Strange Ways of Kissing

By Liam Sweeney

Since the handshake and formal introduction Sunday morning, the question of Mr. Snyder's blindness had overwhelmed Charlie. It wasn't as though Mr. Snyder had a sinister sort of milky film over his irises as you often see in movies. It was a blank stare, through you, meant for some distant point. It troubled Charlie. He understood, of course, that a blind man must point his head one way, and that it's of no social consequence to a conversation which way the head of a blind man is pointed. Nonetheless, as an imaginative boy of 12, Charlie began to construct detailed theories as to why Mr. Snyder looked where he looked.

He knew that Mr. Snyder had been in the army during World War II. And so, as one might expect, the first imagining had to do with warfare. He visualized an enemy capturing Mr. Snyder. They would have wanted information. After fruitless interrogations they eventually lay Mr. Snyder down in what looked to Charlie very much like a dentist's chair, clamped his eyes open, and poured in sizzling, steaming poison. Charlie didn't like this version. Mr. Snyder was a nice man, a friend of his mother's, and the idea that his eyes had been tortured out of him disturbed the image of Mr. Snyder lounging and drinking iced tea with Charlie's mother on the patio.

Charlie considered the possibility that a simple disease had managed to blind Mr. Snyder. Germs that had been resting on a fallen paper cup may have found their way into Mr. Snyder's mouth. They must have made their way north, to his brain. Eventually, they plunged into his eyes and ruined them. "Yes," Charlie thought, "but how boring. Even if the vendor dropped the cup on the ground, he wouldn't have known he was blinding someone. It must be something else, something with more of a story."

In his final theory, Charlie stopped for a moment to consider the image of Mr. Snyder. Mr. Snyder would stare away into the distance when he spoke instead of looking straight at the person he

was talking to. Charlie tried to imagine what could cause this in a person when his mother came out into the garden. There was some connection, he thought, between the two. “If I lost something I cared about so much,” Charlie thought, “maybe I wouldn’t be able to look at anything around me. Maybe I would only be able to look to the distance, because I’d be waiting for her to come back.” Charlie thought about what could be so important, and he concluded that only losing his mother, whom he loved more than anything else, could cause such an affliction. He arrived at the realization nearly without the thought process. It became like gravity. This is what Charlie came to believe.

Charlie, his mother Susan, and his father Tom, all lived outside a small town called Wiscasette, in Maine. The few houses in this patch of wilderness share access to the Atlantic. The neighbors, removed from the rest of society as they were, often socialized in walks to and from the ocean, after dinner. The driveways of the houses wound like tributaries, eventually meeting the red clay road, Brugen Street, which leads directly to the Atlantic. The area ought to have been more popular, considering the sprawling beach and rock formations and the general rugged northern air of the place. However, the beach remained unkempt and the houses sparse due to the obstinate wood that wove itself into immovable knots. Over the years, developers who ventured into the area rarely succeeded in clearing enough land to build a foundation. One such developer, after damaging his backhoe on a stubborn root, nicknamed the patch of land “Russian Acres,” stating, “Napoleon and Hitler couldn’t have downed these fuckers.” Thus, what would have been prime real estate for old money and corporate New York became home only to a stoic few, who weathered the tree branch crashes, unmanageable icy driveways and constant infestations of mice and mosquitoes and gnats.

The mice were hardly a problem after Susan adopted a pair of outdoor cats, one white and black and the other with golden fur. Charlie learned a method of evading the mosquitoes and gnats, which served him well for the last few summers. He’d be on the lawn with his soccer ball, juggling and trapping against a wall, always moving

to keep them chasing him. Then, when he grew thoroughly tired and felt the itch of a mosquito's saliva left over after a bite, he'd slump over so as to get below their radar. Then he'd snoop in the grass, parting blades and lifting leaves until he found crawling bugs. He'd push his thumb down slowly and feel his own flesh indent, and the insect's tiny thrashing legs, squirming thorax, brittle broken antennas. He'd continue to push until he felt the crack of the exoskeleton, the release of pressure. Then he'd feel the slight moisture on his finger of all the precious insides that kept it alive. This process could take anywhere from 30 seconds to a minute. Charlie enjoyed the time he spent squashing bugs, and never let their panic rush him through the routine.

