



[Home](#)

[Winter-Spring 2014](#)

[Fall-Winter 2013-14](#)

[Summer-Fall 2013](#)

[Spring-Summer 2013](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

The Clubhouse Burial

by Adam Shafer

Charlie's funeral brought damn near everyone from town traipsing through our house. It rained yesterday and no one planned to stay long enough to remove their shoes, so all these mourners tracked in mud and brown water. So now on top of everything else, I had a fair amount of mopping to do.

I needed to clear my mind and maybe punch something and figured I could accomplish both outside, so I escaped down the back steps and out to a stand of willows set off from the property.

I had been bending an index card absently against the tips of my fingers so that it made a faint, woozy sound that barely registered. It had been in my hands ever since Mira Furth presented me with the mail she'd fetched from our own mailbox along with a warm dish of something or other baked with love, or concern, or both. That was over an hour ago. Since then, the parade of the droop-faced bereft had filled our home with enough casserole dishes and hugs and people telling us what a good kid Charlie had been to last a lifetime. I know there isn't much folks can say in times like these, I know people feel they have to add something, but affirming that my boy was a good soul was not only an unnecessary confirmation, but one no one standing on my porch with a Pyrex dish wrapped in cellophane had any right to offer.

Anyway, the card I'd been fidgeting with belonged to Charlie. It appears that way, at any rate. It had my name and the family address written in the addressee space and also in the return address space in Charlie's jagged scrawl. There was no stamp and on the reverse side, the side lined with light blue stripes, there was the following message:

Please come to 4150 Burnt Creek Rode on July 4 2051 – at 7 at nite.

Love, Charles Marshall Lively

He signed it with his middle name the way kids do when they want to sound mature.

The boy's grave had barely been filled and already he was sending me a message from beyond it, only I didn't know what it meant. The address was our home and the date was forty years from now. I'd be an old man by then. I could be dead for all anybody knew. We all could, I guess.

Winter/Spring 2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

Contact

I continued making the index card sing in my hand, bending in rhythm to the syncopated hooting of an owl somewhere in the distance. The screen door onto the back porch burst open with life and, for a moment, the creaking sound of strained metal springs transported me to the curved part of Route 9.

Screechrattlethud.

It was the sound of Charlie's bike buckling around the Oldsmobile. I wasn't there when it happened. I didn't hear the real sound, the terrifying blurt of noise that punctuated my son's final moment, but I have since invented my version of it.

Charlie's friend emerged from the back door of the house and let the screen door crack close behind him, sending any thoughts of *screechrattlethud* back where they belonged. I tucked the index card into my shirt pocket and watched the boy's timid approach. Normally, he moved like a buoy in water, but now, his bounce was heavy. His round face appeared choked by the overly long necktie – probably his father's – swinging down at his knees with every weighted step.

I could never remember the kid's name even though he'd been coming around since the boys were both six.

"Hello, Mr. Lively," Whatshisname said, with a rehearsed politeness.

I didn't have the energy to conjure up an appropriate greeting, so I just smiled unconvincingly. I guessed someone instructed him to deliver his condolences to poor Mr. Lively because he didn't seem to want to be standing in front of me. He was neither carrying a casserole dish, which was promising, nor saying his piece and retreating in the direction he came, which was less promising.

I never understood what Charlie had in common with this boy. Whatshisname was never the first one through any door. Charlie, on the other hand, was determined and stubborn. Once, he and his sister Lily were playing hide-and-seek when their mother called for Lily. Lily abandoned her hiding spot and went inside without telling her brother the game had been interrupted. He stayed out there for another hour looking for her – in the barn, in the corn, near the main road, everywhere. He never looked in the house because the house was off limits. Of course, Lily would never be in the house. When mother did finally call Charlie inside, he came in to find Lily eating crackers and reading a schoolbook, oblivious to all the work he'd put in to locate her. He stared at his sister as if she might have been a mirage, a ghostly placeholder for the real Lily who was still hiding under a pile of hay somewhere outside.

Whatshisname asked me if I wanted to see his secret clubhouse and before my brain could translate "buzz off" into a polite equivalent, he added that it was mostly Charlie's secret clubhouse. I told him that I

didn't know either of them had a secret clubhouse and he shrugged.

I guess the secret had been a success.

He told me the clubhouse was through the willows on the other side of the fence. I unlatched the rust freckled gate and let him lead, which he did, chattering about something or other. I can't be sure what it was. I had stopped listening, lost in thought born two weeks ago.

It was then that I had Charlie help me dig out our potato beds. In his digging, he unearthed a dented biscuit tin with a folded square of brittle paper tucked inside. He unfolded it, set it on the ground and studied it closely, kneeling over it as if praying for its resurrection. He asked me if I thought homesteaders buried the map and a corresponding treasure somewhere close by? I'm paraphrasing, of course. He didn't know the word "corresponding" or "homesteaders." I think he used the word "explorers." I told him I wasn't so sure it was a map, much less a treasure map, much less a map of our own property. This discouraged him, but not from pursuing buried treasure, of course. Charlie was too stubborn for that. He was discouraged from including me in on the adventure of finding it.

