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The Meaning of Hats

Charlie Stowe will write a short story about a man who sells hats. The Paris Review will claim that the hats represent the feeble attempts of humans to protect themselves from natural disasters that will inevitably destroy the world. The Independent will insist that the man is an illegal immigrant and that the hats are his attempt to integrate into American society. The National Post will mock both interpretations and assert that the hats are an incisive commentary on gender roles.

Charlie will write the story soon. Soon, but not yet.

He arrives in Aspen wearing the specific brand of superiority that comes with returning home for the first time in years and finding nothing changed. He chooses a shiny rental car and drives through snowy firs. As a child he was afraid of the mountains, convinced they crept closer every year. But now he gazes at them with benevolence. He maintains this mood through Snowmass and Wingo but his confidence trips when he sees the "Welcome to Carbondale/Elevation 6,181 ft" sign. He steadies himself by recalling the cherry-lipped flight attendant who winked and slipped him a mini-bottle of whiskey for his coke. He is a man, one whose fingers lingered on hers for a second too long, letting the secret flush of arousal warm him. He is no longer a boy afraid of mountains.

The house squats at the top of a low hill, sloping roof hunched over wooden siding like the self-conscious posture of a too-tall girl. As he drives up to the house he sees his father's truck, a hulking green beast, struggling against a foot of snow. The picket fence surrounding the house leans close to the ground in three separate places and underneath the snow, weeds crouch until spring when they will emerge, thick and insatiable. This is where Charlie will write a story about a man who sells hats.

But first, he needs to open the shiny car door, take a numbing swallow of mountain air and feel the front porch steps, soft and rotting under his boots. He knocks on the door to the tune of *Who Let the Dogs Out*, whistling along. He reaches the third *Who* when the door swings out from under his fist.

"Stop that." His father used to seem impossibly tall but now they stand nose-to-nose in the doorway. Hair hangs around his father's face instead of sweeping up from his forehead and falling in neat waves to his shoulders. With sharp cheekbones, a straight nose, and blue eyes, he once resembled a Civil War general. But now, dressed in a stained brown sweater, with a beard obscuring the bottom half of his face, he looks more like Santa's insane older brother. "In or out?"

For one delicious moment, Charlie pictures turning on his heel and returning to his shiny rental car without a word. But he is here for a reason. He steps inside instead and is instantly hit with a familiar lemon scent of Murphy's Oil. His mother used to spend hours every Sunday afternoon, wiping down the wooden floors and walls with Murphy's while listening to Alison Krauss and Tammy Wynette. The smell is misleading, Charlie realizes, as he walks up the stairs, leaving boot-shaped imprints in dust. He holds his breath. A sneeze would acknowledge the state of the house.

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He doesn't care about his father's feelings, but somehow it feels as though sneezing will embarrass him even more.

"I made stew." The statement hangs between them like a solid object. It belongs to a different father in a different house.

"I'm not hungry." Charlie says, even though all he has eaten that night is half the packet of pretzels that the cherry-lipped stewardess handed out. The other half sits in his pocket.

"I used good meat, from Benjy's farm."

"Maybe later." Charlie says, "I need to settle in first."

His father snorts, and Charlie relaxes at the familiar sound. His father snorted when Charlie first announced that he wanted to be a writer and when Charlie's mother asked if they could go on an Alaskan cruise. It was the last sound Charlie heard when he left home seven years ago and swore he would never return.

Charlie planned to spend the rest of the night in his childhood room, rationing the remaining pretzels and googling pretty girls in his high school yearbook. But he is hungry. And curious about the man downstairs.

He tracks a second set of dust-prints down the stairs and finds his father in the living room, sitting in an overstuffed leather chair, glass of whiskey in hand.

"You're back." His father says and sets the glass down.

There is a picture of two horses running through a wheat field that Charlie doesn't recognize. He nods his head at it. "That new?"

"No."

More silence. Charlie shifts from one foot to the other. "Stew actually sounds good."

His father tries to stand, but falls back into the chair, arms propelling insect-like in the air. It takes three grunting tries, while Charlie pretends to stare at the not-new picture of two horses. This man was not built to grow old. He belongs to a time when men died young and powerful aboard blazing Viking ships. He is not the kind of man who should ever take three minutes to stand up. Whose bones creak as he shuffles with his son to the kitchen to eat stew out of mismatching ceramic bowls. Charlie finds it fundamentally unfair that the passage of time paints everyone with a sympathetic brush. He does not look at his father as they eat at the kitchen table. The only sounds are spoons scraping bowls and an occasional groan as the wind discovers cracks between the window and the wall.



