

*“If something comes to life in others because of you,
then you have made an approach to immortality.”*

Norman Cousins

PROLOGUE

Nobody expected Charlie when he was born. Not the doctor, not the nurses, and least of all his parents. His sister, Becky, came out first and was supposed to have been the only baby, and it wasn't until the doctor called out, "Holy crap! There's another one!" that anyone knew he was alive.

"Nooooo!" his mother wailed, delirious with pain and exhaustion. "We can't afford another one! Push it back in!"

His father left the room, and when the doctor ordered one of the nurses to get him, she found him slumped against a wall in the corridor, blowing into a paper bag.

For nine months he had managed to stay under the radar. And it was this uncanny ability to make himself go unnoticed that made him who he was. Or wasn't, depending on how you looked at it. He had given his parents many near-heart attacks by disappearing at random. On his second birthday his grandfather found him at a bus stop, sitting on his scooter, head resting on the bench. Fast asleep. He'd had to cross one of the busiest roads in town to get there.

So, technically, he and Becky were twins and their parents referred to them as such. But people in the street always thought Becky was his older sister and, really, they were like night and day. He was sensitive and quiet—a thinker—and always a bit on the skinny side. He had brown hair and grayish-green eyes, depending on the light. His grandmother—Oma, he called her—always said he looked like his father, but he did not see the resemblance. Becky, on the other hand, was big for her age and a bit chubby, with blond hair and blue eyes, just like their mother.

"She looks so Dutch!" people would say, referring to his mom's heritage. Becky was loud and everybody always oohed and aahed over her, and she lapped it up.

Every year on their birthday, after Becky had blown out the candles on their cake, the story of his birth was rehashed to an eager audience.

"We really had no idea whatsoever that little man was hiding in there," his father would say while patting his mother's belly. "He must have crawled in there when no one was looking. We were truly *not* prepared for Charlie Campbell."

"What a surprise it was!" his mother would add and swat his father's hand off her belly. "Can you imagine? Suddenly you need to have two of everything. The extra money we had to

spend . . . a *fortune* on diapers alone! And not to mention the extra sleep we lost . . . We were like zombies that first year! I nearly burnt down the house once . . . I was cooking when Charles started to cry—Becky was being a good girl, as usual,” she’d add with a loving glance at Becky, who would cast a smug look at him, “and I was so sleep-deprived that I forgot to turn off the stove . . . My goodness, we were lucky we didn’t all *die* because of Charles!”

He always laughed politely along with everyone, even when he wasn’t yet old enough to understand. But with every passing year, the weight of his parents’ remarks pressed a bit heavier on his shoulders.

1. LIFE'S HARD

He waited in line, tapping his foot impatiently. He felt nervous and excited. The people in front of him put their valuables in a tray and stepped through the metal detector. Some were being searched by the security staff, one of whom was a very pretty young woman. She had beads woven into the long braids in her hair, beautiful light-brown skin, like velvet, and a dazzling smile amplified by the sparkle in her big brown eyes. He had noticed her straight away and cringed at the thought that she may have to search him. He was sixteen years old today and totally *not* in control of his body—the thought of her touch alone sent shockwaves through his system.

A mother and her daughter were next. The girl was young, a toddler, and she was upset because she had to put her teddy bear in the tray. “He needs to go through the machine, honey,” her mother said. “That way they can see if he’s healthy enough to come with you.” The girl wailed and screamed the bear’s name, “MJ! I want my MJ!”

When he heard it, he sniggered. He wondered if it had been the girl’s idea to give her teddy bear that name. Judging by the T-shirt her mother was wearing, probably not. The King of Pop was dead, but he still reigned from beyond the grave, more powerful than ever.

The soundtrack of Charlie’s life, the one that was always playing in the back of his head no matter where he was or what he did, skipped to “Thriller.”

“Next!” one of the guards yelled.

He put his bag on the conveyor belt and made absolutely sure he did not leave anything in his pockets to avoid the potentially disastrous pat-down, and then stepped through the gate. To his relief, no alarm bells went off. The beautiful guard smiled at him, so he smiled back, keen to make a good impression, and grabbed his stuff. Crisis avoided.

“Can you please step over here, sir?” the beautiful guard motioned at him.

He felt a bit intimidated by the authority in her voice.

“Y-y-yes, ma’am, of course,” he stammered.

“Spread your legs and hold your arms out, please.”

He did as she ordered. *Breathe*, he told himself. He closed his eyes and felt her hands all over his body. The beads in her hair clicked rhythmically while she moved. *Think of something else, think of something else, think of something else.*

“Is that a pocketknife you have in there, or are you just happy to see me?” she suddenly asked in a stern voice.

Gasp! Nooo! He didn’t have . . . he wasn’t . . . Oh my God . . . The blood rushed to his cheeks and he opened his eyes.

“Wh-wh-what . . . ? I . . . um . . . I . . .” he mumbled. *Something strike me down now.* An instant hole in the ground would do too.

“Just kidding, kid. You’re good to go.”

He heard the glee in her voice and the other guards chuckled. Great, he was going to be *that* kid from now on. Embarrassed, he quickly grabbed his things and went on his way through the long corridor. It was just like catching an airplane.

At the next set of doors he had to wait in line again, this time to sign in and receive a visitor’s badge. No beautiful guards here—only a pasty white, whale of a guy with BO that could floor an elephant. The sight and smell of the guy made him sick, so he averted his eyes and caught his reflection in a large, one-way mirror on the wall. His hair had flopped down to its usual droopy state. No matter how hard he tried to get that just-got-out-of-bed-after-having-hot-sex-all-night-look that was so popular right now, his hair would not obey. He took another peek in the mirror. Yeah, he looked like he was having hot sex all right. With himself.

