

CHRIS RICH'S
THEATRE OF THE MIND

A STORY AND ROCK OPERA

Forward

Theatre of the Mind was conceived in the fall of 2003. At the time, I was recovering from a life-threatening case of sleep apnea that had progressed untreated for a decade. I was thirty-six years old. Despite the sleep deprivation haze that had consumed me, I remember vividly that Sunday afternoon when the medical technician arrived at my house with a C-PAP machine in tow. That evening I strapped on the pressurized mask, and for the first time, in quite a long time, I slept – really slept. Three days later I woke up. Three weeks later the libretto and basic composition of Theatre of the Mind was completed. Remedying the sleep deprivation pulled the cork out of my creative “bottle,” and the juice came pouring out. I tell you this story because at its heart Theatre of the Mind is a story about awakening.

Theatre of the Mind has been a deeply satisfying five-year journey, during which time the story has been my nexus – a creative center around which my life has revolved (and evolved). For allowing me the freedom to commit to such an undertaking, and for taking the ride with me, I thank my wife Nicole. You were an amazing editor and proofreader. Your “can of worms comments” pushed me to think in deeper ways, and ultimately, you made the book much better. Thank you for ideas, constructive criticism, and most of all your unconditional love. I thank my lucky stars everyday that Chance put us in the same ninth grade learning community.

Theatre of the Mind is the story of a young tinkerer, Charlie Childs, who invents a miracle device. The story came first as a rock opera that I composed and recorded in three stages. It was during the third stage (the fall of 2007), when a friend and fellow musician suggested that I turn the opera into a novel. While I had written many short stories, travel journals, poems/lyrics, and even the better part of a cookbook, I had never dared to attempt a novel. A boss of mine used to say, “Go in the direction of your fear.” I took her advice. Besides, I already had a great outline: a rock opera. The rock opera’s producer and my dear friend, Jimmy Wilgus, thought the book would be a terrific way to explore the story’s existential themes and develop the characters beyond what we could with the music alone. So it was decided. The book became my New Year’s resolution. I opened my Apple laptop on January 2, 2008 and began writing.

Theatre of the Mind is a concept that I hope delivers enjoyment as both book and opera, and that together they deliver a more robust story than either could do alone. Please feel free to offer every feedback – good or bad – at *theatreofthemindopera.com*. I can also be reached at crich.319@gmail.com. I would love to hear from you. Enjoy.

1***Charlie, Cindy and Wayne***

The evening was, like every evening since the beginning of time, an evening of chance. Thomas Childs wasn't supposed to be at Le Roti. Brick Richardson, an occasionally close friend with whom he bunked during his time in the military stationed in Frankfurt asked him to join for dinner with a well-to-do cousin from Brussels. As old buddies often do, he called from out of nowhere and begged Thomas, his old friend, to come out for dinner. Brick, whose name fits the build, was the kind of guy who always managed to find a brawl. This made him a dangerous date. But due to an unpredicted thunderstorm just south of the city, the electricity was out in Thomas' apartment on the outskirts of Paris. Facing an evening of darkness as the alternative, Thomas politely accepted his friend's invitation.

Le Roti was the Parisian bistro du jour - the place to be seen. Thomas loved the Paris nightlife, and the seemingly limitless number of joints like Le Roti. Roaming the streets always delivered twists with unusual people. Thomas was an adventurer at heart. He liked to observe the world around him and eavesdrop on meaningless conversations. That

night Thomas ordered what he always ordered when introducing himself to a new restaurant: soup d'onion au gratin and coq au vin. In food and life Thomas believed in the basics. Without a standard of comparison how can a reasonable man be expected to judge quality? The food was exquisite. The soup was seasoned perfectly, and the onions were tender but not mushy. The coq au vin was moist, and the chef used an excellent wine that poked through the finished sauce. Thomas guessed it was Bourgogne. The evening was taking shape. Thomas was feeling up, and he was happy Brick had twisted his arm to come out. Brick's uncle Nick was hilarious, telling joke after joke, and flirting effortlessly with the waitresses. Not your average jokes, the ones you swear you'll remember but never do.

Ingrid Dahl was not on the market for a boyfriend. She had one. She and her boyfriend Jean had been seeing each other for three-months. Ingrid made reservations at Le Roti to celebrate the occasion. As chance would have it Ingrid's beau worked for the Bureau of Public Utilities, and he was called to work at the last minute because of the same power outage that knocked out Thomas' electricity. Ingrid decided to go to Le Roti anyway, sans Jean. The prospect of sitting home alone on a Friday night in the city of lights was too depressing to bear.

Thomas never saw it coming. He was on his way to the men's room when he saw Ingrid descending the short flight of steps connecting the parlor to the main dining room. She was wearing a blue dress. It was simple and noticeably inexpensive, but stunning nonetheless. Truth be told, Ingrid wasn't supposed to be wearing the blue dress. She had chosen another, a red one, for the evening. It was the crown jewel of her limited wardrobe, and she had saved up for months to buy it after spotting it on a window display mannequin. Le Roti was one of, if not the hottest bistro in Paris, and she was determined to look its equal. Her cat apparently

disagreed with her wardrobe choice and knocked over a glass of red wine onto the dress. As it thankfully turned out the dress was later saved by a talented Mongolian drycleaner; however, on that particular evening Ingrid would have to wear something else. She had only one other decent evening dress. “Okay, the blue one,” she decided as if she had a choice. Boring blue. The evening had not started off well.

