

Chester Edward Carter

October 28, 2005

Chester waits outside Apex Elementary to pick up his 10-year-old grandson, Matt, from school to go help him pick out his “death suit,” the formal-wear he would be buried in. He’s perfectly healthy – as healthy as an 80-year-old could be.

“You see, one of these days I’m gonna kick it, and I’m not gonna lay in that coffin looking like some scrub,” he tells Matt as he buckles his seat belt. Looking over his shoulder, he pulls into traffic, “just don’t tell your mom about this, tell her we went to the playground.”

He gets in the right lane, and slows down behind a red Prius at a stop sign, “Jesus Christ, do you need an invitation,” he mutters under his breath at the driver. Clicking his blinker on, he turns left into a parking space in front of the store.

With Matt trailing his paces, Chester shops the aisles, thumbing through the hangers as they clang and screech on the rack. Soon thereafter, he settles on a neat, pin-stripped, black two-piece and gives it to Matt to hold for him. The tailor looks at the suit and then at Chester and politely describes, “I’m worried it might be a bit too small.”

“It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t fit, just slice it down the back and make it fit in the front.”



December 24, 1973

Chester, or Chet for short, never misses a dinner at home. He pulls into the driveway after working nine hours at his shop “Carter Machine and Tool Co.” Chet works every Monday to Saturday, specializing in cutting sponges.

They live in North Tonawanda, New York with only one bathroom and three bedrooms for the kids to share. His wife, Jane, has prepared a pot-roast for them and six of their eight children (two of them have graduated already).

Tomorrow is a special day. As a Christmas treat, they are planning on driving out to the airport to watch the planes land and take off. These types of outings and vacations were commonplace for the Carters. Sitting in the parking lot, they fantasize about each plane going to an extraordinary location like the Grand Canyon. And, when they get home, the kids would separate their beds and jump from mattress to mattress, pretending to leap over the chasm of the Grand Canyon. Oftentimes Chet would hear the banging and shouts from their room and warn them, “quiet down or I’m gonna use the belt on you all.” Of course he would never even think to follow through on that threat.

Other times, Chet would get creative and take his kids on a drive, exclaiming that they had gotten lost and might not be able to figure out how to get back. The kids shriek with excitement as they figure out where they are. Chet suspiciously always gets “lost” in the adjacent neighborhood to the house.

Today, however, Chester is going back to work, like he does every workday after dinner. He kisses Jane on the cheek and hops in his car. His kids Tim and Chuck, both in middle school, jump at the opportunity to have some father-son time and help out at the shop. He likes the help at the shop but always tells his kids, “I don’t want to have to pass on ‘Carter Machine and Tool Co.’ to another Carter, I want you all to go get yourself a college education, don’t end up like your old man.”

Tim punches into the time clock and picks up a set of blueprints. He looks at his Dad, “You know, we never got any formal training. Is this even legal?” Chet looks up from the worktable, power drill in one hand, Coca-Cola in the other, and tells him to get to work if he wants his 27 cents.

June 28, 1944

Chester registers to enlist in the Army as soon as he turns 21. He has been married for less than a year and has his first child on the way. He is quickly placed overseas until after the end of the war.

In a letter back to his wife he begins, “Death and destruction. Everywhere I look is just death and destruction.” A large part of his time in the war is spent guarding German prisoners of war. He finishes his letter with “One of the prisoners I have met, Karl, is an excellent painter. He is painting a portrait of me.”

Jane never asks him if he has shot anyone. It’s not the kind of question either of them wanted asked.

When the war officially ends, he joins a few other soldiers in ransacking Berghof, Berchtesgaden, Adolf Hitler’s estate in the Bavarian Alps. He overflows his packs with gold fixtures and silver jewelry, along with an autographed copy of Hitler’s autobiography *Mein Kampf*, and mails them back to his wife Jane in New York to be sold for a profit.

September 23, 1945

The United States Army discharges Chester from his position in Germany. When he arrives home, his two-year-old daughter doesn’t recognize him.

