

# **The Death and Life of Charlie St. Cloud**

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## INTRODUCTION

### I BELIEVE IN MIRACLES.

Not just the simple wonders of creation, like my new son at home nursing in my wife's arms, or the majesties of nature, like the sun setting in the sky. I'm talking about real miracles, like turning water into wine or bringing the living back from the dead.

My name is Florio Ferrente. My father, a fireman, christened me after St. Florian, the patron saint of our profession. Like my pop, I worked my whole life for Engine Company 5 on Freeman Street in Revere, Massachusetts. I served as God's humble servant, going where the Lord dispatched me, saving the lives that He wanted rescued. You could say I was a man on a mission, and I'm proud of what I did every day.

Sometimes we arrived at a fire too late to make a difference. We threw water on the roof but the house

still burned down. Other times we got the job done, protecting lives, whole neighborhoods, and plenty of pets. Those cats and dogs sure chewed me up, but I'm glad I hauled every single one down the ladder.

Most folks have a picture of us loaded with gear rushing into flaming buildings. That's right. This is serious business. But in the quieter moments we also have our share of laughs. We can send a pal flying up into the air with a blast from the pressure hose, and we make our wives crazy planting rusty old hydrants next to the geraniums in our backyards. We have more toy fire trucks than our kids and we get into shouting matches over the best color for emergency vehicles. For the record, I prefer old-fashioned red to that ugly neon yellow.

Above all, we tell stories, the kind where we turn down the TV, kick back in the La-Z-Boy, and relax for a while.

What follows is my favorite. It's about what happened thirteen years ago on the General Edwards drawbridge not far from the redbrick station I call home. It wasn't the first time we had raced there to pry people out of wrecks or scoop up folks who had been hit in the crosswalk.

My first trip to the bridge was back in the Blizzard of '78, when an old man missed the warning light that the ramp was going up. He crashed through the barrier, flew right off the edge, and was submerged in his Pontiac for twenty-nine minutes. We knew because that was how long his Timex had stopped when the divers cut him out from under the ice. He was frozen blue with no pulse, and I went to work breathing life back into him. In a few ticks, his skin turned pink and his eyes blinked open. I was about twenty-four years old, and it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen.

The *Revere Independent* called it a miracle. I like to think it was God's will. In this line of work, the truth is you try to forget most of your runs, especially the sad ones where people die. If you're lucky they dissolve into a great big blur in your brain. But there are some cases you can never get out of your mind. They stay with you for your whole life. Counting the old man in the ice, I've had three.

When I was just a rookie, I carried a lifeless five-year-old girl from a hellish three-alarm on Squire Road. Her name was Eugenia Louise Cushing, and she was covered in soot. Her pupils were pinpoint, she wasn't breathing, and her blood pressure was undetectable, but I kept trying to revive her. Even when the medical examiner pronounced her dead on the scene and began to fill out the paperwork, I kept going. Then all of a sudden, little Eugenia sat up on the stretcher, coughed, rubbed her eyes, and asked for a glass of milk. That was my first miracle.

I picked up Eugenia's crumpled death certificate and put it away in my wallet. It's all tattered now, but I keep it as reminder that anything is possible in this world.

That brings me to the case of Charlie St. Cloud. Like I said, it starts with a calamity on the drawbridge over the Saugus River, but there's a lot more to it than that. It's about devotion and the unbreakable bond between brothers. It's about finding your soul mate where you least expect. It's about life cut short and love lost. Some folks would call it a tragedy, and I see their point. But I've always tried to find the good in the most desperate situations, and that's why the story of these boys stays with me.

You may think some of this seems far-fetched, even impossible. Believe me, I know we all cling to life and its certainties. It's not easy in these cynical times to cast off the hardness and edge

that get us through our days. But try just a little. Open your eyes and you will see what I can see. And if you've ever wondered what happens when a person close to you is taken too soon—and it's always too soon—you may find other truths here, truths that may break the grip of sadness in your life, that may set you free from guilt, that may even bring you back to this world from wherever you are hiding. And then you will never feel alone.

The bulk of this tale takes place here in the snug little village of Marblehead, Massachusetts, a wedge of rock jutting into the Atlantic. It is almost twilight now. I stand in the ancient town cemetery on a sloping hill where two weeping willows and a small mausoleum overlook the harbor. Sailboats tug at moorings, seagulls fly in force, and little boys cast their lines from the dock. Someday they will grow up to hit home runs and kiss girls. Life goes on, infinite, irrepressible.

Nearby, I see a fuzzy old man put a fistful of hollyhocks on his wife's grave. A history buff makes a rubbing from a weathered stone. The tidy rows of monuments drop down to a cove on the water. When I was a school kid, I learned that once upon a time America's first patriots spied from this hilltop on British warships below.

We'll start by going back thirteen years to September 1991. In the rec room at the firehouse, we were polishing off bowls of my wife's famous *spumoni*, arguing about Clarence Thomas, and screaming about the Red Sox, who were chasing the Blue Jays for the pennant. Then we heard the tones on the box, rushed to the rig, and took off.

