Anansi Boys

Neil Gaiman

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1

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Dedication

You know how it is. You pick up a book, flip to the dedication, and find that, once again, the author has dedicated a book to someone else and not to you.

Not this time.

Because we haven't yet met/have only a glancing acquaintance/are just crazy about each other/haven't seen each other in much too long/are in some way related/will never meet, but will, I trust, despite that, always think fondly of each other . . .

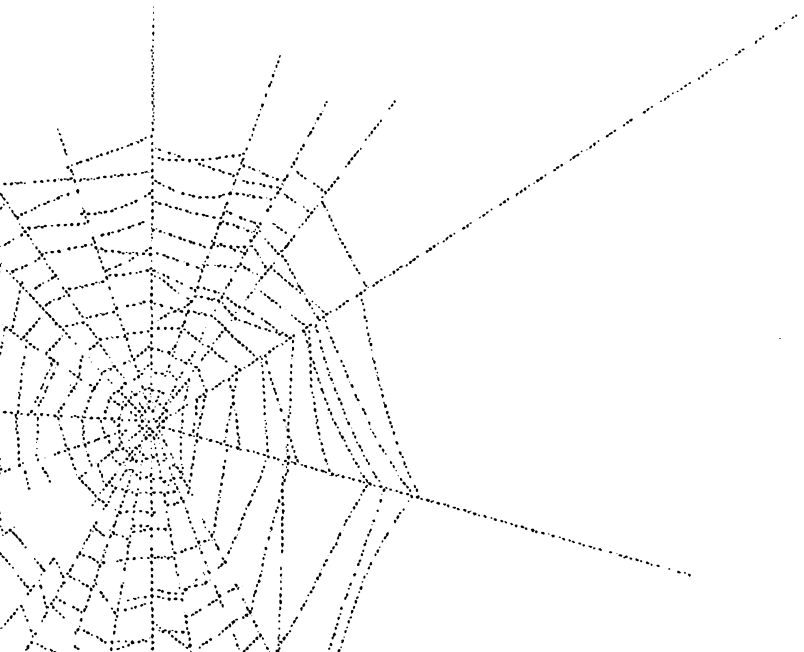
This one's for you.

With you know what, and you probably know why.

Note: the author would like to take this opportunity to tip his hat respectfully to the ghosts of Zora Neale Hurston, Thorne Smith, P. G. Wodehouse, and Frederick 'Tex' Avery.

Chapter One

Which Is Mostly about Names and Family Relationships



It begins, as most things begin, with a song.

In the beginning, after all, were the words, and they came with a tune. That was how the world was made, how the void was divided, how the lands and the stars and the dreams and the little gods and the animals, how all of them came into the world.

They were sung.

The great beasts were sung into existence, after the Singer had done with the planets and the hills and the trees and the oceans and the lesser beasts. The cliffs that bound existence were sung, and the hunting grounds, and the dark.

Songs remain. They last. The right song can turn an emperor into a laughing stock, can bring down dynasties. A song can last long after the events and the people in it are dust and dreams and gone. That's the power of songs.

There are other things you can do with songs. They do not only make worlds or recreate existence. Fat Charlie Nancy's father, for example, was simply using them to have what he hoped and expected would be a marvellous night out.

Before Fat Charlie's father had come into the bar, the barman had been of the opinion that the whole karaoke evening was going to be an utter bust; but then the little old man had sashayed into the room, walked past the table of several blonde women with the fresh sunburns and smiles of tourists who were sitting by the little makeshift stage in the corner. He had tipped his hat to them, for he wore a hat, a spotless green fedora, and lemon-yellow gloves, and then he walked over to their table. They giggled.

'Are you enjoyin' yourselves, ladies?' he asked.

They continued to giggle and told him they were having a good time, thank you, and that they were here on vacation. He said to them, it gets better, just you wait.

He was older than they were, much, much older, but he was charm itself, like something from a bygone age when fine manners and courtly gestures were worth something. The barman relaxed. With someone like this in the bar, it was going to be a good evening.

There was karaoke. There was dancing. The old man got up to sing, on the makeshift stage, not once, that evening, but twice. He had a fine voice, and an excellent smile, and feet that twinkled when he danced. The first time he got up to sing, he sang 'What's New Pussycat?' The second time he got up to sing, he ruined Fat Charlie's life.

