

i
had
such
friends

*Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
And say my glory was I had such friends.*

William Butler Yeats



It all started when a kid died.

He was driving his girlfriend home from a party on a Saturday night. And before you get any ideas, no, he wasn't speeding and he hadn't been drinking or taking drugs. It had simply been raining all day and the roads were shining in that horrible, glassy way. And there was a dog on the road – some old mutt who roamed the streets.

The kid slammed on the brakes and spun the wheel to avoid the dog. That bloody dog. The car skidded into a tree. In the last moments, he swerved so that his side of the car took the impact. His girlfriend survived. He saved her life when he hit that tree.

Before you sympathise with me, I must tell you that I wasn't friends with the kid. Although when you only had one friend, like I did, the chance of them dying in a car crash was fairly slim. Especially when the only time your friend was in a car was when his mum was driving, and she drove slower than my tractor and stopped to let insects cross the road.

I knew who the kid was, of course – the dead one, that is. He was the school captain and everyone at my school loved him. I don't just mean the kids either. I mean the teachers, the principal, everyone. Even the frickin' cleaners loved him. I think my dad wished the kid were his son instead of me.

"That kid's blood's worth bottling," Dad once said. He never suggested he thought any part of me was worth bottling unless he was then going to use it as fertiliser for his cabbages. My mum, on the other hand, I think had a bit of a crush on him. More than once I heard her say he was "as tall as a church steeple."

He was also extremely well built. Next to him, I looked like a candlewick. He was going places, you know? He had a chance of actually getting out of this town. He had curly blond hair and sun-browned skin. He was a swimmer, surfer and runner. He always won the hotdog-eating contest at the surf club and entered those Nutri-Grain Ironman competitions. You know the ones. He was smart too. "Smart as paint," the principal said. He had the prettiest girlfriend in the school. And I'm not saying that to be cute, she really was the prettiest girl in the school. I mean, some people might have debated that point and tried to say that Abbey Ward was the prettiest girl in the school, but that was probably because she threatened to have them exiled to the old basketball courts if they didn't.

But you know what the best part about the kid was? He wasn't even a bully. No lie. In fact, he was a pretty decent guy by all accounts. Not that he ever really spoke to me

of course, but that's why he was nice. He never called me a faggot or pulled my pants down or shoved me into the girls' bathroom. He never stopped others when they did, but hey, he was only human.

Anyway, the kid's name was Charlie. Charlie Parker. And he was dead.

It was the very start of Year Twelve. That meant there was only one year left of school. Ever. He never got to finish high school. But the rest of us still had to sit the HSC. His seat, in the hall, during the exams, would be empty.

By the way, I'm Hamish. Hamish Day. And I think that before we go any further you should know that I was a bit of a loser. You probably already realised that since I told you I only had one friend. And I constantly smelt like a farm. You know that farmy smell? Shit and hay and cows. That was my allure. I smelt like a farm because I lived on a farm. Yep, my dad was a full-on farmer, flanno and everything. I was also into photography. And I don't mean dodgy photography, like naked chicks and stuff. I mostly took photos of the animals on the farm, but that's because there was absolutely nothing else to see where I lived. If you want to know what I look like, and I can't think why you would, I am pretty short, I am very pale, I have dark brown hair and eyes that only accentuate my paleness and I have zero muscles. And I mean zero. You might think that having lived on a farm would mean that I am built. Well you are wrong.

My only friend was Martin. Martin Archer. He *was* a loser. And by loser I mean geek. And by geek I mean super

geek. I mean not your average geek. He was into things like video games, collectable action figures and comic books. Yep. That guy. That guy was my best friend.

Anyway, so Charlie Parker was dead, his girlfriend was in hospital covered in cuts and bruises and our year advisor gathered us together at the start of school that day to tell us what had happened. He was crying when he told us. That was sad because he was a nice guy, my year advisor. I don't think he knew my name though.