James Brown passionately screamed, “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine.”

He signed his name in the visitor’s log and clipped the badge onto his blue hoodie. The metal gate behind him ground closed with a loud clank. The visitor’s room was decorated with colorful balloons and signs that read *Happy Birthday!* and *Hip, hip, hurray!* Apparently it was Family Fun Day. He sighed. Woo-hoo. Instead of giving the dull gray interior a cheerful lift, the decorations made the atmosphere even more melancholic, more desperate. It was as if they shouted, “We can’t come home to celebrate everybody’s birthdays because we are stuck behind bars. But, hey, why don’t you come to us, and we’ll pretend it’s all okay?”

He spotted his dad—head down, shoulders hunched, hands folded—at a table in the back, underneath a flickering fluorescent light.

“Dad!” he called.

His dad looked up and his face lit up like a Christmas tree. Charlie was shocked. He had not seen his father in four years—they had only exchanged letters—and he looked so much older. Nicholas Liam Campbell had been a tall, confident, clean-shaven, suit-wearing business

man who always had a joke ready, but the man he saw now was barely a shadow of his former self. His stubble was a mixture of black and gray, he had dark circles under his sad eyes, and his skin looked drab—a match to the shapeless gray coveralls he was wearing. It was like this place had sucked the life out of him.

Triggered by the bittersweet, torturous atmosphere, the radio in his head skipped to Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues."

"Charlie! So good to see you! I wasn't sure you'd come! I'm so glad you did!"

His father hugged him so tight he could barely breathe. "My God, you are so big now, bigger than me even!" His dad looked up at him admiringly.

"Hi, Dad. How are you?" he asked softly and found it difficult to look into the man's eyes—it was like he was talking to a stranger.

"Been better, been better. Have a seat. Happy Birthday, son! Sweet sixteen, huh?"

He nodded. Way to spend his birthday in prison. Not that anybody cared what he was doing anyway—his mom hadn't even acknowledged him this morning at breakfast.

"You shouldn't have, Dad," he quipped and motioned at the decorations.

"Ah, no trouble at all, no trouble!" His dad smiled, and Charlie was glad to see it. But suddenly tears welled up in his father's eyes and his old man leaned over the table in an awkward attempt at a hug.

"I'm so sorry . . ." His dad's voice was hoarse with emotion.

Was his dad talking about going to prison, or . . . ? His stomach churned.

". . . about Opa Bill," his father whispered, "and that I couldn't be there for you when your grandfather, uh . . ."

Charlie's breath faltered and his heart felt like someone had stabbed it with a blunt carving knife. Eight months ago, Opa Bill had suddenly died of a heart attack. It had been the single worst day of his life, and every day since then was a battle against the overwhelming grief he still felt. It lay sealed in a little room inside his heart and now his dad had tampered with the door.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Thanks, Dad," he said with a lump in his throat. *Focus harder. Swallow. Breathe.*

"Here, have some water." His dad pushed a plastic cup in his direction.

“So, how is everyone?” he asked, his tone too upbeat for the occasion. “How’s Becky? How’s Sofia—your mom?” His dad had never been one to dish out comfort in times of sadness—a change of subject was much safer.

“Mom’s fine. She says hi.” He swallowed as the words came out of his mouth. His mother wasn’t fine and she didn’t even know about his visit. She didn’t allow Becky and him to visit their father in prison and she had no clue about the letters he had sent his dad with the help of Opa Bill. He felt sorry for his dad. It was his own fault, too, that his dad had ended up in prison. After all, Dad committed tax fraud only so he could provide for his family. That’s what he screamed when the police had shown up at their door that fateful afternoon four years ago to arrest him.

“And Becky?” his father urged.

“Becky’s fine . . .” he sighed. “She’s, you know, just being Becky.” He still couldn’t look his dad in the eye. He didn’t mention that two years ago Becky had turned into the devil’s teenage spawn with only one goal: making his and their mom’s life a living hell.

The volatile verses of the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy For The Devil” matched Becky’s anarchic nature perfectly.

“She says hi too.” More lies. He didn’t mention either that Becky had not uttered a word about their dad ever since he had been arrested. She acted like he didn’t exist anymore.

“So, one year to go, huh?” he asked, hoping that the prospect of freedom would cheer his dad up a bit.

“Yeah, only one year.” His dad smiled reluctantly. “Do you think your mother will take me back?”

He knew his dad was joking, but the poor guy couldn’t hide the hope in his voice, even though his ex-wife’s no-shows on visiting days must have been a telltale sign.

He swallowed. He hated this part. In his letters he had gotten away with ignoring his father’s questions, but now that he was sitting opposite the man it was a different story.

“Well, you never know with Mom . . .” He stared at the table and a knot formed in his stomach. Why couldn’t he just tell the truth? Why couldn’t he just say that she took every opportunity she had to slander her ex-husband? That she was seeing Cliff, this douche guy from work?

“So, tell me, how’s school? How are your grades?” His dad looked at him expectantly. Finally a chance to tell the truth. Well, sort of.

“School’s fine. My grades are good.” They were great actually. It was the perfect way to go unnoticed by his teachers. As for his fellow students, well, that was a different story. At his old school he had always been a bit of a loner and he had been fine with that. Going to his new school, on the other hand, was like being put under a magnifying glass.

The weird, interesting creatures were scrutinized the most. He was the loser-weirdo-smart-guy with his headphones glued to his head, who lived in Crapville, and whose dad was supposedly a violent criminal.