* * *

Fat Charlie was only ever fat for a handful of years, from shortly before the age of ten, which was when his mother announced to the world that if there was one thing she was over and done with (and if the gentleman in question had any argument with it he could just stick it you know where) it was her marriage to the elderly goat that she had made the unfortunate mistake of marrying and she would be leaving in the morning for somewhere a long way away and he had better not try to follow, to the age of fourteen, when Fat Charlie grew a bit and exercised a little more. He was not fat. Truth to tell, he was not really even chubby, simply slightly soft-looking around the edges. But the name Fat Charlie clung to him, like chewing gum to the sole of a tennis

shoe. He would introduce himself as Charles, or, in his early twenties, Chaz, or, in writing, as C. Nancy, but it was no use: the name would creep in, infiltrating the new part of his life just as cockroaches invade the cracks and the world behind the fridge in a new kitchen, and like it or not – and he didn't – he would be Fat Charlie again.

It was, he knew, irrationally, because his father had given him the nickname, and when his father gave things names, they stuck.

There was a dog who had lived in the house across the way, in the Florida street on which Fat Charlie had grown up. It was a chestnut-coloured boxer, long-legged and pointy-eared, with a face that looked like the beast had, as a puppy, run face-first into a wall. Its head was raised, its tail-nub erect. It was, unmistakably, an aristocrat amongst canines. It had entered dog shows. It had rosettes for Best of Breed, and for Best in Class, and even one rosette marked Best in Show. This dog rejoiced in the name of Campbell's Macinrory Arbuthnot the Seventh, and its owners, when they were feeling familiar, called it Kai. This lasted until the day that Fat Charlie's father, sitting out on their dilapidated porch-swing, sipping his beer, noticed the dog as it ambled back and forth across the neighbour's yard, on a leash that ran from a palm tree to a fence-post.

'Hell of a goofy dog,' said Fat Charlie's father. 'Like that friend of Donald Duck's. Hey, Goofy.'

And what once had been Best in Show suddenly slipped and shifted. For Fat Charlie, it was as if he saw the dog through his father's eyes, and darned if he *wasn't* a pretty goofy dog, all things considered. Almost rubbery.

It didn't take long for the name to spread up and down the street. Campbell's Macinrory Arbuthnot the Seventh's owners struggled with it, but they might as well have stood their ground and argued with a hurricane. Total strangers would pat the once-proud boxer's head, and say, 'Hello, Goofy. How's a boy?' The dog's owners stopped entering him in dog shows soon after that. They didn't have the heart. 'Goofy-looking dog,' said the judges.

Fat Charlie's father's names for things stuck. That was just how it was.

That was far from the worst thing about Fat Charlie's father.

There had been, during the years that Fat Charlie was growing up, a number of candidates for the worst thing about his father: his roving eye and equally as adventurous fingers, at least according to the young ladies of the area, who would complain to Fat Charlie's mother, and then there would be trouble; the little black cigarillos, which he called cheroots, which he smoked, the smell of which clung to everything he touched; his fondness for a peculiar shuffling form of tap-dancing only ever fashionable, Fat Charlie suspected, for half an hour in Harlem in the 1920s; his total and invincible ignorance about current world affairs, combined with his apparent conviction that sitcoms were half-hour-long insights into the lives and struggles of real people. None of these, individually, as far as Fat Charlie was concerned, was the worst thing about Fat Charlie's father, although each of them had contributed to the worst thing.

The worst thing about Fat Charlie's father was simply this: he was embarrassing.

Of course, everyone's parents are embarrassing. It goes with the territory. The nature of parents is to embarrass merely by existing, just as it is the nature of children of a certain age to cringe with embarrassment, shame and mortification should their parents so much as speak to them on the street.

Fat Charlie's father, of course, had elevated this to an art form, and he rejoiced in it, just as he rejoiced in practical jokes, from the simple – Fat Charlie would never forget the first time he had climbed into an apple-pie bed – to the unimaginably complex.

'Like what?' asked Rosie, Fat Charlie's fiancée, one evening, when Fat Charlie, who normally did not talk about his father, had attempted, stumblingly, to explain why he believed that simply inviting his father to their upcoming wedding would be a horrendously bad idea. They were in a small wine bar in South London at the time. Fat Charlie had long been of the opinion that four thousand miles and the Atlantic Ocean were both good things to keep between himself and his father.

