

*When should my love be sympathetic,  
and when should it be tough?*

## The Tornado



It seemed just a second ago.

Could it really have been so many years?, Charlie Taylor wondered.

Just a second ago, Robin was eight and Paul was thirteen, and they were all at the beach in Gulf Shores. Charlie had put his work down for a week – really put it down, didn't touch it. He remembered Robin running up and down that beach, giggling, deliciously happy despite nothing more to entertain her than some white sand and two-foot surf. The next day he rented a flats boat and taught Paul to catch the flounder that were migrating from the bay out to deep water. They used finger mullets, and they hooked six flounder (only got two to the boat), three reds, and a small bonnetnose shark, which Paul wanted to keep. Man, that was a day to remember. What Charlie remembered more than anything was the look on his wife Susan's face. All week long, she had this look, as though she was a happy white cloud. There are a couple of things that go straight into a man's heart, and one of those is seeing the weight of it all gone from his wife's face.

He would get back there. Charlie vowed he would find a way back. His situation did not look good, he had to admit. It looked downright abysmal. But he had given Susan 21 good years and two great children. And he knew that no matter how hurt she was, in the end those 21 years would count for something.

Man, he had screwed it up. There was nothing else to say about it. He had *screwed it up!*

When they got through this – whenever that would be (one year, five years, ten years?) – he would take Susan back to Gulf Shores. More than just one week a year. He would find a way. And he would buy a boat. Not a flats, maybe a center console v-hull, get out on the water, nothing like it. Nothing like that feeling of heading home over blue water. Salt spray tossed around by a ten mile wind, a baitwell full of kings, a family smelling of sunscreen, a smile on her face.

He would get back there.

Nothing else mattered. Not the baby grand in their great room, not the fancy antiques they had spent years collecting, not being senior vice president at the firm – none of that tripped Charlie’s trigger any more. Not even his 6,100 square foot house. It was just stuff. Stuff! Susan could have all of it. But eventually, he would convince her to get rid of all of it. Sell it, donate it, whatever. Get lean and mean again. Just like he was here, at the Chardonnay Apartments, with a Wal-Mart card table for a dining table, a single couch Susan had let him take, and a mattress on the floor in the one bedroom. They could live like this again, couldn’t they?

Despite the walking wreck he had turned in to, Charlie was doing one thing right. He made sure he saw both his kids every single day. He drove them to school in the mornings, and he coached Robin’s soccer team. Yesterday, Charlie took Paul fishing on the Cahaba River, which runs right through Birmingham.

“Is there anything your mom needs?” Charlie asked his son.

“You asked me that yesterday, Dad. I don’t think she needs anything.”

“How is she?”

“She cries for days, Dad. But she doesn’t talk to me about it. She says it’s between her and you. She says it’s got nothing to do with me and Robin.”

“She’s right.”

“I still think I should have come to you when I read those emails.”

“No, you did the right thing going to your mother. You were protecting her.”

“I didn’t know it would turn into this. I thought you guys would just have a fight.”

“Paul, you did the right thing. *I’m* the one who screwed up. But I love your mom and I’m not going to let her take off.”

“She’s pretty pissed off, Dad.”

“I know that.”

“I don’t see what you can do about it.”

“I promise you, Paul. I promise you I am not going to let her take off.”

“All right.”

A minute later, Paul sent Charlie right back to square one. “Dad, how could you do this?”

“Paul, you’re sixteen. It’s easy for you to look at me and ask how with disbelief. But when you face the challenges a grown man has, you’ll understand better why. I don’t always make the right decision. I don’t always do the right thing.”

When Charlie dropped Paul off that night, Susan opened the front door for her son, probably just so she could give Charlie an icy look that said, *eat shit and die*.

Susan had always made it absolutely clear to Charlie that if he ever cheated on her, she would divorce him. She had watched her mother put up with her father’s affairs for fear of being out on her own without any money. Susan’s mother let herself be trampled, and Susan was too tough to let that happen all over again. She vowed to protect herself and the kids, financially. She did not relent in insisting on a full and formal divorce: half of everything.

Charlie pleaded with her. *It was only four times. I don’t love her. She came after me. I’m a guy. It was flattering to know I still had it at 44. I was vulnerable. My Dad’s dying of cancer, Susan – it was an escape from thinking about my old man wincing in pain. I screwed up, Susan. We can find the best marriage counselor in Birmingham. Please, Susan.*

Susan had no intention of ever being with Charlie again. *You killed my feelings. I don’t know you anymore. I thought you were different than all those men out there. If a man I loved could do this, then men are worse than I thought.*

Susan was getting all sort of advice from friends, too – most told her to welcome Charlie back with open arms.

“No!” she insisted. “That’s not the way it goes.”

Charlie realized he had only one option: to give Susan exactly what she wanted. He would respect the vow she had made with herself, and he would not fight the divorce. The sooner the

divorce was finalized, and the sooner Susan felt protected, the quicker he could get her to let him back in. So he fired his lawyer, and he sent all of his financials over to Susan's lawyer with the instructions, "Take all you want." Then he went to Canterbury Methodist Church and knelt before God and begged for forgiveness and bargained for his life. One does not normally kneel at the altar in a Methodist church, but nobody said anything because they thought Charlie was praying for his dying father.

"God, if you can see me through this, if you can put it back together, I will never do it again. It seems crazy to let her go and divorce me, but I'm trusting you that it's the right thing. Thank you for making me a good husband again and a good father again. Please God, thank you for making this work. I am in your hands. Please God, don't take Susan away from me."

The divorce was finalized by a judge in the fall. On the way out of the courthouse, Charlie asked Susan if he could take her on a date.

"Call me," Susan said. "I'll let you know if I can fit you in."

The next morning, Charlie was parked in the driveway, ready to drive his kids to school. That afternoon, he came by to clean the pool.

"What are you doing?" Susan demanded.

"The pool's a mess, Susan."

"Well. You can't come in the house," Susan said.

The next day Charlie was back to mow the lawn. Charlie knew his wife could ditch him and have a date the next day – she was that attractive. But she wasn't dating anyone. That meant something.

Soon the lawn had never been in as good a condition, for Charlie was out there three times a week, pushing that mower, sweating, working for his forgiveness, every drop of sweat testifying to his commitment. Afterward, he sat on the steps of the garage. He must have been out there every day for a month when Susan finally came out with a mug of water. She sat down beside him. He got her to laugh, and then her anger came to the surface.

She said, “I want to hate you so bad. Why don’t you just go away? You’d make this easier if you went away.”

“I’m not going to go away, Susan. I love you, you love me, and we’re going to make it.”

Susan paused, and tried to imagine it, but only ran right back into her wall of pain. “I don’t see how,” she said sadly. “How could you do this?” she cried. “How could you hurt me this bad?”

“It’s worth saving, Susan. I don’t want another life. I don’t want to be a single guy out on the prowl. I want to have dinner every night with my wife of twenty-one years.”