Then my whole year took the day off classes to sit together in the staff common room and share stories and boxes of tissues and look at photographs of Charlie. Charlie smiling. Charlie with a surfboard. Charlie with his girlfriend. Charlie running on the beach ahead of all the other boys.

I am going to be honest with you here, and tell you that it made me sick. All the girls were crying and most of the boys were too. It was one of those moments in movies and books when people who were normally enemies or outcasts came together in a time of need to form some sort of beautiful bond that went beyond the realms of cliques and popularity.

But that never happened. I was still a loser in that room, I was still an outcast. Martin was sitting there right next to me. Neither of us were crying. Girls who normally wouldn't give us a second glance kept passing along these photographs and tissue boxes and I still felt alone. I was alone and bored and Charlie Parker, the one person I thought might make it somewhere, was dead.

Charlie Parker was buried in the ground and I was still self-conscious about the fact that my mother had picked out my shoes for me and they were a size too big because she had a pipe dream that my feet, along with the rest of me, might keep growing. There was cottonwool stuffed in the toes. I was also extremely conscious that almost every other guy in the room, except Martin of course, had a weeping girl bundled in his arms, and there I was with no one to comfort. I was stuck sitting next to Martin who was probably thinking about whether or not his shipment of comic books had arrived from Japan yet. I looked at the other boys with such envy. It was so easy for them. So easy to just be with those girls, to touch them without worrying. I hated them. I hated everyone in that frickin' room. And, most of all, I hated Charlie Parker for making me sit through that hellhole of a day.

It didn't happen until that afternoon though, after everyone had petered out of the room and casually draped themselves over the school grounds like washing on the line. Martin and I had escaped from the common room at lunchtime and spent the rest of the day in the library. I was taking photos of the books while Martin had managed to unblock the internet so he could play *World of Warcraft* on a school computer, and since it had been such a trying day for us poor Year Twelve students, the librarian didn't even tell him off.

But anyway, it happened when I was standing at the bus stop. Everyone in the line was awkwardly silent, their conversations were whispers about whether you could

still see the blood splatters on the road and how there was broken glass stuck into the tree trunk that just wouldn't come out.

My bus was always later than the others because it only took about fifteen people home. Not many lived out my way, just us loser farm kids. Our bus driver also liked to park around the corner to have a cigarette before picking us up. The bus always stank like an ashtray. Also, just for the record, Martin's mother drove him to and from school every single day. Poor kid didn't stand a chance in high school.

So, then it happened. Peter Bridges pulled into the bus bay. You're not allowed to do that. Peter was in my year but I hardly ever saw him at school. He was on the football team, though he had almost been kicked off more times than I could count for fighting and not showing up to training. His car was the cheapest-looking piece-of-shit Toyota Corolla I had ever seen in my life.

Peter leant over his passenger seat and looked straight at me. I was standing on the hill by myself, as usual.

"Hey Hamish," he said, and I couldn't for the life of me work out how it was that he could possibly know my name. "Want a ride home?"

I wish I didn't say it, I really do, but I couldn't help myself and my little white hand came up and pointed to my weedy little chest. "Me?"

"Get in," he said and turned the radio up.

I stood frozen to the spot for what felt like ten minutes. Part of me wanted this to be real – that Peter Bridges

would actually willingly spend time with me. But the rest of me was picturing a group of footballers hiding in the back seat waiting to pummel me into the dust, or a short drive to a deserted street where Peter would take my stuff and splatter my face into the pavement. I wondered how long he would wait for. The odds of this being a joke far outweighed the chance that it was serious, but for reasons unknown I walked down the hill, opened the door, dropped my bag on the floor and sat down. I won't lie, I did check the back seat for an ambush. I found nothing but sand, empty cigarette packets, McDonald's refuse and dirty clothes. Sitting on the back seat was a scungy old beach towel and at least three odd thongs. And when I say thongs I mean sandals, not underwear.