'Well . . .' said Fat Charlie, and he remembered a parade of indignities, each one of which made his toes curl involuntarily. He settled upon one of them. 'Well, when I changed schools, when I was a kid, my dad made a point of telling me how much

he had always looked forward to Presidents' Day, when he was a boy, because it's the law that on Presidents' Day, the kids who go to school dressed as their favourite presidents get a big bag of candy.'

'Oh. That's a nice law,' said Rosie. 'I wish we had something like that in England.' Rosie had never been out of the UK, if you didn't count a Club 18-30 holiday to an island in, she was fairly certain, the Mediterranean. She had warm brown eyes and a good heart, even if geography was not her strongest suit.

'It's *not* a nice law,' said Fat Charlie. 'It's not a law at all. He made it up. Most states don't even have school on Presidents' Day, and even for the ones that do, there is no tradition of going to school on Presidents' Day dressed as your favourite president. Kids dressed as presidents do not get big bags of candy by an Act of Congress, nor is your popularity in the years ahead, all through middle school and high school, decided entirely by which president you decided to dress as – the average kids dress as the obvious presidents, the Lincolns and Washingtons and Jeffersons, but the ones who would become popular, they dressed as John Quincy Adams or Warren Gamaliel Harding, or someone like that. And it's bad luck to talk about it before the day. Or rather it isn't, but he said it was.'

'Boys *and* girls dress up as presidents?'

'Oh yes. Boys and girls. So I spent the week before Presidents' Day reading everything there was to read about presidents in the *World Book Encyclopedia*, trying to choose the right one.'

'Didn't you ever suspect that he was pulling your leg?'

Fat Charlie shook his head. 'It's not something you think about, when my dad starts to work you over. He's the finest liar you'll ever meet. He's convincing.'

Rosie took a sip of her Chardonnay. 'So which president did you go to school as?'

'Taft. He was the twenty-seventh president. I wore a brown suit my father had found somewhere, with the legs all rolled up and a pillow stuffed down the front. I had a painted-on moustache. My dad took me to school himself that day. I walked in so proudly. The other kids just screamed and pointed, and somewhere in there I locked myself in a cubicle in the boys' room

and cried. They wouldn't let me go home to change. I went through the day like that. It was Hell.'

'You should have made something up,' said Rosie. 'You were going to a costume party afterwards or something. Or just told them the truth.'

'Yeah,' said Fat Charlie meaningfully and gloomily, remembering.

'What did your dad say, when you got home?'

'Oh, he hooted with laughter. Chuckled and chortled and, and chittered and all that. Then he told me that maybe they didn't do that Presidents' Day stuff any more. Now, why didn't we go down to the beach together and look for mermaids?'

'Look for . . . mermaids?'

'We'd go down to the beach, and walk along it, and he'd be as embarrassing as any human being on the face of this planet has ever been – he'd start singing, and he'd start doing a shuffling sort of sand-dance on the sand, and he'd just talk to people as he went – people he didn't even know, people he'd never met, and I hated it, except he told me there were mermaids out there in the Atlantic, and if I looked fast enough and sharp enough, I'd see one.

' "There!" he'd say. "Did you see her? She was a big ol' redhead, with a green tail." And I looked, and I looked, but I never did.'

He shook his head. Then he took a handful of mixed nuts from the bowl on the table and began to toss them into his mouth, chomping down on them as if each nut was a twenty-year-old indignity that could never be erased.

'Well,' said Rosie, brightly, 'I think he sounds lovely, a real character! We have to get him to come over for the wedding. He'd be the life and soul of the party.'

Which, Fat Charlie explained, after briefly choking on a Brazil nut, was really the last thing you wanted at your wedding, after all, wasn't it, your father turning up and being the life and soul of the party? He said that his father was, he had no doubt, still the most embarrassing person on God's Green Earth. He added that he was perfectly happy not to have seen the old goat for several years, and that the best thing his mother ever did was to leave his father and come to England to stay with her Aunt Alanna. He

buttressed this by stating categorically that he was damned, double damned, and quite possibly even thrice damned if he was going to invite his father. In fact, said Fat Charlie in closing, the best thing about getting married was not having to invite his dad to their wedding.

And then Fat Charlie saw the expression on Rosie's face and the icy glint in her normally friendly eyes, and he corrected himself hurriedly, explaining that he meant the second-best, but it was already much too late.