The next week Susan and the kids were eating dinner while Charlie was out cleaning the pool. She took him a plate of food, covered in aluminum foil.

“Can I kiss you goodnight?” he tried.

“No. You go home.”

He took his food back to the Chardonnay Apartments, where he had one fork and one knife, and sat at his card table. Hours later, he was in the driveway again, to take the kids to school. That became their routine – he worked for food. Charlie found a marriage counselor and made an appointment. The first appointment, Susan never showed. Nor the second. During the third appointment, Susan walked in. She was surprised to see the counselor was a woman. She had figured it would be Charlie and another guy ganging up on her, making excuses for men.

“I went for the kids,” Susan said, several years later. “My kids needed two full-time parents. Paul was sixteen, and despite being a select-level player he hadn’t made the high school soccer team, and I’d found some pot in his room. He didn’t have a whole lot in his life but school, which he was never that great at – Charlie and I tutored him every night just to get C’s. And Robin was eleven, and she was just starting to pull away from her friends, the future cheerleader crowd, and she was drawn to these other girls who wore black and smeared black eyeshadow around their eyes. Nothing was wrong yet, they were just teens, but I could feel that they were vulnerable, that they were on the fence.”

“Were you afraid Robin and Paul were reacting to the divorce?”

“I always insisted to the kids that they had a good dad and this was between me and him. Charlie was with them every day. We did what we could. We did not tell them we were divorced, but Paul found the papers in a drawer. We took Robin to a counselor to get her to try to talk about what we were going through. A divorce was unthinkable to her. She didn’t want to hear it. She covered her face and her ears and refused to say a word.”

So Susan relented and went to marriage counseling. One day the marriage counselor turned to Susan and said, “I’ve met with this guy for several months. I think Charlie’s genuinely remorseful. You’ve either got to get over it, or tell him that you can’t. In one direction or another, you’ve got to move on.”

She turned to Charlie. “Everybody at church knows.”

“Canterbury is not the only Methodist church in town.”

Christmas of that year was upon them. Susan decided to let Charlie back into the house to sleep on the couch in the living room. At night, she locked the door to her bedroom.

Finally Charlie got Susan to go on a date. He drove her down towards Montgomery to the Wetumpka casinos. They got a room with a hot tub and ended up making love. Afterward, Susan cried and cried and cried.

In February, Charlie moved back upstairs into their bedroom.

“I give God the credit,” Charlie said. “I give Susan the credit too. She must love me a lot, because I really hurt her. We are closer for what we went through. She had a vow to herself, and I respected it and I took the consequences. That eventually impressed her, and she let me back into her life.”

That spring, Charlie bought a 1,900 square foot condo at Gulf Shores. To afford it, he had to rent it all but a few weeks a year. But he would figure it out. It was a stake, a foothold, and a sense of direction.

On Valentine’s Day a year later, Charlie and Susan went back to Canterbury Methodist and remarried. They went alone,



without the kids, using the associate minister as their witness. When they walked out of there, Charlie figured they had put their bad times behind them. They had hoped to go to lunch together, but they had been called the day before by Robin's school and were asked to come in for a meeting. Apparently Robin, despite scoring nearly perfect on her tests, had stopped doing any homework or classwork and was about to receive F's in every class. Also, yesterday, Charlie had found a hollowed-out-pen stuffed with pot on Paul's desk. Charlie had denied him use of his car for a week, and had given Paul a speech about how he was a teen once, too.

Maybe they weren't in the clear just yet, Charlie realized.

In Charlie's gut he felt like he had scared his kids to death, and he had knocked himself off the pedestal they put him on, but despite that, some good had come of it. *Because he and Susan had made it back.* In so doing, he had showed his kids how not to run from a problem, how to work through it, how to hang in there and be there everyday and just keep trying. Charlie hoped that when his kids did run into hard times, whenever that was, they would remember their Dad in the back yard, mowing that lawn, sticking it out. He hoped they would remember that. He hoped that would sink in.

If there were a motto for Charlie Taylor's life, it would be: "He never saw it coming."

Charlie is an insurance broker. The main point he tries to impress upon his clients is that no matter how you might think you have it all figured out, *you don't*. Life sends things your way that are simply not in the playbook. His own life is a shining example.

Charlie Taylor did not have a screwy childhood. His parents might as well have been Ward and June Cleaver. For 57 years they lived happily married in one single house. "I put my parents through absolutely *nothing*," Charlie insisted. Any trouble he tasted he managed to keep out of their sight. Charlie went off to college at Auburn, and he thought he had it all figured out – "the

stupidity of youth,” he laughs. He proposed to his college sweetheart upon graduation, and he figured they would marry and have kids and spend at least 57 years together, same as it ever was.

The marriage was all planned. Betty had been given her wedding shower and unwrapped the gifts. Charlie had paid for the bridesmaid dresses. 1,200 cocktail napkins had been printed with “Charlie & Betty” in the wedding colors. The last thing Charlie ever expected was that he would find himself thinking about this woman who lived downstairs, Susan. He’d had pizza with Susan a couple times – just a friend – and then she stayed away from him because he was getting married and it wasn’t right. Charlie wondered: was he just experiencing cold feet? Was there something special about Susan? He told his preacher first. When he told Betty, she slugged him.

But he married Susan not four months later.

Just like Charlie, Susan came from a middle-class, small-town southern family. They thought they would get pregnant right away, and they did – but the egg implanted in the tube, and that tube collapsed after the surgery. Then a cyst took the other tube. The surgeons were in Susan every six months. Her stomach was carved into a smiley face. Charlie remembers the hurt on Susan’s face, and the guilt she wrongly carried. At church, Susan would have to get up and leave during christenings for new children. Charlie took her to the best doctors he could find. For two years, those doctors tried to unblock the first tube.

A lawyer arranged for them to get Paul. They got the call to meet at a Hardee’s – in one hour. They rushed there in their van. Paul was two days old, bundled up in a hospital blanket.

Five years later they got Robin through St. Peter’s foster home. Robin was three weeks old.

“When we got Paul and Robin, I smacked myself on the head. Now I get it. Now I understand. Maybe this is what we went through all that for. Because if it had gone like clockwork, I wouldn’t have *my* kids.”

Charlie Taylor kept trying to live a perfectly normal life, but surprises continued coming his way. The trick to life, for a guy

like him, was learning to embrace all the pieces that don't go according to plan.

A good example was the tornado that hit them right before dinner, a few years back when they lived over in Oak Grove. There was no siren warning. The lights flickered, the sky went black, and the windows starting sucking in and out. Charlie had about three seconds to act. He pushed Paul and Robin into a windowless bathroom, then he tackled Susan and pinned her to the floor. They heard a sound like a train. Lumber shot through the air, impaling the walls. Then the roof exploded and disappeared. Charlie rose up and yelled out to the kids. Paul returned, "Yeah, we're okay!"