Ingrid did not know that Thomas had a rather peculiar history with blue dresses. On his sixteenth birthday his father took him to an establishment where boys went to become men. There Thomas was introduced to Katrina, a true professional, whose unapologetic mission in life was to raise the bar for all the other women in a man’s life to follow. Thomas performed like a champ, at least that’s what she said. She wore a blue dress. Blue. The bluest blue he had ever seen. Thomas knew not of Pavlov, but when Ingrid walked through the door of Le Roti wearing that dress he exploded with blue-hot passion. Boom!

When a man meets a woman his initial exchange is generally a blur of meaningless showmanship designed to demonstrate confidence, which in the language of evolution translates as reproductive prowess - good DNA. Ingrid’s blue dress flipped a switch that made Thomas irresistible. He spoke at the perfect volume, and his gestures were fluid. He was an overflowing dam of testosterone, yet he remained thoughtful and reserved. It was as if he had tapped into a part of himself that he hoped had been there, but he had never seen before. He didn’t have to plot or think. He acted as if he had practiced his whole life for this very part, this night, and miraculously he remembered every line. He was totally in the now. Thomas and Ingrid clicked rhythmically to the beat of the jazz trio playing in the corner.

It was love at first sight – chance working its magic. Ingrid’s boyfriend was a rapidly fading memory, and she was too practical to fight

the inevitable. She loved Thomas' tenor; the rush of his pursuit, and the calm of knowing without an inkling of doubt that willing submission was in waiting. She was in control because she knew the opposite to be true. She did not see a man trying to impress her, but rather a man completely, and perhaps uncharacteristically at ease in her presence. Had she known about the blue dress it would not have made any difference. She was never one to question cause in the face of effect. When the chemistry between a man and woman is right the reasons are irrelevant. Thomas made her feel beautiful, inside and out, and within thirty seconds she knew she couldn't live without him. They made love that evening, and in this case "love" was not a euphemism for sex.

Unwanted pregnancy is generally not good, particularly when the parents to be don't know each other that well. Thomas wore a condom, but given its expiration date he would have been better off using the withdrawal method. Anyway, defying the odds, Thomas and Ingrid stuck together. True love is the strongest adhesive known to man. They brought a son into the world, Charlie, and they moved to the States. The year was 1970.

Charlie's conception was pure chance, a freak accident. Not to get too clinical, but the sperm eventually to be known as Charlie Childs was running a distant third as the proverbial race for the egg neared the finish line. But luck was on Charlie's side that evening. Thomas, basking in post-rupture rapture, gestured with a playful nibble on Ingrid's ear. Ingrid gasped in delight, and the tickle made her shiver rather forcefully from head-to-toe. The jolt was enough to send the two top contending sperms into collision. Before they could recover from the seismic tremor, the Charlie sperm dashed to the right, made an end-around, and got the prize of life. Never underestimate the importance of post-play.

A person is more likely to get struck by a bolt of lightning than die in a plane crash (that's what the airlines say anyway). That's good, because most folks prefer the lightening bolt. People are not afraid of death, they are afraid of dying. Specifically, how they die. Quick, painless and unknowing is preferred. Plummeting 30,000 feet, drifting in and out of consciousness with just enough awareness to contemplate the full horror of the moment, is less than ideal. Thomas and Ingrid died in a plane crash when Charlie was 16 months old. They were on their way to Paris for a romantic weekend to celebrate their first wedding anniversary. They had reservations at Le Roti. Engine failure was the official non-specific explanation. At the time, Charlie was staying with Ingrid's sister Karin and her husband Anders who lived in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, just outside of Philadelphia.

If one could be insensitive enough to say that there was a silver lining in the tragedy it was that Charlie never really knew his parents, and so he was spared the trauma of grief. Claudia and Anders took care of him, well enough that Charlie always called them mom and dad, even later when he understood that they were not his real parents. They were honest, hard-working folks; satisfied with what they had. They loved Charlie, and all in all he had a very decent, albeit unremarkable upbringing.

When Charlie was six, the family moved to Bloomfield, New Jersey. Claudia was offered a job in New Jersey Bell's Newark customer service center, and the relocation offer came with a fifteen percent raise plus nine hundred dollars for moving expenses. Anders found a job as a fleet maintenance manager for the United States Post Office. He took a slight pay cut, but the regular hours and government benefits made the switch acceptable.

They moved into a modest three-bedroom, two-bathroom home a few blocks off the main street, Bloomfield Avenue. Charlie took to Bloomfield like a plant to fertile soil. He liked the park that was in walking distance from his home (except for the slide – he hated slides). He liked the pizza parlors, hamburger joints and ice cream shops. He liked his school and his first grade teacher Ms. Quinn. Most of all he liked his two playmates Cindy and Wayne.

