

# 1



**M**y name is Carlos Xavier Alessandro, though everyone calls me Charlie. My parents, of Southern Italian extraction, were born in Argentina, but I was born here in the States. When I was eight years old, something happened to me, or, rather, happened to someone else *because* of me, that forced my parents to decamp in a panic with me to Buenos Aires for a few years, and led them, after I was an adult, to move back there permanently, where they have remained until this day, filled with wine and shame.

What happened was that my little friend from down the block, a very shy and pretty brown-haired girl named Wilhelmina (though I called her Willa) invited me over to her house to help her babysit her infant sister. Her mom was out running errands, and as I remember it, Willa and I were talking in the middle of the sunlit sidewalk—it was the height of summer in Chicago, and it was hot enough that the stripes of tar between the sidewalk cracks were rubbery to the touch, like Black Jack chewing gum, and the actual wads of gum on the sidewalk were even softer and stickier than that—and she said, “Charlie, do you wanna watch Elizabeth with me, she’s really cute and she doesn’t cry or throw up much,” and I said sure, because even at that young age, I loved little babies, and of course I loved Willa too, but in a different way.

Elizabeth and Wilhelmina. Her parents, whom I doubt were of an ironic cast, must have hoped their little girls would become

queenlike, or maybe they just liked those regal-sounding, four-syllable names. I don't know, and in any event I don't remember their father at all, although I remember their mother far more clearly than I would prefer.

What puzzled me years later, when I was a rational adult and back in Chicago, was why Willa was standing in the middle of the sidewalk under one of those big elm trees that partially shaded our eyes from the implacable sun (this was in the days before the elms all became infested with disease and were chainsawed and carted away) asking me that question when her three-and-a-half-month-old sister Elizabeth was back in the apartment in her slatted wooden crib, all alone.

The tree itself was remarkable: It had fantastically gnarled above-ground roots that looked like the knobby knees of a kneeling person seated atop another kneeling person and a crown of leaves as infinitely complex as another galaxy adjacent to our own. This I remember much more clearly than any fleeting follow-up discussion about her sister, and why she had been left alone, that Willa and I might have had under those still, summer leaves.

Be that as it may, we eventually made our way back to Willa's neat little apartment on the second floor of a perfectly rectangular, red-brick, three-floor co-op, and we checked on Elizabeth, who was sleeping peacefully in her crib in her thin, gray swaddling blanket. And then we spent a little time hanging around in Willa's tiny room at the back of the apartment, with its view of the backyard that held a single crooked ash tree with a frayed scarlet mitten still dangling in its branches from last winter and a rusted swing set screwed together out of thin metal pipes, no more and no less fragile than that rickety crib within. We probably talked instead of played, because Willa's toys and stuffed animals wouldn't have held much interest for an eight-year-old boy—especially since she didn't own, as I recall, anything nearly as magical as a certain dollhouse that floats in the air above the dormer room floor in the rental house where I live now. Two years before, when I was six, I had given her a small gumball-machine

“engagement” ring with a big green plastic jewel the color of a lime Jujyfruit while we were standing on the very same sidewalk where she'd asked me to help her babysit, but if that ring was still somewhere in her room, I didn't see it then.

We must have gotten bored after a little while, so we wandered into the kitchen and got a couple of Fla-Vor-Ices from the freezer, the kind you squeeze from the bottom with your thumb and forefingers out of its flattish cellophane tube and suck down bite by icy bite until all that's left is a little bit of warm fruit-flavored water at the bottom that you tip toward your mouth and drink, and it pains me to remember quite distinctly that my ice stick was orange flavored, though I do not remember many rather more important details of that afternoon. We had found a rusty pair of scissors in a kitchen drawer, and I'd snipped the cellophane top of Willa's Fla-Vor-Ice first, like the little gentleman that I was, and then my own, and, still clutching our sticky cellophane treats, we wandered out of the house to go “butterfly hunting.”

