

A Sign of the Times

I wish he would speak to me.

Another day brought another fight and another haunted night spent stitching up his own wounds. He sat alone, blood dripping from various parts of his body leaving indications of where his opponents landed their blows.

How did it get this bad?

“He needs to let out some of his anger,” his father would say.

His mother would mumble “I just don't want him to get hurt,” and then the conversation would end. She was fading from a disorder no one would understand until it was too late. She hated confrontation because she “just couldn't take it anymore”. At least, that's what he overheard his mother say one night when his father came home late. The man's excuse was that it was just “so damn depressing” in this small pocket of a city they lived in. “That boy can't function unless his fist is in someone's face and all you do is sleep and whine and sleep some more.” The woman didn't put up a fight but the argument ended with the boy's father packing up the few items he had in this world, his son not being one of them, and leaving his family alone in that ratty apartment.

He never said goodbye. I mean I guess it's better he left than to stay his punching bag but what kind of father- what kind of man leaves his only child without saying goodbye. He was scum.

After his father left, the boy, named Charles, started to notice things. He watched his mother more closely in the afternoon hoping that something in her face or behavior would

explain why his father had left and if he was ever going to return. Every other night, when she insisted they “watch TV” together, he would glance over at her. She’d walk over to the tattered sofa, the only piece of comfortable furniture in the apartment, and flick on any random show. Nothing in her actions ever offered an explanation and Charles never cared to watch any show so he’d sit with her long enough for her to fall asleep. When she was asleep he’d grab one of the old blankets they kept in a hallway closet and lay it on top of her.

She would always fall asleep. No matter where we were or what time of day it was, she was always exhausted. At least I wanted to believe she was just tired.

He’d watch his mother every night. Somedays he’d think about his father and others he just thought about how he should be grateful that his mom was there even though mentally she grew more and more distant.

The only thing his father gave him, that he kept, was his first pair of boxing gloves. They weren’t new and they weren’t in the best condition but his father instructed him to “take care of those gloves like your life depended on them because one day it might”. At first, him and his father would practice throwing punches in the living room. His father held up a pillow and told him to hit it as hard as he could. They’d do it for hours until dinner or until his mother suggested he do his homework. Then, his father insisted that they “spar” together. The boy thought he and his father were only play fighting but on days when his father was really angry he’d see that beating on the boy was his father way of “dealing” with his anger.

As a boy, I could never understand my father’s hypocrisy when it came to my anger. If I had a fight at school, usually the only “treatment” for my issues my dad suggested was throwing

punches at me. Now, I see that he saw himself in me and his way of apologizing for burdening me with this anger was beating me black and blue.

After a few weeks of lessons in the living room, his father took him to a local gym. Charles walked around the gym while his father spoke to the owner about prices. Eyes wide open, he saw adults, teens and kids sparring in and around the boxing ring in the center of the gym. All of them being coached and prepped. He reveled in the inescapable sound of violence. Fists making contact with varying body parts, limbs hitting the mats spread across the floor, jabs rapidly being thrown into punching bags. In the corner was a man no older than 30 jump-roping so fast that you could hear the rope hit the wind every single time. In this gym there was no scolding or belittling. No instructors beating down on kids.

I was almost ashamed to show my parents how eager I was to join. How much I craved to be in an environment where they cared for kids. Where they wanted to show them how to protect themselves the right way. Where, if I didn't show up they would worry. Where I was greeted when I walked in instead of ignored.

It seemed as though his father was going to be right about this solution to his problem but then, his father left and his mother couldn't produce enough money for him to continue his lessons. He decided to save face and avoid pity, something his father would've wanted him to do, and just stop going.

I had to make him proud. Even after all he did, he had embedded in me a sense of stubborn pride that I still haven't rid myself of.

After a few days had passed his mother sent him to get some potatoes from the nearby market and Charles ran into George, the owner of the gym. He asked Charles where'd he been.

Ashamed of the answer, the boy flew into a fit of rage. “Its none of your business! What do you care? Leave me alone!” He pushed past the man and ran home forgetting to pay for the potatoes..

He paid for those potatoes. The grocer told me later that he paid for them so I wouldn't get in trouble and he never spoke on it. When I tried to apologize he said “forget your past, forgive yourself and begin again”.

Later that night George came to the apartment. Charles didn't leave the bedroom him and his mother shared. He listened through the door as his mom explained their whole situation to this stranger. He could only catch a few words here and there because his mothers voice was so soft.

Father would have called her weak. I'd be lying if I said I didn't think it myself.

Then he heard the door to the apartment close and his mother slipped a letter under the door. In the letter George had written a contract explaining that Charles was to show up to the gym right after school every other day practice as hard as he could. As long as he did that and stayed out of trouble, he could continue going to the gym free of cost.