For every young man there is a defining moment, a ‘so that’s who I am’ realization. Charlie’s came at the age of fourteen when Claudia brought him a box filled with relics his mom and dad had left behind. Buried beneath a collection of faded photographs, meaningless letters and the remains of a blue corsage, Charlie discovered a book, a journal of sorts kept by his father. Its pages were filled with descriptions and diagrams of product ideas and inventions his father conceived. Each page brought new delight, and each idea seemed better than the last. Page 6: travel toothbrush with a built-in tube of toothpaste. Page 9: hairbrush with built-in water spray. Page 14: reusable ice-cubes. Page 19: cool-temperature sleeping comforter. Page 22: hand-held sonic device to scare away dogs. Page 27: noise-canceling headphones. Page 29: battery-powered massager. Charlie understood each idea as if his own; written in a special language he shared with his father – a father he never knew. As he read his father materialized in front of him, like a dream with an indiscernible quality that bridges the gap between life and death. It was a moment of clarity for Charlie, and in his subconscious a seed was planted, the seed of invention.

Cindy Strohlechi was an unusual girl. She was tall for her age, and as thin as a pipe cleaner. She had reddish blond hair and pasty white skin complete with a galaxy of freckles. Cindy was the brightest child in the

first grade. She was reading several grades ahead of her class, and knew single-digit multiplication tables. Cindy did not possess that annoying precociousness common for girls her age. Her intelligence was genuine. She was curious about everything. She was polite and liked to help others. Her kind nature was the reason she and Charlie became pals.

It was a crisp fall afternoon. School had just broken for the day and the students were bouncing around on the playground, releasing pent up energy from a day in the classroom. Charlie was coaxed to climb up the big slide and froze at the top (Charlie had an unusually acute fear of heights for a boy his age). The children waiting for their turns became impatient and teased Charlie mercilessly. The combination of fear and humiliation was unbearable, and Charlie began to cry. Bobby Hill, the class bully, was leading the attack until Cindy reminded him that he had a habit of vomiting after a turn on the tire swing, and threatened to remind everyone at school. Cindy had a tenacious maternal instinct that was fully armed at age six (although she rarely pressed the button). In defeat Bobby took a final, half-hearted, and cowardly jab at Charlie, and a shadow of shame followed him as he lumbered away. Cindy then climbed up the slide and took a hold of Charlie's hand. "Don't be afraid, it's easy. I'll show you," she said. Words need not be complex to convince. Cindy's voice sang in the key of trust, and Charlie felt safe. He wiped the remnants of tears from his eyes, and offered her a smile. Cindy slid down and Charlie followed, leaving his fear at the top of the slide. In fairy tales it is customary for the knight to rescue the maiden from the tower. In this instance the roles were reversed, but the ending was the same. They became attached to one another.

There is a loveable prankster in every class and that was Wayne, Wayne Wagner. Wayne made Charlie laugh. He was always telling butt

jokes and making obscene noises. He had a teenage brother, and thus had been exposed to music and movies that were less than appropriate for a first grader. In second grade Mrs. Wagner got a concerned call from the principle's office after his teacher discovered a notebook filled with drawings of severed horse heads. Wayne's brother had recently seen the Godfather and had described the famous horse head scene to the entire family over dinner. Wayne thought his brother's gruesome depiction was so cool that he dedicated his artistic talent to recreating it. Despite the innocent obscenities and juvenile pranks, Wayne didn't have a mean-spirited bone in his body, and everyone liked him. He straddled the line between clicks and classes. "He'll either grow up to be President, or he'll be in jail," his teacher said on more than one occasion.

Wayne officially met Charlie and Cindy a month after the slide incident. Charlie and Cindy were attending a birthday party at The Bouncing Room. As they were leaving, they saw Wayne sitting on a bench in the lobby corner. He looked upset. Charlie and Cindy recognized him from school and went over to see why. Wayne's mom was thirty minutes late to pick him up from a birthday party he had attended. The staff at The Bouncing Room had tried Wayne's home phone (Wayne knew his number) but got no answer. Cindy asked her mom if they could give Wayne a lift home and she agreed.

Wayne's mother had of course not forgotten about her son. She was on her way to pick him up when her car was rear-ended on Bloomfield Avenue. The driver of the offending car had been distracted when a bird smashed into his windshield. A small crack and remnants of blood verified the driver's claim.

Cindy's mom was driving down Bloomfield Avenue when they passed the scene of the accident. "That's my mom's car!" Wayne squeaked. Cindy's mom pulled over, got out, and walked over to Wayne's

mom. Mrs. Wagner thanked her profusely for picking up her son, and Cindy's mom offered to watch him for the rest of the afternoon while she got her car troubles sorted out. She accepted and Charlie, Cindy and Wayne had their first of many play dates. They were a perfect trio, rarely fighting and always thinking of interesting and exciting ways to play. Cindy's father likened them to Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy. Cindy was clearly in command, Charlie had the mind of a scientist, and Wayne was full of good-natured emotion just like the doctor. They stayed close through grade school, high school, and thereafter. Three joined as one, because of a bird.