The day Charlie developed his history of Mr. Snyder's blindness was a day filled with such activities. A hot summer day, during which Charlie had tired quickly and fallen to the grass, and Mr. Snyder had walked from his neighboring house to chat with Susan. The neighbors had noticed this recent development of friendship between Mr. Snyder and Susan, at least the perceptive ones had. But then, the perceptive ones had also discovered the rumor that Tom had a mistress in Rhode Island, and what's more Susan knew about it. And because of this, a friendship that would have been considered inappropriate became innocent. Everyone understood that a life so stressed demands a confidant, and often acts as a catalyst for those relationships that would have blossomed later without the rush. What Susan had managed to keep to herself, with the exception of Mr. Snyder, was that this mistress was pregnant. Mr. Snyder was helping Susan cope with the realization that she was mother to the first family in a pair.

Mr. Snyder would say his usual, "How've ya been, Sue?" And Susan, as usual, would have the iced tea ready on the patio. Susan realized that having the tea brewed, iced, pitchered and patioed for the moment Mr. Snyder arrived might have seemed desperate. She didn't care. The thought of even the slightest dishonesty, even the sort of dishonesty in which you make your good deeds seem coincidental instead of planned, was abhorrent to Susan. It may have been that she didn't *want* to hide her desperation, which she had already made clear

to Mr. Snyder anyway. She poured the tea and responded with an, "Oh you know." The inflections were always sung, with the first syllable being one tone, the second slightly higher and the third returning to the first.

"He's going back to her soon."

"Soon? Good! You should be glad. He eats all the nice cheese when he's home."

"He does! Doesn't he?" Susan said with a sort of gasping laugh.

"Well listen, Elizabeth has been teaching herself the violin, and she's awful, but I'm afraid to tell her and she wants to show off to a real audience. Maybe after he leaves I'll cook you dinner and in return you can suggest she take up, oh I don't know, bowling or something." Mr. Snyder said.

Elizabeth was Mr. Snyder's British wife. She was assigned to him as a nurse during the Second World War. She seemed callous to the rest of the neighbors, who took her husband's blindness very seriously. She had been caught a number of times sighing at a chore he required of her. Mr. Snyder would stop in now and then on a neighbor's porch with a story of a broken mug and an infuriated wife. She had a severe look about her…thin lipped and skin taught across her high cheekbones. Her neighbors tended to blame her misfortunes on her nationality, and if they ever came across someone mentioning London as a cold city they would say, "You're absolutely right! I know one of them, not an ounce of warmth in her!"

It was now, during a lull in the conversation, that Susan decided it was the right time to introduce Charlie to Mr. Snyder. She called for him and he came promptly from crushing insects.

"Charlie, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Snyder." Susan said, "he's been over a few times and I know you've seen him, but it's time to give him a good hand shake and say hi." Susan had learned it was best to prompt Charlie this way, or he would sometimes stare and not be sure what to do. This was when Charlie noticed how Mr. Snyder stared the wrong way when he talked to people. It was later that night that Charlie determined Mr. Snyder had tragically lost his mother and therefore could not focus his eyes, as they were always

searching elsewhere for her.

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Two days had passed. It was Tuesday. After falling into a fascination with the tragic fable he had developed, Charlie vowed to pretend to be Mr. Snyder for an indefinite period of time. This choice presented itself organically to Charlie. It wasn't made as any sort of sacrifice, or tribute to the honorable loss of a sense. It was one of the many colorful Wiscasette games, meant for one person who has burrowed deep inside themselves. When pretending to be Mr. Snyder, Charlie didn't close his eyes, as you might expect someone imitating a blind person would. This is because Mr. Snyder's eyes weren't closed. Charlie kept them open, but didn't allow his neck to turn as it naturally would in order to see different things. Instead, he pointed his head one way, and then went about his business without changing its angle in any degree. He used his peripheral vision significantly. At the top of the stairs he began to pretend. He'd turn to walk to his room, keeping his eyes pointed strictly forward. He unfocused his eyes, and at his bedroom door reached for the handle. Most of the pretending occurred in the privacy of Charlie's room, where he could avoid embarrassment and questioning. But after two days Charlie felt confident in both his ability to behave normally and the principles upon which the game had been founded. So when his mother called him out to the garden, Charlie determined that he would continue to act as Mr. Snyder, even in her presence.

He came, turning the corner and looking at the horizon, eyes fixed forward. Susan had her head down, focused on a weed, so she didn't notice immediately. Still looking down she said, "Oh good, Charlie, I need you to carry these weeds over to the garbage," pointing at black plastic bags full of dandelions, crab grass, some poison ivy, "Then I need you to go around the house and collect all the garbage and bring it to the end of the driveway." It was then that she noticed Charlie wasn't looking at her. He was nodding in agreement, but staring off behind her and to the left at a hedge. "What are you looking at, honey?" she asked.