The next morning Charles explained to his mother that he couldn't take charity and that he would rather not box. All his mother said was “The contract is for you. The decision is yours.”

All day at school he thought about the contract, about why George cared so much. What he had to gain from helping him? After school he went to the gym to return the contract unsigned and George stood at the door waiting for him. “You got my contract Charlie?”

“Why? What does it matter if I box?”

The man explained to him that if he needed to box to get through school then it was important to the man that he box. “No matter what your schooling comes first. You need that brain for the important things,”

I've let him down.

“Your mom told me you're smart. That you got a 'scientific mind'. Well, I want you to use it.”

I boxed my way through high school but I couldn't do more George. Not without you. Not alone.

Watching his mother every other night, he might have been the first person to catch the disorder. He was the only person who stared close enough to see that her heart was literally breaking. Walks to the couch took longer than usual. Required more energy. She fell asleep much quicker. The trip from the kitchen which used to last a few seconds became an eternity of waiting for his mother to shuffle her aching feet across the wooden floorboards in the floor. Her chest moving up and down at the speed of the water dripping from the kitchen sink. Their tempos matching up and managing to slow time with them. Her shoulders slumped as she leaned forward probably hoping it would propel her forwards so she'd reach the couch sooner. Her head a lead balloon weighing her down.

He'd have told her to see a doctor except physically she looked fine. Her frame was always small. She couldn't eat more than a half a plate of food and since she slept half the day she was extremely frail. Charles' mother hadn't worked in years and never developed skills for anything. She applied to odds and ends jobs but no one would hire someone in her state. She was miserable all the time and always cried, blaming herself for everything. She even blamed herself

for things she couldn't control, like her husband leaving.. Charles and his mother held on for weeks praying that the man would come back.

He never came back but our bills did every month and then I lost her. She seemed to whither away slowly. Leaving me alone because she was too fragile, too weak to stay.

Charles' mother finally gave in to her illness and took her own life only a few months after his father abandoned them. A social worker explained to Charles that his mother suffered from Persistent Depressive Disorder also known as chronic depression. "Your mother loved you very much but she was dealing with a lot and it just got so hard for her so she made a very difficult decision. I'm sure she only wanted what was best for you. " The social worker gave him that speech on the way to her office.

We'd have found a way to fix things. I'd have asked George. He would have helped us. Helped her, but she was selfish. Both of them were. They never grasped the concept of being active parents. Never fought their own demons so when they left, those demons began haunting me.

The woman tried her hardest to locate the boy's father but her efforts were in vain. When asked if he knew of any family members he could stay with the boy responded with "I don't know." Turns out he didn't. Not one family member living and/or willing to take in a boy they've never met. He went to a foster family for a few days.

They weren't terrible. I'm sure they genuinely wanted to help me and that was already better than what I was used to but, I wasn't worried about finding "new parents". I wasn't even interested in finding a "family" at all.

Days became weeks and he was placed in another foster family because of his “anger issues”. Weeks turned to months and before he even reached his teen years, 2 foster homes turned to 6 and 2 group homes.

Those on the other hand were horrible. An all boy’s group home where most of the children were eager to make the new kid wet the bed probably wasn’t the best idea for a kid like me. When recess came, the boys would have brawls in the courtyard. They’d hold matches with “prizes” like a few bucks or candy they got from friends at school. I probably fought every kid there every single day until my social worker moved me. There were days there where I didn’t sleep because I swore to myself I had to stay prepared for the next attack.

His social worker took him out to lunch every few weeks and asked him about his current placement. He would explain that he hated it and that she should give up on finding him a home. All the while he prayed day in and day out for God to bring his father back. “We are working to find him and get you into his custody but its not a walk in the park.”

“Whatever.”

He was a piece of scum but getting beat by my father was better than traveling around the county and getting beat by new strangers every few months.

“Charles I have something to tell you.” One afternoon instead of taking him out for lunch his social worker instead took him to a local carnival. They walked through the games and food booths for some time before the woman actually said what she wanted to tell him.

With a mouth full of funnel cake, Charles spit out “What?”

“They found your father.”

“Really? So does that mean that I can I go stay with him?”

From the reaction of the lady he should have known she brought no good news. He realized then that she had been fidgeting with her fingernails and biting her lip. The social worker wasn't an old woman in fact she was surprisingly young. Charles guessed he must have been one of her first cases. "Charles...your father--"

"Yeah what about him?" The boy stopped walking. "WHAT ABOUT HIM?" Charles began to lose his temper causing his body to vibrate. The sugar from the cake started to fall out of the plate. Had the woman not answered at the time she did, the whole cake may have flown off.

"Charles, your father has passed. He was found a few days ago in an alley. It looked as though he had been fighting and..." Charles stood there in shock not knowing how to handle the fact that not only had his father passed but with him he took any chance of Charles returning to some kind of familiarity.

