

Jacqueline Phillips

Professor Varner

ENG 391

4 October 2018

Goodbye, Charlie

March had always been a dreary month, still chilly with the sun resting in a gray sky. Instead of taking the normal way to school, my mom went a slightly different route. She avoided Broad Street at all costs. My mom dropped me off to the back of the school for another day. I walked along the dark pavement towards my friends. The clouds stood in the sky, looking as if they would start to cry at any moment. Whispers floated into the air, but were too quiet to pick up what was actually being said.

My feet carried me to where Mrs. Olsen's third grade class sat outside. I looked at the teachers, all huddled together. Mrs. Olsen had puffy eyes and her face was flushed of the usual rosy color. There was a pit in my stomach, a feeling that at the time I did not understand. I felt as though my body was being dragged into the depths of the earth where there was no happiness, no light.

I sat on the cold, damp pavement next to my two best friends, Jess and Sara. We exchanged looks, but did not know what to say to one another. So instead we sat there in silence, looking at our shoes, hoping it wouldn't start to rain on us.

My friend Joey made his way over to us, hand in hand with his older sister who was speaking to her friend. I craned my neck slightly toward the sound of her voice and caught the last of their conversation. "It's so weird that it happened last night, I dreamed of an angel going

to heaven last night before I even found out.” Looking back, I don’t know if she was telling the truth.

My innocence had been taken from me just two hours before. I was expected to understand something that a nine-year old shouldn’t have to think about. I pulled my knees in closer to me and allowed my mind to wander back to earlier that morning at home.

“Over, under, pull it tight. Make a bow, pull it through to do it right,” I mumbled to myself as I finished tying my sketchers. Gym class was today and I needed my best shoes if I was going to win whatever we were playing. I stood up, without looking in the mirror and made my way downstairs to breakfast. The smell of scrambled eggs and rye toast made its way through the house. I was really sick of eating scrambled eggs.

My baby sister, Christina, was already in her high chair. She looked like she was sick of scrambled eggs too. I sat down in my seat at the island and stared at the sad looking yellow pieces on my plate. “Mom, can we have pancakes tomorrow?”

She wasn’t facing me as she washed the pan that made breakfast. “Sure, whatever you want sweetie.” Well, that was easier than I thought. I smiled and began to take a bite of the standard Phillips family breakfast. The salty taste of eggs took over my mouth, nothing new. Christina looked at me and started to eat too.

There was an uncomfortable silence that was heavy and uncertain, causing me to shift in my seat. Mom walked over and sat in the seat next to mine before she took my hands in hers. Was I in trouble? I didn’t do anything. Oh my god, she knows I snuck that chocolate bar. I could feel the slightest tremble as she took a deep breath. Her eyes were red and out of focus as she tried to find words. Her face had no remnants of any happiness. I wasn’t used to this. I was used to the mom who would cuddle up next to me on the couch, smiling as we watched Animal Planet

or one of her favorite classic movies. The mom who always seemed to have an answer and a hug ready for you if you had a problem. Now she looked like she needed the hug more.

“Jacqueline, honey. I have something really important to tell you. Sometimes bad things happen. Last night, something happened to your friend Charlie. He won’t be coming back to school. He is going to go away to heaven for a little bit. He is going to be happy there though because he can play all day,” she said as quickly as she could before she embraced me in the first of many hugs. Again, I felt her body shake slightly before she got up and turned back to the sink. I saw her lifting her hand up to her face, to wipe away the tears she tried to hide. She had no idea how to handle this one. There are no books or mom blogs that explain to you how to handle this. To this day it was one of the hardest things she had to learn how to do.

I shook my head. What else could I do? It didn’t register. Ok, Charlie wasn’t coming into school. It’s just like he is sick at home. He will be back soon. But he won’t really be coming back. Why? I just kept shaking my head despite all the questions I had. My mom looked over and asked, “Do you want to go to school?” I shook my head yes. “Ok get on your rain coat, it looks like it might rain.”

The whistle blew which took me back to reality and away from my thoughts. This was the signal to line up. We all rushed to get in line, pushing to see who would get to be line leader today. I didn’t get there in time and instead stood in the middle of the line. To my right one of the whispers got slightly louder. The word “murder” entered my ear. That was a big word for someone who had lived in this happy little bubble for her whole life. I think the saddest part is that the word wasn’t some rumor. It was true. The word is something we all hear in our lives without thinking much about it. We hear it in movies, television, books, and on the news. But it

is more than just something in an actor's line or character's dialogue. The word actually happened. It wasn't fiction this time. The word that I have never given much thought to before, suddenly became real.

