

ARMSTRONG
&
CHARLIE

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*If someone draws a circle and leaves you out,
you draw a bigger circle and include them in it.*

—*Maya Angelou's mother, Vivian Baxter, as quoted in
Great Food, All Day Long by Maya Angelou*

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AN OPPORTUNITY

Charlie

“GUYS, WE SHOULD GO IN. It’s a school night.”

“Shut up, Charlie.”

“Why’d you have to mention *that*?”

“Yeah, Killjoy Charlie. You just ended our summer vacation.”

Like it’s *my* fault the earth spins? I brace for a tornado of punches. Instead I hear Keith say, “Charlie Ross is right. It’s getting dark.”

Capture-the-flag ends in a tie and we all head for home. You can hear air conditioners humming from side yards and crickets chirping from trees. Someone kicks an empty Coke bottle into the street. It sounds like a ringing bell.

You can’t hear much talk, though. We’re all thinking about *you-know-what* starting *you-know-when*. Most summers I look forward to *you-know-what*. But this year I’m

starting sixth grade. If I start sixth grade, chances are I'll finish it. And when I do, I'll get older than my older brother.

"See you guys at the bus stop tomorrow," I say.

"Won't see me," says Bobby Crane.

"Won't see me," says Mike Applebaum.

"Or me," says Brett Deitch.

"Why not?" I ask.

"I'm going to Buckley."

"I'm going to Carpenter."

"I'm going to El Rodeo."

Buckley is a private school in Sherman Oaks. Carpenter's a public one in Studio City. El Rodeo is in Beverly Hills.

That's three out of my four friends in the neighborhood changing schools. I turn to Keith, the one I look up to most.

"I'll see *you* at the bus stop, won't I, Keith?"

Keith has sandy blond hair, fair skin with freckles, and sea blue eyes. He carries a pocketknife in his jeans, started wearing puka shells way before they were popular, and lives in the thoughts of practically every girl in Laurel Canyon. He calls us by our first and last names, which can make even a short kid like me feel tall.

"Fraid not, Charlie Ross. I'm going to Carpenter this year. We gave my aunt's address in Studio City so I don't have to go to Wonderland."

"What's wrong with Wonderland?"

"My mom says it's going downhill."

"She say why?"

"Nope. Just that it's a good time to be movin' on. But don't worry, man. I'll still catch you around the neighborhood."

"Cool," I say, as in *No big deal*. But what I feel is cold. Like they all just ditched me.

Armstrong

The trouble with white people is, they're white. It's what I try to tell Mama when she informs me I'll be attending a new school.

"What's wrong with my old one?"

"It's segregated," Daddy says.

"How so? Black kids sit on one side of the schoolyard. Black kids on the other."

"And where do the white kids sit?"

"Only white kid at Holmes is the one in Miss Silverton's belly," says Charmaine, my big sister third from the top.

"That's segregated. And the Supreme Court has said it's time for Black and white to blend."

I don't see why. It's not like we're going to rub off on them.

"Where is this new school?"

"In the Hollywood Hills," Mama says.

Hollywood Hills sounds like I'm going to be a movie star. I check myself in the shine of the toaster. Look like a young Sidney Poitier. Start practicing my autograph on the plate.

"How's he going to get there?" Lenai, the oldest, asks. "We don't have a car." She's the practical one. Parent Number Three, we call her, behind her back.

"He won a spot on the bus."

Two slices of toast pop up like eyebrows. Two eyebrows—mine—pop up like the crusts on that toast. How can I win what I didn't even try for? Then Daddy says they tried for me. Signed me up for a new program.

"Opportunity Busing, it's called. You got the last spot."

"I see," I say. "And what time in the morning will my alarm clock have the opportunity to ring?"

"Five thirty. Bus comes at six fifteen."

All five of my big sisters bust up. Lenai, who hardly ever smiles, is laughing. Cecily the Dreamer, always lost in the drawings she does, looks up from her sketchbook, laughing. Charmaine, boy crazy and bull stubborn, is laughing. Nika and Ebony, identical twins born a year before me, who like to fool the world as to who is who, are laughing. All five of them are laughing. Laughing at me.

Last year I got to sleep till seven. They know I need my beauty rest.

"What's the name of this school?" I ask.

"Wonderland."

"Wonderland? You're sending me to a school called *Wonderland*?"