2***Regular Guy***

Charlie's screaming alarm clock blasts him out of bed. It is the spring of 1998, and Charlie is twenty-eight. Here the story begins. He puts on his bathrobe, and goes outside to retrieve the newspaper from his walkway. The sun is beaming through the smoke-smuggered New Jersey sky, and the air is crisp and smells of baking bread and a hint of bus fume. He goes back inside and turns on the TV to catch sound bites of news while he fixes a bowl of Golden Grahams. He loves Golden Grahams. The weatherman is babbling on the TV, making excuses for the picture perfect morning he grossly failed to predict.

"Well folks, it looks like you won't be needing your boots or umbrella today after all. It's going to be a beauty, sunny with a high of seventy degrees. At approximately 3:00 AM last night the storm that was coming our way took a sharp right turn and headed out to sea. That's the weather for you. We get it right most of the time, but there's always that element of chance."

Yes, that element of chance, a voice says in Charlie's head.

Fortunately for weathermen, no one ever loses their job for predicting rain and getting sunshine.

Chance. The one observable, and therefore certain force governing the universe; the single hand responsible for the chaos and order that surrounds us; the single parent that gives birth to the infinite number of planets, solar systems, galaxies, and universes in the infinitely expanding and contracting cosmos. Chance. Man lives at the mercy of chance. Chance trumps all: love, choice, and even logic. Chance is the supreme cause, and there is little we can do to combat its effects. People fight to control Chance armed with science and spirituality as primitive weaponry, but their efforts are futile, regardless of the weapon employed. The wrath of Chance is without reason, remorse or calculation. Chance doesn't think, and it does not hold grudges. At any given moment Chance is absolutely random, and patterns that do reveal themselves do so slowly over time. Such patterns cannot be created overnight, or in a week. Sure it takes on forms from time to time, but they are as fleeting as those of a cloud. Chance does not have a son, daughter, cousin, a wife, or a gardener. It does not sit at the end of a marble table drinking nectar in the Aspen-high altitude of Mt. Olympus. Chance is a cold and lonely nothing without a soul. It is a bus out of nowhere that runs you over on a carefree spring afternoon. Chance is the enemy, at least from a certain point-of-view. Human beings, regardless of how intelligent they are or hope to ever become, will never defeat Chance. The human condition is Chance management.

Charlie's life has been driven by the winds of chance: the plane crash that stole his parents; the events that lead to him becoming a postal worker; even his friendships with Cindy and Wayne; all circumstances shaped by unpredictable forces. Sometimes Charlie plays a game where he

eliminates events from his past and imagines how things might have turned out differently. He is fascinated by how any event, even the most trivial one, can have massive implications if removed or altered. Cindy tells him that thinking in this manner is unhealthy (not to mention unproductive); still he can't help himself from doing it.

Charlie is a mailman, but science is his passion. It provides a calming antidote of rationality to an existence otherwise subject to the chaos of Chance. Not that there's anything wrong with being a mailman, but Charlie considers the job temporary (despite nine years of employment). He joined the United States Postal Service in 1989 after being expelled from SPI, a prestigious technical college in Massachusetts. Charlie's expulsion was an injustice that changed his view of the world and himself forever. During his freshman year he had been asked to pledge the school's most powerful secret society, but at the last minute - during the initiation ceremony - he got cold feet and refused to take the oath. The society was outraged. Charlie's refusal was the first by any pledge in its history, and it threatened to damage the society's reputation, or so they were convinced. They retaliated by committing an egregious act of sexism and framing Charlie for having done it. Sexist behavior does not go over well on elitist college campuses, and Charlie was sacrificed without a fair investigation to quell mounting public outrage and to protect the school's image. It took Charlie months to get back on his feet after the SPI ordeal, and had it not been for a sustaining purpose, his desire to continue what his father had shown him in his journal, he might never have gotten back on his feet.

Cindy knew there were powerful forces driving Charlie, but she never pushed him to talk about them any further than he offered. She occasionally teased him about some of his crazier inventions, but she was careful never to go too far. Luckily she thought most of his ideas were

brilliant, so the occasional dud made him all the more human, and therefore all the more loveable. When Charlie got expelled from college, Wayne's job was to make sure he had a steady diet of social contact, and so he took Charlie to bars, concerts and sporting events. He even offered to put in a good word at the landscaping company where he worked, but Charlie declined the favor. Cindy's job was to nurture him back to health by listening and making him feel loved. It was a job she did exceedingly well and often, especially since she was living locally, attending college at Montclair State University. Cindy's romantic feelings for Charlie grew during this time, but she could never quite bring herself to tell him how she felt. She was afraid he might be too fragile so soon after his expulsion ordeal, that she might get a false response, or worse the wrong response. She was atypically uncertain. Crossing the chasm between platonic love and romantic love requires a giant leap of faith. But she knows she loves him. She believes in him unconditionally. She likes that the two of them are paradoxically so different, and yet so the same. She doesn't need Charlie to be famous or overwhelmingly successful. She just wants him to love her. Cindy isn't looking for a meal ticket. She will pay her own way. She prefers it that way.