Charlie edits his father out of all the stories he tells and all the stories he writes. He charms his MFA class with small-town anecdotes and meticulous details: murdering chickens for dinner with his mother, getting lost in lavender fields, a neighbor with no teeth who sings Italian arias. But literary magazines snub him. *Unfortunately, your work is not right for us at this time. Please try again.*

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Here he is, trying again.

Charlie sits at his childhood desk. It is the confusing hour when morning still looks like night. He flips open his notebook, reaches for a pen, and tries to summon something monstrous and frightening. But all he can picture is the man from last night, the one who grimaced every time he stood up. Whose fingers shook when he ladled stew into a bowl for his son. Who didn't notice when he dribbled brown liquid down his beard onto his shirt. The man who cleared the bowls and wished his son a good night. Charlie is not interested in writing about this man.

He isn't sure how long he sits at the desk, staring at a blank piece of paper. Long enough for the sunrise to turn his skin fuchsia. A black-capped chickadee lands on the windowsill and turns a tiny black eye on him. It is a plump, furry thing. He used to spend hours in his room, avoiding his father's ever-changing temper, and watching nature unfold outside his window. A phantom memory materializes as he stares out the window, *when they sense a threat, chickadees engage in their famous dee-dee-dee call, to warn other birds of the danger. The greater the danger, the more dees they will use.* This chickadee is silent, it hop-jumps the length of the sill, unbothered by the human inside. They eye each other for a moment until a loud thud sounds from downstairs, vibrating the windowpane. The bird cocks its head, as though weighing the pros and cons of its decision, before flying off.

Charlie stands, rubs his hands together, and opens the door. There is nothing strange in the hallway or stairs. The kitchen looks the same as it had last night, two mismatching ceramic bowls sit side by side on the counter. He pokes his head in his father's study. Growing up, he only ever caught glimpses when his father opened the door and then slammed it shut behind him: a mahogany desk, neatly stacked bookcase, and a large picture of a ship on a stormy sea. Now, papers bury the mahogany desk and spill onto the floor. The bookcase is cluttered. The ship still sails on the stormy sea, though.

He is about to return to his room when he hears a noise. A knock. Charlie follows the *tap tap* to his father's bedroom door.

"Dad? Are you up?"

From the other side of the door, he hears a whimpering noise that sounds more animal than human. He wishes he had never come down the stairs, never drove from Aspen to Carbondale, never convinced himself that returning home would help his *craft*. Because whatever pathetic creature is on the other side of this door, it is going to replace all prior versions of his father. Which isn't fair. His father doesn't deserve to live in Charlie's memory as anything but a man who once made his son spend an entire day in urine-soaked pajamas to teach him a lesson about wetting the bed. *It is for your own good.*

He opens the door.

Edward Stowe, the wrathful god who once make a waitress cry with a single glance, is curled into a fetal position on the ground. "Ghlahhhhhh." He moans, writhing.

Charlie tries to arrange his features into something resembling con-

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cern. "Are you... ok?"

"Fucking. Leg." His father grinds out, a tear forms at the corner of his eye, fattens, and loosens, leaving a wet trail behind.

There is something disgustingly intimate about watching this man cry. Charlie looks away. "I'm going to call the doctor."

His father hits the floor with his palm, "No. Doctors."

Charlie digs his cell phone out of his pocket and dials 9-1-1. He gives the operator the address and hangs up.

"It is for your own good," he says. His father is quiet now, glaring at him with glassy-pained eyes. They stay like this until the ambulance arrives and the paramedics place his father on a stretcher and wheel him into the back of the ambulance.

"Want to ride along?" One of the paramedics asks.

"I'll follow in my car."

Charlie goes back inside the house and makes himself a cup of coffee. He spends the rest of the morning watching birds. Later, he will walk into his father's study and sit on his leather chair in front of his mahogany desk. He will find a pen beneath stacks of yellowing paper and a notebook in the top desk drawer. At last, he will write a short story about a man who sells hats.



Even after he writes a number of successful novels, this is the story people ask him about the most—*what do the hats mean?* He always tells them that the story is a Rorschach test. *You give the hats their meaning.* Only once does he change this answer. It is after his body turns soft and his scalp peeks through his hair. The story is being adapted into a movie and he is on set, talking to the producer. One of the actresses, a dark eyed beauty with a nose ring, stops him and asks what the hats really mean. In a moment of middle-aged weakness, he tells her.

"The hats are just a distraction."