"What difference does it make what it's called?" Daddy says in a tone like a loaded gun.

"It's the difference," I say, "between a boy who gets jumped and one who gets left alone. Can you see me stepping off that bus at the end of the day? Kids around here be all, *Yo, Armstrong, we hear you're going to a new school. That's right. What's it called? Wonderland. Wonderland? Say, Alice, what's it like down that hole?*"

"That's exactly why we're sending you. To get away from ignorance like that."

"Well, I'm not going," I say, arms locked across my chest. You got to be firm with people. Especially parents.

Blam! Daddy's fist comes down hard on the table. That's my cue to jump up and run. I've got the advantage when I'm on my feet 'cause he left the one leg in Korea.

"Armstrong, sit down on this chair!"

Daddy picks up the chair, slams it to the floor. *Crack.*

"Ain't no chair now, Daddy. It's a three-legged stool."

"*Isn't a chair.* And that's nothing some wood glue and a clamp can't fix."

I squat on that three-legged stool like I'm in a public toilet afraid to make contact with the seat. Start praying for this to be a short talk.

"Did Rosa Parks give up her seat on the bus?"

“No, sir.”

“Then why are you so quick to give up yours?”

There he goes again, bringing up some hero of Black history. Every time I sass him, he throws back a legend in my face. How am I supposed to grow up brave like Jackie Robinson, wise like Thurgood Marshall, or strong like Mohammad Ali when they’re all looking down at me from Daddy’s high shelf?

My legs wobble and burn. I can only catch every third word.

Courage . . . country . . . pride.

In the shine of the toaster, the future movie star starts to sweat.

Change . . . chance . . . pushups.

Pushups?

“No, sir, no pushups for me. I heard everything you said.”

“Then you’ll go to Wonderland?”

“Yes, sir. I will follow the White Rabbit down the hole.”

“Good. Now hop along and do your chores.”

I should’ve run while I had the chance.

Charlie

The leading cause of death for kids between ten and fourteen is unintentional injuries. Freak accidents like getting hit by

a car, riding your bike off a cliff, or sticking a fork in a light socket. With statistics like those, why am I sitting in a tree?

Andy called it our Thinking Tree. Its botanical name is acacia, which is what Dad called its twin that blew over once in a storm.

“Boys,” he said, firing up his chain saw, “I’m going to need a little help bundling up the acacia.” Andy and I had been playing Battleship on his bedroom floor. We looked out the window and saw this massive tree lying in the yard. It had fallen all the way to the front door. “I’ll cut up the branches. You bundle and drag them to the curb.” Dad tossed Andy a ball of twine. “And remember, boys, do a man’s job.”

We were boys and men in one breath. Andy put on his ski mask, goggles, parka, and gloves. I wore shorts and a tennis shirt. By nighttime I was squirting Bactine over my arms and legs, Andy was wheezing from an allergy attack, and Mom was combing tiny green bugs from our hair. Tree bugs, we called them. The next morning I found one up my nose.

From the fifth branch of my Thinking Tree, I can see the streetlight by our house. It hasn’t come on yet, so I’ll sit here and watch until it does. Any time you see the streetlight come on, Andy always said, you’re guaranteed good luck the next day.

I wonder why all my friends are changing schools. Do their parents know something mine don’t, like we’re getting a new principal who’ll double the homework and cut the field

trips in half? Have all the good teachers gotten better jobs someplace else? Or is there a toxic substance leaking into the water supply, and all the kids who stay at Wonderland will die from accidental poisoning?

Last year in the United States, more than six hundred kids died from accidental poisoning.

Dad's Vespa comes rumbling home from the Mulholland Tennis Club. He's been spending most of his free time up there, playing tennis or gin rummy with his friends. On weekends especially, he'll finish breakfast and say, "Well, I'm going up to the Club." And he vanishes on the Vespa.

The garage door wheezes up. He backs the Vespa into its slot, then steps onto the driveway.

Everything about my dad makes a big sound. He's got Paul Bunyan feet that rattle the walls when he comes downstairs. When he chews a sandwich, you can hear the lettuce crunch. Even his keys sound like heavy chains.

"Hey there, Dad," I call down from my branch.

"Charlie," he says, looking up at the tree.

Some kids have dads who are dictionaries. Mine's all twenty-two volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia in one brain. Whenever there's something I need to know, I look it up in my dad.