Charlie had never been so grateful – never so absolutely in touch with what really mattered. The story of his whole adult life was encapsulated in those eight seconds. When those eight seconds began, Charlie considered his house his bragging right, a monument to all he had accomplished in his career. When those eight seconds were over, the house was meaningless rubble, but he had never loved his kids so hard.

The tornado spared the house right next door. A few gutters were torn off, that was it.

"You never know why it hits one house and spares another," Charlie counseled. "That's life. You do everything you can to prepare. You think you have the angles covered. And stuff still happens."

Birmingham, for instance, was supposed to be one of the top places in the country to raise kids. Among the neighborhoods and suburbs of Birmingham, Mountain Brook was supposed to be *the best*. It had the kind of houses you want, the quiet streets you want. It's safe to play on the sidewalks, you know your neighbors, the schools are good – when you raise your kids here, you think you're doing right by them. You think your kids can't possibly get in much trouble here.

"But then," Charlie warned, "There are a lot of parents around here who work too hard and then feel guilty about it and just want to be their kid's friend. So these kids are spoiled. They've got a lot of cash in their pockets, despite nobody making

them work. And it starts to become common for these kids, if they want to party, to rent the fieldhouse or the country club for celebrations. And it steamrolls, until parents are renting out the country club for every birthday. Soon Robin's fourteen-year-old girlfriends are renting limos for dances. Everyone's drinking, everyone's screwing – and you finally wake up and say, 'Damn, Charlie! A kid can get into a whole heck of a lot of trouble in Mountain Brook!' In fact, when your kids get to a certain age, it seems there isn't a single thing to do here *but* get in trouble."

Charlie always worried Paul might fall in with the wrong crowd. Like many teens, Paul had long ago decided his parents were idiots. If Susan commented on how nice a day it was, Paul would retort, "Oh, she thinks it's a *nice* day." Paul was a decent kid, but not a natural student. He wasn't going to college. If there was an antidote to trouble, Charlie figured, it was having a job. Paul had been working at the Fairfield Inn since he was sixteen; Charlie insisted on it. Paul could build a nice resume in the hospitality business. When he graduated from high school, Paul went to full time at the Marriott Courtyard and moved in with his girlfriend in the West End. Charlie figured his son was doing all right. Whose kid doesn't try pot? Charlie didn't know that a maintenance guy at The Courtyard had given Paul coke in exchange for using his car to make drug pickups. Charlie didn't know that his son had been beaten and robbed at his girlfriend's apartment, or that he had found another source in Tarrant City and was blowing an eight-ball every night. Charlie just knew that Paul showed up one day saying his girlfriend had dumped him.

"Where are your clothes?"

"I'll get them next week," Paul said. In truth, Paul was afraid to go near West Birmingham again.

The Taylors welcomed their son back.

The motto had never been more appropriate. Charlie never saw it coming.

One day Charlie and a friend were headed to the range for target practice. Charlie kept a 357 magnum in the house. That gun,

which was ten years old and in mint condition, meant a lot to him. When he found it missing, he went straight to Paul.

“Where is it!”

“I don’t know,” Paul cowered.

“You sold it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“After all we’ve been through, buddy? I can’t believe it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I know you’re broke, Paul, but if you need money you need to come to me!”

“I’m sorry Dad.”

“Can I buy the gun back?”

“No. It’s gone.”

“I can’t believe you put another gun on the streets of Birmingham. Someone’s probably going to get killed because of you. Did you think of that?”

What do you do, when you discover your son has stolen from you and put another gun onto the streets? Charlie stewed for several sleepless nights. Was he wrong believing his son was basically a good kid? Charlie always thought Paul would be fine. The kid *knew* how to apply himself. By the age of eight, Paul was a black belt in karate. He was a darn good soccer player, and devoted to the game – Charlie had coached him himself. So was this just a phase every teen goes through? Or was Paul sliding into real trouble? Charlie had pulled a few fast ones on his own parents, but he could never imagine stealing from them.

“Am I playing this right?” Charlie kept wondering. *This is my son.*

Charlie had busted Paul for pot twice and drinking beer at least once while Paul was in high school. He’d taken Paul’s car, and he’d grounded him, and he’d warned Paul how the Mountain Brook police would love to find a drunk punk behind the wheel of a car. Charlie had tempered that toughness with kinship: “Paul, I was young once. You’re not putting anything by me, you know? Just take it easy with this stuff.” He let Paul know it was wrong, but he also let Paul know he was still loved.

Should he have been tougher?

A scary thought entered Charlie's mind. Maybe he was so grateful that Susan had forgiven him, such that he was too willing to forgive his son. Susan had made Charlie suffer the consequences before forgiving him. Maybe if Charlie had been stricter ... maybe if he had taken Paul to the police the second or third time he found pot ...

Or, god forbid, had Charlie let it slide because he felt guilty? – because he feared that his affair – those damn emails! Had they pushed Paul over the edge?

And maybe it was already too late! Paul was eighteen now; Charlie had no authority over his son. Charlie felt the best thing he could do was keep Paul close as long as Paul was willing. He believed he and his son had a bond.

In his gut, Charlie trusted his sense of things. He shook off those scary thoughts. He had played it right. Paul was just a kid who fell in love too easily, this time with a girl from a screwed up family – a girl who had friends who shouldn't be Paul's friends. Charlie figured if it weren't for the girl in the middle, Paul never would have fallen into this crowd. He would be saving his money rather than blowing it on beer or pot. Charlie trusted his instincts.

How could he have known that the truth was far worse?

Paul got away with it for awhile, thanks to the fact that Charlie never bothered to balance his checkbook. One day Susan got a phone call from the bank saying there was an overdraft.

"Overdraft?" Susan asked. "There's two thousand dollars in the account."

Susan went down to the bank to reconcile the matter. She realized Paul had been stealing checks out of the back of Charlie's checkbook. The checks were made out to the local corner store, and were cashed for sixty to a hundred dollars a pop with a forged signature. They added up to two thousand dollars.

For the first time they realized the extent of the trouble Paul was in.

Charlie was in the kitchen when Paul came home. When Paul stepped around the corner, Charlie knocked him flat on his

back. Then Charlie jumped his son, and started soft-punching him in the ribs.

“I can’t *believe* you did this to me!” Charlie hissed.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Paul yelped.

Until that moment, Charlie had never touched his son in his life. Charlie wasn’t trying to hurt his kid – he held his punches – but he did make contact. Charlie needed to show Paul a level of anger that Paul had never seen – so that Paul would get the message and finally think about what he was doing.

“Two thousand dollars Paul! Two thousand dollars!”

“I’m sorry Dad!”

“What was it for!?”

Meekly, embarrassed, “Coke.”

“Cocaine?! You’re into *cocaine* now!”

With every soft-punch, Charlie just wanted to hug his boy. He couldn’t believe he was losing his boy to a drug. It seemed like just a second ago.

Charlie got up, misty eyed.

Paul screamed, “Dad, you beat me up!”