His alleged reputation had been enough for his classmates to leave the chair next to him empty on his first day. Up until that day the police came for his dad, he was protected by a one-way shield that allowed him to look out and observe other people and prevented other people from looking in. But his father’s arrest and the divorce put holes in the shield—and he had suddenly felt naked and defenseless.

“So, tell me, what are you doing this summer?”

His dad’s voice startled him.

“I . . . um . . . I have a job at the record store, actually.” A surge of excitement pumped through his body. For months he had been hassling the owner of the small store, where he and Opa had gone for years, for a job. Last week the guy had called and offered him a job for the summer. He started in six days. He had been buzzing with excitement all week—the prospect of spending his summer submerged in vinyl was almost too good to be true.

“The record store, huh?”

Charlie couldn’t help but notice the disappointment in his father’s voice. For some reason, his dad had always frowned upon his and Opa’s hobby, which Dad had always described as “wasting money on plastic.” Dad’s fishing boat and paraphernalia obviously fell into a different category of plastic altogether.

His dad frowned. “Didn’t you write that you were applying for an internship at one of the local law firms?” he asked sharply.

“Right, the law firm.” He hesitated but felt he had told enough lies already. “They . . . um . . . they don’t look so fondly upon an intern whose father is in prison.” He felt guilty saying it, but it was the truth.

“Ah, yes, of course. Sorry, that one’s completely on me.” His dad smiled sheepishly and added, “Better luck next year, maybe, you know, when I’m out. It will probably look better on your college application anyway when you do an internship closer to your graduation.”

He nodded halfheartedly.

“Have you thought about law schools yet?” his dad went on. “I mean, with your grades you could probably get in anywhere. They’ll be lucky to have you.”

“Hmm . . . um,” he mumbled. He hated this part too. His parents were no longer on speaking terms, but they still shared the same dreams for his future. Law school (on a scholarship, of course), gorgeous fiancée (*so* not ready for that; need to get past first base first), great job (suits—don’t think so), beautiful wedding (barf), happy family (kids, yuck), happy ending (only in the movies, people!). They had not managed to complete the sequence and needed him to do it so they could redeem themselves.

He didn’t want to disappoint them, but their pipe dreams were starting to close in on him like zombies on a moonless night, with gaping mouths and greedy arms, and he couldn’t see an out. If he didn’t turn around and run now, the monsters would grab him and drag him into the grave. And he didn’t want to be buried alive; he wanted to break free and take on the world. Maybe stand in front of a sea of people and belt his lungs out while the band behind him played the tightest tune anyone had ever heard. To feel the heat come off the ecstatic bodies, to hear them scream his name. To hurl himself off the stage into their waiting arms, to be swallowed by their passion and drown in their energy—

But how could he make them understand without hurting them?

“Well, the owner of the firm said I could apply again next year and I’ll definitely try then,” he said quickly and gave himself an imaginary kick in the balls. He had betrayed himself again.

A shadow suddenly fell over their table and when Charlie looked up, he saw a massive guy staring at him curiously. The man was at least six feet four and had a bald head, a black goatee, and a barbwire tattoo around his neck. The giant’s appearance screamed outlaw. Charlie shrunk in his seat.

The convict smacked him on the back so hard that the air was forced out of his lungs and his bones rattled.

“Dis your boy, Nick?” the guy grunted.

Charlie coughed and tried to breathe. Holy crap, that ogre was strong!

“Oh, hey, Wade,” his dad said with a smile. “Yes, this is Charlie.”

Wade held out his enormous hand and Charlie was afraid to shake it, but he didn't want to seem like a wuss so he shook it as firmly as he could. His knuckles cracked, but he managed to keep a straight face.

“Your old man here saved my life, did he tell you that?” Wade grunted.

He shook his head in surprise. “N-n-no sir, he did not,” he stammered.

Wade grinned. “Call me Wade. I ain't no sir, but I appreciate the courtesy.”

He cleared his throat. “Okay . . . Wade.”

“Well, I'm allergic to kiwifruit,” Wade began.

Charlie raised his eyebrows in surprise. The thought of that giant being held hostage by an innocent little kiwifruit was kinda funny, but he somehow didn't think Wade would share his opinion, so he took a sip of water to keep himself from laughing.

“My old lady, bless her bones, baked me a birthday cake and put some kiwifruit in it. She ain't the brightest spark, y'know, and she forgot all about my allergy. So when I ate a piece, I got one of them anal-factastic shocks.”

“Pfffffffffffff!” The water sprayed out of Charlie's mouth, all over the table, and into his dad's face. He frantically tried not to laugh and was grateful for the enormous coughing fit that followed.

A grin flitted across his dad's face as he wiped the water out of his eyes. Wade slapped Charlie on his back again, which made him cough even harder.

“There, there,” the big man said, “no need to get all upset by the story. I'm still alive.”

Panting, he closed his eyes and tried to compose himself. His nose stung like hell.

“So there I was,” Wade continued, “lying on the floor, and it felt like someone was squeezing my throat. Your old man and I share a cell, and he knew I needed one of them pens with drugs to snap me out of it.”

“An epipen,” his dad clarified.

“Yeah, one of them. So he ran to the nearest guard and told him to get one. So the guy did and Nick here yanked the pen out of his hands and jammed it into my thigh.”

“Wow,” he said, still panting.

“Yes, your old man's a bit of a hero around here.”

His dad smiled and winked at him.

“So, son, if there’s ever anything you need,” Wade said, “you just give me a holler, okay? I owe your old man and that includes his family too.”

