

## FROM THE PUBLISHER

Authors of fiction are often asked about possible autobiographical connections. Readers want to know if the main character is actually a cloaked version of the writer, or if any of the supporting characters are based on family members, coworkers, friends, or even enemies. These connections, for the writer of fictional stories, can be direct, indirect, or subconscious. And they can be nonexistent—a fact readers sometimes have a difficult time accepting.

We'll never know how much of *Posthumously Yours* is related to the life and times of its author. Charles D. Braun is a pseudonym, and the writer is no longer with us to field questions about his life or inspirations. What we do know is that he worked as a copywriter and was a lover of pop culture and especially, music, and we know that before he ended his life, he sent a box to a colleague—someone he knew only peripherally. In the box was a letter with a final request, and this manuscript.

We've taken care to honor the author's intentions and tone, and the structure of this remarkable story. Because of copyright protections, we couldn't print the song lyrics he referenced by artists such as Kate Bush, Suzzy and Terre Roche, Jackson

Browne, Suzanne Vega, Roseanne Cash, Roland Orzabal, Phoebe Snow, and more. Suffice it to say, the author was greatly influenced by wonderful lyrics, the kind that reach your soul and help you find your way when feeling lost.

Charles D. Braun, the character in this story, is a creation of fiction, and his perspective and struggles are his alone. The wit, talent, and intellect of his creator shine brightly in these pages. The novel raises multi-faceted questions involving ethics and existentialism, family connection and mental health, and readers should be aware that the story deals heavily with suicidal ideation and suicide. As its publisher, we believe this to be an important book that will engender much discussion about difficult topics, and a wide appreciation for one man's unique view of the world.

—Mary Vensel White, Type Eighteen Books, 2025

*A portion of the proceeds for this novel will be donated to the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (afsp.org). Are you in a crisis? Call or text 988 or text TALK to 741741*

## CHAPTER ONE

### FAMOUS LAST WORDS

FIRST, the good news:

If you look in the upper right-hand drawer beneath the Altoids and the Gideon Bible, you will discover a five-hundred-dollar bill acquired on July 14, 1969, the day I was born (and the denomination was discontinued by the Federal Reserve). As you might imagine, it is worth considerably more today—up to eight hundred and fifty as of last week. Consider it your finder's fee.

Obviously, you have figured out the bad news. This was not a burden I wanted to place on anyone, never mind a stranger. While I've tried to downplay the drama—no blood, no bloated and bluish effigy to cut down from a doorway, and a climate-controlled, Swiss-made, HyperHEPA-filtered air purifier to neutralize any lingering scent—your discovery is not something I would wish on anyone, much less a complete stranger. So, while it might not mitigate the initial trauma, the least I can do is introduce myself:

According to my mother, I've been trying to make my exit from the world since the day I arrived with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck (intentionally, she claimed). When-

ever anyone learns my story, I don't know whether to read their look of astonishment as admiration or contempt. They want to know how anyone could have made it well into their colonoscopy years without having had such universal experiences as skinny dipping, receiving a speeding ticket, traveling beyond North America, texting, reading Shakespeare, experiencing a hangover, watching *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, *Star Wars*, or porn, opening a social media account, texting, sexting, possessing a cellphone, owning a pet or a plant, buying a lottery ticket, pulling an all-nighter, writing a love letter, sharing a room, house, bank account or vacation with a significant or insignificant other, engaging in PDA (the "P" being public or private), or understanding how football is played. (This is the highly abbreviated list.)

Even those who might get past the football thing could not imagine living this long without ever having been married, in a long-term relationship, or in love. For myself at least, I always had an answer—until now.

## CHAPTER TWO

### IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO

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10.13.83 Wilbraham, Massachusetts

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PLAYING SCRABBLE WITH MEL, as we did since she bought the game for my seventh birthday, was like trying to beat the house in Vegas. In my entire life, I might have won a dozen times, yet she played each game like it was a national tournament. Watching this woman—who supposedly bought the game, hoping to develop the vocabulary of her only child—morph into this take-no-prisoners competitor was simultaneously fascinating and disturbing.

She insisted that I displayed a certain precociousness and mastered the rules, if not the game, a full year before reaching the suggested “8 to Adult” age specified on the box. What she observed wasn’t as much talent as aptitude by attrition—what’s left over when you don’t have math, science, or other academic skills. “Charles has an impressive grasp on his native language,” Mrs. Volk wrote in a third-grade report card, “and he spells like an eight-year-old.” I was a real prodigy, all right.

Assessing the board one evening, I found myself suppressing a smile.

“You’re thinking of a dirty word, aren’t you?” Mel inquired hopefully.

“That’s right,” I replied, “and I’m not going to tell you which one.”

She looked at me with wide eyes. “You really think there’s a dirty word I haven’t heard in eighty-three years?”

Truth be told, there probably wasn’t a dirty word she hadn’t said in eighty-three years. Yet, although I was approaching my sixtieth birthday, I couldn’t acknowledge to my mother that the word “clit” was in my consciousness. “Clitoris” had been included in conversation—along with every other female body part—stemming from another birthday gift: the *Our Bodies, Ourselves* book, wrapped in Peanuts-themed paper, for my thirteenth birthday. Nevertheless, “clit” reminded me too much of the other C word, so I told her I was thinking of a word that wasn’t allowed.

As she scanned the board silently, a gleeful smile emerged.

“Fuck!” She pointed to the F in the word “roof.” She thought I planned to add a U, a C and a K—twenty-three points for the K on a red square.

I reminded her I didn’t have a U or a K, and obscenities weren’t in the Scrabble Dictionary, a source Mel always dismissed as having been written by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

I told her the word I was thinking of was sexually explicit.