Charlie desperately wants to quit his job at the post office, and he dreams that one of his inventions will be his meal ticket. The problem is he has no follow-through. He will spend months designing and building a prototype for one of his inventions, then do nothing with it (if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it the tree does NOT make a sound). Last year he attended an inventor's convention in Boston at great expense. He met fifty or so fellow inventors and gathered scores of business cards and phone numbers, yet to date he's done nothing with the contacts. His actions, or lack thereof, resemble those of a man banking on winning the Lottery. But truth be told, his most pressing problem is that he is a

perfectionist, and so in his mind, nothing he ever does is good enough. Charlie is starving for the nourishment of validation. He is a checkmated captain standing on the bow of his ship shouting into a storm, begging for a lucky break.

3

Dog Attack

It is energizing marching the streets of Bloomfield on a radiant spring day with a bag full of mail. Charlie knows every resident by name, and his popularity proves quite profitable at Christmas. But every occupation has its downside: mafia bosses get whacked; rock stars are prone to suicide; and for the mailman, it's the dog attack. 696 Orange Avenue is the downside of Charlie's route. A paranoid seventy-two year-old widow named Agnes Filcher and her psychotic dog Sugar live there. Sugar is sweet, but this canine is all spice. Agnes adopted the dog for companionship and protection after her husband died of lung cancer. Charlie is positive that the dog suffered terrible torment before Agnes pulled it out of the shelter. Sugar was mostly kept inside the house, or safely locked in her pen; however, occasionally the absent-minded Agnes would forget to latch her front door, allowing the clever animal to escape and roam freely.

As Charlie rounds the corner of Bloomfield and Orange he hears Sugar barking. He prays it is a day when she is safely locked away in her pen. With cat-like stealth Charlie drops off the mail at #698 and approaches the Filcher residence. Ever so quietly he opens Mrs. Filcher's mailbox, slides in the mail, and closes the hatch. With hell bent fury Sugar's barking explodes. Charlie looks over his right shoulder and sees her charging straight in his direction. Saliva is flying from her mouth, and her sharp pearly whites are glistening like razors in the sun. Charlie yells in vain to Mrs. Filcher, and then sprints down the street. He knows the drill. Fifty-five yards until he reaches the Drake residence. They have an empty garage and thankfully Mrs. Drake never locks it. Forty yards to go, thirty-five, now thirty, twenty-five, Sugar is closing fast. *Don't look back Charlie. Don't look back.* Twenty, fifteen, ten, five and SLAM! *You should kill that dog!* Charlie huffs with his back against the inside of the garage door, out of breath and enraged.

Then the idea comes to him with the urgency of a baby needing to be born. *Build dad's device, the one in the journal - the electric dog whistle.* Chills run up his spine, and a welcome rush of confidence washes over him. For a moment he tastes the pleasure of a successful future. His father's idea had been laid out only in conceptual form, lacking technical specifications, but the principle of its operation made complete sense; more importantly, it was completely doable. The more Charlie thinks about it the more he likes the idea. It would be perfect for joggers, repairmen, delivery personnel, senior citizens, and of course postal workers. And knowing that his father would be proud to collaborate fuels his conviction further. Charlie jumps the gun and gives his dad's idea a name, The Sonic Gun.

4

Taking A Tripp

Charlie begins work on the sonic gun early that evening. He stopped by Bloomfield Doodad on his way home and found everything he needed, except a frequency modulator small enough to accommodate the gun's compact design. The sales guy didn't even know whether a modulator that small exists, and by chance if it does he tells Charlie, it will take at least a week to get it to the store. *Forget it. Go see Tripp. He's got one. He'll help you out.* Charlie decided he would pay his friend Tripp a visit the following morning.

Charlie works feverishly on the device through the night. He preps the casing, wires and solders circuits, and reinforces a micro-tweeter with a metal compound he concocts. He decides the gun will require two 9-volt batteries, not one as he initially thought. It is all just a guess, but he figures having too much power is better than having too little. By morning, Charlie has gone as far as he can with the parts in hand. After calling in sick to work he cleans himself up and hops a bus in search of his friend Tripp and a modulator. Charlie has a car, but as Chance would have

it his 1990 Taurus was in the shop with a fairly serious and expensive mechanical malady.

The Newark-bound bus takes forever and Charlie is getting impatient. The bus is traveling down Bloomfield Avenue at a snail's pace, and Charlie passes the time looking at the never-ending lineup of storefronts and billboard advertisements. By the time he finally arrives, it is afternoon. Charlie checks the faded address scribbled on a napkin, 126 Lassiter Drive. He looks around and thinks man this is one bad neighborhood.