“Thanks, Wade. That’s very kind of you,” he muttered. He wasn’t sure how that was going to work, with Wade being in prison and all, but he was afraid to ask the big man how much longer he’d be in here. Judging by his size and demeanor, he feared it would be long.

“Well, I’ll be off now,” Wade said and shook his father’s hand. “See ya later.”

In awe, he watched the big man walk away. If his dad hung out with this gorilla, he should be fine.

“Nice friend you have there, Dad.”

His father sighed. “Beggars can’t be choosers, son. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

2. AN INTERESTING TURN OF EVENTS

“Hey, Charlie! You asshole! Turn that freaking thing off!”

He heard the shrill voice but had trouble placing it. It definitely didn't sync with his current situation. The beautiful prison guard with the velvet skin had seduced him right there, in the prison corridor, and had dragged him into an office where he was now having wild sex with her, for the second time, on top of someone's desk. The fire alarm was blaring, but things were so hot and heavy right now that it didn't matter.

“Turn the fucking alarm OFF!”

Hang on . . . The voice was Becky's. What the hell was she doing here? The pervert!

Thud!

“Ouch!” Something hard hit him behind his ear and bounced off. The fire alarm stopped abruptly. He opened his eyes and glanced over to find out what had hit him. To his surprise, he saw that it was Becky's alarm clock. How on earth did that thing end up here, in prison?

Slowly it dawned on him. Of course . . .

He sighed, pulled his arms over his head, and fell back onto his pillow, cursing his horny subconscious. As if that gorgeous prison guard would really . . . He peeked under his sheets. Damn. He'd have to sneak them and his boxers into the wash. Again. That would be the third time this week.

He glanced over at Becky's bed. She had pulled her duvet over her head, thank goodness. The sight of her frump would definitely extinguish whatever was left of his afterglow. One of the many perks of downsizing: he was forced to share a room with his evil sister. Not a great concept in general, and especially not when you're both sixteen. Thankfully she wasn't seeing anyone right now—the sight of her making out with some random guy on his bed still haunted him. But he wasn't going to let that thought ruin his morning. Today was the best day of his life. Today was his first day at the record store. Seven weeks of nothing but vinyl lay ahead of him. Complete and utter bliss.

Alice Cooper sneered, “School's Out,” and an adrenaline rush pumped through his veins.

He got up and crumpled the sheets together, carefully hiding the evidence of his imaginary horizontal tangos in case his mom was up already. He listened for a second—

everything was quiet. He snuck out of the room, into the tiny bathroom-slash-laundry across the narrow hallway. He stuffed the sheets and his boxers into the washing machine and quickly jumped into the shower. But before he even had a chance to shampoo his hair, he had to leave his tiny refuge because the water alternated between blazing hot and freezing cold as the washing machine filled up. He sighed. He'd have to call Mr. Wolzicki, the landlord, again to remind him to fix the plumbing.

He took a good look at his face in the tiny mirror, turning his head from side to side. Not bad. Still not much of a beard growth, but at least he couldn't see any significant zits. It was another reason for Becky to hate him—her face looked like a pepperoni pizza most of the time. She had to cake on the makeup to hide the crater landscape, which in turn didn't help her skin at all.

He quickly combed his hair, put in some token wax, and crept back to the bedroom, hoping that Becky would still be asleep. She didn't bite his head off the second he walked in, so that was a good sign. He walked over to his wardrobe and quickly put on a pair of jeans, a plain white shirt, and his favorite pair of sneakers, then slipped out of the room before he accidentally woke the dawn monster. He tiptoed past his mom's bedroom—she wasn't exactly a morning person either—to the living room and noticed that she had left the TV on again. A young girl in a skimpy outfit gyrated with a few buff dancers. He sighed and turned it off. There, that was much better. The giant flat screen looked grotesque in the cramped living room, but his mom just had to hang on to one last relic of her former cushy existence.

“Mercedes Benz” by Janis Joplin crept into his head, but the sparkle of the song clashed loudly with the melancholia around him.

Two empty wineglasses stood on the table, remnants of another date with Cliff. He opened the curtain and spotted the little brown hatchback on the other side of the street. Jeez, it had gotten to that stage already. He felt slightly nauseous at the idea of Cliff in bed with his mom and quickly tried to banish the image from his head. Yuck, it was way too early for that.

He picked up the two glasses and went into the kitchen, where he put them in the sink, making sure they clanked loudly. Better warn those two that he was up so they wouldn't go at it while he was within earshot of that bedroom. He made a cup of coffee (strong, a bit of milk, two sugars), fried four eggs (over easy), made toast (four slices, four minutes), and poured himself a big glass of OJ (without pulp).

He didn't have to be at the record store until eleven, but he loved having breakfast by himself—it was his weekend ritual. The kitchen was so small it could barely contain the dining table and being stuffed in there with Becky and his mom during morning rush hour was unpleasant to say the least. Depression and melancholy seeped out of their pores and contaminated the air around him, leaving barely enough clean oxygen for him to survive. Add Cliff to the picture and he'd suffocate for sure.

He sat down at the table, his morning feast spread before him, and salivated. He stalled by taking a sip of coffee to heighten his anticipation even further, but as the comforting liquid filled his mouth, his bliss was suddenly disturbed by a really loud honking outside.

He jumped. “Pfffffffff!” The coffee sprayed out of his mouth and his nose, all over his food. “What the hell?” he groaned, sniffing and snorting coffee. “Aargh!”

HONK! It was loud—like someone had planted a foghorn outside the window.