Charlie’s anger returned. “I didn’t beat you up. Can you get up? Are you hurt? If you think that was a beating, you’re softer than I thought.”

Paul left the house in a daze, sweating and crying, unable to recognize that any of this was his own fault. He was gone before Charlie or Susan realized letting him go maybe wasn’t their preferred next move. Susan started calling Paul’s friends, and soon she got him on the phone.

“Mom, I can’t believe my own father hit me!”

“Paul, I am the most non-violent person in the world, and *I* wanted to hit you.”

When Charlie drove over to get Paul, he recognized the moment. He figured this was close to being the last chance he had with his son in possibly a long time. It killed Charlie that he had not seen this coming. If he played this wrong, Paul might run, and end up dead or in jail. He had to get through to his kid. He *had* to. For a moment, Charlie considered taking Paul to live with his

grandmother – but what would keep him out of trouble there? Then he thought about the coast. Gulf Shores. The condo. He could move there, take Paul, take a year off, mentor his son every day. Should he do that? Was that the right thing? Somehow, that didn't quite seem right. If Paul had spent two grand in just over a month, then Paul had a genuine drug problem, probably. He needed treatment. When Charlie landed on that possibility, it seemed right. *My son needs treatment.* He had seen ads on late-night television for a rehab center called Bradford. If nothing else, a place like that might scare Paul straight. But again, Paul was eighteen. Charlie couldn't make him go.

So when Charlie got Paul in the car and buckled down, he put it to his son.

“Paul, I love you and I always will. But you've got two choices. I can drive you right down to the Mountain Brook police station, and they will send you to jail for writing bad checks. Or, you can go to Bradford, a rehab center. You tell me where we are going.”

“Dad, let's wait until tomorrow. It's late, it's dark.”

“No, Paul. Either way, it's happening *tonight*. I can take you to jail, and I will press charges against you. Or you're going to rehab.”

“Dad, don't do this to me!”

“You've done this to yourself, son.”

Charlie was serious that he would have taken Paul to jail, but he was not serious about pressing charges. Charlie is a city commissioner, which means he's on a development board, and he knew a couple people down at the police station who could keep Paul overnight and put a good scare into him if need be. But that's not where Charlie wanted to go.

“Paul, you need help. If anyone knows weakness, it's me.”

“All right,” Paul nodded.

Charlie drove his son to Bradford's intake center. A counselor evaluated him and processed the paperwork for Paul to be admitted the next day to an outpatient program. It was devastating for both father and son. Paul had a powerful need to



impress his father, and this was the most embarrassing thing he could imagine. Charlie was tearing himself up for not figuring it out sooner. Now he was trusting his son's life to strangers he had seen on television. Would they look out for his boy? Or were they a machine that preyed on innocent people in order to squeeze maximum dollars out of health insurers?

Paul's outpatient program required him to show up every day at a giant house. He was assigned to a group, which moved from room to room, listening to doctors and therapists. That was about all Charlie learned from Paul. The place was extremely strict. About a month into the program, Paul showed up five minutes late one day – and thus had forfeited his privilege of being in the outpatient program. Or at least that's what Paul told Charlie. Charlie didn't know what the truth was. Maybe his son had failed a urine test? The next day, Paul moved into an apartment with four complete strangers, grown men with lifelong problems. He would be in there for at least a month. Charlie was not allowed to visit. It was two days before Christmas.

Every few days, the phone in the Taylor house rang at seven p.m. This was Paul's only allotted call.

"I can't wait to get out of here, Dad. These guys are such bullshit. They keep us in meetings day and night."

"Maybe you need to be in meetings."

"Dad, I get it, all right? I'm in here with guys who are screaming all night long, aching because they want more stuff. Guys with no teeth. Guys who sneak out to get high. I don't want to end up like this. I'm done, man. I'm never touching coke again."

That was what Charlie wanted to hear. The ghost of Paul's future had paid him a visit at Bradford, and it had put the scare in him. Charlie figured Paul would be all right now.

Paul got out after a month.

"What are you going to do now?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know," Paul said. "I'm scared to go out at night, Dad. Every person I know gets drunk or gets high."

"Maybe you need to get out of Birmingham."

"Maybe I do."

“Do you think you can stay clean living on your own?”

“Dad, I told you. I’m never touching that stuff again.”

“Then what about Gulf Shores?”

“You would let me?”

“Your Mom gave me a second chance, son. I owe you a second chance. Don’t screw it up.”

“I won’t.”

“You’ll have to pay me rent and make the utilities. I’m not carrying you. But with your resume, you could get on with any hotel in two days.”

It killed Charlie to make this offer. Here he was, a squeaky-clean working man, twenty hard years into the financial planning business, and he couldn’t get down to Gulf Shores more than a week or two a year. But his own son, an addict, a desk clerk at eighty dollar hotels, a *screw up*, was about to have the life that Charlie had coveted for so long.

It took Paul less than a month in Gulf Shores to make a fatal mistake. He had the condo, he was meeting girls (and managing not to fall in love with every one who looked his way), and he had a decent job at the Residence Inn. Then he called some buddies, and he sorta blurted out how great his setup was, which they took as an invitation to come and ruin it. Charlie figured six hours of freeway was sufficient distance between Paul and his old friends. But trouble has a way of chasing you.

Charlie called Paul often. When Paul got fired by the Residence Inn, he told his Dad that he had been “hired away, with a promotion” by another hotel. Charlie called that hotel. They’d never heard of Paul. Charlie knew something was up.

Several months later, Paul pulled up in front of their Birmingham home when he saw Susan in the yard. She called Charlie right away.

“Are you sitting down?”

“What is it now?”

“Paul is in trouble. He’s here.”

“What’s up?”

“He says he drove here to drop a friend off, to get him out of his life. Paul wasn’t going to show up here, but he drove by and saw me. He’s shaking, Charlie. He says he’s drinking all the time.”

“A lot?”

“At least twenty beers a day. Often more.”

“Son of a bitch!” Charlie felt weary. How long could it keep on going?

On the way home, Charlie stopped by Canterbury Methodist again.

“Is this how I pay back, God? Is this my mission, to learn to forgive the weak as I have been forgiven? Or is this just me and my own doing, God? Did I bring this upon myself? Because if I did, I will tell anyone you need me to. I will tell them it’s not worth it. You bring me the man, and I will tell him.”

That night he and Susan talked. Charlie had found another rehab center for alcoholism that was covered by his insurance. He knew he would be taking Paul there in the morning. But he needed to blow off some steam.

“Susan, you made it clear to me. *There would be consequences.* And there were. You forgave me once, but I know for damn sure you would not forgive me again. So why are we not kicking Paul out on his own? How many times are we supposed to bail him out? He’s twenty years old! It’s his life, not ours.”

Susan just let him talk. Maybe after Paul got out of rehab they would send him on his way. In the meantime, they decided Susan would drive out to the coast first thing, to make sure Paul’s friends hadn’t caused any damage to the condo. Charlie would take Paul to rehab at the university hospital.

