

## Tell Me More

*By Michelle Pugh*

It's difficult, sometimes, in the day-to-day of this busy modern world, to stop and listen. But, *shh*— if you just take a second, you might hear something life-changing.



Charlie Mills was a shy boy, with messy brown hair and bright green eyes, perpetually searching for a new adventure. When he was seven he would regularly race his older brother around the block on their bikes, each day getting faster and faster, closer and closer to finally winning. The two raced daily for almost three months before Charlie took a tumble, breaking his arm and splitting his skull wide open. Charlie bragged about the eight stitches he ended up with for the rest of the year, and continued to bear the scar proudly well into his teenagehood, but his parents didn't let him touch a bike again for five years.



It was cold and rainy, despite it being summer in Northern California. I checked my phone several times just to make sure I hadn't somehow passed out during English and woken up in the winter. Nope. Still 3 pm on September 2nd. Bullshit. My umbrella was at home, where, confident that the sun would remain out, I had ignorantly left it that morning. So there I was, forced by my own idiocy to trudge home in the bleak weather that, frankly, reflected my mood in an almost poetic fashion. Spurred on by my revelation, I chose to pass the time by writing haikus in my head that matched the rhythm of my footsteps.

*Three homework projects*

*Six hours to do them in*

*How will I find time?*

I smiled to myself. That one was quite good. Leigh was always considered the poet of our friend group, but maybe I just hadn't had my opportunity to show *my* talent yet.

*The rain's really gross*

*What'd I do to deserve this?*

*I thought—*

I stopped suddenly in my steps, about three blocks from my home. I stood there in shock for at least ten seconds, trying to register what was in front of me. A car— but it wasn't a car anymore, no, because a car needs a front, and this car was clearly missing its front, which was crumpled around the other side of the massive pine. The car itself was on its side, windows shattered, airbags deployed. I didn't know what to do. Finally, the rain pounding on my skull jolted me back into reality, and I found myself next to the car, trying to pull the door open, trying to get to the driver I knew had to be inside. A piece of glass crashed down from the window, narrowly missing my hands, and I withdrew, reaching instead for my phone. Fingers trembling, I dialed the numbers inked into my brain since childhood. 911.



When Charlie was sixteen, he met Esther. Esther was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life. She had golden hair that tumbled over her shoulders, and wide blue eyes that sparkled in the sun. Whenever she laughed, it felt like the world got a little bit better, even just for that second. When they spent time together, Charlie couldn't help but feel as though he was just about the luckiest boy in the world. It took him eleven months to work up the courage to ask

her out. She hugged him tightly and told him she loved him, but only as a friend. It took Charlie almost a year to ask Esther out. It took him two to get over her.



They told me I couldn't see the man until they were absolutely certain he wasn't in critical condition. They called him John Doe, because he didn't have ID on him and wasn't conscious to state his name. I somehow felt responsible for his accident, like if I had gotten there a minute earlier I could've thrown myself in front of the car, used some superhuman powers I didn't realize I had to stop the vehicle in its tracks. One of the nurses told me I had nothing to do with the accident. She even reminded me that I had likely saved Mr. Doe's life by calling emergency services when I had. It didn't stop the guilt from practically consuming me. Eventually the same nurse had to come to me and ask me to leave.

"Visiting hours are over," she said. I pointed out that I wasn't technically visiting because she hadn't let me see the man in the first place. She gently pointed me to the door.

"You're tired, sweetheart," she said. "You should go home." I was tired. So I did go home. But I wasn't done at the hospital.

I returned the next day after school and asked to see John Doe. The nurse gazed at me over the counter for at least five seconds before getting to her feet.

"Charles Mills," she said, motioning for me to follow her.

"Sorry?"

"Charles Mills," she repeated. "Not John Doe."

"Did he wake up?" I asked, realizing her implication.

“For a minute, last night,” she said, stopping in front of a door. “I told him you would probably come back to speak to him. He looks forward to meeting you.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know,” she muttered. “We didn’t have a lengthy conversation.”

I stood in the doorway for a second, taking in my surroundings. The walls were painted white, and devoid of any decorations. In the middle of the room was a similarly plain white bed. The only color seemed to come from a faded red armchair, neatly fitted into the corner, and everything smelled faintly of cleaner.

Mr. Mills looked around eighty years old, but I imagine the extensive injuries aged him a bit. I took a seat in the armchair and looked him over.

As if by magic, the man’s eyes cracked open the second I settled down. Silently, he regarded me. His eyes were kind and green, but there was a sadness I could immediately see in them.

“Mr. Mills?” I asked hesitantly. He blinked but said nothing. I shifted in my seat, prepared for an awkward moment. After a second, though, I realized that the quiet wasn’t totally uncomfortable. In the halls I could hear the rolling wheels of carts, the footsteps of nurses. The hushed voices from the room next door drifted softly through the wall. But Mr. Mills and I spent our first day together in silence, just basking in each other’s company. When I got up to leave twenty minutes later, we didn’t exchange a word. He knew I’d be back the next day.

And I was.

Charlie wasn't drafted to fight in the Vietnam war, but that didn't mean he wasn't affected. He lost three close friends in the early years of the war and was left to reflect upon the preciousness of life. It was during his early twenties that he remembered crashing his bike as a child, how close to death he had come at such a young age, and this realization sent Charlie spiraling into a deep sadness. He began to show up late to his job almost daily, and spent much of the rest of his time at home, asleep. Whenever he did leave the house to spend time with friends and family, his conversations always drifted towards the inevitability of death. His parents were frightened for him, but unsure what help they could offer. So, when Charlie lost his job, they offered a place for him to stay, but that was all. With every agonizing day that passed, he found himself more and more alone, consumed by the dark maze of his own mind.