"I'm pretending to be Mr. Snyder," he said.

"Well do you think you can still manage your chores, Mr. Snyder?"

"Sure I can. I have this whole house memorized," he said, picking up the bags with his head cocked upward. His mother said before he walked away, "Then clean up for dinner, and wear something nice. Your father's going on a business trip tomorrow and you won't see him for a while."

Susan returned to the weeds. Her arms were deep in the loosened soil, tangled in the labyrinth of roots, some meek and delicate, others violent and hearty. Her gloved fingers began at the stem of a particularly vicious weed, and descended into the dirt, tracing the winding thing inch by inch. It got to where Susan needed to remove her glove and start over, so as to let her sense of touch guide her. Her bare fingers followed the root, which eventually thinned and branched out. Her bare fingers were ashamed. She found the weak point, where the root split and thinned. She hooked two of her fingers under the intersection. Her muscles grew rigid. She bit her lip. She was lifting up with her shoulders, with her glutes, on the balls of her feet, the root cutting into a finger, the knuckle white and caked with dirt. Then it gave, and she felt some relief. She followed the root back to the stem, and tore the thing out. She felt relief, and she breathed easy. But it only took a few moments before shame crept back into her fingers. And so she washed them in the mudroom and used them to dial Mr. Snyder's phone number.

"Hey Jerry, I've got a huge favor to ask. Are you busy tomorrow afternoon?"

"Free all day, Sue. What'd you have in mind?" Mr. Snyder said.

"I was wondering if you could go for a walk with Charlie. I just want some time alone with Tom. I need to sort this out, finally."

"Yeah, I'll have him walk me to the beach. Don't worry about a thing."

When Susan found Charlie she, like any clever mother, reformulated the task so as to engage her son. "Charlie, I've got a big job for you tomorrow. It's going to be a lot of responsibility," Susan said.

"Okay," Charlie said tentatively, "What is it?"

"Mr. Snyder would like to take a walk to the beach, but he needs

someone to walk with him, to keep him company and make sure he can find his way back. He thought maybe you could take him. It would be a big help. How about it?"

"Sure mom, I'll walk him," Charlie said with a shrill voice, thrilled at the chance to help Mr. Snyder, with hopes to feed his obsession. That night Charlie lay awake, imagining the walk. He worked through each step in his head. What would he say? How would he act? He wasn't able to fall asleep until he arrived at a decision: he would share his version of how Mr. Snyder came to be blind, and he would wait for Mr. Snyder to confirm it as truth.

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Passing red clay underfoot, Mr. Snyder walked down Brugen Street, his hands clasped behind him and shoulders straight. Charlie walked next to him watching the dirt and, occasionally, Mr. Snyder. It was only a short time before Mr. Snyder broke the silence with a topic common and dull to Charlie, "So Charlie, are you excited for Middle School?"

"Yeah, I guess," Charlie found a flustered and unconscious part of his brain saying, the rest intent on more important matters. "But everyone says it'll be harder."

"It probably will," Mr. Snyder said. Then, in a hasty and encouraging tone, he added, "But you'll get smarter as well, so you won't even notice the difference." Another silence ensued. Mr. Snyder wasn't used to talking to children. He'd never had any of his own, and they seemed to never have anything to say, and to never want to say anything. But after a few moments he thought of another topic of conversation.

"Charlie, a few times when I've been over to talk with your mother I've asked where you've been. She says you're slumped over in the dirt, like you're investigating something. What's that all about?" The question caught Charlie by surprise. He knew the gravity of the offense of torturing insects wasn't anything like that of torturing real people, or bigger animals for that matter. Yet, he wasn't entirely sure if it was, objectively, a grave act.

"I'm inspecting bugs," Charlie explained. "Grasshoppers are my

favorite to watch." Charlie was sticking close to the truth. Grasshoppers were, in fact, his favorite to crush. They were difficult to pin, but if he managed to get his thumb on them the legs would release like catapults over and over into the ground. They were also big enough to provide a satisfying crunch, where as even the big black ants can't be heard when the exoskeleton cracks.

"So, you have an interest in entomology?" Mr. Snyder said. "That's the study of insects. I'll have to get you a book next time I go out with Elizabeth."