"How come nobody's going to Wonderland this year?"

"You're going to Wonderland this year."

"Most of my friends aren't. Keith's mom says it's going downhill."

"Your mother and I don't think it's going downhill. It's taking a different path. Some new kids are coming."

"From where?"

"A housing development in South Central LA. It's ninety-nine percent Black."

The opposite of Laurel Canyon, which is ninety-nine percent white. Not boring white. We've still got hippies living in the Canyon. Rock stars too, like Graham Nash, Joni Mitchell, and Carole King, whose daughter was in Andy's class.

We don't have many Black people, though. There were a couple of half-Black kids at Wonderland last year, but that family moved out of the Canyon. The only all-Black people I know, besides Mrs. Gaines the Yard Supervisor, are Nathaniel and Gwynne, who work for my dad.

"Don't they have their own schools?" I say.

The streetlight is taking a long time to come on.

"The Supreme Court has ruled it isn't fair to keep Black and white kids separate. Our city is trying to bring them together by busing some up here."

"Are they busing any to Carpenter?"

"Carpenter seems to have missed the map."

"So that's why so many families are sending their kids to other schools," I say. "They're racist."

"I wouldn't go that far, Charlie. They're doing what they think is right for their children."

I can't help it. Just for a second, my eyes leave the streetlight to look at Dad's face.

“And you and Mom?”

“We’re doing what we think is right for ours.”

I look back at the streetlight. Just my luck: it’s already on.

Armstrong

As the only boy in a house full of girls with a working mama and a one-legged daddy, guess who gets all the nasty chores.

When my daddy’s drips land on the bathroom floor, I get the blame—and the sponge. When the toilet clogs with whatever it is females put down there, who do you think is given the honor to plunge? And the one time we had mouse droppings in the bathroom, did they call an exterminator?

No. They called me, Armstrong Le Rois.

You ever empty out a mousetrap? Most people take the longest shovel they can lift, scoop up the dead mouse—trap and all—and chuck it into a brown bag, then throw the bag away.

I wasn’t allowed that luxury.

“Mousetrap costs forty-nine cents,” my daddy said. “When’s the last time you earned forty-nine cents?”

So instead I had to peel back the metal bar and shake the dead mouse into a grocery bag so I could reuse the trap. It was nasty and I didn’t want to do it.

“Can’t somebody else empty the trap?” I said.

“Who you expect that to be?”

“I’ve got five sisters.”

“They’re too squeamish.”

“Mama, then?”

“She sees enough death at the hospital.”

“Why not you?”

“I saw enough in Korea. You don’t want The Flashbacks to come, do you?”

The Flashbacks are my daddy’s nightmares that come by day. He can be in the kitchen making dinner or paying the bills when all of a sudden he starts to scream like a thing in the forest, calling out names of men I never met, shouting words I’m not even allowed to whisper.

When I was little and The Flashbacks would come, I thought they were ghosts in the house. I’d hide under the table and grab hold of my daddy’s one leg like it was a tree that could save me from a flood. He’d scream and I’d shake. He’d yell and I’d pray—for The Flashbacks not to touch me with their damp, cold hands.

Soon as the nightmares stopped, my daddy would reach down and lift me into his lap.

“It’s just The Flashbacks, Armstrong. I never know when they’re going to come.”

“Can I help you fight ‘em?” I’d say.

“You just did.”

Another chore I’ve got is to help my sisters fold the laundry. It’s something we all do together because six kids times

their clothes is a lot of clothes. Since tomorrow's the first day of school, everybody wants to start with a clean pile.

Here's a pretty little tank top Charmaine wore all summer. I fold it up and put it on her stack.

Daddy plucks it off.

"That's Charmaine's," I say.

"It's yours now."

He puts it on top of my jeans. A pretty little *pink* tank top.

"I'm not wearing that. It's pink."

"What's wrong with pink?"

"Girl's color."

My sisters all bust up again.

"Armstrong, do your sisters take sewing?"

"No."

"Do they take cooking?"

"No."

"What *do* they take?"

"Shop class with the boys."

"And why's that?"

"Cause you marched into the school and said your girls can do anything a boy can." *Except empty out mousetraps*, I think but don't say.

"And my boy can do anything a girl can, right?"

"*Most* anything," I say, hoping he won't ask for the exceptions.