The next day was a Saturday, and it was nine in the morning when I showed up to see Mr. Mills. He was awake and seemed to be doing quite all right for a man who had been in a major car accident just a few days prior. He managed what I believe to be a smile when he saw me. For the first time in my life, I heard him speak.

“You were in here yesterday.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You're the one that saved me.”

I paused. It still didn't feel like that was what I had done. “Yes, sir.”

It was that moment that I will never forget. I may live for a hundred more years but not a single second will compare to this one, when Charles Mills took my hand and smiled at me.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “Thank you. I wasn't ready to die just yet.”

Mr. Mills told me his story a little bit at a time. Sometimes he skipped over decades of his life; whether due to innate consciousness of good storytelling or just a lack of memory, I don't know. Every so often he'd ask me about myself. I talked to him about my interest in computer science and my years as a soccer player. I recounted suffering two concussions and having to make the hardest decision of my life, quitting the sport I loved to protect myself from future injuries. All the time that I spoke, he sat silently, devouring my words as if they were the most important ones on the planet. But I always tried to steer the conversation back over to him, because when he told me about his life, his eyes glimmered with joy and he seemed to sit up a little bit straighter. When I left, he thanked me again, this time for listening.

"It makes it a bit less lonely," he admitted.

"You don't have to thank me, Mr. Mills," I said.

"Charlie," he said. "The only people that ever called me Mr. Mills were my bosses, directly before they fired me."

"Okay," I said, with a small smile.

"I'll see you soon?" he asked, hopefully.

I scratched my head, thinking for a second about my schoolwork, my friends. "Yeah," I finally said. "Yeah, you will."



In his forties, Charlie reconnected with Esther. She returned to their home town for a few weeks to look after her sick mother, and the two ran into each other at the local pharmacy. Through a lengthy conversation, Charlie learned that she was now married, with three young

children. The two exchanged contact information, agreeing to stay in touch. Charlie expected little of that to happen. Acquaintances he met rarely followed through on “keeping in touch”, and he hardly expected an old friend from his youth to be any different. But, a little over four months later, when Esther had returned to her home, states away, Charlie received a phone call from her. Together, they reflected upon their teenage years and those shortly following them. Charlie opened up to Esther about his struggles with mental health in his twenties and she admitted that the war had taken its toll on her, as well. Her boyfriend at the time had fought for two years in Vietnam and, riddled with anxiety, Esther herself had fallen into one of the darkest times of her life. As the old friends continued to call and speak regularly, they each realized they had gone through similar experiences—losing friends to the war, being jobless, struggling to stay afloat in the thrashing currents of depression. The freedom to finally be open and understood by someone felt like a breath of fresh air to Charlie. The more he and Esther spoke, the lighter Charlie felt, and suddenly he no longer remembered her by her rejection but instead by the time he had felt truly loved in her company.



“The loss of a friend you’ve had for fifty-five years is the worst feeling on the planet,” Charlie said, gazing at me over a cup of tea. He was sitting upright now, and the doctors told me he was likely going to be able to be released from the hospital soon.

“I can’t imagine how horrible that would be,” I mumbled, eyes downcast.

“Cancer was what took her,” Charlie said, his voice breaking slightly. “I did my best to comfort her family, her husband and kids. But what is there to say?”

I swallowed down a lump in my throat. Charlie’s eyes brimmed with tears.

“Almost a year ago,” he said. “It’s been almost a year and I still think about her every damn day.”



The day that Charlie was set to go home, I skipped school. I wanted to talk to him one last time before he left. But when I got to the hospital, a doctor stopped me from going in.

“Charles Mills had an atrial fibrillation attack last night,” she said.

“What?”

“Atrial fibrillation,” she repeated. “Heart palpitations.”

“I—how can this happen? He was recovering! He was fine!” I cried, my voice rising.

The doctor gently motioned me to sit down. “The attack was likely a result of the stress the car accident put his body and mind through,” she explained. “He probably experienced a good deal of pain over the past few days, but attributed it to his other injuries and as a result didn’t feel the need to bring it up. We’re doing our best to treat it, but you can’t see him today.”

“Is he going to die?” I asked, my voice small.

“Atrial fibrillation is rarely fatal,” she said. “But it has been known to lead to heart failure. I promise you, we’re doing our best.”

My own heart in my throat, I picked myself up, and I went to school that day. But I didn’t learn a thing. Nothing seemed important enough to take my mind away from Charlie.



I learned a lot from stopping to listen to Charlie Mills. I learned that life can get hard. Sometimes, it can get unbearable. You might be driving in the rain one day and remember that someone who brought you comfort for your entire life is gone. You might, without warning, find



yourself tumbling again into the bottomless chasms in your mind. And, to stop it, you might do the only thing you can think to do—veer off the road. End it.

He told me he was grateful that I saved him that day. He realized, immediately after pulling the steering wheel, that the rest of his life was worth living. He realized that he had gotten through the darkness before and he could get through it again. But then the impact came, and he stopped realizing.

Charlie passed away just two hours after I left. He didn't scream, didn't cry. His heart just... stopped. They told me he was peaceful, that there was no pain in his final moments. I knew there was no way they could know. They were focused on his body, but through his stories, Charlie had tasked me with saving his mind. And it pained me that I would never know if I had succeeded.