"Thanks, Mr. Snyder." Charlie was getting nervous. He didn't know how long he could maintain a conversation about insects when the extent of his interest was feeling their insides. He jumped, perhaps with unnecessary abruptness, to this: "I know why you're blind Mr. Snyder." Charlie had been imagining this moment since last evening, so even though he sensed that the change in direction hadn't been subtle, he was, nonetheless, relieved to have brought it up. Mr. Snyder was visible stunned by the non sequitur. Charlie rushed on, "I mean, I have an idea. Did you lose your mother?" Charlie felt cold embarrassment and hot blood. Mr. Snyder looked surprised and slightly disgusted. After a few moments Charlie organized his thoughts and began to explain.

"What I mean is that the other day I was talking to you, and I was surprised that you weren't looking at me. I understand that you can't see me, but it got me thinking about the way you were looking and why someone would look that way. I know you just can't see, but while I was thinking about it I realized why someone would do that."

"Do what?" Mr. Snyder asked.

"Look off in the distance like that, instead of at what's right in front of you," Charlie said. "I thought of a lot of different things it could have been, but I settled on that you must have lost someone you loved so much. So much that you're always looking everywhere, and you can't focus on anything right in front of you. And the only person I could think of that I would miss that much is my mom. That's why I thought it was her." Mr. Snyder's face was blank for seconds, as it fell and rose with each step toward the ocean. Eventually he

muttered, “So it’s as if everything is in the foreground.” He said it to himself — and then with a change in inflection made it apparent that he was addressing Charlie, and said, “and for you, everything is in the background, isn’t it?” Charlie maintained silence and the two stepped off the clay and eventually onto the beach.

Charlie wasn’t satisfied with Mr. Snyder’s answer. While he didn’t understand exactly where his obsession with this theory came from, it seemed, by the confidence of his answer that Mr. Snyder did.

“How did you lose your sight, Mr. Snyder?” But Charlie was once again disappointed. Mr. Snyder didn’t want to talk about it. After further persistence, Mr. Snyder said, “It’s a nasty story. I wouldn’t burden a child with a story like that.” Mr. Snyder, having seen many awful things in his life, had a great deal of respect for innocence, both the small amount left in him, and the abundance of it that was in Charlie. However, he hadn’t considered the disregard an innocent person has for their condition. The perceived burden of it. This is how Charlie’s mind began to search for a way to force the story. It didn’t take long before Charlie’s imagination turned sinister. He thought back to what his mother had said, “Make sure he can find his way back.”

The water was cold over their feet while the two walked down the strip of wet sand, a darker shade than the fluffy dry stuff they had just gotten through. The beach was empty, and there were mussel shells, knotted seaweed, and driftwood strewn over the sands that separated the grass from the water. Charlie considered the threat he was about to make. There was danger in it, he knew. But Charlie was determined to learn what was being kept from him. He felt entitled, after three days of imitation, to some kind of truth. “Mr. Snyder,” he said in a soft voice, “maybe you should tell me now how you went blind, because I’m the one who has to walk you back, and if I wanted to I could just go back by myself, and then what would you do?” The two stood for moments. Mr. Snyder seemed to be staring out to sea. For an instant his shoulder jerked up slightly and his arm seemed to twitch. Charlie wasn’t sure what to do. He’d never had this kind of control over an adult before. Silence remained between them until Mr.

Snyder heard Charlie's feet pushing sand as he walked off.

"Charlie," Mr. Snyder said, "this is much too early in your life to be exercising power over those you believe to be helpless." Charlie stopped walking, and turned to listen. Mr. Snyder continued, "I say 'believe' to be helpless because I, in fact, am not helpless. I know how many steps I've walked from our driveway, and while it would take me slightly longer to get home without you, it would only be the most minor inconvenience." Mr. Snyder took a step forward, and with sound estimation placed his hand on the young boy's shoulder. "But perhaps I will tell you the story of how I went blind while we walk home. There is a lesson in it for you, as it turns out." Mr. Snyder took the first step with Charlie's shoulder under his arm.

"You know I was in the army, Charlie?" Mr. Snyder asked.

"Yes, that was the first thing I thought of," Charlie said.

"Well I didn't go blind in the army. I was shot, twice, before I was discharged and hospitalized. I nearly died, Charlie, but they saved me in the hospital. Elizabeth was assigned to be my nurse. That's where we met. Did you know that?"

"No, sir." Charlie didn't understand why he suddenly felt the impulse to say 'sir.' He had never felt the need before. He assumed it was due to the context of war.