“I don’t need to go, Dad,” Paul insisted.

“You’ve been drinking a rack a day, Paul.”

“With my friends around! I got rid of them.”

“You’re my son, Paul. I’m not trying to punish you or scare you this time. I simply can’t take the chance of sending you out into the world without treatment. I can’t look in the mirror in the morning if I don’t do everything I can.”

UAB's rehab program was on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. That day, Charlie said goodbye to his son, who was wearing a pajama top and jeans. Paul was surrounded by druggies and junkies. It killed Charlie to get on that elevator.

Susan called when Charlie was headed home. She was distraught. "You wouldn't recognize the place," she cried.

"Charlie, it's *awful*."

"We'll get it fixed up, Susan."

"The wallpaper has been peeled from the walls. Two windows are broken. There's vomit in the carpet, and the couches have been peed on. Who pees on a couch, Charlie? The electricity is off – I'm sure they didn't pay the bill. And cockroaches, Charlie. It's *infested*. I can't sleep here."

He felt violated – god, his dream home! His future! – but it was the hurt in his wife's voice that stabbed Charlie hardest.

Would it ever end?

Would they *ever* get back there?

It took eleven grand to repair the condo. Paul was kicked out of the UAB center on a technicality after three weeks. They were strict there. They had rules, and they enforced them, and if that meant writing off a twenty-year-old kid, so be it. Charlie begged them to continue counseling his son. They told Charlie to leave.

"Can he come to AA classes here?"

"Not here. Find somewhere else."

There's a theory about the brains of teenagers. Scientists have put dyes in their brains, and then taken pictures with MRIs. These scientists speculate that there is a lobe of the brain which has the purpose of controlling one's impulses, and that this part of the brain isn't fully developed until one's early twenties. One day, your son is a pot of water, boiling violently, and seemingly, for no real reason, he comes off the heat and turns into a placid guy who seems to finally recognize the distinction between right and wrong.

Charlie doesn't know, but he considers this a possible explanation for why Paul got a whole lot better in the next six months. Another explanation is that not one single day went by

when Charlie didn't call or see his son. And not one single day went by that Charlie and Paul didn't tell each other how much they loved each other. Charlie hung in there, despite never being sure whether he was hearing the truth or just a version of it dressed up to impress Dad.

Paul professed that he kept going to AA classes for six months. Charlie doesn't know. But that could be an explanation, too.

Yet another explanation is that Paul finally realized how badly he had screwed it up. "I had the good life in the palm of my hand," he told his Dad by phone. "You set me up. I had the condo, the job, the girls, the pool, the DVD, the big television. I had *everything*. I kept it spotless. And then I screwed it up. I let it go to shit. Dad, every single morning when I wake up, I think about Gulf Shores. How good I had it. Where I could be in my life today if I didn't invite my friends there. It makes me sick to think about what I had, Dad. And what I lost. It makes me *physically* sick, Dad. Can you understand what I'm saying?"

Charlie was sitting at his desk in his office, looking at a picture of Robin running on the beach when she was eight years old.

"I understand, son. Believe me, I understand."

"I would jump at the chance to go back there. Someday."

Charlie wanted to say it. He really did. The words almost left his mouth. *We'll get back there*. But Charlie felt like if he said it, that might somehow feed Paul in the wrong way. It was good to hear his son have remorse. It was good to hear his son know the agony of having screwed up the best thing he ever had. That very same feeling had worked wonders on Charlie. It had changed him.

When he hung up that phone, Charlie knew the worst was behind him. Paul was going to be all right. Somehow, they had made it through his trouble. Not only had they made it, they still had a relationship. They still talked every single day.

It was worth it. It was worth every minute.

Charlie did plan a two-week family vacation that summer to Gulf Shores. But he would not fly Paul there. Paul had a job, and that was a good reason not to include him. Let him taste his loss a little longer.

Meanwhile, Robin was asking for her boyfriend to be included. His name was Jason.

Jason had recently celebrated his eighteenth birthday. Robin was only fifteen. Despite that, Robin was the responsible one in the couple. She was the parent and Jason was the kid. Robin was a straight-A student who loved to study but hated the immaturity of high school. Jason, meanwhile, had flunked out of tenth grade and hadn't done anything to speak of in the last two years except visit his father in prison once or twice. That was just like Robin. She loved her projects. She brought home stray dogs when she was a girl, and she brought home stray kids as a teen. She also loved to shock her parents.

No way was Charlie bringing Jason to Gulf Shores.

This trip would strictly be a family affair. It wouldn't be like old times, not without Paul, but it would be good for all of them. Charlie half-hoped that two weeks away from her boyfriend would help Robin realize that it wasn't her responsibility to save Jason.

Charlie suddenly wondered – was Robin trying to save Jason because Charlie had worked so hard to save Paul? Had he, inadvertently, taught his daughter to parent a loser?

Robin always related to people with problems, so much so that she would invent her own just to be part of the club. Every kid's gotta have an identity, and these days there's a badge of honor in having been one of the oppressed. So Robin reveled in her status as an adoptee. She believed her birth parents would never have been so cruel and uncool as Charlie and Susan. Her birth parents, according to this fantasy, would have been completely cool and let Robin have all the independence she wanted. In this way, Robin manufactured an aura of being oppressed by her troll-like parents. Robin would even make up stories about how mean

Charlie and Susan were – one friend’s mom was ready to take Robin in, until the friend got wind and said, “Robin, I can’t believe you told my mom all those lies! You’ve got the two coolest parents in Birmingham! You don’t even know how lucky you are!”

It seemed like Robin had been looking for a reason to get distance from her parents ever since she was twelve years old. Robin had even come to the dinner table recently and said nonchalantly, “I need some time on my own. I should leave school, get a job, and get a place of my own.”

Charlie knew better than to just say no. Or to laugh. So he took her proposal on its face and tried to shine some sense on it. “Robin, you aren’t even old enough to drive a car. And the law limits someone your age to twenty hours a week of labor. At six dollars an hour, you can’t afford a place.”

After dinner, Charlie got out the newspaper and went through the apartment listings with his daughter. They did the math, adding in the cost of a bus pass and food. Robin was good at math. She didn’t bring it up again.

So that was Robin. You had to think quickly in parenting her. You had to show her how the world worked, but if you became the dictator, you would play right into her strategy. What was he missing, here? He was handing his kids the keys to a very good life. But they didn’t seem to want anything to do with it.

“Do you think Robin and Jason are sexually active?”

Charlie asked Susan, after they caught Jason sneaking into Robin’s window one night.

“I hate to think of it, Charlie. She’s fifteen. But I’ve taught her a thousand times how important contraception is.”

“Susan, we’re talking about Jason here. You think he’s going to be smart enough to use a condom?”

“I can’t even believe we’re having this conversation.”

“Me neither. But we need to.”

“You think we should put her on the pill?”

“I don’t know, Susan.”

“It just wasn’t like this when I was her age.”