'You'll just have to get used to the idea,' said Rosie. 'After all, a wedding is a marvellous opportunity for mending fences and building bridges. It's your opportunity to show him that there are no hard feelings.'

'But there *are* hard feelings,' said Fat Charlie. 'Lots.'

'Do you have an address for him?' asked Rosie. 'Or a phone number? You probably ought to phone him. A letter's a bit impersonal when your only son is getting married . . . you are his only son, aren't you? Does he have e-mail?'

'Yes. I'm his only son. I have no idea if he has e-mail or not. Probably not,' said Fat Charlie. Letters were good things, he thought. They could get lost in the post for a start.

'Well, you must have an address or a phone number.'

'I don't,' said Fat Charlie, honestly. Maybe his father had moved away. He could have left Florida and gone somewhere they didn't have telephones. Or addresses.

'Well,' said Rosie, sharply, 'who does?'

'Mrs Higgler,' said Fat Charlie, and all the fight went out of him.

Rosie smiled sweetly. 'And who is Mrs Higgler?' she asked.

'Friend of the family,' said Fat Charlie. 'When I was growing up, she used to live next door.'

He had spoken to Mrs Higgler several years earlier, when his mother was dying. He had, at his mother's request, telephoned Mrs Higgler to pass on the message to Fat Charlie's father, and to tell him to get in touch. And several days later there had been a message on Fat Charlie's answering machine, left while he was at work, in a voice that was unmistakably his father's, even if it did sound rather older, and a little drunk.

His father said that it was not a good time, and that business

affairs would be keeping him in America. And then he added that, for everything, Fat Charlie's mother was a damn fine woman. Several days later a vase of assorted flowers had been delivered to the hospital ward. Fat Charlie's mother had snorted when she read the card.

'Thinks he can get around me that easily?' she said. 'He's got another think coming, I can tell you that.' But she had had the nurse put the flowers in a place of honour by her bed, and, several times since, had asked Fat Charlie if he had heard anything about his father coming and visiting her before it was all over.

Fat Charlie said he hadn't. He grew to hate the question, and his answer, and the expression on her face when he told her that, no, his father wasn't coming.

The worst day, in Fat Charlie's opinion, was the day that the doctor, a gruff little man, had taken Fat Charlie aside and told him that it would not be long now, that his mother was fading fast, and it had become a matter of keeping her comfortable until the end.

Fat Charlie had nodded, and gone in to his mother. She had held his hand, and was asking him whether or not he had remembered to pay her gas bill, when the noise began in the corridor – a clashing, parping, stomping, rattling, brass and bass and drum sort of noise, of the kind that tends not to be heard in hospitals, where signs in the stairwells request quiet and the icy glares of the nursing staff enforce it.

The noise was getting louder.

For one moment Fat Charlie thought it might be terrorists. His mother, though, smiled weakly at the cacophony. 'Yellow bird,' she whispered.

'What?' said Fat Charlie, scared that she had stopped making sense.

' "Yellow Bird",' she said, louder and more firmly. 'It's what they're playing.'

Fat Charlie went to the door, and looked out.

Coming down the hospital corridor, ignoring the protests of nurses, the stares of patients in pyjamas and of their families, was what appeared to be a very small New Orleans jazz band. There

was a saxophone, and a sousaphone and a trumpet. There was an enormous man with what looked like a double bass strung around his neck. There was a man with a bass drum, which he banged. And at the head of the pack, in a smart checked suit, wearing a fedora hat and lemon-yellow gloves, came Fat Charlie's father. He played no instrument, but was doing a soft-shoe shuffle along the polished linoleum of the hospital floor, lifting his hat to each of the medical staff in turn, shaking hands with anyone who got close enough to talk or to attempt to complain.

Fat Charlie bit his lip, and prayed to anyone who might be listening that the Earth would open and swallow him up, or failing that, that he might suffer a brief, merciful and entirely fatal heart attack. No such luck. He remained among the living, the brass band kept coming, his father kept dancing, and shaking hands, and smiling.

If there is any justice in the world, thought Fat Charlie, *my father will keep going down the corridor and he'll go straight past us and into the genito-urinary department*; however, there was no justice, and his father reached the door of the oncology ward and stopped.

