Nothing."

Charlie downed his afternoon glass of milk in three swallows, then settled into the sofa. Drowsiness enveloped him like the musty cushions. No matter how alert he was at last bell, the comfort of home was like ether, usually knocking him out until suppertime. If the woods were his natural habitat, the Nuvola house, with its wood paneling

and clutter of paperbacks and magazines, was his den. Nothing could touch him here, off the grid.

“This one’s got me stumped,” Thaddeus said, meaning the crossword. “What about a nine-letter word for *truest pal*? Begins with a *c*?”

Charlie mumbled a response. He couldn’t do word games.

Through his thickening doze, Charlie sensed his father watching him. He opened his eyes. Thaddeus was in the La-Z-Boy, leaning forward, hands folded. Charlie had seen his father stare this way at unclassified blossoms. Charlie felt uneasy.

“So, I had my meeting with your school counselor today.”

“Oh?”

“The test results came in.”

The first day of school, Saint Seb’s administered “personality adjustment profiles.” Ten pages of questions like, “If you were a spoon, what sort of handle would you have?”

“The counselor, Dr. Lightly, she told me your results suggested maladjustment.” Thaddeus rubbed his hands together, his voice casual, as if they were discussing the latest article in *Botanica*. “They think you’re depressed.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean?”

“She mentioned Fixol.” Thaddeus scratched at the bare patch of skin under his right eye. Fixol was a popular antidepressant.

Depressed. The word closed like a lid on his brain. And the way his dad smuggled it home, into their den, and dropped it with no more than mild scientific curiosity. He felt sick. Thaddeus placed a hand on Charlie's knee. His pinky was smudged with newsprint and graphite.

"That . . . can't be right." Charlie swallowed. It felt like a walnut was caught in his throat.

"Do you feel depressed?"

"I . . . don't know."

Thaddeus exhaled, his mustache poofing outward. "Well, think about it. OK, pal?" He patted Charlie's knee and rose from the armchair.

Charlie's mother had always said, "Normal follows the path of least resistance." Charlie thought he chose—on some level—to be different, but what if he was wrong? Wasn't he happy? At least sometimes? In the woods? By himself? A test couldn't determine that, could it?

Suddenly he couldn't breathe. Darkness crowded him, filling his nose and ears. It was like drowning. He turned over and puked on the floor.

"Are you OK?" Thaddeus rushed to his side. Charlie's face was green. "Sorry, buddy. I should have thrown that milk out a week ago."

That night, Charlie tossed and turned until three. He went to his desk, turned on the light, and made a list of times during the day when he was happy. Then he made a list of

the times he was sad. The columns were even but showed an obvious trend: Charlie was happy alone. He was miserable with others.

Then he rated, from one to ten, how he felt on average. He remembered when he was a kid, going swimming with his parents at Olive Lake, his dad hoisting him up on his shoulders, his mom laughing and taking a picture. That day was a ten.

He looked at the number he'd written. Three.

Charlie put his head in his hands and thought. He woke later, still at his desk, an oval puddle of drool on the blotter, his Afro dented on one side. He turned off the light and climbed into bed. He lay awake in the darkness for a few minutes, then whispered, "OK." In a moment he was asleep.

2. The Date

What Charlie found attractive in women were brains and personality—beauty optional, popularity an absolute no. On reconsidering, he decided he could stomach someone popular if he had to. His options were limited. Saint Seb’s was separated from its sister school by a shallow ravine, a border Saint Mary’s girls rarely crossed other than to the track behind the old gym—and track girls were tall, somber, and reportedly stuck-up.

Charlie decided on a theater girl. Twice a year the two schools staged a joint play, and by early September the cast was staying late for rehearsals in the Saint Seb’s auditorium. Rebecca Lampwick was Mrs. Higgins in this year’s production of *My Fair Lady*. She had big boobs, which she referred to as “the twins,” and a laugh that started high

and avalanched into her lower register. Charlie first saw her last year when, after basketball practice, he had crossed the auditorium to use the Coke machines. Then she'd been Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, and her big laugh and black eyes seemed to follow him from up onstage.

After two days of reconnaissance, he made his move. Rehearsal started at four, and from three fifteen to three thirty the cast lounged in folding chairs in front of the stage. Charlie entered through the fire door and crossed to the back. They were loud and carefree, ignoring him until he veered toward their loose circle. The chatter stopped. Charlie stood like a Sequoia in a thicket of elms. He cleared his throat. Rebecca, who'd been saying something to Eliza Doolittle in a goofy baritone, turned to the newcomer and smiled.

"What's up, buttercup?" (This in her normal tenor's register.)

"Hi." Three heavily edited flash cards were tucked reassuringly in Charlie's pocket. He focused and recited. "I was wondering if . . . you would like to come . . . with me on Friday night . . . to get some Chinese food."