"Elizabeth took care of me in the hospital. I couldn't walk to the bathroom at first. I couldn't eat solid food, I couldn't even take a deep breath. Without someone like Elizabeth I wouldn't have been able to get better. Do you understand?"
Charlie said yes. The waves continued to run, cold, over his feet. Cold embarrassment had crept back into his blood.

"When I was able to lift myself out of bed the hospital sent me home." He had a larky grin on his face. "My parents *were* dead, Charlie. My folks had been gone for a long time." Mr. Snyder had assumed a trance like state as he told the story. "I wasn't ready to be on my own, and so Elizabeth took me in. She left the hospital, she took care of me when I needed it more than anything." The canopy of leaves shaded the two as they left the beach and began to walk back on Brugen St.

"It was then that I began to lose my eyesight. At first I lost sight in my left eye for a few minutes. It came back, and then was gone again after an hour. On our way to the doctor both eyes went blind, flashed on and off, and then didn't flash back on. I remember the last thing I saw —— it was noon and we were passing the church on Broad St. You know the one?"

"Yes, St. Sebastian's. That's where we go to church."

"I could see all the people walking out of church. It was a nice thing to see. Everyone was dressed up and the bells were ringing. Then my sight was gone, and the bells continued to ring. That was so strange, I remember, hearing the only evidence of that last image fade into the distance. Tests came back positive for methanol, but no one could explain why. Do you know anything about methanol, Charlie?" Charlie shook his head, and then remembering that Mr. Snyder couldn't see him, muttered, "No."

"It's a chemical used in some household products, like window washer fluid. Ingesting ten milliliters can cause blindness. You should stay away from that stuff." Mr. Snyder still had his hand on Charlie's shoulder, and gave it a slight squeeze. "Want to know why I was ingesting this poison, Charlie?"

Charlie muttered something, an inaudible whimper.

"Elizabeth poisoned me," Mr. Snyder said. "I didn't know right away. She kept taking care of me while I was blind, and she kept the secret. After a few months a romance developed between us, and by the end of the year we were engaged. She would joke, saying something like, 'I might as well love you if I can never leave you.' I couldn't believe her charity, her dedication to me. It was two years later that she finally broke down and told me, after we were married. We were sitting in a parking lot about to go into a diner and she started to cry. We sat there for so long. She sobbed and uttered the beginnings of syllables to words that she couldn't finish. And then finally she managed to say 'I made you blind.'"

"I left her after that. I had nowhere to go, but I couldn't stand to be near her. She begged for me to stay, claiming she did

what she did out of love. 'You would have left me so long ago otherwise. How could I let you walk away?'" Mr. Snyder said, mimicking her. "I hardly had enough money for an apartment, so I called a few friends. No one had the means to take care of a blind person. After half a year I was begging. When Elizabeth tracked me down again I had managed to get a bed in a halfway house. Someone had stolen my shoes. It didn't take much convincing before I decided to go back with her. She said she owed me a lifetime of service —— that serving me was her life's purpose. I still felt some love for her, despite everything. I know it's hard to understand how we can live together, but we live comfortably, and we've established some level of normalcy over the last few years." Mr. Snyder cleared his throat, and with finality said, "So there you are, Charlie. The story of how I went blind."

Charlie felt ill, and wanted to go home more than anything. But when they came to the fork leading to Mr. Snyder's house, Mr. Snyder, who was on the outside of Charlie, veered left and with a subtle nudge of the shoulder, steered Charlie's feet in the direction of his house. Mr. Snyder knew the walk had been truncated, and therefore he would need to keep Charlie for lunch in order to provide Susan enough time to do whatever it was she needed to do.

The house was clean, with potted plants scattered throughout the rooms. They walked through the foyer to the kitchen where Elizabeth was cooking.

"Hey boys, how was the walk?" She asked.

"Fine dear," Mr. Snyder said, "Elizabeth, I'd like to introduce you to our neighbor Charlie. Charlie this is my wife Elizabeth." Elizabeth turned around. There was something about her face that was stunning and boring at the same time. Her eyes were large and domineering. Her hair white and wild. She smiled with some kind of happiness, her mouth half-heartedly, but her eyes sincerely, giving full creases to the premature wrinkles that could be seen.

"It's very nice to meet you, Charlie." Elizabeth said, stretching out her hand. "I'm making some lunch, would you like

anything?" Charlie was silent, and Mr. Snyder interjected, "How about a grilled cheese and some soup?" Charlie nodded, at a loss for what else to do, and took a seat at the kitchen table. Mr. Snyder went to the refrigerator and started pulling things out.