Peter had a lit cigarette in one hand that hung out the window in an almost purposefully casual gesture. He wasn't wearing his school uniform, but that was no surprise. He wore a hoodie, even though it had been at least thirty degrees that day.

He sped away from the curb before I even had a chance to put my seatbelt on.

"Where to?" he asked, tossing his cigarette.

"Oh, um, I'm out on the highway," I said. "But if you don't want to drive that far, I understand."

"No, it's cool," he said.

Even though the car was held together with duct tape and sheer willpower, jealousy ate away at my stomach. I couldn't afford to buy a car because I didn't have a job and my parents would never have bought me one, not in

a million years. I could drive the tractor though, but that hardly counted. You couldn't pick up girls in a tractor with shit caked into the tyres. It just didn't work.

Peter had a job. He filled bags with rocks and sand down at the quarry. He had arms like a lumberjack. I sometimes saw him down there on the weekends when everyone else was at the beach.

"Want to do something first?" he asked me.

"Like what?" I said, leaning one of my arms on the window. Okay, I'll admit it: I was trying to sound a lot cooler than I was. Truth be told I was shitting myself that I was going to say something he might think was too girly or too smart.

"I dunno. You play footy?"

Now would have been a great time for me to tell the truth.

"Oh sure, I love footy." Unfortunately I was an idiot.

"I've got a ball in the boot I swiped from school. Fucking Anderson wouldn't let me borrow it for the weekend so I just took it. Let's take it down to the beach, yeah?"

"Sure," I said, sounding like the biggest girl in the world.

Peter turned up the radio some more, so as to make conversation impossible. I tried not to look at him. Instead, I pretended to be fascinated by my fingernails. Yet another girly thing to do. *Shit.*

Peter was a big guy, and by big I mean he was as tall as my father, and that's tall. And he had big legs and those

big arms. He had the perfect body for a rugby player. His skin was dark brown, and I'm not sure how many different races were in his blood but he looked slightly Aboriginal and slightly Maori and slightly something else. He was tough too; tough as nails. Nobody ever messed with him unless they wanted a couple of broken ribs and a smashed-in face. Unlike me. Anyone could've messed with me. A Year Seven girl could probably have messed with me and I'd have just squealed and hidden in the boys' bathroom until she went away. In fact, I'm pretty sure that happened to me in primary school.

Peter pulled into a car space at the beach and removed his key from the ignition. It wasn't on a key ring. Then he popped open the boot and we got out of the car. I left my backpack and my school shoes and socks in the front. I wore white socks with my school shoes because that was the rule. Some people tried to get away with black socks, but not me.

Peter's boot was strangely tidy compared to the rest of the car. He pulled out the football and closed it before I really had a chance to see, but I could have sworn I saw a patchwork quilt in there.

The beach was full of little, screaming kids making sandcastles, and parents soaking up the afternoon sun with weary expressions on their faces. Poor parents. They never realised what they were getting into when they had kids. They didn't know that their lives would end and they would only have their children's lives to live through after that.

There were a few surfies out the back but they weren't having much luck catching waves. There were girls in bikinis lying on their towels in the sun covered in shiny sunscreen.

The sand under my feet was still hot from the sun but I didn't complain about how it was searing my skin off because I would have sounded like a pussy.

It was the hottest summer on record and the temperatures were causing havoc on the farm.

Peter was acting very aloof and I was still dubious as to why he was hanging out with me in the first place. I don't think you fully understand what a legend he was at my school. He was the guy who set fire to things right before an exam so we had to evacuate everyone to the oval. He was the guy who covered the principal's chair in Vaseline. He was also the guy who'd once orchestrated the tying together of the entire school's bags in the quad while we were sitting in assembly. Not that he ever got caught, of course. He was also ace at every sport despite never showing up for training.

We walked along the sand until we reached the shark tower. There were less people that way because it was so far from the flags. We stopped walking and suddenly I was anxious this was the moment I would have my face smashed in and lose half my teeth. Peter started to back away and my anxiety escalated. Was he waiting for his friends to tackle me?