HONK! HONK! The horn sounded again, and the noise reverberated in his ears. He checked his watch. Seven thirty. Making a ruckus like that at this time on a Saturday was not a smart thing to do in this neighborhood.

Rubbing his aching nose, he got up to take a peek through the blinds. To his surprise, a dinged-up old bus took up nearly the entire driveway. It was a rusty classic in desperate need of a paint job. He couldn't see who was behind the wheel, but whoever it was kept honking like the end of the world was nigh.

“What the hell is going *on* out there?” His mom stumbled into the kitchen. Her hair looked like she had just stuck her fingers into a wall socket and her face was pulled into a big frown, accentuating her wrinkles. He hoped for Cliff's sake that the man was still asleep.

He shrugged. “There's an old bus in the driveway,” he mumbled.

The driver honked again and neighbors began to hurl abuse at the driver.

“An old *bus*?” his mom groaned. “Well, what are you waiting for, idiot! Get your ass out there and see what this guy wants!” She sat down at the table and took a sip of his coffee. Great. So much for a mellow solo breakfast.

Reluctantly he walked through the front door and down the three steps. As he approached the bus, he noticed red checkered curtains at the windows—it had been converted into a camper. He could now make out a woman behind the wheel. She honked again, twice. He cringed at the sound and put his hands over his ears. The woman smiled and the bifold door opened with a hiss.

Who *was* she? There was something about her, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He watched her exit the bus. She had long, gray hair that fell over her shoulders and wore a long, flowing yellow dress with bright flowers and wide sleeves that blew behind her in the breeze as she walked towards him on her platform sandals. A long, beaded necklace hung around her neck and a plethora of bracelets around both wrists jingled at every step. She looked like she had been teleported directly from the sixties.

She waved at him as she came closer. "Sharlie!"

He froze on the spot and his mouth fell open. Holy crap! It was Oma Ruth! Her Dutch accent had mellowed over the years, but she still pronounced her "ch" as "sh," fervently forcing the air through her teeth, whenever she said his name. It annoyed the hell out of him—he thought it sounded silly and belittling. He had repeatedly begged her to stop saying his name that way, but she steadfastly refused. "No, Sharlie," she'd smile. "It's my special name for my grandson and I won't change it." Never mind that he had grown to be at least a foot taller than her.

She grinned at him. Her face . . . it was different. The frozen mask she always wore had disappeared and she looked so . . . alive.

"Close your mouth, darling," she said as she stopped before him. "You look like a fool."

He snapped it shut.

"Hey, you fucking hippie!" Mr. Wolzicki, who lived across the street, hung his pasty, bloated torso out of the window. "Keep it down! Don't make me come over there!"

"Sorry, Mr. Wolzicki!" Charlie yelled and put his hand up apologetically. Before he had a chance to say anything else, Oma Ruth did the same, but then turned her hand and flipped Mr. Wolzicki the bird.

"Climb this, Tarzan!" she shouted back.

He gasped and so did Mr. Wolzicki. The man's stunned face turned purple with anger. He pulled himself back inside and slammed the window shut with a bang.

"*Mama?*" Charlie's mom stumbled down the driveway with an incredulous expression on her face. "What are you doing, Mama? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Sofia," Oma said matter-of-factly.

"But, but what are you doing with this bus? And what on earth are you *wearing?*" She looked worried now and a condescending tone had crept into her voice.

Oma ignored it. “Don’t you like it?” she asked. She twirled around, strutting her stuff. Her big bosom jiggled, jangled, and dangled under the fabric.

“Are you even wearing a *bra*?” his mom asked. Her eyes flitted up and down the street to see if any of their neighbors were witnessing this old lady making a fool of herself on their driveway. He shook his head. Old habits sure died hard.

“No, I burnt my bra,” Oma said casually.

He chuckled. “Well, technically that would make you a yippie then,” he said. “And not a hippie.”

Oma looked at him and frowned. “How do you know about hippies and yippies?” she asked.

“Opa told me about that. In the Music Room.” His stomach contracted as soon as he uttered the words. The Music Room was a room in the basement of Oma and Opa’s mansion that held the family’s music library—a massive collection of albums, some over a hundred years old. He had spent the best hours of his life in there, together with Opa.

“You know, Oma,” he said to spite his mom, “I really like your dress.”

“It’s a *kaftan*, darling,” Oma berated him, but then she winked. “I bought it when I was eighteen and it still fits! Isn’t it groovy? Oh, and it’s just ‘Ruth’ now, no more ‘Oma,’ please.”

“Okay . . . Ruth . . .” he mumbled. Whatever. Cuckoo.

The Beatles’ ominous and surreal “I Am the Walrus” played in the background.

“And what has happened to your face?” his mom exclaimed. “You look so . . . so . . .”

“Real?” Oma offered. “That’s because I’ve sworn off the neurotoxins. And I can’t even begin to describe how liberating that feels!”

“You’ve *what*?” His mom looked dumbfounded.

“You heard me, Sofia,” Oma said haughtily. “From now on I’m ageing gracefully. I’m done cheating on Mother Nature. She’s laughing at us, you know. In fact, she’s peeing her pants with laughter at the huge amounts of money we spend trying to deceive her. And that’s exactly what we’ll all end up doing, when the end is nigh. We’ll all be peeing our pants, no matter how much junk we’ve injected into our faces.”

He stared at the woman in front of him. The same woman that used to clear her schedule when she had spotted what she thought was another beauty flaw.