I held onto the hope that maybe my father heard about my mother's suicide and was working towards bettering himself so that he could come for me. But, I was an idiot to expect scum to be anything more than scum. After that it was impossible for me to see my life getting any worse. But it did, so much worse but before that happened it seemed to better.

"It can only get better Charles." That's what his social worker said to him as she left in a group home full of disgruntled orphans just like him. The next set of words she said to him after seemed to reflect that sentiment. "The court is finally allowing you to stay with someone you know. He's been fighting for custody of you for months now but he's gotten some push back.

"What are you talking about? You said my father was dead."

“He is Charles but now that we have a confirmation of his whereabouts the pushback from the courts won’t stop George from-”

“George?”

“Now he won’t be able to adopt you right away but we are taking steps towards that outcome.”

“You said George? Boxing George? Why does he want me?”

“He cares for you Charles. He vouched for you in court when they wanted to put you in a juvenile detention center.

“Well, Can I leave now?”

I never gave much thought to George before that day. I thought he was like all other adults. He would just forget about me when I was no longer convenient to him. When I no longer mattered. That’s what my mother and father did. But, when I saw him I knew he meant what he told the courts, that he believed in me and my ability.

Charles was able to move in with George who lived in an apartment above the gym he owned. It was visibly understandable why the court was reluctant to grant him full custody of a child. However, with George’s presence in the community, especially with troubled adolescents, the court came around.

Getting back into boxing and school, Charles was becoming content with his current situation. George also was able to get Charles to sit down with a counselor a few times a month. He enjoyed 3 full months of living with George before the courts granted him full custody.

“Guess you’re officially my responsibility now Charlie.”

“Guess so.”

“Well, then I guess it’s time we get you your own space huh? Or you could always stay on the living room cou--.”

“No.”

“Okay then lets go. I have to get out of this suit.”

“I don't think I've ever seen you in a suit before.”

“If I'm being honest, I don't know if I've ever worn a suit before this.”

We buried him in a suit. He told us if he ever passed he wanted to be buried in style.

“Keep the neighborhood on its toes.”

When Charles was a sophomore in high school he went to compete in a boxing match in a nearby city. He traveled with another coach from the gym because George didn't feel comfortable being away from his gym for a weekend. While he was at the competition, his coach received a phone call that the gym had caught on fire. George was upstairs sleeping and by the time they were able to put it out he had died from smoke inhalation. They found his body trapped in an eternal sleep. Charles was given George's cross necklace that he always wore.

“I cant take this, just bury him with it.”

“I'm certain that he would have wanted you to have it. He always spoke about giving it to his kid one day and though he parented many kids through that gym, you were the closest thing to a son he ever had.”

The coach who was with Charles when the fire started had been put in charge of funeral arrangements. He let Charles handle as much of the responsibilities as he could. Probably because he felt pity for the boy. He knew how happy Charles was when he won his match. He wanted to show George his belt as soon as they got back home.

Home. It seems like such an unfamiliar word now. My living situation in that apartment with my parents didn't even feel like a home. My mother didn't pay much attention to her only child. There were days I had to find my own ways to get food to eat. My father spent every moment he was home abusing and belittling my mother and I but George, he always made sure I wasn't hungry or bored or hurt or uncared for. In fact, with George I experienced "smothering" for the first time. I miss him.

Losing another parental figure made Charles become a recluse. He was put back into the foster care system till he became 18. Once he aged out he decided to continue boxing but, without the proper guidance and with all the emotional baggage he carried, he began to fight dirty. This resulted in him being kicked out and banned from a lot of competitions. This led him to turn to underground boxing matches. And these matches only paid well if you beat your opponent to a pulp. He was good at it but, in the end he knew it wasn't what he truly wanted. Every time he boxed he would take off the cross necklace out of respect for George.

I let him down enough. How could I possibly wear one of his most prized possessions while doing something I know he would disapprove of? The only man to care. I know my father got what was coming to him and my mother got what she wanted but I hate them for not thinking I was enough. I wish I wore this necklace because I believed in the same God Charles did. I wish his God could show me what to do. I wish he would speak to me.

Charles' old social worker contacted him many times after he aged out of the system but Charles never responded. One day when he was coming out of a local deli he ran into her and convinced him to sit down for lunch like they used to do years before. After speaking about

George and Charles' past the woman recommended that he go back to the counselor he was seeing when he lived with George.

“I didn't know George extremely well but, I know his dedication to you and I know that's what he would have wanted.”

“How can you know what he would've wa-“

“Because when the judge gave the condition that you could stay with George only if you consistently went to counseling he said 'that's no problem he'll go' and when the judge questioned how he knew you would he answered 'Because that kid is smart. He's got a scientific mind. He'll choose what's right.'”