Then, all of a sudden, he kicked the ball into the air. Honest to god, I really thought I could catch it.

I was saying to myself, *You can do this, man; it's just a football. People catch hundreds of them every day. You can do this.*

No chance.

Peter laughed, but not in a you-retard-how-could-you-have-possibly-not-caught-that-ball way, just in a good-one-fool-we're-all-friends-here way. Which was strange because we weren't friends at all.

I had to run to fetch the ball and when I tried to kick it back to him, I fumbled it clumsily along the sand.

The afternoon passed in much the same way. I was rubbish, Peter was amazing and we both ended up covered in sand. Peter took his shirt off but I didn't. He had pecs and abs and biceps and I was just a pasty, skinny little white boy. And pasty, skinny little white boys didn't take their shirts off in public if they could help it.

Eventually I had to say something, well, other than "Good kick, Peter!" and "Sorry, I'll get it, Peter."

"So, um, I kind of have to be home for dinner," I said. My face would have turned red if it weren't already crimson from playing in the sun all afternoon.

"Oh yeah, right, sorry, lost track of time a bit there, Hamish. I'll drive you home."

"Thanks, man."

Peter put his shirt back on before we walked back to his car. I brushed the sand off my feet, but he didn't bother. It was all caught up in the cuffs of his jeans anyway.

Back in the car, he didn't turn the music up full blast so I started to worry that he might want me to make conversation.

“So,” I said, “did you hear about Charlie?” I wasn’t sure if he had, seeing as he hadn’t been at school that day to hear the announcement from our year advisor. Lucky for him, he missed out on having to sit in that damn common room full of crying people.

“Oh,” he said, and then paused for a particle of a second. “Yeah I heard.”

“I didn’t really know him, did you?”

“I guess. I mean, everyone knew him, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

I kicked myself for using the word ‘sure’ again.

A silence blossomed between us. The kind that you can only break with an awkward conversation starter.

“So, what’s your plan after the HSC then?” I said. Nailed it.

“I’m getting the fuck out of this town.”

“Sounds great.”

He laughed, but again, not in a mean way. “Seriously? I thought you were a farm boy?”

“Well yeah, but that doesn’t mean I want to be. I can’t stand farming, but our farm is my dad’s baby. He loves his fucking cabbages more than he loves me, the bastard. I could never sell it.”

“Shit,” he said, laughing again.

“Yeah, anyway, where do you want to go?” I asked.

“I dunno, Sydney, Melbourne, just anywhere that isn’t here.”

“Cool,” I said.

“So what do you want to do?”

“I dunno, I don’t have much of a choice really. There isn’t much chance of me ever getting out of this town.”

“But surely you enjoy doing something? Like, I can’t think of much that’s better than kicking a footy around.”

I cringed. Could I tell him my favourite thing to do was photography? Would he judge me? Would he laugh?

“I guess I like taking photos.”

“What, like, of trees and shit?”

“Yeah, whatever really, I don’t really care what. But yeah, if I could take pictures for a living, I’d be pretty happy.”

“Why don’t you, like, do weddings or whatever?” he asked.

“Yeah well, there isn’t much call for a photographer in this town.”

“Fair point.”

He had a gruff, sort of gravelly voice whereas mine was high and whiney, like the annoying little sister in a cartoon.

“What will you do once you get to Sydney? Play football?”

“Yeah or soccer, cricket, anything they want me to.”

“God I wish I was good at something.”

“Everyone’s good at something. Aren’t you pretty smart?”

“Yeah but that doesn’t count.”

“Fuck off, ‘that doesn’t count’! I’d give anything to be smart, but all the teachers in that fucking school have it in for me. They all think I’m the shit beneath their feet.”

“It’s not hard, you just have to sit there and shut up and they’ll kiss your arse.” Okay fine, I was trying to sound cool.