I am certain that we didn't catch any butterflies, and in fact this whole story distresses me for trivial reasons, because you hardly ever see any butterflies fluttering around anymore, or that Black Jack gum that tasted tangentially of licorice, or elm trees, or ribbons of tar between the squares of city sidewalks. But I remember these forgotten things distinctly, and yet I do not remember anything at all about our little sojourn, and I certainly do not remember taking Elizabeth out of her crib and placing her on Willa's bed that she shared with her cats, Willy and Willard, and the usual assortment of stuffed animals. Nor do I remember seeing Elizabeth in her diaper but out of her swaddling blanket, lying on that bed, but in fact by the time we returned from our fruitless summer hunt, Elizabeth had somehow managed to roll into the crack between Willa's bed and the sea-green wall.

What is a three-and-a-half-month-old baby capable of seeing? I have often speculated about this, and, from time to time, I have closed my eyes and tried to imagine the world from Elizabeth's perspective, looking up at a tangle of sheets and, beyond

*Everything Solid has a Shadow*

the sheets, at the white ceiling, not knowing what a “sheet” or a “ceiling” was, nor why with every exhalation her slender ribcage constricted a bit more and she slipped infinitesimally further toward the unforgiving floor.

It took about two minutes after that for everyone’s lives to come to an end.



**S**he entered through the back door of the club, a door that seemed, in the distance, far too small to accommodate an adult human being. She walked through the crowded and crooked tables, twisting and turning here and there because the absurdly wide organza-and-tulle ball gown she was wearing barely afforded her passage between the oddly crooked wooden chairs. They were chairs that looked somehow arthritic and impoverished, like they were out of one of van Gogh’s later paintings from Arles. As she walked, she grew alarmingly larger, until by the time she was standing next to me, she was the size of a normal adult person. The club’s walls were canted at a precipitous angle, so that when we stood side by side, each of us had to tilt our heads awkwardly in the direction of our own shoulders to peer into each other’s eyes. Though her gown billowed out from below her waist all the way down to her ankles, somehow the lower half of her body didn’t seem to exist at all.

Her name was MariAngela, and she was, like me, a singer and guitarist. I did not think to ask why she needed to wear a lilac-colored, organza-and-tulle ball gown in a funky little neighborhood Italian restaurant and music club, nor why the color of the gown at one point changed to an intense orange like a polluted sunset. Her eyes held a bit of metallic orange in them too as she spoke to me, her face held uncomfortably close to mine, as if she were peering through my eyes instead of into them. Well, that

wasn't quite right either. It was as if she had entered my head through the back door of my brain and walked toward the front where my shuttered eyes slept, and thus was looking at my eyes from the inside rather than from the outside.

All she said was, "There's something wrong with my brain."

Her lips did not move when she said these six words, and in the time it took for my blood to course just once from my heart through my veins and clamber its way back again, she was gone.

When I saw the real MariAngela at the real music club the following evening, I of course thought nothing of telling her this funny little dream. I saw no reason not to; we were friendly, and not at all rivals as musicians. In fact, she was a waitress at the club and not a musician at all, as she had been in my dream. The nightclub, which was also a pretty good Italian restaurant, was called Berto's, unlike the dream version, which had no name, and its walls were straight, not painfully tilted like the dream-restaurant, and MariAngela was wearing a light lavender-colored sweater—spring was settling into summer, but none of us quite trusted it yet—and a pair of black denims. Most important of all, the real-world MariAngela, a South Side Irish Catholic girl, was glowing with good health. She had just gotten back from a vacation in Australia, where she'd surfed, snorkeled on the Great Barrier Reef, and partied with a lot of good-looking beach-bum types, whose twangy, relaxed, long-voweled accents, she claimed, made her think of the color blue.

So when she walked up to me as I was sitting on a stool and tuning my old Cordoba guitar, it was merely a funny and casual conversation opener to say to her, "Hey, MariAngela, guess what? You were in my dream last night!"