"I've already got the tomatoes out, Jerry," She said, and then asked Charlie, "Do you like ham and tomato on your grilled cheese? That's how I usually make them." Elizabeth opened a cabinet filled with spices. Her hand danced with hasty indecision in the cabinet until she settled on the right two, and turned around to season the soup. "Was this how she had done it?" Charlie wondered. "It must have tasted bad if she put it in soup. Then again, if she knew what to mix with it maybe he wouldn't have noticed." Charlie hadn't realized that he never answered the question. Elizabeth's voice grew more stern, "What would you like, Charlie?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm not hungry, may I go home now?"

"Don't be silly, Charlie," Mr. Snyder said, and turning his voice to Elizabeth, added, "He'll take it all." Charlie noticed the familiar mixture of condescension and anger in Mr. Snyder's voice, familiar from earlier. Elizabeth began to fry the sandwich. Charlie couldn't help but enjoy the smell of the sizzling butter that filled the room.

"You won't be sorry," she said. "The tomatoes have just come into season, and they're perfectly ripe." Mr. Snyder walked from the refrigerator to the kitchen table, and passing Elizabeth, laid a soft kiss on her cheek. Then he pulled up a chair next to Charlie. He asked Charlie about soccer. Charlie stared at Elizabeth's face, at her cheek. He wasn't horrified anymore. Confusion wiped out that emotion. He was like a student genuinely interested in his subject. What was the nature of the problem? This was what Charlie began to consider first. What did it mean to give someone a kiss?

They ate their food mostly in silence, with the occasional question and answer from the couple to Charlie. Charlie answered the questions with as few words as possible. The sandwich tasted fine. The soup, on the other hand, he could swear tasted strange. He focused on every spoonful. Was that a bitter taste? Or was it sour?

Charlie couldn't decide what was wrong with it, but he was sure it didn't taste right. Halfway through the bowl Charlie asked again if he could go.

"Not until you finish what's in front of you," Elizabeth said. Charlie swallowed another spoonful of soup, and another, until he finally was finished. He brought the dishes to the sink, and without asking to be excused walked out the front door and down the driveway, back to Brugen Street. From there he ran home.

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Once he reached his own driveway, Charlie slowed to a walk. He wondered if he had been rude. He hadn't meant to be, leaving like that, but Charlie had things to think about, things he couldn't think about while Mr. Snyder and Elizabeth were sitting there asking him questions about soccer and school and food. It had grown more humid since the walk on the beach, and the mosquitoes and gnats were back in numbers. Charlie made it to the yard thinking about that kiss on the cheek, which was just like the way his mother kissed him on the cheek.

It was then that he heard his mother yelling at his father to get out of her house. Charlie, not sure what to do, stepped into the corner of his yard and lay down to keep the mosquitoes off him. The door opened and Charlie's father seemed to fly out. Charlie was watching from his belly, elbows on the ground and hands propping up his head. His mother was wielding a ceramic mug like a weapon. Tom ran to the car. Charlie saw his mother standing in the doorway, eyes squinting and red, mouth taught in that sobbing fashion that resembles a laugh. She was holding herself and her body was shaking. Tom turned the car on, looked to his right through the window, and to his surprise he saw Charlie there, lying in the grass. The car stalled. Tom rolled down the window and shouted, "Bye Charlie! Stay out of trouble!" He turned the engine back on and turned his head around to the left to watch the driveway as he pulled out in reverse. Charlie watched the back of his head until the car wound around a bend in the trees. He listened to the sound of the motor shrinking until it was nothing.

Susan walked back inside. Noticing a grasshopper jump above the plane of the grass, Charlie got on his hands and knees and scrambled over to the place that it landed. He saw it, paused, clinging to a single bending blade. Charlie snatched it from the grass, and with it pinched between two fingers crashed back onto his belly to play with it. He held the grasshopper to the ground with his thumb and watched the legs catapulting themselves into the ground while the grasshopper struggled. But instead of crushing him, Charlie pinched one of the legs with the fingers of his other hand. With a quick tug he pulled the leg off the grasshopper. He released it and it attempted to hop with the remaining leg, but instead it slid pathetically through the dirt in a sort of panicked lurch. Charlie pulled the other leg off. The grasshopper lay on its side, like a torpedo, still. It was then that a smaller cricket also hopped by. Charlie did the same to the cricket, whose smaller legs were more difficult to pull off. He then lined them up and made their faces touch, as if they were kissing.