Now turn the page, come along on the ride, and let me tell you about the death and life of Charlie St. Cloud.

I

RACING  
THE MOON

## ONE



CHARLIE ST. CLOUD WASN'T THE BEST OR BRIGHTEST BOY in Essex County, but he was surely the most promising. He was junior-class vice president, shortstop of the Marblehead Magicians, and co-captain of the debate club. With a mischievous dimple on one cheek, nose and forehead freckled from the sun, and caramel eyes hidden beneath a flop of sandy-blond hair, he was already handsome at fifteen. He was a friend to jocks and geeks and even had a girlfriend one year older at school. Yes, Charlie St. Cloud was a blessed boy, quick of mind and body, destined for good things, perhaps even a scholarship at Dartmouth, Princeton, or one of those Ivied places.

His mother, Louise, cheered his every achievement. Indeed, Charlie was both cause and cure for her own life's disappointments. Those troubles had begun

the very moment he was conceived, an unwanted pregnancy that pushed the man she loved—a carpenter with good hands—right out the door. Next came Charlie's obstructed journey into the world, catching somewhere deep inside and requiring bloody surgery to be born. Soon a second son arrived from another vanished father, and the years blurred into one endless struggle. But for all her woes, Charlie erased her pain with those twinkling eyes and optimism. She had grown to depend on him as her angel, her messenger of hope, and he could do no wrong.

He grew up fast, worked hard at his books, watched out for his mom, and loved his kid brother more than anyone in the world. His name was Sam, and his father—a bail bondsman—was gone, too, barely leaving a trace except for his son's curly brown hair and some bluish bruises on Louise's face. Charlie believed he was the only true protector of his little brother, and someday, together, he knew they would make something of themselves in the world. The boys were three years apart, opposites in coloring and throwing arms, but best friends, united in their love of catching fish, climbing trees, a beagle named Oscar, and the Red Sox.

Then one day, Charlie made a disastrous decision, a mistake the police could not explain and the juvenile court did its best to overlook.

To be precise, Charlie ruined everything on Friday, September 20, 1991.

Mom was working the late shift at Penni's market on Washington Street. The boys had come home from school with mischief on their minds. They had no homework to do until Sunday night. They had already gone spying on the Flynn twins



down the block. They had jumped a fence and snuck onto the property of the Czech refugee who claimed to have invented the bazooka. At sunset, they had played catch under the pine trees in their yard on Cloutman's Lane, just as they had done every night since Charlie had given Sam his first Rawlings glove for his seventh birthday. But now it was dark, and they had run out of adventures.

Sam might have settled for crashing and watching Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game" video on MTV, but Charlie had a surprise. He wanted action and had just the plan.

"How 'bout night fishing on Devereux Beach?" he asked Sam, setting his brother up perfectly.

"Boring," Sam said. "We always do that. How 'bout a movie? *Terminator 2*'s playing at the Warwick. Nick Burrige will sneak us in the back."

"I've got a better idea."

"It's R-rated. What's better than that?"

Charlie pulled out two tickets from the pocket of his jeans jacket. Red Sox tickets. They were playing the Yankees. Boston was on a roll, and the evil Bronx Bombers had lost eleven of their last thirteen.

"No way! Where'd those come from?" Sam asked.

"I have my ways."

"How we gonna get there? Fly?"

"Don't you worry about that. Mrs. Pung is on vacation. We can borrow her wagon."

"Borrow? You don't even have a license!"

"You want to go or not?"

"What about Mom?"

"Don't worry. She'll never know."

"We can't leave Oscar. He'll freak out and mess up the house."

"He can come too."

Sure enough, Charlie, Sam, and their beagle were soon driving to Boston in Mrs. Pung's Country Squire. Without their neighbor Mrs. Pung, that is. The police report would make considerable mention of two unlicensed minors, a dog, and a white stolen vehicle with red interior. But Mrs. Pung dropped the auto-theft charges when she got back from Naples, Florida. They were good kids, she said. They only borrowed the car. They made a terrible mistake. They more than paid the price.

The drive took thirty minutes, and Charlie was especially careful on Route 1A where the Swampscott and Lynn cops patrolled. The boys listened to the pregame show on WRKO, talked about the last time they'd been to the ballpark, and counted their money, calculating they had enough for two Fenway Franks each, a Coke, and peanuts.

"This is our year," Sam said. "The Sox'll win the Series."

"They just have to break the Curse of the Bambino," Charlie said. It was the superstition of every red-blooded Boston fan: Trading Babe Ruth to the Yankees had put a hex on the Sox.

"You don't believe in that stuff, do you?"

"Think about it. The Sox haven't won the Series since 1918. The Yanks have done it twenty-two times. You do the math."

"C'mon, the Babe didn't make Bill Buckner boot that ground ball in '86." Buckner was the reviled first baseman who let an easy dribbler through his legs in the World Series, costing the Sox game six and, many swore, the championship.

"How do you know?"

"He just didn't."

"Well, I think he did."

"Did not."

"Did too."

A standoff.