Charlie spent the next day using trial and error to rule out what the map's crude markings represented. When the sun's slivers burnt out, he laid in bed planning his next dig across the field. It didn't take but a few days for that boy to pimento our whole damn property full of holes.

And yeah, I'd laid the stomp and whipsong on him for all the damage he'd done to the fields, but truthfully, I was happy. That map, Charlie believed that if he dug enough holes, wore off enough skin, he'd eventually discover something worth finding, which was the whole reason I hid a treasure for him to find in the first place.

I might as well come clean now: I drew up the map myself. I stained it in coffee to make it look old, then I buried it, along with an old biscuit tin filled with baseball cards, dented buffalo nickels and a few other doo-dads Charlie might find exciting, in places I knew he'd find them. Then I pretended not to know anything about it, even keeping his mother and sisters in the dark for fear they'd encourage what should have appeared to them as naïve adventuring. That kind of coddling, especially from his sisters, would have signaled something suspicious happening around him. Encouragement would have been too easy – where was the endurance in it? Besides, it wasn't persistence that he lacked – it was payoff. The boy scraped for everything. How far did it get him? How many times had he been searching for someone or something that wasn't there? I just wanted to give him reason to believe nice things happen, though I knew they mostly didn't.

About ten feet ahead of me, Whatshisname stopped at a converging scrum of branches.

We'd arrived at the clubhouse.

"This is it," he said. "It's through there."

The drooping willow branches formed a curtain soft as cotton sheets on a clothesline. I parted the branches and stepped into the clearing. It was quiet and private and perhaps more idyllic than it had been the morning I buried the tin here. In the center of the clearing, Charlie and Whatshisname had set up their sleeping bags, a cardboard box table with a deck of playing cards fanned across it, a football and a precarious wooden chair Charlie borrowed from our cellar, apparently. Charlie had fortified his clubhouse around a bounty he had been on the cusp of finding. As I walked toward the wooden chair, I noticed that all of it had been reduced to soaked garbage as a result of yesterday's rain. Under the chair, a tree root had erupted from the soil like a sea monster's tentacle. It was the same root Charlie mistook for the drawing of our chicken coop on the map.

I never said I was an artist.

The biscuit tin had been buried a step past the root, about twenty inches underground. I sat on the chair and drew an X in the spot in front of me with my boot.

"We saw a rabbit the other day," Whatshisname said. "Popped right out and then jumped back in the trees over there. We waited a long while to see if we'd see him again." He didn't finish his story, but its conclusion was evident. The rabbit never returned. "I don't suppose anyone will come here in 2051 now," he said. I turned back toward the boy's slight figure and he seemed frightened by my attention. He was motionless, as if he'd just returned to his campground to find a bear rummaging through his tent. I moved my legs halfway around the chair to square up on the boy. I removed the index card from my pocket and held it out in front of him.

"Did you get one of these?" I asked, knowing the answer before I asked it. He answered yes through cautious, unmoving lips, still not yet aware that he held at least one more piece of the puzzle than I did.

"Charlie mailed one to everyone he knew," he said, pulling out his own card and spinning it in his hand. He didn't offer it to me, he just wanted to validate our connection. "He didn't have any stamps so he swapped the addresses of the senders with the addresses of the receivers. He figured, without stamps, the post office would just send them back to whatever return address was written. He was so excited, the other day to mail them out. It was all he talked about in school. That's what he was doing on Route 9. Mailing the cards."

With that, my heart sank from the mezzanine to the orchestra pit.

"What was supposed to happen in 2051?" I asked.

Whatshisname sucked air through his nose then exhaled, then explained that Charlie was sure he was close to digging up a world of riches. He said he was close to hard work finally paying off.

“He planned to travel the world,” Whatshisname said, “see everything there is to see and he wanted to make sure that after he returned he’d be able to share his adventures with everyone.”

Something like pride skimmed across my surface then sank with malice. In contrast to what Charlie imagined he’d find, the treasure that awaited him would have disappointed. I felt reckless for having started this mess, and then I felt something worse.

I stood and looked into the trees where Charlie’s friend said they’d seen the rabbit. I thought maybe it would pop out at that moment, thought maybe it would hop to and show us that it had been listening, that it knew. Maybe it had been aware that people wanted to see it again and was rewarding such a desire. There was a rustle in the high brush, but only stillness followed and nothing else.

Whatshisname asked me if this was where the treasure was hidden, after all. He asked if Charlie had been right. I took a last look at the X in the dust before wiping it away and told him there wasn’t no treasure.

Adam Shafer does most of his writing in the city of Chicago from a computer named Horace. When he’s not writing fiction for fun, he’s writing advertising for money. He values humor, irony and quiet interactions and hopes his writing reflects that. He’s been published in Columbia University’s *Catch & Release* journal, the *Florida Review*, and *Carve Magazine*, among others, and was recently honored with the Nancy D. Hargrove Prize for Fiction from *The Jabberwock Review*. Follow him on Twitter at @adamjshafer.

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