Theodore "Tripp" Stevens lives on the second floor of a dilapidated two-story building. His electronics shop is on the first floor. Charlie met him at *The Invention Convention* in Boston six months ago. They were seated next to each other at the commencement dinner and Tripp struck up a conversation. "Man, there sure aren't many female inventors here," he half-whispered leaning into Charlie's ear. Charlie looked at him and shrugged in mild agreement. After dinner Trip insisted Charlie join him for a night on the town. Tripp knew Boston well, and as a joke he took Charlie to a bar called The Ramrod. It took Charlie twenty minutes to realize it was a gay bar, and Tripp got a huge kick out of Charlie's reaction. But Charlie wasn't the type to take a gag personally, and so they hung out all night, visiting half of a dozen bars before greeting the sunrise. The hangover was brutal, but Charlie had real fun, and real fun doesn't happen everyday. He wished Wayne and Cindy could have been there. Tripp and CC (as Tripp affectionately dubbed Charlie at the end of that first evening) spent every waking minute of the week together, bonding over their passion for invention and cocktails. Charlie hadn't seen or talked to Tripp since (Tripp had no phone), but he kept the bar napkin on which Tripp

had scribbled his address the night before they said goodbye. Charlie was glad he had a reason to reconnect with him.

Charlie peers through the dusty window in Tripp's storefront door to see if he is inside, but he isn't. Charlie knocks. No answer. He checks to see if the door is open. It is. Charlie enters quietly.

The store looks like the inside of a dirty engine. In the dim shadowy light the merchandise shines of grease. There are gadgets everywhere, and boxes and boxes of parts spilling off the shelves. Wire nests hang from the rafters. Charlie hears a noise coming from the backroom. He approaches with caution, and his mouth drops open when he sees what is going on inside. Tripp's pants are down to his ankles and he is in push-up position on top of a woman (whose pants are also down to her ankles). Clearly consensual, the woman is kissing Tripp's neck passionately and smiling between kisses.

Charlie's resume as a lover is short and undistinguished. He has had sex three times in his life, twice with the same girl, clocking a total five minutes of intercourse time (but who's counting?). The first time he lasted thirty seconds; the second time almost a minute. The third time, by then a regular Don Juan, he lasted a full three minutes. Charlie clears his throat to get the couple's attention and scares the living daylights out of Tripp.

"What the! Doesn't anybody knock anymore?"

"It's me Tripp, Charlie Childs."

"Childs, CC? Is that you? Jesus Christ man, you scared me."

"I didn't realize you were..."

"...On my lunch break," says Tripp, and then he stands up to shake Charlie's hand. Charlie nearly trips backing away. Tripp looks down at himself and understands Charlie's obvious discomfort. "Hey man, how are you doing," Tripp asks, now with both hands covering his thing? "Long

time no see amigo. This is my girlfriend, Cynthia. Cynthia, meet CC. He is the one I told you about – the one I met at the convention in Boston.”

“Hi Charlie, I mean CC,” she says.

“Sorry about barging in on you and all. Tripp, I’m...I...I’ll wait out front, okay?”

Tripp closes the door and the couple picks up where they left off. Five minutes later Tripp emerges half-dressed.

“It’s never good to leave a girl hanging. You know what I mean?”

“How have you been Tripp?”

“Can’t complain. Working on a couple of things. I think I finally have some investor money coming. Thank god, cause this store isn’t paying the bills.”

“It could use a little tidying up.”

“Are you kidding? If someone cleaned this place I’d never be able to find a thing. It’s organized like my mind, all over the place. So, what can I do you for my friend?”

“I need a frequency modulator, the smallest one you have. Like really small.”

“What’s it for?”

“Nothing really, something I’m working on.”

“Yea, no shit you are working on something. I seriously doubt you came all the way down into this war zone of a neighborhood just to watch me make it with my lady.”

“True, but seeing that was definitely worth the trip.”

“Come on. What’s cooking CC? Give it up. You think I’m going to steal your idea or something?”

“No, of course not. It’s an electric dog whistle. I’m building an electric dog whistle. You know, to scare dogs.”

“Hmmm...really?”

“Yes really!”

“Okay, okay. Take it easy. It’s is a simple concept for sure - a bit pedestrian, but not bad. My grandmother, she’d buy one in a heartbeat. She’s always complaining about this one German Shepard.”

“So you think it’s a good idea?”

“Hell yes, why not? The sign of a good idea is when it makes someone else think, ‘I wish I thought of that.’ I wish I thought of it. It’s not sexy, but it does make a whole lot of sense. You want me to mention it to those investor guys I’ve been talking to?”

“At some point sure, but better wait until I have something that works. So what about a modulator, do you have one?”

“There is one in this pocket-sized glasscutter I designed. It’s pretty damn small.”

“A sonic glasscutter? That’s brilliant Tripp.”

“Not really. The signal was too strong, and I couldn’t figure out how to keep it focused. The glass kept exploding. Plus, every time I used the thing it gave me a bad headache. It’s all yours. Give me a couple minutes and I’ll remove the modulator.”

“Are you sure you want to take it apart?”

“Absolutely. I’m done with that thing. I obsessed over it for six months. Time to get the monkey off my back.”

While Tripp takes apart the glasscutter Charlie wanders the store.

“Tripp, what is this?”

“It’s a lamp.”

“Yes, I can see that. How does it work?”

“It draws power from an internal gyroscope - no plug or batteries required. It converts gravity to energy. It’s 100% self-sustaining. That’s my idea that attracted the attention of the investors.”