“And what do you think of my bus?” Oma asked, excited. She turned around and motioned at the giant piece of scrap metal as if she were unveiling the latest model at a car show. “I bought it from this man who said it’s an original from the sixties. It’s been all over the country, to concerts and peace rallies and sit-ins . . . He said that at one point, twelve people were living in it. Can you believe that? It has two double beds, a kitchen, and even a bathroom, and—”

“What the hell is going on, Mama?” his mom snapped. “You *bought* this bus? This is not like you at all!”

“Ah, Sofia,” Oma said condescendingly, “this is completely like me. I’m sick of the charades, always worrying about what other people think . . . That’s not a life, Sofia, that’s a stage play, a scripted show. I’m breaking out of the bourgeois cocoon I have spun for myself, like a butterfly on a warm spring day, and it feels wonderful!” She sighed in delight, threw her head back, and spread her arms. Her wide sleeves fanned out like colorful wings. “Oh, and you should know, I am speaking my mind from now on,” Oma added. “I say what I think, and that’s that.”

His mom looked worried again. “Come on, Mama, let’s go inside the house,” she urged. “We’ll have some coffee and talk about this. You’re a bit confused and that’s fine, with Papa’s death and everything, but acting like a hippie is not going to make things any better.” His mom grabbed Oma’s arm in a bid to guide her inside, but Oma pulled away.

“I’m not going inside! I just came over to talk to Sharlie about something and to say good-bye to you before I leave on my trip.”

Talk to *him*? About what?

“What *trip*?” his mom snapped before he could get a word in.

“My road trip, of course,” Oma said smugly. She looked at the bus and then back at his mom.

He pictured Oma chugging along in that thing and laughed. “*You* are going on a *road trip*? By yourself?” he exclaimed. This was getting better and better.

“A *road trip*?” his mom screeched. “Are you out of your *mind*? There’s no way you are going to drive that bus any place other than your house! In fact, why don’t you drive it back to the guy who sold it to you and ask for your money back? A *road trip*! In that *bus*? That’s the last thing I need right now, a lunatic for a mother! Unbelievable!”

“Oh, of course, now it’s all about *you* again!” Oma retorted loudly. “You don’t care about *my* well-being, *my* happiness—I’m just your mother after all. All you care about is what other people might think! Well, let me tell you—it’s taken me nearly fifty years to discover that money and status don’t mean anything. When you die, nobody is going to care about what car you drove, how big your house was, and how much money you had in the bank!”

“Well, I won’t have to worry about having a ton of money, will I?” his mom yelled back. “My sorry excuse for an ex-husband made sure of that, didn’t he? And you and Papa too!”

“Don’t drag your father into this!” Oma sneered. “How dare you?” She looked furious.

“You didn’t exactly help me out when we lost everything!” his mom countered. “I had expected a bit more from my parents, you know? I was at rock bottom, with two children to feed . . .”

Tears welled up in his mom’s eyes and he sighed. She was going to play her pity card. But Oma didn’t fall for it.

“Let me get my violin, you poor girl,” she sneered. “You are just never happy with what you have!”

His mom began to sob. “That’s so easy for you to say, with all your money,” she sniffed. “But I’ve got nothing! Look at me, look at us . . . this house, this neighborhood . . .”

“You can’t use the money argument any longer, Sofia,” Oma said smugly. “I have given it all to charity.”

His mom froze. “Wha . . . you’ve what?” she stammered. “I . . . I . . .” Her face turned grayish-green and she swayed on her feet.

Oma winked at him and he smirked—she really wasn’t holding back.

“Don’t be so ungrateful, Sofia!” Oma continued. “You have a roof over your head, food on the table, and your kids are healthy. What more do you want, huh? It’s time you stopped feeling sorry for yourself!”

“Like you were such a perfect mother all the time!” his mom yelled through her tears. “Always pretending that everything was just fine. God forbid that people saw what really went on at the Van Buurens’! It’s no wonder I turned out like this, with you as my example! And I can’t believe Papa stayed with you for so long, you know that? That he didn’t run off with one of the secretaries at the bank!”

“Stop right there, Sofia!” Oma warned and he was surprised at the hurt in her voice. Her face was suddenly filled with pain and she looked away.

“What the fuck is going on here? I’m trying to sleep!” Becky had dragged herself out of bed and came down the steps.

“Language, Becky,” his mom berated her, wiping her tears away. “Language, please.”

“Oh, get lost, you moron,” Becky grunted back at her. His mom just sighed and shook her head.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Ruth said in a cheerful voice. “I was just telling your mother I came over to say good-bye before I leave on my road trip.”

Becky looked at the bus and then noticed Oma’s changed appearance. “What the . . . ?” she mumbled. She looked to him for an explanation. He shrugged.

Oma smiled innocently and raised her hands up to the sky. “I can just . . . *sense* that it’s the right thing to do,” she sighed.

“Oh, so you’re a psychic now too?” his mom sneered. “You are *not* going on a road trip. I’m going to make an appointment for you with a shrink—*that’s* the sensible thing to do!” She crossed her arms again to make her point.

“I’m *going*, Sofia. I’m not asking for your permission. I’ve made up my mind,” Oma said arrogantly.

Nobody said a word and he wondered how this standoff was going to end.

“Ahem . . . um . . . Sofia, honey? Is everything okay out here?” Cliff appeared in the doorway, wearing satin boxers with a tiger print and a white tank top. He looked a bit uncomfortable.

Uh-oh. Dude, you’d better scram.

But it was too late. Oma looked Cliff up and down and then turned to his mom. “Who’s this tiger, then?” she asked. She growled and clawed her hand in the air like a paw. Becky thought it was hilarious and nearly fell over with laughter. His mom looked really embarrassed and poor Cliff’s head turned tomato-red.