The very next day, Susan got a telephone call from Robin's school, reporting that Robin was not in classes. A mother's instinct kicked in. Susan drove over to Jason's house. She knocked on the front door.

"Don't hide from me, Jason! Your car is in the driveway. If Robin is in there with you, you better open this door!"

Jason continued to pretend he wasn't there.

Susan looked down and saw a screwdriver. So she began stabbing at the door with the screwdriver, plunging the head an inch deep into the cheap wood. If that boy didn't open the door, she would axe her way in. Anyone who crosses Susan Taylor ends up regretting it.

By the time Jason opened the door, he and Robin were both dressed.

"Mom!" Robin fumed.

"Jason, you are eighteen years old. A fifteen year old girl is underage in Alabama. Do you get what I'm saying? You stay away from her!"

Susan dragged her daughter to the car and drove straight to the doctor. They told the doctor – a friend of Susan's – that Robin's periods were irregular and painful, and they wanted birth control pills to even her out. He gave Robin a sample pack to try – one month of pills. If they were agreeable to her system, he would write a prescription when those ran out.

Robin agreed to begin the pills. The Taylors were headed to Gulf Shores in two weeks, as soon as Robin's sophomore year was done. The time away couldn't come fast enough. Susan decided she would drive out to the coast a week early.

The night before she left, Susan was on the back patio when Robin came to her. She looked strained, ready to burst.

"Robin?"

Robin couldn't say it. So she threw the sample pack of birth control pills in Susan's lap. Susan saw right away that none of the pills had been taken. Anger did not come to her. Only sadness.

"Are you already pregnant?" Susan asked.

Robin nodded. "I think I am."



“You think?”

“I took a test at a friend’s house.”

Susan sighed. “I had a feeling you weren’t taking them. Come here baby.”

Robin climbed into Susan’s lap, and they cried for a while.

Then Susan got serious. “We can’t tell your Dad when he’s here. He’ll kill Jason, and then your boyfriend will be dead and my husband will be in prison. We’re going to wait a week, until he gets out to Gulf Shores, and he can’t go after Jason. I’m going to drive out to the coast tomorrow exactly as planned. Okay?”

While Robin was great at keeping secrets from her dad, she was terrible at keeping secrets from everyone else. She told her brother, who by now – thrilled with newfound command of right and wrong – decided Charlie needed to know.

“I hate to tell you, Dad. But your daughter is pregnant.”

Charlie didn’t know how to act. He flipped out, but he didn’t do anything except go into the garage and started smoking Susan’s cigarette butts. He had never smoked a cigarette in his life. He felt panicky. Then he went upstairs to see his daughter. He had no plan. He had no plan at all.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” Robin asked.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“Paul told me.”

“Told you what?”

“Robin, are you sure you’re pregnant?” He felt like crying.

Caught cold, Robin went for the shock value. She pulled out the three pregnancy tests she had taken and showed her father the blue line.

Charlie hugged her and could no longer hold back the tears. He was sure his daughter’s life was ruined.

“I guess you have some choices ahead of you,” Charlie said, broaching the topic as gently as he could.

Charlie believed in a women’s right over her own body, but he was devotedly anti-abortion. His kids wouldn’t be in his life if they had been aborted rather than given up for adoption. He was

sure of this stance. But that night, it ate at him. There was an easy way to nip this in the bud, to make it all go away. It was not a theoretical question anymore. The life course of his fifteen year old daughter was at stake. If she had this baby, her youth was plumb gone. If she kept this baby, all her potential for a full life would be sidetracked.

He didn't sleep. He felt crazy. He got a phone number and gave it to Robin and told her it was for an ob-gyn, and she needed to make an appointment for when they got back from Gulf Shores. All day long, he bugged her. "Did you make that appointment?"

"What's it for, Dad?"

"You gotta see an obstetrician if you're pregnant, Robin."

Robin's instinct told her that wasn't what this was about. Her instinct told her that her father was sending her to a doctor who would offer her the choice of having an abortion. And Robin was right. Charlie's official position was that he would be supportive of whatever Robin chose. But right then, still feeling panic, he hoped Robin would choose the quick out.

"Dad, you know me. You know I have always told you that if I ever got pregnant I would *never* have an abortion. That baby could grow up to be president, or discover a cure for cancer. Dad, what if my mother had aborted me?"

When Charlie heard those words, his mind relaxed a bit. Robin was right. He couldn't support an abortion, and he already regretted that he had even considered it. It was good to have that off the table. One less decision to fret over.

An hour later, Charlie and Robin left for the coast. They talked the whole way, and it felt good.

At the beach, they made an important decision the very first day, so that it wouldn't hang over their vacation. They were afraid Robin would drop out of school with this big distraction. So they would be pro-active. They would take Robin out of school and Susan would homeschool her through Jubilee Christian's program. Robin was too smart a girl – she had too much potential – to risk her academics. Susan was game for it, and when they shared this idea with Robin, she was too. She hated high school anyway.

The happy white cloud never quite came over Susan's face those two weeks. But it came close. They enjoyed themselves. Their troubles were in Birmingham. The day before they left, they were sitting at the dunes looking at the water when Charlie saw Susan was crying.

"We'll get through it, Susan."

"I'm not ready to care for a baby again, Charlie. I'm ready to be a grandparent, and I will be a *great* grandparent. But I am *not* ready to be the mother of this baby. If Robin keeps it – you *know* she's not responsible. You *know* who will end up taking care of it."

"Well we're just going to have to make that absolutely clear to Robin. She'll have to factor that into her decision."

Susan was quiet for a while. She was thinking about all that they were going to go through in the next nine months.

"I hate to leave here. I love it here."

Charlie sat there for five minutes, trying to think it through.

Finally, he offered, "Why don't we move here?"

"What?"

"Why not? Not today. We'd have to start a process. We'll have a plan. We'll get Robin's baby out, and we'll sell the baby grand piano and all those antiques – we'll sell the house, scale down to a rental condo. A year from now, we can be living here."

"What about your job?"

"I don't need to be in Birmingham every day. I mostly talk to my clients on the phone. I can gradually build a business here."

"Are you serious?"

"Susan, I don't want to wait until we are in wheelchairs to do it. I want to do it while you and I are still young enough to take a ten mile bike ride."

Tears of joy came to Susan's eyes. "Man, I'm all over it," she said, laughing with relief.

They had something to look forward to. That made such a difference. It didn't hurt to leave when they took off the next day.

They would be back.

They would.

They had a plan.

Sure enough, something unexpected happened.

Charlie never saw it coming.

Charlie grieved over the loss of his daughter's youth. He was soaked with regret for this very sad thing that was happening to Robin. But then he bothered to notice something about his daughter. Robin was responding miraculously to the sudden responsibility she carried. The change in her was undeniable. She used to drink, and she probably smoked pot, but Charlie wasn't sure. Now she wouldn't go near it. If her friends were driving and got reckless, she made them stop and she got out of the car and waited for her Dad to pick her up on the side of the road. Robin was always smart – but not until now did she have a reason to not act stupid. Not only was she in church every single Sunday – swollen, proud, beaming, shocking everyone – but she went Thursdays as well, to youth night, something called “Fuel” that the Baptist church was doing.