'Fat Charlie,' he said, loudly enough that everyone in the ward – on that floor – in the hospital – was able to comprehend that this was someone who knew Fat Charlie. 'Fat Charlie, get out of the way. Your father is here.'

Fat Charlie got out of the way.

The band, led by Fat Charlie's father, snaked their way through the ward to Fat Charlie's mother's bed. She looked up at them as they approached, and she smiled.

' "Yellow Bird",' she said, weakly. 'It's my favourite song.'

'And what kind of man would I be if I forgot that?' asked Fat Charlie's father.

She shook her head slowly, and she reached out her hand and squeezed his hand in its lemon-yellow glove.

'Excuse me,' said a small white woman with a clipboard, 'are these people with you?'

'No,' said Fat Charlie, his cheeks heating up. 'They're not. Not really.'

'But that *is* your mother, isn't it?' said the woman, with a

basilisk glance. 'I must ask you to make these people vacate the ward momentarily, and without incurring any further disturbance.'

Fat Charlie muttered.

'What was that?'

'I said, I'm pretty sure I can't make them do anything,' said Fat Charlie. He was consoling himself that things could not possibly get any worse, when his father took a plastic carrier bag from the drummer, and began producing cans of brown ale and handing them out, to his band, to the nursing staff, to the patients. Then he lit a cheroot.

'Excuse me,' said the woman with the clipboard, when she saw the smoke, and she launched herself across the room at Fat Charlie's father like a Scud missile with its watch on upside down.

Fat Charlie took that moment to slip away. It seemed the wisest course of action.

He sat at home that night, waiting for the phone to ring or for a knock on the door in much the same spirit that a man kneeling at the guillotine might wait for the blade to kiss his neck; still, the doorbell did not ring.

He barely slept, and slunk in to the hospital the following afternoon, prepared for the worst.

His mother, in her bed, looked happier and more comfortable than she had looked in months. 'He's gone back,' she told Fat Charlie, when he came in. 'He couldn't stay. I have to say, Charlie, I do wish you hadn't just gone like that. We wound up having a party here. We had a fine old time.'

Fat Charlie could think of nothing worse than having to attend a party in a cancer ward, thrown by his father with a jazz band. He didn't say anything.

'He's not a bad man,' said Fat Charlie's mother, with a twinkle in her eye. Then she frowned. 'Well, that's not exactly true. He's certainly not a good man. But he did me a power of good last night,' and she smiled a real smile and, for just a moment, looked young again.

The woman with the clipboard was standing in the doorway, and she crooked her finger at him. Fat Charlie beetled down the

ward towards her, apologising before she was even properly within earshot. Her look, he realised, as he got closer to her, was no longer that of a basilisk with stomach cramps. Now she looked positively kittenish. 'Your father,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' said Fat Charlie. It was what he had always said, growing up, when his father was mentioned.

'No, no, no,' said the former basilisk. 'Nothing to apologise for. I was just wondering. Your father. In case we need to get in touch with him – we don't have a telephone number or an address on file. I should have asked him last night, but it completely got away from me.'

'I don't think he has a phone number,' said Fat Charlie. 'And the best way to find him is to go to Florida, and to drive up Highway A1A – that's the coast road that runs up most of the east of the state. In the afternoon you may find him fishing off a bridge. In the evening he'll be in a bar.'

'Such a charming man,' she said, wistfully. 'What does he do?'

'I told you. He says it's the miracle of the loafs and the fishes.'

She stared at him blankly, and he felt stupid. When his father said it, people would laugh. 'Um. Like in the Bible. The miracle of the loaves and the fishes. Dad used to say that he loafs and fishes, and it's a miracle that he still makes money. It was a sort of joke.'

A misty look. 'Yes. He told the funniest jokes.' She clucked her tongue, and once more was all business. 'Now, I need you back here at five-thirty.'

'Why?'

'To pick up your mother. And her belongings. Didn't Dr Johnson tell you we were discharging her?'

'You're sending her home?'

'Yes, Mr Nancy.'

'What about the, about the cancer?'

'It seems to have been a false alarm.'

Fat Charlie couldn't understand how it could have been a false alarm. Last week they'd been talking about sending his mother to a hospice. The doctor had been using phrases like 'weeks not months' and 'making her as comfortable as possible while we wait for the inevitable'.

Still, Fat Charlie came back at 5.30 and picked up his mother, who seemed quite unsurprised to learn that she was no longer dying. On the way home she told Fat Charlie that she would be using her life's savings to travel around the world.