MariAngela, five six-and-a-half and with a black, pixie haircut and strong eyebrows the color of espresso, skinny and slim-hipped with a girlish swayback that thrust out her flat little belly and made her look just a bit parenthetical, blew some air out of the corner of her mouth that troubled a feathery black bang for just an instant. She laughed lightly. "Yeah, I'll bet I was."

"Nah, nah, nah, it wasn't a sex dream. Not that I don't have those about you too."

Actually, I hadn't, at least that I could remember, but MariAngela and I were comfortable flirting with each other, maybe because she alternated between musician boyfriends who disappointed her and terribly serious young lesbians who bored her, and maybe because it was rumored that when she wasn't waitressing at Berto's she worked at a local sports bar where all the servers wore skimpy halters, and thus was used to gently parrying horny male come-ons. Anyway, she always laughed when I made some comment or another about how I was the one who could put her back in tune, or pluck her strings, or help her hit a high C, or some such.

But this time she shrugged and said, in an impatient-sounding voice that made it sound like I was one wrong word away from her ending the conversation abruptly, "Yeah, so what was it about?"

I laughed to lighten her up a bit; it didn't work. I suddenly felt nervous for some indefinable reason and hesitated before continuing. I put my Cordoba back in its case to cover my unease. "Well, so, anyway, in this dream we were in Berto's just like now, except it wasn't Berto's, and it didn't smell like red sauce and wine or look anything at all like this place. And you were dressed in this bizarre ball gown for some reason, and you came into the room from some tiny back door like you were entering my skull from the back and then you walked forward until you were looking me right in the eyes with these weird orange eyes you had."

"Lovely." She sounded bored, and a little contemptuous. Not like her at all.

"Hey, I can't be responsible for my dreams. It's not like I can, you know, go back and *edit* them like I'm an *auteur* or whatever." Why was she making me feel so defensive about a stupid little dream? "So, anyway, that was pretty much the whole thing, except at the end you looked into my eyes—and, I don't know, it was more like you were looking *through* my eyes or something, except through the back of my eyes through to the front, if you

know what I mean—and you said, ‘There’s something wrong with my brain.’”

Pretty, parenthetical little MariAngela opened her mouth and made an odd grunting sound that I’d never heard from her or from anyone for that matter—it sounded like a baby seal being clubbed. She put the three middle fingers of her right hand on my right bicep, so that her arm crossed both my body and her own, and at first I thought it was a friendly gesture, but I slowly realized that she was doing so to steady herself. She had become terribly pale, like she was about to vomit Berto’s garlicky, overly sweet red sauce all over Berto’s black-and-white tile floors.

A second passed like this, as she stood in her usual swayback stance, but for once actually, almost imperceptibly, *swaying*, and then she said, “I was diagnosed yesterday afternoon with something called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. She withdrew her hand from its awkward position on my arm and crossed her hands in front of her like a deferential schoolgirl.

I said, “I’ve heard of it.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say, because, having heard of it, I had also heard that it was about the worst thing any human being could get.

After a moment, MariAngela said, “After my doctor’s appointment, I went out with Dani”—her girlfriend of the moment—“and we talked about it and I cried and I said I couldn’t decide if I should tell my parents or my brothers or sisters yet, and I really didn’t want them to get all drippy about it, but then I was telling Dani, and *she* was getting pretty weepy herself, which I already like totally hated, and I realized that I had to tell somebody who was a nice guy and would be sympathetic and all that but wouldn’t get all goopy on me. And for some reason you crossed my mind, Charlie. I was planning to tell you tonight before you had to step in and ruin it.”