Charlie casually explores the store, but he can't help thinking about what he saw in the backroom. He is envious of Tripp. His thoughts turn to Cindy, and he wonders what her sexual experiences have been. That is one thing they never talk about. He would rather not think about it, but he can't help himself. He is in love with her.

Cindy has been with three men in her life, but was not in love with any of them. The events were more like experiments (she insisted on a condom each time). She slept with the first guy simply because she didn't want to be a virgin any longer. She wanted to know what all the fuss was about. She was 19. The guy was 22 and had a fair bit of experience. She enjoyed it and all, but it certainly wasn't the earth-shattering experience it was hyped up to be. The second time she was 21. She and her girlfriends were hanging out with some guy friends from Montclair State. The guys asked the girls if they wanted to watch an "adult movie" (slick move). The girls agreed. None of them had ever seen an adult movie before and they were curious. The movie had the intended effect on Cindy, and later that evening she succumbed to the advances of one of the guys. That was the first and last time she watched a porno, although she had on occasion thought it might be fun to watch one with Charlie. The last time she had sex she was 22 and traveling in Europe after college graduation. He was a Brit named Roger. She thought she might be falling in love and slept with him to expedite the process. But as the song goes, 'you can't hurry love, no you'll just have to wait.' As it turned out she was in love with his accent. It was merely a case of trans-Atlantic infatuation. With each passing day since returning from her sojourn in Europe, Cindy fell more deeply in love with Charlie. She is saving lucky number four for him, but she has no idea if Charlie has the same desire for her. She sees no signals, and not for a lack of trying. Love truly is blind. The indifference Charlie projects is

making him all the more desirable. Unknowingly he is playing hard-to-get, and it is working.

Charlie jumps when he feels a gentle tap on his shoulder: Tripp's Cynthia.

"Hi there. Sorry, did I scare you?"

"Oh hi. No, I was just daydreaming."

"Tripp talked about you all the time when he returned from the convention. He thinks you're brilliant."

"Thanks, but brilliant is a bit of an exaggeration. I've never really invented anything. I mean I've never made any money doing it."

"Sales and success are two different things. I tell Tripp that all the time."

"Does he believe you?"

"No, but I keep telling him anyway. Sales are about what the world thinks. Success is about what you think. Sales can't be the goal, or you'll be left empty. Success is what keeps you going and the ideas flowing."

You are beautiful, Charlie thinks (nearly out loud). Her sensibility and optimism remind him of his Cindy. He wonders if it is somehow more than coincidence that their first names are the same. Charlie laughs inside - of course it's coincidence. Believing otherwise would be like believing in the tooth fairy.

Tripp interrupts, "Charlie, are you making time with my lady? Get over here. I got your modulator."

"You're sure you want to part with it?"

"Like I said, it's time to get the monkey off my back. I got bigger fish to fry."

"Thanks. How much do I owe you?"

“This one is on me amigo, but on one condition: don’t be a stranger. We should go out to dinner one night - a double date with your girl. What was her name again?”

“Cindy. She’s not really my girl. Just a friend.”

“Well all right then, the three of us and your friend.”

“It’s a deal. Thanks.”

Charlie leaves the shop and makes his way to the bus stop. The temperature has dropped ten degrees, and he is underdressed. A cool breeze sends him a shiver. He would have liked to spend the afternoon with Tripp, but he keeps hearing a voice in his head. *Hurry Charlie, the sonic gun.*

Charlie’s mass transit woes pick up right where they left off. The bus takes fifteen minutes to arrive and then crawls to Bloomfield. It is three o’clock when he finally arrives home. He had hoped to finish the gun at a decent hour that evening, but now it will be difficult. A wave of exhaustion falls over him like a warm, wet blanket.

5

In The Basement

The suburban basement: sacred shrine; Mecca; the hang room; home of the first make-out session; the first bong hit; the first listening of Dark Side of the Moon; and countless other critical developmental firsts for America's youth. For Charlie, his basement had also been a laboratory, even as a teen living with his aunt and uncle. He named it The Lab, until the police showed up one day chasing a rumor that he was manufacturing LSD. From then on he just called it "the basement." Generic is safe.

When Charlie got a job with the U.S. Postal Service he moved to a place of his own. Cindy and Wayne helped him look of course. Cindy would inspect the kitchen and bathrooms. Wayne would size up the living room for a comfy couch, TV, and a stereo. Charlie would check the basement for space, power, and inspirational vibe - he would never live in a house where the basement didn't stimulate his mind. The fifth house they saw fit the bill for the most part. Cindy complained that the bathroom was a disaster, but conceded that with a lot of work it could be passable. Charlie loved the basement. It wasn't large, but it was pulsing

with creative energy, and it had plenty of power outlets. It came equipped with a built-in workbench (huge bonus) and the lighting was bright, an ideal feature that meant Charlie would not have to install lighting. For \$350 a month he was sold. He was happy.

By seven o'clock that evening, scarcely more than twenty-four hours since undertaking his project, Charlie can see a light at the end of the tunnel. The gun is taking shape, but he is tired and feeling punchy. His thoughts turn to Cindy. He wonders what she is doing at that moment.

