

Charlie

An essay by Ed Lin, originally published in *Amerasia Journal* 30:3
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I wrote this essay back in 1998 immediately after arriving home from the funeral of my young cousin who killed himself. Before the essay, I had been struggling to write a novel but couldn't find any themes that rang true with me. After, I knew I wanted to write something that captured the hurt of our childhood (our lives were rather similar) while trying to find a way out or at least some measure of hope.

My cousin is the Charlie to whom I dedicated Waylaid.

When I got the telephone call from my sister and heard her voice like that, I didn't have to ask what. I just didn't know who.

"Charlie killed himself," she said. He was twenty-four. My family isn't well. Mental illness runs through us like chocolate in a marble cake. Thicker in some sports, thinner in others. But you can taste the chocolate even if you can't see it.

Charlie was one of my cousins on the father's side. Me and my sister were the only ones born here. All the other cousins on my father's side were from Taiwan.

I got along best with Joe, who was my age and in my grade. I remember when Charlie's family was coming over. Joe's family had been here about two years. My mother was raving about Charlie's sister, who was an overachiever in Taiwan.

"She only wants 100s," my mother said, praising her. "She cries when she gets 99s!"

Sure enough, Charlie's sister was getting 100s in the American school.

Then she started hearing voices. They were calling her in English, saying things she didn't understand. Calling her from down the road, from across the highway, from the other side of the fields. She tried to follow the voices, but they kept moving farther and farther away. It was like trying to walk to the moon.

Nobody knew what was wrong with her. Nobody wanted to admit she was mentally ill or needed professional help until her crazy screaming and crying fits.

My mother shut up about her and those 100s.

Charlie's sister had to take a handful of pills and capsules a day, and she hated taking them because it was so laborious to swallow her medication.

When she skipped, she'd do things like drink bleach or chase Charlie around with a Chinese knife. Charlie walked around for years holding a small chopping block in case his sister came from around a corner ready to cut his throat. You could see the physical toll the sickness was taking on his sister and his parents, but Charlie seemed to be okay. If you talked with him, though, his voice came out in a flat, low monotone.

Before he'd gotten into Yale, I had asked Charlie what he wanted to do for a job, and he said he wanted to work for the C.I.A.

"They're really evil," I said. He shrugged. "You might as well go for the most evil," Charlie said, like the world was completely evil already.

Charlie stayed on for a master's in neurology at Yale, but transferred to Emory in Atlanta because his adviser and mentor was moving there. It was a tough decision for Charlie to make.

In the last e-mails he wrote to me and the other cousins, he wanted to know if Emory was prestigious enough, if it was good enough. But in the end, he chose to head south to continue his experiments. For his lab work he cut the heads off of mice and saw what was wrong with their brains.

His parents fixed it so that the local funeral home in New Jersey would bring Charlie's body in from Georgia. The Atlanta police found Charlie's body on Thursday morning. By Saturday, it was in New Jersey, being prepared for the funeral on Monday.

I was riding the New Jersey Transit train back for Charlie's funeral. I was mad. I hate you, Charlie, I was thinking. I hate you for taking me back to New Jersey, this shitty town where the groceries write down prices on cans and boxes with felt-tip markers. I hate you for throwing me back in with these relatives who asked how I was doing in the stock market and when I was getting married even before you were buried.

In the pecking order of cousins, Charlie was mine and Joe's punk. He was about five years younger than both of us and much smaller. We named him "Ugly," and called him that the whole night. He fell asleep early once, but sat up as his body jerked from a series of violent sneezes.

"Die!" I yelled at him. Joe laughed so hard he almost fell over.

Charlie gave me a hard look that softened quickly, and he dropped back down.

But Charlie got the last laugh on Joe. He snagged Joe's diary and found out Joe was gay, years before any of us knew. But he never told anyone. He could have hit back, and hard, but Charlie only knew how to wield the chopping block, not the knife.

I met Charlie's best friend at the funeral, this white guy who didn't look too comfortable

with being in the minority. He was one of the pallbearers along with me.

Charlie's friend told me they'd found him slumped over in his new Rav4, which was idling in front of his house. But there was no hose and no note.

Charlie's parents couldn't sell his vehicle because it was registered in his name, and a death certificate was required in order to make a transaction on his behalf. But there would be no death certificate for at least three months because the autopsy results weren't done yet, and the cause of Charlie's death was marked "mysterious."

It was no mystery to me. Charlie had killed himself. Even if there weren't a hose, he'd figure out a way to do it because he was so smart.

A woman I met at the funeral told me Charlie had argued with an ex-girlfriend over the phone just last weekend. But I knew it ran a lot deeper than that.

The autopsy would never show what was wrong with Charlie's brain or his upbringing. It wouldn't show the time Charlie said he had the same sickness as his sister, but his parents wouldn't listen. They wouldn't find the Taiwanese son working himself mad academically to make up for his incapacitated sister.

I only need to look at my own immediate family to know what happened in the households of my cousins.

"You're going to go to hell if you keep reading Rolling Stone!" my mother would scream at my sister.

"All the good kids are studying hard right now, and you're just goofing off," my father would say.

They didn't know it then, but my sister would be valedictorian of her high school and go on to M.I.T., fulfilling the Asian parents' wet dream.

"We only let you apply to Columbia because we knew you wouldn't get into a really good school," my mother said to me when I was accepted. "Otherwise we wouldn't let you go to New York with all those blacks, but we had no choice." I only had 1400 on my SATs, which was far from perfect.

At Charlie's funeral several of his professors stood up and spoke. "Hard-working" and "really bright" came up a lot. I wanted to cut their throats.

I know what the last straw was. His parents told him to take care of his sister after they died. Charlie could have kept up the academic work of two children, but could he have been a caretaker for life, as well?

When Charlie's mother told his sister that he was dead, the sister broke down sobbing.

"I dreamt you were at a funeral!" she told her mother. "But it was supposed to be mine! It was supposed to be mine!"

We are all failures. All the cousins. A walking shame to our parents. An unmarried thirty-year-old son. A gay son. A daughter who works for animal rights. A deaf son who married a deaf woman. A son who went to Brown and not one of the good Ivies. A daughter who will be on medication for life. A daughter in therapy. Numerous runaways that all came home. And three suicide attempts. No. Two attempts.

I know why Charlie didn't leave a note. We were his living suicide note.

Our lives, our pain is written in our eyes, our faces. It is a note that omits nothing and rambles on, perhaps, a bit too long. 🐼