'The doctors were saying I had three months,' she said. 'And I remember I thought, if I get out of this hospital bed then I'm going to see Paris and Rome and places like that. I'm going back to Barbados, and to Saint Andrews. I may go to Africa. And China. I like Chinese food.'

Fat Charlie wasn't sure what was going on, but whatever it was, he blamed his father. He accompanied his mother and a serious suitcase to Heathrow airport, and waved her goodbye at the International Departures gate. She was smiling hugely as she went through, clutching her passport and tickets, and she looked younger than he remembered her looking in many years.

She sent him postcards from Paris, and from Rome and from Athens, and from Lagos and Cape Town. Her postcard from Nanking told him that she certainly didn't like what passed for Chinese food in China, and that she couldn't wait to come back to London and eat *proper* Chinese food.

She died in her sleep, in a hotel in Williamstown, on the Caribbean island of Saint Andrews.

At the funeral, at a South London crematorium, Fat Charlie kept expecting to see his father: perhaps the old man would make an entrance at the head of a jazz band, or be followed down the aisle by a clown troupe or a half-dozen tricycle-riding cigar-puffing chimpanzees; even during the service Fat Charlie kept glancing back over his shoulder, towards the chapel door. But Fat Charlie's father was not there, only his mother's friends and distant relations, mostly big women in black hats, blowing their noses and dabbing at their eyes and shaking their heads.

It was during the final hymn, after the button had been pressed and Fat Charlie's mother had trundled off down the conveyor belt to her final reward, that Fat Charlie noticed a man of about his own age standing at the back of the chapel. It was not his father, obviously. It was someone he did not know, someone he might not even have noticed, at the back, in the shadows, had he not

been looking for his father . . . and then there was the stranger, in an elegant black suit, his eyes lowered, his hands folded.

Fat Charlie let his glance linger a moment too long, and the stranger looked at Fat Charlie and flashed him a joyless smile of the kind that suggested that they were both in this together. It was not the kind of expression you see on the faces of strangers, but still, Fat Charlie could not place the man. He turned his face back to the front of the chapel. They sang 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot', a song Fat Charlie was pretty sure his mother had always disliked, and the Reverend Wright invited them back to Fat Charlie's Great-Aunt Alanna's for something to eat.

There was nobody at his Great-Aunt Alanna's whom he did not already know. In the years since his mother had died, he had sometimes wondered about that stranger: who he was, why he was there. Sometimes Fat Charlie thought that he had simply imagined him . . .

'So,' said Rosie, draining her Chardonnay, 'you'll call your Mrs Higgler, and give her my mobile number. Tell her about the wedding and the date . . . that's a thought: do you think we should invite her?'

'We can if we like,' said Fat Charlie. 'I don't think she'll come. She's an old family friend. She knew my dad back in the Dark Ages.'

'Well, sound her out. See if we should send her an invitation.'

Rosie was a good person. There was in Rosie a little of the essence of Francis of Assisi, of Robin Hood, of Buddha and of Glinda the Good: the knowledge that she was about to bring together her true love and his estranged father gave her forthcoming wedding an extra dimension, she decided. It was no longer simply a wedding: it was now practically a humanitarian mission, and Fat Charlie had known Rosie long enough to know never to stand between his fiancée and her need to Do Good.

'I'll call Mrs Higgler tomorrow,' he said.

'Tell you what,' said Rosie, with an endearing wrinkle of her nose, 'call her tonight. It's not late in America, after all.'

Fat Charlie nodded. They walked out of the wine bar together, Rosie with a spring in her step, Fat Charlie like a man going to the gallows. He told himself not to be silly. After all, perhaps Mrs

Higgler had moved, or had her phone disconnected. It was possible. Anything was possible.

They went up to Fat Charlie's place, the upstairs half of a smallish house in Maxwell Gardens, just off the Brixton Road.

'What time is it in Florida?' Rosie asked.

'Late afternoon,' said Fat Charlie.

'Well. Go on then.'

'Maybe we should wait a bit. In case she's out.'

'And maybe we should call now, before she has her dinner.'

Fat Charlie found his old paper address book, and under H was a scrap of an envelope, in his mother's handwriting, with a telephone number on it and, beneath that, 'Callyanne Higgler'.

The phone rang and rang.