"Draw?" Sam said reluctantly.

"Okay, draw."

And with that, the argument was done but not over. A draw was their way of stopping a dispute that would have gone on all night. It would be dutifully recorded in *Charlie & Sam's Book of Big & Small Arguments*. And after the proper procedural motions, it could be started up again at any point. Ignoring their age difference, Sam threw himself into these arguments with passion, and the two brothers often spent hours in the Abbot public library on Pleasant Street gathering ammunition for their battles.

Now, with its red bricks and shimmering glass, Boston was waiting across the Charles River. They turned down Brookline Avenue and could see the hazy lights of the stadium. Biting at the chilly air, Oscar leaned out the window. With his red and white coat, he was the perfect mascot for the adventure.

In the parking lot, the boys stuffed their beagle into a backpack and took off for the bleachers. As they reached their seats a thundering cheer rose for Roger Clemens, #21, throwing his first rocket. The boys laughingly bowed left and right to acknowledge the crowd. A stadium guard would later testify he saw the two unaccompanied youths, wearing caps and carrying mitts, but did not stop or question them.

Their seats were in right field, directly behind a guy who must have been seven feet tall, but it didn't matter. It could have

poured, it could have snowed. Nothing could ruin the spectacle of the Green Monster in left field, the grass, the chalk lines, and the infield dirt. They were right near Pesky's pole, just 302 feet from home plate, easy distance for catching a home run.

One of their heroes, Wade Boggs, sat out the game with a sore right shoulder, but Jody Reed took his place and delivered, with a run-scoring double and homer off the left-field foul pole. The boys ate two hot dogs each with extra relish. Oscar got some Cracker Jacks from a woman in the next row. A big bearded guy next to her gave them a few sips of Budweiser. Charlie was careful not to drink too much. Still, the police report would mention traces of alcohol in their blood. There was enough to raise questions, but not enough for answers.

Clemens shut out the Yankees, allowing only three hits and striking out seven. The crowd cheered, and Oscar howled. With the final out and a 2-0 victory in the books, the fans scattered but the boys stayed in their seats, replaying the highlights. The team was now miraculously within striking distance of Toronto. Instead of falling apart in September, always the cruelest month, the Sox were surging.

"Someday, we'll have season tickets," Charlie said. "Right there behind home plate in the first row."

"The bleachers are good enough for me," Sam said, eating the last of the peanuts. "I don't care about the seats. As long as it's you and me, that's what makes baseball great."

"We'll always play ball, Sam. No matter what."

The stadium lights began shutting down. The ground crew had just about spread the tarp over the infield.

"We better go," Charlie said.

The boys headed for the parking lot, where the white station wagon was all alone. The drive home was much faster. Springsteen was born to run on the radio. There was hardly any traffic. The trip would take half an hour. They would be home by 10:30. Mom wouldn't be back until midnight. Mrs. Pung in Florida would never know.

Just past the Wonderland Greyhound Park, Sam pulled a cassette from his pocket and stuck it in the radio. It was U2's *The Joshua Tree*. Charlie sang along to "With or Without You."

"Bono rocks," Sam said.

"The Boss."

"Bono."

"The Boss."

"Draw?"

"Draw."

They drove silently for a while, then Sam asked out of the blue, "How long will it be until I'm grown up?"

"You already are," Charlie answered.

"I'm serious. When do I stop being a kid?"

"Officially," Charlie said, "when you're twelve, you're a man and you can do what you want."

"Says who?"

"Says me."

"I'm a man and I can do what I want," Sam said, enjoying the sound of it. A great moon floated on the Saugus River, and he rolled down the window. "Look," he said. "It's bigger tonight. Must be closer to us."

"Nah," Charlie said. "It's always the same distance. That's just an optical illusion."

"What's that?"

"When your eye plays tricks on you."

"What kind of trick?"

"Wherever it is in the sky," Charlie said, "it's always 225,745 miles away." He did the math. Numbers were easy for him. "At our speed right now, it would take about 170 days to get there."

"Mom wouldn't be too crazy about that," Sam said.

"And Mrs. Pung wouldn't be happy about the mileage."

The boys laughed. Then Sam said, "It's no optical delusion. It's closer tonight. I swear. Look, you can see a halo just like an angel's."

"No such thing," Charlie said. "That's a refraction of the ice crystals in the upper atmosphere."

"Gee, I thought it was a refraction of the ice crystals on your butt!" Sam howled with laughter, and Oscar barked in a series of sharp, distinctive woofs.

Charlie checked his mirrors, aimed the car straight ahead, and took one quick glance to the right. The moon was flickering between the iron railings of the drawbridge, keeping pace with them as they sped home. It sure seemed closer than ever tonight. He turned his head for a better look. He thought the bridge was empty so he pushed down on the gas.

Of all his reckless decisions that night, surely this was the worst. Charlie raced the moon, and in the final second before the end, he saw the perfect image of happiness. Sam's innocent face looking up at him. The curl dangling over his forehead. The Rawlings glove on his hand. And then there was only fracturing glass, metal, and blackness.