Cindy is still at work, finishing what she hopes will be her last phone call of the day. She works for her father, although some days it seems more like he works for her. The Strohlechi family owns a successful printing business that produces marketing materials for several of NJ's largest pharmaceutical companies. She loves the family business. Her older brother Dave is head of operations, and her younger cousin Denise is the office manager. Cindy is in charge of sales, a role in which she excels. In 1997, she made ninety thousand dollars. In 1998, she will easily make more than one hundred thousand. Cindy's father sees her as heiress to the family business. Dave does a good job running operations, but he sees something special in Cindy, an ability to create opportunities, to grow a business, and guide it in a direction guaranteeing its future - perhaps a case of paternal bias, but more likely the result of his experience over the decades since starting the business at the age of twenty-three.

Her father doesn't think as much of Charlie however, and he minces no words when Charlie's name comes up. "How can the smartest kid in Bloomfield be working for the post office? Not that there's anything wrong with the post office, but I would have expected more from him. That boy is wasting his potential." Cindy always defends Charlie, telling her father not

to be such a judgmental ass. “Inventions? He’s a dreamer!” he would go on.

On the other hand, Cindy’s mom adores Charlie. She has fond memories of their childhood together, particularly one night in high school when Charlie came to her daughter’s rescue. Cindy was a sophomore and had accepted a date with Tommy Sauchek, captain of the football team (a senior). Against her better judgment, Cindy’s mom let her go on the date. They were going to a nine o’clock movie and Cindy agreed to be home by midnight. Charlie was walking home from Rizzo’s Pizza around 11:30 when he heard voices coming from an alley around the corner. Charlie immediately recognized Cindy’s voice and ran to the ally. Sauchek had his hands all over her, forcing his way up her shirt. Without thought or the slightest hesitation Charlie jumped Sauchek allowing Cindy to break free. Sauchek pulled Charlie off with ease (he was 6’1” and weighed 225 pounds), and belted Charlie so hard that he had a black eye for six weeks. Cindy ran to the light and was calling for help. Rather than making the situation worse and possibly prosecutable, Sauchek walked away. His parting words: “Screw you Strohlechi, and your weirdo friend too!” Cindy helped the half-conscious Charlie back to her house. He sat in the kitchen with an icepack over his eye, holding Cindy’s hand while her mother made hot chocolate. It was the happiest moment of his life.

At eight o’clock that evening Wayne arrives at Charlie’s house like a soldier searching for a buddy gone AWOL. Charlie is focused on his work, and nearly jumps out of his skin when Wayne comes barreling down the basement stairs. “Charlie! Charlie, are you down there man? There you are. What’s up? What is that?”

“Don’t laugh.”

“Who, me? I won’t laugh.”

“It’s an electric dog whistle.”

Wayne can’t contain his laughter.

“It’s not that funny,” says Charlie.

“It’s pretty funny,” says Wayne.

“Wayne, you really are a total Neanderthal.”

“Ouch, that hurt.”

“As the truth is often prone to.”

“A little touchy tonight are we?”

“Not at all, but why don’t you leave me alone for a couple of minutes so I can finish? I’m a few minutes away from being done.”

“Charlie, are you down there?” a second voice sounds from upstairs.

Cindy. Her footsteps approach the basement stairway at the pace of Charlie’s beating heart. Her outfit reveals itself piece by piece in slow-motion as she descends the stairs: conservative black heels, sheer pantyhose, dark navy blue skirt, pale pink blouse. A pearl necklace bounces off her chest, and her hair, which is pulled back in a tight ponytail, exposes the nape of her neck.

“Hi Cind...y,” chokes Charlie.

“Hey Charlie, what’s up?”

“I was giving him an erotic massage,” Wayne answers.

“What a lovely visual Wayne. Thank you for that. Charlie, what are you up to?”

“Not much. I’ve been working on something.”

“It looks like you haven’t slept in days. What are you working on?”

Charlie explains his idea to her, and she doesn’t laugh. “I like it. It’s a great idea. Don’t you think so Wayne?”

“I suppose it has possibilities.”

Cindy has come armed with a bag of burgers from BP's, Charlie's favorite burger joint. "Hungry boys?"

Wayne attacks the bag like a wolf on fresh meat. "Good call on the burgers and fries Cindy. Now where is the ketchup? Damn it! They forgot the ketchup again. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the human population eats ketchup with burgers and fries. Am I right? Can someone check me on this? Charlie, do you have any?"

"It would surprise me if I didn't. Check the fridge."

Wayne goes upstairs and Charlie and Cindy are alone. Charlie continues working with his head down, every so often looking up quickly to steal a glance at the woman who owns his heart. Their eyes meet and her gravity refuses to let him look away. The intensity of her gaze screams out love, but Charlie can't hear it. His love has her on a pedestal that is out of reach. So, as he has done time and time before, Charlie squanders a chance to answer her call, to let her know how he feels. Chance is unpredictable. You have to seize an opportunity when it presents itself.