'She's not there,' he said to Rosie, but at that moment the phone at the other end was answered, and a female voice said 'Yes? Who is this?'

'Um. Is that Mrs Higgler?'

'Who is this?' said Mrs Higgler. 'If you're one of they damn telemarketers, you take me off your list right now or I sue. I know my rights.'

'No. It's me. Charles Nancy. I used to live next door to you.'

'Fat Charlie? If that don't beat all. I been looking for your number all this morning. I turn this place upside down, looking for it, and you think I could find it? What I think happen was I had it written in my old accounts book. Upside down I turn the place. And I say to myself, Callyanne, this is a good time to just pray and hope the Lord hear you and see you right, and I went down on my knees, well, my knees are not so good any more, so I just put my hands together, but anyway, I still don't find your number, but look at how you just phone me up, and that's even better from some points of view, particularly because I ain't made of money and I can't afford to go phoning no foreign countries even for something like this, although I was going to phone you, don't you worry, given the circumstances—'

And she stopped, suddenly, either to take a breath, or to take a sip from the huge mug of too-hot coffee she always carried in her left hand, and during the brief quiet Fat Charlie said, 'I want to ask my dad to come to my wedding. Getting married.' There was

silence at the end of the line. 'It's not till the end of the year, though,' he said. Still silence. 'Her name's Rosie,' he added, helpfully. He was starting to wonder if they had been cut off; conversations with Mrs Higgler were normally somewhat one-sided affairs, often with her doing your lines for you, and here she was, letting him say three whole things uninterrupted. He decided to go for a fourth. 'You can come too if you want,' he said.

'Lord, Lord, Lord,' said Mrs Higgler. 'Nobody tell you?'

'Told me what?'

So she told him, at length and in detail, while he stood there and said nothing at all, and when she was done he said, 'Thank you, Mrs Higgler.' He wrote something down on a scrap of paper, then he said, 'Thanks. No, really, thanks,' again, and he put down the phone.

'Well?' asked Rosie. 'Have you got his number?'

Fat Charlie said, 'Dad won't be coming to the wedding.' Then he said, 'I have to go to Florida.' His voice was flat, and without emotion. He might have been saying, 'I have to order a new cheque book.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Why?'

'Funeral. My dad's. He's dead.'

'Oh. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.' She put her arms around him, and held him. He stood in her arms like a shop-window dummy. 'How did it, did he . . . was he ill?'

Fat Charlie shook his head. 'I don't want to talk about it,' he said.

And Rosie squeezed him tightly, and then she nodded, sympathetically, and let him go. She thought he was too overcome with grief to talk about it.

He wasn't. That wasn't it at all. He was too embarrassed.

* * *

There must be a hundred thousand respectable ways to die. Leaping off a bridge into a river to save a small child from drowning, for example, or being mown down in a hail of bullets

while single-handedly storming a nest of criminals. Perfectly respectable ways to die.

Truth to tell, there were even some less-than-respectable ways to die that wouldn't have been so bad. Spontaneous human combustion, for example: it's medically dodgy and scientifically unlikely, but even so, people persist in going up in smoke, leaving nothing behind but a charred hand still clutching an unfinished cigarette. Fat Charlie had read about it in a magazine: he wouldn't have minded if his father had gone like that. Or even if he'd had a heart attack running down the street after the men who had stolen his beer money.

This is how Fat Charlie's father died.

He had arrived in the bar early, and had launched the karaoke evening by singing 'What's New Pussycat?', which song he had belted out, according to Mrs Higgler, who had not been there, in a manner that would have caused Tom Jones to be festooned in flung feminine undergarments, and which brought Fat Charlie's father a complimentary beer, courtesy of the several blonde tourists from Michigan who thought he was just about the cutest thing they'd ever seen.

'It was their fault,' said Mrs Higgler, bitterly, over the phone. 'They was en*cour*agin' him!' They were women who had squeezed into tube tops, and they had reddish too-much-sun-too-early tans, and they were all young enough to be his daughters.

So pretty soon he's down at their table, smoking his cheroots and hinting strongly that he was in army intelligence during the war, although he was careful not to say which war, and that he could kill a man in a dozen different ways with his bare hands without breaking a sweat.

Now he takes the bustiest and blondest of the tourists on a quick spin around the dance floor, such as it was, while one of her friends warbled 'Strangers in the Night' from the stage. He appeared to be having a fine time, although the tourist was somewhat taller than he was, and his grin was on a level with her bosom.