Rather than having to choke back his anger at his daughter, Charlie found himself saying, “Robin, I'm not proud of how you got into this situation. But I sure am proud of how you're handling it.”

And she was racing through school! Susan was paying \$60 a month to Jubilee Ministry for the booklets. She had Robin at the kitchen table from darn near the moment she woke up straight through lunch. Without all the distractions of school, Robin soaked up every detail. She was burning through her studies with such commitment that she had finished her entire junior year program by September! Every couple weeks, Robin went down to Jubilee's center in Irondale to take the tests on the material. She walked out with straight A's. Charlie could hardly believe it. His daughter was supposed to drop out of school – that's what happened when a teen got pregnant in Birmingham. Who ever thought she would use this chance to study harder than ever?

“You sure must be a good teacher, Susan.”

“I’m not doing anything but turning the phone off and keeping her at the table through lunch, Charlie. It’s all Robin.”

Robin loved to go to the mall and walk around showing off her little belly. She loved telling every friend and every stranger that she was pregnant. It drove Charlie crazy, but he respected it too. She was maybe owning up to it a little too much, he thought. Maybe he was old fashioned, but he still thought there were a few things in life you kept hush hush. Some of his clients found out. He got over the shame.

And who would have known that Jason was a decent kid at heart, after all? At first, it was dicey. Charlie did want to kill him. He had gone looking for Jason a few times, after they got back from Gulf Shores. Jason hid at his mom’s. But then he showed up the second Sunday to take Robin to church. Charlie stopped him in the driveway. He looked him in the eye, hard. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say, or what he might do. But you couldn’t beat a kid up on his way to church, could you?

So Charlie said, “Listen, Jason. Here’s the deal. You don’t have to do this. You can walk away from Robin and that baby right now. It doesn’t have to be your responsibility. I don’t want you hanging around out of some sort of guilt, then leaving later. If you’re going to leave, leave now. I will never come after you, and we will never demand anything from you as the father. But if you’re going to come around here, take my daughter to church and all, then you’ve got to *stick* around. You can’t be here one week, gone the next. You can’t waffle. You either need to be here for Robin or *not*. You understand?”

Jason did not have the smarts to respect Charlie. To Jason, Charlie was just another grown up, trying to order him around. But Jason liked having this responsibility to help make order of his life. So he went to church twice a week with Robin, and he attended every single doctor’s appointment. Charlie wanted to chase Jason away, but he knew if he did, Robin would get her fur up and make them miserable and end up with Jason anyway. Charlie figured he had to let their relationship run its course, as doomed as it seemed. Charlie signed Jason up for GED classes and paid for the three

hundred dollars out of his own pocket. If there was any chance he was going to be in Robin's life, it made sense to stake him. Jason went out and got himself a job – in the warehouse at EBSCO, making eight dollars an hour. Then Robin got a job there too, part-time, and the two of them imagined themselves to be having a regular adult life going. They could almost imagine being parents.

They told Charlie they were leaning toward keeping the baby. Robin was about five months pregnant then. Charlie was not surprised. He knew Robin would not want to put her baby up for adoption. In hanging on to her baby, Robin would redeem the mother who was not able to hang on to her, sixteen years before.

Charlie was ready. "I'll support you in whatever decision you make. But if you're leaning toward keeping the baby, then you should know what your expenses will be."

Charlie gave them a magazine with apartment listings, and then he made a list of all the things they would need to care for the baby: tubs of formula, packs of diapers, a crib, a stroller, a cold air humidifier. He sent them to Target to price this stuff out and to see if they could swing it on jobs that paid eight dollars an hour. Even at Target prices, it added up fast. Wandering the aisles, Jason remembered back to his child development class, back when he bothered to go to high school. There was a poster on the wall he used to look at. It said a baby cost ten thousand dollars a year, for twenty years. They imagined all the Friday nights they could never go out, because they could not pay a babysitter. The movies they would never see.

It really burst their bubble to realize they couldn't afford their own baby. It was a brutal accounting, and it made them feel guilty and worthless. At the heart of Robin's decision were her feelings about her own adoption. For whatever reason, (and despite all the evidence), she believed her life had turned out worse for being adopted. So how could she doom her baby to the same fate?

Robin did not say any of this out loud, but she did not have to – Charlie and Susan knew what their daughter was thinking. So they decided it was time to tell Robin everything. They had a file

on her adoption. Robin was on the couch when they dropped this file on her lap.

“We were going to keep this for you until you were eighteen,” Susan said.

“But we thought you might want to see it now.”

Until that moment, Robin knew only one thing about her birth mother: that she was very young. Robin had always imagined that “very young” meant eighteen or nineteen. She pulled the top sheet off the stack in the file and scanned the page.

NON-COMPLETED BIRTH FAMILY INFORMATION

FORM

DATE OF BIRTH: \_\_\_\_\_  
SEX OF BIRTH: \_\_\_\_\_  
WHERE AS BORN: \_\_\_\_\_  
LOCAL AS BORN: \_\_\_\_\_

Details of medical reports are attached:	BIOLOGICAL REPORTS	OTHER
AGE AT TIME OF SUBJECT'S BIRTH	11	
PATERNALITY/GENETIC BACKGROUND	Irish/Irish	
RACE	White	
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE	Baptist	
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	6th Grade	
HEIGHT	5'2"	
WEIGHT	130	
HAIR OF BIRTH	Blonde	
COLOUR OF EYES	Blue	
COMPLEXION	Fair	

OTHER INFORMATION:  
The birth mother has a brother and a son. The father is the same as the mother's father.

BRIEF HISTORY OF BIOLOGICAL FAMILY AND OTHER BIOLOGICAL MATTERS:  
The birth mother has had all children deceased and has a son. She was born on her father and has a sister who was placed in the same process on both sides of the family and an uncle of alcohol. The maternal grandfather has since traveled and visited his mother. The paternal Great grandfather had diabetes, heart, and cancer.

“My mother was twelve years old when she had me!”

Robin screamed with horror. *Twelve*. Robin looked back four years, and tried to imagine having a kid in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. No way could she do it.

*No way would my life had been better, if I was never adopted.*

The file was brutal, too.

“God, they were all fat!” Robin blurted, looking at the heights and weights of her birth family. “Not one person in the family had more than a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education!” Robin kept reading. Her mother had had a brother who died at fourteen. Throughout the family was a history of alcoholism. Very little was known of Robin’s birth father, except his age, sixteen. Robin understood that the lack of information meant her father wasn’t around.

Charlie looked at his daughter and remembered back to the judge who signed their adoption papers for Robin in family court. Robin's birth mother was the youngest the court had ever recorded. "This little baby girl is so fortunate," he said.