"Iambic tetrameter?" Pickering asked. Higgins snickered.

That day Rebecca was wearing a billowy pirate's blouse and gypsy earrings, an outfit Charlie thought silly. But up close she was lovely, with skin as white and flawless as windblown snowbanks. The others waited in silent anticipation. They were an incestuous group and wary of outsiders,

especially ones like Charlie, who in some circles was considered a jock, despite his dork status. Charlie swallowed and studied the scuff marks on the floor, only looking up when Rebecca spoke.

There was a lot Charlie didn't know about Rebecca. Her confidence was showy. She felt fat and repulsive because boys her age never talked to her. Only grown men seemed to like her. They shouted at her from their cars, which made her feel like a freak. Last year her history teacher grabbed her chest while driving her home from Model UN, a secret that constricted like a noose around her throat whenever she thought about it.

When Charlie stammered his invitation, that rope seemed to loosen enough for her to slip out. A normal date with a guy her age felt like a last-minute reprieve.

“Yeah. Yes. I'd really like that. Thanks.”

The next week was endless. When final bell rang on Friday, Charlie was the first out of his seat. His preparations were timed to the minute with no room for dawdling. With no car and no permit, he arranged for a cab to arrive at six thirty. Their reservation was for seven. That gave him three and a half short hours to perfect his transformation.

The date required a complete personal overhaul, appearance-wise. Charlie planned to shed his fuzzy school self and expose the finer, hipper person he knew was underneath. “Show her your best self,” said the men's magazine

he'd purchased. For Rebecca he'd reveal the Charlie no one knew, the Charlie he'd been saving.

He imagined himself as a caterpillar gestating in the balmy cocoon of the shower stall. He scrubbed his skin raw and paid extra attention (optimistically) to the undercarriage. Charlie anointed himself with woody cologne and fruity moisturizer. He rarely shaved, and the process was like stripping paint. His new razor made several passes before each stippled red path was clear. He'd selected jeans, a white T, and his father's suede jacket with the fringed lapels—not because it was cool but because it *wasn't*. It was rebellious, quirky, and had an ironic intellectual charm—like him.

At 6:27 Charlie emerged, a leathery, woolly moth, smelling (due to the combination of cologne and moisturizer) like roasted bananas.

The cab was twenty minutes late, and Charlie had to repeat the directions three times. At 7:03 they pulled into a lot across from Denny's. Rebecca lived in a drab apartment building on Cay Street, by the highway. Walking toward the door, Charlie spotted her sitting in the bright lobby reading a magazine. She was wearing a low-cut aquamarine cocktail dress of stiff, shimmering material like scales—a loud outfit, full of personality, which relaxed Charlie somewhat. He called her name but she didn't look up. He called it again, thinking he really should have brought flowers,

and walked into the invisible glass partition that bisected the lobby. The partition chimed like a gong, and Rebecca looked up to see Charlie clutching his nose and mouthing curses. She ran to the door at the far end, and when it opened, Charlie heard a radio grumbling.

“Oh, Jesus, I’m so sorry. Are you OK? They put this in last year because of break-ins. You know, for security. Let me take a look at your nose.”

“I’m fine,” Charlie said, his ears turning scarlet. “Really.”

“They should put up a sign.” Rebecca smiled. “You look really nice.”

“You too. Should we go up to your apartment? Should I meet your parents now, or . . . ?”

Rebecca laughed a little socialite’s laugh. “Oh, now’s not a good time. It’s just a mess up there and Dad’s had a long day at work, so . . .”

“Oh. OK.”

“Is that our carriage?”

“It is. I don’t have my permit yet, so . . .”

“No, no. It’s perfect.”

She smiled again, and Charlie felt warm all over, even as his nose began to throb.

Dinner was at the Peony Pavilion, a pan-Asian restaurant with dancing after nine. The food was cheap and the carding policy lax, so it was a popular date spot. When they arrived, some public-school girls were smoking in the stone pavilion outside. Seeing them reminded Charlie of his men’s

magazine, *Nice!*, and its “Ten Surefire Dating Tips from Real Women.” He could only remember one, contributed by Melinda, 21, of Brooklyn: “When leaving the bar, I always love it when he places his hand on the small of my back. It’s sexy and reassuring. It sort of makes me feel owned—but in a good way!” This was Charlie’s ace in the hole, and remembering it made him walk a little faster toward the golden entranceway.

A waitress in a flowered robe led them to a glass-topped table near the back. *Pavilion* and *Tax Included* were the only English words on the menu.

“I guess it’s order by number, huh?” Rebecca said. “My luck, I’ll wind up with boiled goat feet.”

“I don’t think they do those.”

“Right.”

“Do you like edamame?”

“What are those?”