And then, the dance done, he announced it was his turn again, and, because if there was one thing you could say about Fat Charlie's father, it was that he was secure in his heterosexuality,

he sang 'I Am What I Am' to the room, but particularly to the blondest tourist on the table just below him. He gave it everything he had. He had just got as far as explaining to anyone listening that as far as he was concerned his life would not actually be worth a damn unless he was able to tell everybody that he was what he was, when he made an odd face, pressed one hand to his chest, stretched the other hand out, and toppled, as slowly and as gracefully as a man could topple, off the makeshift stage and on to the blondest holidaymaker, and from her on to the floor.

'It was how he always would have wanted to go,' sighed Mrs Higgler.

And then she told Fat Charlie how his father had, with his final gesture, as he fell, reached out and grasped at something, which turned out to be the blonde tourist's tube top, so that at first some people thought he had made a lust-driven leap from the stage with the sole purpose of exposing the bosom in question, because there she was, screaming, with her breasts staring at the room, while the music for 'I Am What I Am' kept playing, only now without anyone singing.

When the onlookers realised what had actually happened they had two minutes' silence, and Fat Charlie's father was carried out and put into an ambulance while the blonde tourist had hysterics in the ladies' room.

It was the breasts that Fat Charlie couldn't get out of his head. In his mind's eye they followed him accusatively around the room, like the eyes in a painting. He kept wanting to apologise to a roomful of people he had never met. And the knowledge that his father would have found it hugely amusing simply added to Fat Charlie's mortification. It's worse when you're embarrassed about something you were not even there to see: your mind keeps embroidering the events, and going back to it and turning it over and over, and examining it from every side. Well, yours might not, but Fat Charlie's certainly did.

As a rule, Fat Charlie felt embarrassment in his teeth, and in the upper pit of his stomach. If something that even looked like it might be embarrassing was about to happen on his television screen Fat Charlie would leap up and turn it off. If that was not possible, say if other people were present, he would leave

the room on some pretext and wait until the moment of embarrassment was sure to be over.

Fat Charlie lived in South London. He had arrived, at the age of ten, with an American accent, which he had been relentlessly teased about, and had worked very hard to lose, slowly extirpating the last of the soft consonants and rich Rs, while learning the correct use and placement of the word 'innit'. He had finally succeeded in losing his American accent for good as he had turned sixteen, just as his schoolfriends discovered that they needed very badly to sound like they came from the 'hood. Soon all of them except Fat Charlie sounded like people who wanted to sound like Fat Charlie had talked when he'd come to England in the first place, except that he could never have used language like that in public without his mum giving him a swift clout round the ear.

It was all in the voice.

Once the embarrassment over his father's method of passing began to fade, Fat Charlie just felt empty.

'I don't have any family,' he said to Rosie, almost petulantly.

'You've got me,' she said. That made Fat Charlie smile. 'And you've got my mum,' she added, which stopped the smile in its tracks. She kissed him on the cheek.

'You could stay over for the night,' he suggested. 'Comfort me, all that.'

'I could,' she agreed, 'but I'm not going to.'

Rosie was not going to sleep with Fat Charlie until they were married. She said it was her decision, and she had made it when she was fifteen; not that she had known Fat Charlie then, but she had decided. So she gave him another hug, a long one. And she said, 'You need to make your peace with your dad, you know.' And then she went home.

He spent a restless night, sleeping sometimes, then waking, and wondering, and falling back asleep again.

He was up at sunrise. When people got in to work he would ring his travel agent and ask about bereavement fares to Florida, and he would phone the Grahame Coats Agency and tell them that, due to a death in the family, he would have to take a few days off and yes, he knew it came out of his sick leave or his

holiday time. But for now he was glad that the world was quiet.

He went along the corridor to the tiny spare room at the back of the house, and looked down into the gardens below. The dawn chorus had begun, and he could see blackbirds, and small hedge-hopping sparrows, a single spotted-breasted thrush in the boughs of a nearby tree. Fat Charlie thought that a world in which birds sang in the morning was a normal world, a sensible world, a world he didn't mind being a part of.

Later, when birds were something to be afraid of, Fat Charlie would still remember that morning as something good and something fine, but also as the place where it all started. Before the madness; before the fear.