We shuffled into the building and walked as a class into the classroom. I looked outside and saw that it had started to rain. We all sat down in our assigned seats after putting our backpacks into our cubbies. Everyone looked around to see if their best friends were there. Being nine, that was the most important thing about school. There was one seat empty. I looked back at it and turned back around, still puzzled as to why it would stay empty.

I don't know why, but I guess my face showed Mrs. Olsen all the emotions needed for a hug. She came up behind me and hugged me from the back whispering, "I miss him too." I sat there confused, I knew I wasn't crying but here I was, singled out of the class to get a hug.

Mrs. Olsen stepped toward the front of the room. Her hands were pressed to her heart. She explained, "Mrs. Graziano and Mr. Kirk will be stopping in for a little bit to talk to everyone. Until they do we are going to continue to practice spelling. Everyone take out your spelling books." The sound of ruffling through desks and papers overtook the room. I reached for my favorite pencil. It was one that smelled like cotton candy. I looked toward the front and waited for the word. "Ok, the first word is coach."

We all began our practice spelling test, until a slight whimper was heard from the back of the room. I turned my head, but not too much because I didn't want my teacher to think I was cheating. It was Julia. With her pencil clutched in her fist, almost silent tears rushed down her face and splashed the paper. The words started to smudge. Mrs. Olsen walked over, took her by the hand, and led her outside. I didn't see Julia for the next couple of days. Charlie was her

cousin. School ended, like every other day. I walked outside to meet my mother. I got into the silver van without saying much. Mom asked, "How was school sweetie?" This was her attempt at trying to take my mind and hers off everything. I just shrugged.

The funeral came and went the next week. I wasn't allowed to go, despite my arguing that I wanted to. My parents hired a babysitter instead. I wasn't the only one not allowed to go. None of the parents wanted to expose their children to the full extent of what had happened. Honestly, I think it was the right decision. Bringing kids to see their dead friend is something that sticks with them for life. We were all so young, and seeing Charlie lying, lifeless there would have just confused and upset us all in a way we were not prepared for. It was necessary to preserve some of the child like innocence we all still clung onto.

The babysitter and I sat on our overly comfy couch with our feet up on the coffee table. Next to my feet lay *The Coast Star*. On the cover was a picture of Charlie. A stubby little boy, whose smile overtook his roundish face. The same smile that I would see when trying to break the barrier of arms in the game Red Rover. He looked like a character straight out of *The Peanuts*. I didn't read the newspaper; I mean, what kid did? But if I had, I would have found out a lot sooner the mother killed her precious boy so no one else in the world could have him. A few years later, I learned that his mother had stabbed him multiple times before trying to take her own life due to her severe depression. She faced 30 years in prison. The thought sickens me every time I think about it. A mother is supposed to love you unconditionally. What mother would do this to her child? I grew up in one of the most loving households and up until then I truly thought everyone was as lucky as I was. I was wrong.

“Do you wanna play a game Jacqueline?” I shook my head no. “Do you wanna watch a movie?” I nodded, and went over to our DVD bin. I pulled out *The Lion King*. It wasn’t my favorite, but it felt right. *I just can’t wait to be king* echoed through the living room. I wish school could be as fun as that scene again. I stopped watching and instead wondered why I wasn’t allowed to go to the funeral? Why I wasn’t allowed to say goodbye to my friend? More thoughts raced through my mind as Simba and Nala stood scared and frozen in the elephant grave yard. Not long after, I fell asleep as Simba mumbled, “Dad?”

School slowly became normal again. My mom took the regular route. Looking out my window, we passed Charlie’s old apartment. The white paint from the outside lay on the ground, like a blanket of snow had just fallen. Outside was what any child would consider heaven. Piles and piles of toys gathered in front of the door. A memorial for him. People started to talk and smile during school again. My friends began to speak about what happened without seeming to feel guilty of mentioning Charlie’s name. It was weird to talk about him in the past tense. I sat with Jess and Sara at lunch. With PB&J’s in hand, we talked about him for the first time without counselors or parents or teachers asking us how we felt about it.

“I like liked him you know,” I said before taking another bite into the sandwich.

Sara looked up and said, “Well I like liked him too. I wanted to tell him, but I was scared.”