“Yeah but it’s not that easy. I get bored so quickly, especially when I don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about. And all they do is send me outside or up to the principal and I’m like, ‘What the fuck is that supposed to teach me?’”

“I guess you’re not planning on going to uni then?”

“Fuck uni. You’re going I suppose?”

“I guess so, if my dad doesn’t need me to help out on the farm. I might have to come home on weekends though to tend to those fucking cabbages.”

He laughed again. “You know what, Hamish? You’re all right.”

“I do what I can.”

God damn I was a pansy.

“Well, anyway, where the fuck am I taking you?”

“Oh right, sorry, I’m just down here on the left.”

He pulled the car up so suddenly that I nearly hit my head on the windscreen.

I gathered together my shoes and things and got out of the car.

“Hey, thanks for hanging out with me today, Hamish.”

“No worries,” I said. “Thanks for the lift.”

As he drove away in a cloud of dust, I wondered if I should have invited him in for dinner.



My mother was at the stove when I walked in the front door. She didn't look up.

"Where on earth have you been?" she said.

She had uncanny powers for knowing who was in the house even when she couldn't see them.

"Oh sorry, I was just, I mean, I just went down to the beach for a bit."

"Down to the beach? And you didn't think to call to tell us where you were?"

"Well I don't have a mobile phone do I?"

It was worth a try.

"It's funny – before mobile phones existed I still managed to let my parents know where I was." Yep, she was still trying that old line.

"I didn't have any change for the payphone."

"Look we'll talk about this later, just go and call your father in, will you?"

I called out to my dad from right where I was standing. It was usually a running joke with her, but my mother gave me one of her looks, one of those I'm-not-at-all-in-the-mood looks, so I went out the back door in search of him.

Our house was literally falling apart at the seams. We didn't have air conditioning but we did have ceiling fans in every room that made ominous clicking sounds if you left them on for too long. The cladding was falling off in some places and the flyscreen on the front door had a huge hole in it from when my dad accidentally put his foot straight through it after Australia lost the Ashes.

I found my dad at the well, and before you picture a cute little wishing well with a rope and bucket, don't. Our well was a huge tank in the ground with a big heavy pump you needed to push back and forth to get the water to run. There was this tube that released the water and to get it to work you had to pour water into the tube first. Ridiculous, right? Something to do with suction. Anyway, so Dad was at the well filling a bucket with water – something I had endless trouble with. He always seemed to know the exact moment to start pumping after he'd poured the water in.

"Hey Dad," I said, sitting beside him on an upturned bucket. We were very classy in my family.

"Hi Son," he said. "Just getting some water for the cows."

One thing to say about my dad: he loved to tell you exactly what he was doing. I liked that; he never hid anything.

"Well, dinner's ready when you are," I said. "I can take them the water if you like."

"Thanks, mate," he said handing me the bucket. "I'll be sure to leave you some potatoes."

I heaved the bucket over to the cowshed; it weighed more than my house, I swear. When I got there, the fat old cows didn't even look up to thank me for the effort. Some gratitude. Back inside, Mum and Dad were already at the table ladling carrots and peas onto their plates. I sat down.

"Your mother tells me you went missing this afternoon."

“Hardly missing, I was just down at the beach.”

“Well, you should call before you get into any more shenanigans, all right mate?”

“Noted.”

My mother pursed her lips, something she did when she thought my father hadn’t disciplined me enough. I don’t know why she didn’t just discipline me herself.

After dinner, I excused myself and took a book out to the front veranda. Part of me wanted to see Peter’s car pull into the driveway, and it was a big part. There was something about hanging out with him that had made me feel really... I dunno... cool, you know? And I wished I could have thought of a better word to describe it, but I felt safe when I was with him, like no one could hurt me when he was around, like all the bullies in the world couldn’t touch us. But I doubted very much that I would be seeing Peter Bridges again.

I was wrong.