“This, err . . . this is Cliff,” his mom stammered. “He’s, um . . . err . . . my . . . my boyfriend. Cliff, this is my mother, Ruth Van Buuren.”

Cliff hesitantly waved at Oma.

“*This* is your boyfriend?” Oma looked genuinely surprised and he couldn’t blame her. Cliff was the total opposite of his dad. Well, before his arrest and the divorce anyway.

“Come over here, Cliff!” Oma motioned at him. “Let me have a better look at you.”

Cliff walked towards them slowly, keeping his eyes on the ground the whole time. The walk of shame.

“How long have you two been dating? And how is it that I know nothing about this?” Oma asked sternly.

Cliff and his mom stood side by side and looked at their feet.

Becky was still in stitches. “Roaaar!” she growled.

“Shut up, Becky!” he hissed, feeling sorry for Cliff. But Becky was beyond reason.

“We’ve been dating for a few months now, Mrs. Van Buuren,” Cliff said softly.

“‘Ruth,’ young man. Please call me ‘Ruth,’” Oma stated.

“I didn’t say anything because I didn’t think it was any of your business!” his mom yelled suddenly. “Stop treating me—us—like we’re teenagers! I’m a grown woman and I don’t need your permission to date anyone!”

Here we go again. Ding-ding-ding! Ladies and gentlemen, round two of the bout between Ruth and Sofia!

His mom clenched her teeth. “Go back inside, Cliff,” she ordered. “My mom has no right to treat us like this! This could get ugly.”

Cliff looked apologetically at Oma and shuffled back inside.

“My, my,” Oma teased, “don’t get all worked up now. You’re right, you *are* an adult. So start behaving like one!” The first punch had been thrown.

Oma continued, “I refer to my prior comment. Take responsibility for your own actions and stop whining!” Ouch, another one, right where it hurt!

“How dare you speak to me like this!” his mom hit back. “Cliff is a good man, an *honest* man. But you wouldn’t know about good and honest men, now, would you?” Oh, she went straight for the jugular.

“Well, you’ve trained him well, Sofia,” Ruth lashed back. “A house-trained tiger, who would have guessed? Something you never managed to do with Nick.” A left-hander straight in the kidney.

His mom buckled but managed to recover. “You know what?” she yelled. “You’re just jealous because you have *no one!*”

Instant knockout.

Oma immediately lost her pizzazz. “You know what?” she sighed, suddenly looking deflated and tired. “You are right. I have no one. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a bus to catch. Oh, and Sharlie, you’re coming with me, by the way. Go pack some things and be back here in five.”

A ripple of panic spread from his stomach to his limbs. “Wha . . . what?” he stammered.

“You heard me,” Oma said. “You are coming with me.”

“Coming? Where?” he peeped. “Do you, um, need me to do something for you before you go?”

“No, not at all.” Oma smiled. She had a twinkle in her eye, which made him think she was up to something. “I just need you to accompany me on my trip for a couple of weeks. I’ll see you on the bus in five. Bye, Sofia. Bye, Becky.” She nodded at his mother and sister, then turned and walked toward the bus.

His heart beat frantically. She couldn’t possibly expect him to go on a road trip with her, could she? And for *that* long? This was absurd! What would everyone at school think? He felt nauseous. Besides, he had more important things to do.

“No! No way!” he said quickly. “I’m starting work today at the record store. The one Opa and I used to go to all the time. I have to be there all summer! The owner is counting on me. I’ve made a commitment!”

“I think it’s a great idea, Oma,” Becky said and a sly smile appeared on her face. “It’s obvious that Oma—”

“*Ruth*,” Oma interjected, turning around, “call me ‘Ruth.’”

Becky rolled her eyes and continued, “—that *Ruth* is going through some stuff right now and Charlie should totally go with her, to look out for her. I mean, he can drive, he can cook, he can clean. I’m sure he even knows how to play bridge!”

No, no, no. His mouth fell open. How could she do this to him?

“Oh, and you will *love* his music,” Becky gushed. “It’s right up your alley, you know, all that golden oldies crap.”

Oh no. No, no, no! That conniving cow! “Go back to bed, you miserable troll, and mind your own business!” he snapped. “I don’t listen only to golden oldies! Just because something doesn’t sound like it’s been vomited up by a computer doesn’t automatically mean it’s a golden oldie! I’m on to you, you know! You pretend to be so hardcore, with your black everything, but I know for a fact that you’re listening to all the mainstream stuff!”

Becky gasped. She opened her mouth but then shut it again, and eventually huffed, “Well, that doesn’t change the fact that you’re still a loser.”

“Cut it out, you two,” Oma said. “Now, Sharlie, tell me, how much will they pay you at the record store?”

He frowned. “Six bucks an hour.” Where was she going with this?

Oma thought about it for a moment and smiled. “You know what? I’ll pay you eight,” she offered.

“Huh, what?” he muttered.

“Yeah. It’s the least I can do for inconveniencing you like this. And of course I’ll pay for everything else as well. You know, food, gas—”

“*What?*” Becky exclaimed. She suddenly didn’t look so smug anymore and a smile crossed Charlie’s face. The thought of Becky slaving away over a greasy hot grill for pocket change all summer while he was on an all-expenses-paid-and-then-some road trip changed things. Even if it meant he had to put up for a couple of weeks with this crazy, old, born-again hippie his grandmother had become.