MariAngela had never been an especially close friend, but nonetheless I used to encounter “her” all the time. I say “her” because

I am actually referring to two other women I’d observed that sort of looked like MariAngela but also reminded me of her for other reasons I couldn’t explain. Not too long ago, I was in a little resort town in Illinois called Galena, one of those places that seems to consist of nothing but tea shops and bakeries and gimmicky gift shops and rock shops and bookstores and candy stores, and I saw a young couple coming toward my girlfriend and me. They were arm in arm and looking very much in love. But his left leg was in a hip-high cast, and his head was heavily swaddled in bandages, and he was supporting himself with a three-pronged cane. His girlfriend, upon whom he was leaning, had an enormous club-like cast on her left foot, and her face was largely obscured by her own bandages. She also had splints on the fingers of the hand opposite the one that she had around the waist of her crippled boyfriend. My girlfriend Alisa and I looked at each other, taking care to avoid staring at this terribly damaged couple, and an indefinable understanding passed through us (we must have talked about it later as well) that this couple had been on a honeymoon trip when they’d had a terrible car accident.

How did we know this? We just knew.

That was the part that haunted me. But I also found it of note that, of the little of this young woman’s face I could glimpse through her bandages, her resemblance to MariAngela was strong—so strong that a few days later at work I nearly, for just a passing second, asked MariAngela if it were her before realizing that she was entirely unhurt. It was the eyebrows, mostly, I guess—the injured woman on the street had strong, coffee-colored eyebrows still visible through the bandages and light-brown eyes like MariAngela’s as well, and there was something of her parenthetical quality, a subtle curvature through the middle of her body, though that no doubt had been a temporary condition due to her terrible injuries.

And both before and after my encounter with this woman and her boyfriend (or husband), I used to see another woman on the El who would get on a stop or two after I did and, if the train was

not too crowded, slowly remove the contents of a large, cheap-looking, pink-straw knitting bag, piece by piece, onto the seat next to her. If I had nothing better to do or was sick of looking at my phone, I'd watch her as she would take out, say, a ham and cheese baguette, still in its crinkly cellophane wrapper, and a couple of knitting needles, and some earbuds, and a phone recharger, and a paperback book, and a green apple, and a tube of lipstick, and a toy wind-up duck, and etcetera, etcetera, as the King of Siam used to say. The first couple of times she did this—with great care and deliberateness, I might add—I watched her with some interest, wondering how she was going to integrate all of these disparate items into some coherent activity, and how this action was going to be completed in the few minutes before she got to her stop. But in fact, the “activity,” such as it was, consisted solely of removing these items one by one from her flimsy pink knitting bag, and then, in the very order in which they had been removed, carefully placing them back into the bag again, just before she arrived at her stop. The second or third time I watched her perform this careful ritual, I concluded that she might be mildly mentally ill, and I would have turned my attention elsewhere except that she, too, looked like MariAngela.

### 3



*H*aving lived in Buenos Aires only from age eight to twelve, I'm about as Americanized and un-Argentine as anyone I know, so everyone except my parents calls me Charlie instead of Carlos. I'm a junior partner in a Chicago integrated marketing communications consulting agency, I speak hardly any Spanish at all these days, I love to travel, and of course I love music, though I've long since given up any hopes of being a professional musician beyond my weekly gigs at Berto's. I've got a mild case of irritable bowel syndrome, but on the other hand I've got great hair, which shouldn't be a big deal for a thirty-six-year-old, but I have friends my age in the agency business and even more friends in the music business who are already losing theirs. (I associate hair loss with heavy marijuana use, for some reason, and I hardly ever touch the stuff myself.) My hair is very straight and floppy and so deep brown it's almost black, and occasionally when I'm playing guitar I'll wear a funky little headband to keep it out of my eyes. I've got very pale skin, like a lot of Chicagoans who hibernate all winter, and an unfortunate little chin that gives up the ghost just when it should be getting started, and a permanent shaving rash over my Adam's apple. I'm skinny edging toward scrawny, and my shoulders hunch, probably from all that bending over my guitar to pick out notes, and bending over my laptop to write marketing proposals, but I've been told that, even with the weak chin and hunched shoulders and all, I'm pretty good-