February 17, 2008

“Hey Jane, remember the time you threw away all the gold and silver I sent you from the war before I got home? Google says an ounce of gold is worth \$1,328.20 these days. Heck, I could’ve retired ten years earlier *and* bought you a string of pearls.” Jane keeps reading her book.

March, 11, 1993

“Tim!” Chet shouts to the other room at his son. “Where did your wife get her degree from? I’m updating my obituary.” Chet keeps his obituary more up to date than most people do with their resumes.

November 23, 2014

Chester is admitted to Duke Raleigh Medical Hospital for a heart attack.

November 24, 2014

“Well what did the doc say?” Tim asks Chester on the phone.

“They said it could be three hours, three days, three weeks, or three years. They really don’t know,” says Chet.

“Well just so you know I booked a ticket to come visit you on Sunday.”

“Okay, I see where you put your money on.”

August 12, 2015

Chet sits up in his bed, in his new periwinkle cardigan per request. He’s anxiously peering out the window. “Hey you, nurse!”

The nurse rushes to his side, “What appears to be the problem Mr. Carter?”

“Take a look out this window. You see that lady out there. That’s Jane, my wife. Doesn’t she look pretty today?”

August 16, 2015

Tim stands at the entrance of the church, next to a poster with “In loving memory of Chester Carter (March 22, 1921 – August 13, 2015) printed above a photo of Chet’s wrinkled smile. Tim recognizes most of them: a wife of seventy-two years, a daughter, seven sons, seven daughter-in-laws, twenty-five grandchildren, fifteen great-grandchildren, new friends and old friends. Intertwined, however, are a surprising number of strangers.

“How did I meet Chester? Oh, well we had a few wonderful chats at the barbershop four or five years ago. When I saw his obituary I just needed to come to the service,” exclaims a woman with thin lips and silvery hair.

“Chet? Why we met at an airport restaurant a few years ago, we met up for a meal a couple times after,” responds a couple wearing matching tweed jackets.

“Oh I just have so many fond memories of him, I lived on the same street and sometimes we would just chat for hours on a park bench,” says a woman in an oversized, royal blue feathered hat smelling vaguely of spoiled milk.

April 30, 1987

Tim, recently graduated from Dental School, steps into his Dad's shop to say hi. "Tim! Perfect, I've been working on something for you all day." Tim walks over to Chet and sees him playing with his old laminator machine.

This isn't the first time Chet has distributed laminated cards to his kids to keep in their wallets. Each time one of his grandchildren is born, Chet goes to his manual type-writer and adds their birthday to a list of grandchildren and prints it out. He then hops in his old sports car and drives to the pharmacy to make a photocopy and shrink it down to wallet size. He prints 17 copies and laminates them. One for himself, Jane, each of his children, their spouses, and an extra and then mails them out to everyone. This paper shouldn't be confused with a separate laminated card that contains the contact information for all his children and their spouses. Again, 17 copies.

There is only one copy of this one. The card reads:

MISS ME --- BUT LET ME GO

*WHEN I COME TO THE END OF THE ROAD
AND THE SUN HAS SET FOR ME
I WANT NO RITES IN A GLOOM FILLED ROOM
WHY CRY FOR A SOUL SET FREE*

*MISS ME A LITTLE --- BUT NOT TOO LONG
AND NOT WITH YOUR HEAD BOWED LOW
REMEMBER THE LOVE
THAT WE ONCE SHARED
MISS ME --- BUT LET ME GO*

*FOR THIS IS A JOURNEY
THAT WE ALL MUST TAKE
AND EACH MUST GO ALONE
IT'S ALL A PART OF THE MASTERS PLAN
A STEP ON THE ROAD TO HOME*

Tim quietly reads the card to himself, tucks it away into his leather wallet, and looks up at his Dad. Chet looks at him and chuckles, "I've got one foot on the grave, the other on the banana peel."