But, *but*, he wasn’t working at the record store for the money. It was a sanctuary, a safe haven, an endless supply to feed his addiction. He’d have serious withdrawal symptoms. And Mick, the owner, had a rather volatile personality and would not be pleased if he bailed now. In fact, he’d probably be banned from working there ever again. And that would be a disaster. He needed the record store—it was his only opportunity to pay tribute to Opa in public. Opa, who had introduced him to the Music Room and its contents. Who had taught him everything about music by playing hundreds of records for him. He wasn’t going to let Oma, who had chosen to completely ignore this part of Opa’s life when she had arranged his funeral, ruin this experience for him as well. He’d been livid with her at the time for her blatant disregard of Opa’s wishes, and now that anger boiled up again.

“No!” he yelled. “I’m staying right here in Chicago! You can’t just throw money at me to make me change my mind! It *ain’t gonna happen!*” He turned around and marched back to the house, but just as he thought he was safe, someone forcefully grabbed his arm. It was his mom. Her long, fake, crimson nails dug deep into his flesh.

“Hang on a minute, mister. Not so fast,” she hissed and looked at him sharply. Her pale blue eyes pierced his and trepidation washed over him. He knew this look and it never boded well.

“Don’t you dare walk away, Charles,” she growled and squeezed his arm harder. “That woman’s old and bat-shit crazy, and you’re gonna keep her out of trouble, you hear me? And you need to find out if she really gave all the money away. I’m not gonna let her ruin this for me. It’s my money too!”

Aha. There it was. Of course. The money. It was always about the money. He should sacrifice his dream job so his mom could find out if the family fortune had been squandered.

He yanked his arm out of her grip. “Of course she hasn’t given all the money away!” he snapped. “She’d never do that! And you can’t do this to me! It’s not fair! I’m not a kid anymore! I don’t have to put up with your crap!”

Anger flickered in his mom’s eyes and a vicious smile appeared on her lips. “Oh, yes, you do, Charles Campbell,” she hissed. “You are going to do exactly as I say.” She moved her face to within an inch of his. “And if you don’t,” she whispered, “I swear I’m gonna go into that goddamned Music Room and I’m gonna pick up every single stupid record and I’m gonna snap it in half.”

He jerked his head back in shock and stared at her. “You . . . you wouldn’t,” he stammered.

She narrowed her eyes. “You know I would, Charles. Just try me.”

Utter desperation took hold of him. He knew she’d live up to her threat. She had destroyed things that he loved before, without hesitation. The thought of her wrecking Opa’s precious records was too much to bear. His limbs grew heavy and he hung his head in defeat.

His mom turned to the others. “Okay, that’s settled then,” she said cheerfully. “Charles is going with Oma.”

“It’s ‘Ruth,’ not Oma, remember?” Oma sighed.

His mom rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Charles is going with *Ruth*.”

He knew he had no chance of turning this around. A knot settled in his empty stomach. He struggled to fight back his tears. “But what am I supposed to tell Mick?” he muttered.

“That you’re babysitting your grandmother this summer to gain experience for your future career as a snooze-inducer at the local retirement village,” Becky sneered.

“Yeah, but at least I’ll be a *rich* snooze-inducer!” he retorted and shot her a dirty look.

“You’d better start packing, Sharlie,” Oma said with a big smile.

“But I have to go and see Mick!” he objected. “And I have to call D—” He could only just stop himself from blurting out “Dad.”

“Who do you have to call?” his mom snapped. “You don’t. You don’t have any friends!”

“Dave,” he replied flatly, avoiding her eyes. “I have to call Dave. *My friend* Dave.”

“Oh, *that* weirdo.” She rolled her eyes.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Oma said. “We’ll drive past the record store on our way out of town. Now start moving that ass!”

They all raised their eyebrows at her choice of words—the old Oma would have been absolutely mortified to hear that language, let alone use it herself.

He dragged his feet to his room and grabbed his iPod from his nightstand and put it into his pocket. Without it, he wouldn’t be able to survive this trip. It had taken him months to download all his favorite tunes on it—many came from the records in the Music Room, and copying from vinyl was a laborious process to say the least. He also packed his car adapter in the hope that the bus had a decent sound system, even though he expected the exact opposite.

The joyful beat of The Velvet Underground’s “Rock & Roll” filled the room, but it hardly lifted his spirits this time.

He sieved through his closet, chucking random items of clothing into his large backpack, and filled his toiletry bag with his toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, a comb, shower gel, and shampoo. He grabbed his hair wax but put it back in the cabinet. There was no point.

He found his sleeping bag in a cardboard box in the back of his closet. Phew, it smelled like something had died in there, twice. Finally he grabbed his phone and charger so he could at least stay in touch with reality while away on Oma’s psychedelic trip.

“Here, you might need these.” Becky’s voice startled him. She stood in the doorway and held up a packet of condoms. “You know, in case you and Oma, oh sorry, *Ruth*, get bored, you can fill them with water and throw them at each other! It will be a real blast!” She giggled at her

lame joke and chucked the box at him. He picked it up and threw it back at her, hitting her right between the eyes.

“Ouch! Asshole!” She rubbed the spot with her hand.

“You’ll need them, Becky. Genital herpes is for life, you know?”

“Oh, fuck off, loser,” she huffed. “You’re just jealous. The only time you’ll ever get laid is when you pay for it!”

“Well, I guess that may happen, now that Oma is paying me, huh?” he said smugly.

Becky sat down on her bed and pulled her sulking face.

“Have fun flippin’ burgers, sis. Seeya when I’m looking atcha!” He slung his backpack over his shoulder and walked out of the room.

Thank you for reading this! Do you like it so far?

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