For the first time in her life, Robin recognized this too. And she finally realized that her baby could have a better life as someone else's child.

They used the very same adoption counselor who had brought them Robin. She recommended Robin use an open adoption process, in which the birth mother gets to meet the adopting family and is allowed to continue visiting the baby until the baby is three months old. The theory here was that Robin would end up with less guilt and regret later. She found a very nice professional couple who already had a three-year-old daughter. A meeting was arranged.

Charlie showed up at the house to take everyone to the meeting. He was flabbergasted. *Robin had dressed up.* The bolt was missing from her tongue. Her purple hair had been dyed back to its natural color. Not once in Robin's life had she dressed to impress. If clothes had a purpose, it was to shock people. Robin had always ridiculed Susan's taste, and she never touched the clothes Susan bought for her. But here she was, for the first time in her life, trying to make a good impression, wearing khakis and a sweater.

Right then, Charlie knew his daughter was going to be all right. He knew the worst was behind them.

Their 6,100 square foot house was put up for sale. Some doctor bought it. The baby grand was donated to a school. The antiques were scooped up by a dealer.

Robin kept whizzing through school. She was on track to graduate her senior year by May – a year ahead of schedule. She took the ACT test and almost won a full-ride college scholarship on her first try. She planned to move in with Jason when her parents moved to Gulf Shores, and go to college at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.



Baby Emma arrived two days early. Susan called Charlie, and he rushed to the hospital. It was a surreal moment. Charlie had never been in a delivery room in his life. Charlie was holding one of Robin's legs. Jason was holding the other. Susan was at Robin's head. The nurse was there to catch. Robin was pushing ... pushing

...

*Look how brave my daughter is!*

A voice was screaming inside Charlie Taylor.

This was not the plan!

*No, it's not, my old friend,* Charlie told the voice.

This was not the plan!

*But it sure is beautiful, isn't it?*

In the last moment before Emma came nose out, Robin looked over and saw her father, the man she had been trying to get away from for five years. She had spent years testing this man. Years rebelling from him. Years seeking her independence. But there he was, holding her leg, *crying*, tears draining down his face, all confused and full of joy, and she finally understood.

She finally got it.

He's not a monster. He's not an ogre. He's not my jailor or a hardhead.

He's been at my side, holding my leg, all this time.

For five years, she had been looking forward to the day she could have nothing to do with her parents.

But now, she knew different. She and Jason would go to Gulf Shores, too.

He's just my dad.

Every girl needs a dad.

And with one last push, Emma came.

It hit them like a tornado, and it blew for six years. They fell like dominoes, one right after the other. First Charlie, then Paul, then Robin. They never saw it coming. Everything was fine before, and everything has been fine since. It gives Charlie the shivers to think how close it came to taking his kids away.

But they survived it, and they're closer for it. A lot closer.

"If I had not had my own troubles," Charlie said, "I would have judged what Paul and Robin did far more harshly. It taught me to love them through it. If I hadn't gone through what I did, I might have pushed them away."

A little later, he added, "I don't feel like we're a success story. I don't think I'm a model of anything. I don't know what we did right or what we did wrong. Half the time, I think we must have screwed up as parents, for our kids to do this. I must have spoiled them, been too supportive, too lax, too forgiving. I think I gave them too many chances. But the other half the time, I worry I was too strict. I must have come down too hard. My love was too tough. I think I overreacted early, and I pushed my kids into rebellion. So which is it? I don't know."

That's the usual way to think about it: should I be more strict, or will that cause them to rebel?

But there's another way to think about it. Maybe Charlie and Susan were neither too strict nor too forgiving. Maybe what they did right had nothing to do with where they fit on that spectrum. Maybe the one thing they did right was this: they established a *precedent* for how you work through trouble. In working through their separation, divorce, and remarriage, Charlie and Susan showed their kids a very simple lesson. You don't have to run, no matter how ashamed you feel, or rejected you feel. You can get through it.

"In your the darkest times, life takes care of itself if you just don't lay down, don't put your hands up and say woe is me," Charlie believes.

It was established, in the Taylor family, that despite a picture-perfect setting for a picture-perfect life, things will not go according to plan. And when that happened, you figured it out. You stayed together in some way. You worked through it.

That is how Paul and Robin explain making it through their hard times. "I saw my parents go through something just as tough," Robin said. "And they made it. They set an incredible example." Paul echoed this. "When I was in Bradford, and wondering how

I'd ever make it, I just remembered my dad out there mowing the lawn every night, cleaning the pool, refusing to go away. I'd gain strength from that."

Maybe we shouldn't try to create perfect childhoods for our children. We shouldn't agonize over every detail, hoping that if we do it right, our kids won't run into trouble. The most important thing we can teach them is how to work through problems. Kids need practice distinguishing right from wrong, and learning how to stay away from bad influences. Rather than hide our own problems, maybe we need to let our kids see us work through them.

Trouble finds everybody. The couple that has never learned to fight through a challenge, *together*, is often woefully unprepared when their time comes. They often have no idea how their partner will respond – can he be truthful when the truth hurts? Will she run? Will he put his head down in denial, changing nothing? Only then will it be revealed that the "perfect" prelude to marriage doesn't look so perfect after all. By contrast, the couples that worked through some conflict *before marriage* developed the necessary skills to resolve differences.

We all wonder how we're going to handle the situations the Taylors found themselves in. How might we handle it, when we learn our spouse has been with someone else? How will we react, when we discover our son is trying drugs? What will we say, if our teenage daughter tells us she's pregnant?

We wonder, will we hug them? Will be furious? Will we *act* furious, to send them a message?

But maybe these are not the real questions we should be wondering.

Instead, we should ask this: What precedent have we set?  
What precedent *can* we set?

The weather was clear. A ten mile wind blew from the southwest. Charlie made it out to the one wreck he knew of by about noon. He found several large schools of bait in the area, which was a good

sign. He tried trolling for about an hour with clarks and drones but had no luck. He finally anchored off a reef and went after the top water. The amber jacks found his plugs irresistible. He hooked five, all on light tackle – not one under twenty pounds.

He released them all.

He would come back tomorrow to catch them with Paul, who was flying in that night. Paul had managed to get hired at the Marriott.

*His son was coming.*

That, too, is one of the things that goes straight to a man's heart: Having his whole family around. Robin was in college there. Jason was working at Wal-Mart. Susan was the white cloud.

With plenty of time before the sun went down, Charlie released his anchor and pointed the boat towards shore. It was times like this that a man did his best thinking. Sometimes it hurt like hell to think that he had given away his first grandchild. That was usually his first thought, on days like these. But then, he would think about what he was headed for, right then. How lucky he had it. How good he had it. Tonight he would fall asleep beside his wife, with the sliding glass door wide open, and the sound of the ocean in their dreams. Sometimes, it felt so good he *had* to say something; his love drummed so hard in his chest that he could not fall asleep unless he let a little out in a whisper.

We made it, Susan. We made it.