"Including," Daddy goes on, "wear a pink shirt. Now,

this one cost three ninety-nine. When's the last time you earned three ninety-nine?"

But Charmaine's not ready to hand down the tank top. She plucks it off my pile and puts it back on hers.

"I like the way it fits," she says.

"So will the eighth grade boys," says Daddy, putting the tank top back on my pile. Then he reaches over to Cecily's, nabs a top two sizes up, and drops it onto Charmaine's.

"That's my lucky shirt!" Cecily says.

Daddy takes another shirt — this time off Lenai's stack — and puts it on Cecily's.

"What am I supposed to have," Lenai says, "one of Ma-ma's? One of yours?"

"You can have a new one. That's how hand-me-downs work. The oldest gets a new shirt."

And the youngest gets a pink one.

Charlie

Mom has spent the last hundred days mostly in bed. She gets up for important things, like the bathroom or morning coffee. Some days she gets up to shower, and some nights she comes down for dinner, which Lily cooks. Once a week, Lily drags her to the market.

Lily is our housekeeper. She came to America in the trunk of a car and had to pay a *coyote*, or smuggler, to get her

here. Her room smells like Olvera Street, where she goes on her days off because Olvera Street reminds her of home. Dad's the only one who really talks to Lily—he took Spanish in high school. Sometimes I listen in when she's on the phone with her family in Guatemala or watching TV. But to me, Spanish sounds like Jiffy Pop.

Mom used to tuck me in at night. Now I tuck her in. The bed smells like perfume plus coffee mixed with today's *Los Angeles Times*. A headline peeks up from under the covers: "Ford Pardons Nixon."

"Tomorrow's the first day of school," I say.

Mom's face crinkles up like she forgot.

"Do you have everything you need?"

Good time to ask. Bullock's closed an hour ago.

"Dad took me shopping. I got new jeans. Went up a size."

She smiles her rubber-band smile. It stretches, but it doesn't curl.

There's nothing worse than losing a child. That's what all the people said when they crowded into our house for a whole week last May. They came with pink bakery boxes and cold cuts from Art's Deli. They all had more or less the same thing to say.

We can't imagine what you're going through.

A parent's worst nightmare.

Buzzer words, I call them. If life were a game show, a buzzer would go off every time someone said them.

If there's anything Eleanor and I can do.

Bzzz.

Thank God you still have Charlie.

Bzzz.

You could sue, you know.

Triple bzzz.

There's nothing worse than losing a child.

It must be true. She hasn't said Andy's name since he died.

"Good night, Mom."

"Good night, honey."

She hasn't said mine, either.

Armstrong

"You ever been to the Hollywood Hills?"

"I've been to Hollywood Boulevard. Daddy and I took you and the girls once to the Chinese Theatre."

"I remember I stepped in somebody's footprints."

"Jack Benny's. And I put my hands in Clark Gable's handprints. The ladies' were too small for me."

"Whose idea was it to send me to a new school?"

"Your daddy came up with it first. But I agreed."

"Sisters staying put?"

"Not as many spots for junior high and high school."

"You think those white kids want us to come?"

One thing about Mama, she will never tell me a lie.

"Some maybe do. Some probably don't."

"Cause we're different?"

"Yeah. But you're also the same."

"How are we the same?"

"All starting sixth grade. All turning twelve. Going through the same changes."

I shrug my shoulder to say I'm not so sure. Also to get the covers off so maybe she'll remember to scratch my back!

A cool breeze comes as Mama lifts my shirt. Her nails do lazy eights down my spine.

"You know, you're not the only one getting on that bus. Otis is going. Alma and Dezzy, too."

"Otis?"

"Yep."

"He's always talking about astrology."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's stupid, Mama. Like your birthday's got something to do with who you are."

"It's just a hobby, is all. Some people believe it."

"Well, I don't. Keep scratching."

She does for a few seconds.

"Come on, now. Otis is all right."

"I guess."

"You will be too, Armstrong."

It's quiet, and I wonder who she's trying to convince.

"I just hope those white kids keep an open mind," I say.

"Why, are you going to teach them something?"

"Somebody's got to."

Mama's hand stops. "You know, Armstrong, it's not just an opportunity to change schools. It's to change ways, too."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Six fights in fourth grade. Five in fifth. It doesn't always have to be Armstrong against the world."

That's gonna depend, I think, if it's the world against Armstrong.