“Me too,” said Jess.

“Well, we can’t all like like him,” I said.

We all eyed each other. Deep down we all knew that we didn't have an actual crush on him, but were trying to find a deeper connection to the friend we lost. A deeper connection than just a stupid game of "chase the boys" or an invite to his birthday party.

It had been three weeks since Charlie's death. Mrs. Olsen stepped to the front of the classroom, "Ok guys listen up. We are going to do something very nice for Charlie. I need all of you to draw a picture on these cards I hand out please. You can draw whatever you think Charlie would like. When you are done we will frame them all together and put it in the library." She passed out the cards while friends talked about what they are going to draw.

Sara said, "I'm going to draw him a dog! Charlie liked dogs."

"I'll draw him one too!" Jess said.

I racked my brain for what to draw. For some reason, the first thought to pop into my head was surfboards and the beach. Charlie didn't surf and I don't know if he even went to the beach, but it was a piece of our town and one of the only things I knew was still the same.

The beach was orange, with three surfboards sticking out of the sand. All were different colors with another color stripe down the middle. A masterpiece, if I said so myself. The cards were collected and placed into a shoebox.

We gathered into the library during our reading period a few days later. All of us sat on the colored rug in the kiddie section. Mrs. Kirk, Mrs. Graziano, and Mrs. Olsen stood in front of us. Some photographer for *The Coast Star* was snapping picture after picture for her big new story.

Mr. Kirk stepped forward and began a speech. I traced my finger around the circles on the mat that contained the letters of the alphabet, while I leaned up against a tower of children's books. *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* pushed into the back of my skull. A thud stopped my finger dead in its tracks. I looked up and saw a rocking chair being placed in the section. It was like any other wooden rocking chair but with a plaque, *In Memory of Charlie*. Then, a giant frame was taken out of a box and hung over the book stacks. It had every drawing we made in the form of a collage. I saw mine and smiled at the way it looked amidst all the dogs. Without noticing the clock hit three and the bell rang to dismiss the school.

My mom picked me up after I walked out of the main entrance. I pulled the car door handle and let the door slide open before hopping inside. "How was school sweetie?" I don't know why, but at those words all the understanding rushed into me. The knowing that Charlie, my friend, was murdered by his mother. The emotions that I wouldn't get to see him again, confusion; sadness; anger; grief all entered my mind. I burst into tears.

Between gasps for air I cried to my mom, "I miss Charlie. I didn't get to say goodbye." This was the first realization that I, Jackie Phillips, can't be at peace until actually saying goodbye. Goodbyes were what helped me move on from anyone's passing, whether it is my pet or my Grandpa. She reached around and took me into a mama bear hug. My tears caused her to have tears of her own.

I cried until my mom asked, "Do you want to say goodbye?"

"Yes, I really want to," I said as I wiped away the wetness from my eyes and cheeks.

"Ok, buckle yourself in then." We drove to Party City. We walked in and the smell of cheap plastic and rubber made me scrunch my nose. My mom lead us over to the wall of colors



and animated faces. “Which color do you want to get?” Where was she going with this? I pointed at the red one. She walked over to the employee and asked for one red balloon, the employee filling to the brink with helium. After 10 minutes we were back home, my mom handed me a piece of paper. “Write Charlie a letter to say goodbye and we will send it to him with the balloon.”

I began to write this letter in a red crayon.

*Dear Charlie,*

*Hi. I just wanted to say I miss you soooooooo much. I’m so sad I didn’t say goodbye to you. You still are my friend and I hope you are having fun in heaven. There are so many toys at your house. I know you can’t play with them, but I hope you like them. We gave you pictures and a rocking chair at school, I hope you like that too. Do you miss me and the rest of our class? Goodbye Charlie. I’ll never forget you.*

*Love,*

*Jacqueline*

Everything in the letter ended up being true. Graduation from my elementary school consisted of a video of each student discussing what they wanted to be when they grew up. Charlie didn’t have the chance to even dream about it. So at the end we had a moment of silence for him, the boy who never got the chance to live his life.

Without reading the letter, my mom took the it and sealed it into an envelope. She tied it to the string of the balloon we bought. She gave it to me and lead me outside to our porch. I clutched the string, making my knuckles go slightly white.

She bent down and smiled, “Let go, Jacqueline, and Charlie will be able to read it.” I let go and watched as the wind took hold of the balloon. The red dot circled in the sky until it became nothing. At last, goodbye.