“Salty bean pods.”

Rebecca giggled. “Oh, Charlie, I like the way you talk.”

Charlie took a sip of his water. He couldn’t tell if she was laughing at him or not. What was funny about . . . ? Oh.

“Well, then you’ll love number four,” he said. Number four was Chicken Dong.

“Hm?”

“Number four. On the menu.”

“Oh! Why?”

“Uh, because.” Charlie coughed into his fist. “Because it’s Chicken Dong.”

“Dong?”

“Should go well with salty bean pods.”

Rebecca blinked. “Oh. OK, now I get it. Ha, ha.” She pronounced it as two words: Ha. Ha.

Charlie hid behind his menu. By the time the waitress brought the salty bean pods, he was ready to leave. Rebecca talked about her interests, which were theater and Romantic literature. “That’s with a capital *R*,” she said. She preferred Shaw to Beckett, Lerner and Loewe to Rodgers and Hammerstein, and had no time for Stanislavski. She tossed these names out naturally, but to Charlie they were as foreign as the menu’s squiggles. Gibberish. When it was his turn, he told her about the *Epigaea repens* he’d seen last week, rare this time of year.

“Is that a bird?”

“A flower.”

She didn’t know any of the scientists he mentioned—they weren’t *that* obscure—and identified the posies on the waitress’s sleeve as “lavender.”

They spoke the same language, but their English was like Mandarin to Morse code. Their body language was no better. Rebecca sent signals Charlie didn’t understand. When she leaned across the table to tease the fringe of his jacket, she was saying, “Charlie, aren’t my breasts fantastic?” But Charlie heard, “Your clothes are intriguing; tell me more about them!” When she moved her shoulders to the music, she meant, “I love this song. Ask me to dance!” But Charlie thought she meant, “I’m so bored, I’m fidgety.”

And at the end of the night, when she squeezed his hand and smiled sadly over the electric candle, meaning, “I’m sorry we didn’t really hit it off,” Charlie heard, “Now would be a good time to lean over and kiss me.”

So Charlie went for it. Rebecca, who wasn’t expecting a kiss at all, and certainly not before the check arrived, turned her head to look for the waitress and turned back in time to see Charlie’s face making a poorly aimed dive toward her own. She yelped and jerked back, sending Charlie farther off course. He tried to abort but put his elbow in the soy sauce. He did kiss her — sloppily, on the chin — before falling almost into her lap, which had retreated with the rest of her a good seven inches from the table. To onlookers it appeared as if an Afroed cowboy had vaulted across the table at an unwilling date, when in reality he had leaned in gracefully (just at the wrong time) and his date wasn’t unwilling (just very, very surprised). Charlie landed at her feet, and the two stared at each other in mute horror for three agonizing beats before the entire room erupted in applause.

Charlie sat back in his seat and they waited, not looking at each other, until the bill was at last paid. As they left, ignoring several cheers from the tables they passed, Charlie figured at least he had the small-of-the-back trick. But when he went to place his hand, the large bow on the back of Rebecca’s dress was in the way, and since he couldn’t put his palm on her butt, he pressed instead on her mid-back between her shoulder blades.

To Rebecca, who tended to take responsibility for everyone's misery, it felt like her date was bodily shoving her out the door. She felt she had humiliated Charlie. The look of startled hurt in his eyes when she yelped — actually yelped! — seared her. On top of that, she'd apparently made him feel bored and awkward during dinner. Now she took his stony silence for anger, and as soon as they reached the pavilion she dropped onto one of the cement benches and started to sob. Charlie wanted to give her space and so turned away, and misinterpreted Rebecca's sputtered explanations for inarticulate but furious blubbing.

They were alone until the cab came. Charlie opened the door for her. The cabby's radio played Johnny Cash, and when they pulled up to Rebecca's building, she muttered a hoarse "thank you" and disappeared, her skirt swishing behind her like a fish's tail.

As the cab's headlights swept the quiet lot, Rebecca appeared in her bedroom window. She fogged the glass with her breath and wrote what looked like seven digits of a phone number with her fingertip. The building receded, and Charlie tried to make out the numbers, and wondered why she would write them (he had her number already). Only the middle three were legible, 0-7-7, followed by maybe a backward five. As the cab pulled onto Cay Street, Charlie's tired brain groped one last time before he gave up and closed his eyes against the ghostly trees and the whole awful night.

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Rebecca climbed under her down comforter and stared at the moon through her window. Her cell phone, which she'd left on her nightstand, chirped insistently. She silenced it—she would check her messages tomorrow.

Her head ached from crying, and her chest felt bound and tight, making it difficult to relax. As sleep began to crowd her thoughts, she thought back on the night and realized that *I'm sorry*, when read backward from the back-seat of a moving cab, fifty yards away, might not make sense.