“You don’t think fuck is sexually explicit?” She took the tile from my hand and returned it to the rack. “That explains why you’re not in a serious relationship. For your information, that thing you aren’t doing is called fucking.”

Mel had always meticulously avoided specifying pronouns or even species when inquiring about my hypothetical sex life,

amending the stock line “I just want you to be happy” with some comment about my loneliness in aging. At my age, I knew she’d gladly settle for “unhappily committed” to any mammal—living or otherwise—who didn’t have an R after their name on the voting rolls.

She said this half sardonically but never with a sense of irony warranted by her own history. Here was a woman whose only child was conceived through her only known liaison—with a sperm bank—extolling the virtues of a committed relationship. Even as a devout agnostic, I’d always considered my birth a modern-day version of Immaculate Conception.

In an era when kids with divorced parents were from “broken homes,” my situation always seemed perfectly normal to me. So did our unspoken agreement that each of us was allowed to keep one subject off-limits. *Mine* was that she could never dispute the immortality I had attributed to her. All my life, she’d quote *her* mother, who matter-of-factly announced she would like to die at eighty-one. Why eighty-one? Because, well, “enough already!”

My mom always considered her signature achievement as having any lack of similarity with her mother. “The greatest gift she ever gave me was ignoring me,” she used to say. So, I was surprised the day she succumbed to a bout of her mother’s morbid practicality and reminded me she had reached the age where even the life insurance company which claimed “you cannot be denied for any reason” would reject her.

Once during our weekly drive to the Big Y in Springfield for groceries, she pointed to the cemetery and asked, “Where will I be spending eternity, there, or on your bookshelf?”

The question was so straightforward—“Sugar or Splenda?”—that I responded in kind, telling her I assumed she’d already

made her own arrangements. It wasn't like the question hadn't occurred to me, but it was a clear violation of our unspoken pact.

"Never mind," she said. "Surprise me."

To me, burial seemed simultaneously solitary and claustrophobic, a situation that let the whole eternity thing drag on far too long. Cremation was more of a clean break, but I could never get past the name, deceptively reminiscent of soft serve ice cream, her favorite food. Cryonics struck me as wasteful, dated, and perhaps a bit exclusive—a Republican's way out. Natural Organic Reduction, or human composting, was environmentally sound, but, at the end of the day, it didn't seem all that different from roadkill albeit six feet under. Each of the standard options for eternity seemed less appealing than the last.

I was never smart enough for science fiction, but I wondered if something could be arranged along the lines of the transporter in *Star Trek*. A person could be converted into an energy pattern through "dematerialization." Or there was the episode in which two crew members were transformed into small, chalk-like cuboctahedrons, before one is crushed like sand. Simple, clean, environmentally sound—but unfortunately, still science fiction. Ashes now, dust a couple of hundred years later: the difference was not the mode of disposal but only the timeframe. Despite Mel's advancing age, I managed to defer my decision until the end and made the unsurprising choice.

I kept my eyes on my tiles. She insisted that "fuck" was obviously the root of "fucking," which remained the act of having (or, in my case, not having) sex.

"Look it up," she said, sliding the dictionary across the table. I told her I didn't care what it said and that, in any case, it wasn't the word I was thinking of.

She returned to studying the board but after several minutes



her unnerving smile reappeared. “You don’t have a U, you don’t have a K, but you didn’t say anything about a C,” she said.

I begged her to drop it.

“It’s four letters, right?” She tapped her fingers on the table. “A four-letter C word.”

No, I insisted, definitely *not that one*.

She thought it sweet that I felt the need to protect her from the word. Yes, she acknowledged, the sexual aspect of the word had lost its meaning, and the F word was simply the go-to swear.

“You’re right,” she proclaimed flatly, “Fuck is the new shit.”

Although discussion of her death was off limits, Mel had a favorite related topic: what I would do alone in the world when she was gone. All my life, I had her life to justify my own. Imagining her gone, all I could come up with was the hope that everything would magically get better—eventually. But it only got worse.

The laboratory results from my annual physical were as I had always feared: cholesterol 150, glucose 90, blood pressure 90. Even my normally dour doctor added a smiley emoticon to the report. With my luck, I would live forever. First, the loss of my only family member, now the specter of immortality hovering over me like an act of retaliation from a deity I never believed in. Nature, it appeared, was not going to make it easy. If I wanted out, I’d have to do the dirty work myself.

I had read that every year nine million Americans contemplate suicide. Surely, most had experienced the milestones that had eluded me. How could someone who had been nothing, done nothing, and expressed no desire to become anything, make it to the ironically named status of sexagenarian when younger people with far more experience and potential were gone? I was thinking not just of the Woolfs, Plaths, and Hemingways, but all the anonymous people for whom the fear of ending their life was eclipsed by the fear of carrying on.

For more than an hour, I tried to produce someone who knew me well enough to convince me of a reason for my existence. But I had no such person in my life. With Mel finally gone, there was nobody relying on me, literally nobody on the planet would ask me to reconsider. I could finally slip out the back door, and nobody would even notice. For the first time in my life, I felt completely free, untethered by responsibilities and guilt, relieved, exhilarated, and terrified.

The only thing keeping me alive was the angst about everything that might or might not come after. Planning an exit was more difficult than I had imagined, compounded, perhaps, by a genetic disposition toward hypochondria. Mel presented her paralyzing fear of illness and pain in practical ways: “What would happen to you if anything happened to me?” she would ask before deploying me as a human shield against a line of would-be hand shakers at a wake. Although I kept my eye on the ultimate finish line, I never developed a healthy adolescent appetite for self-destruction. Even during the last twenty years, when our caretaking roles had reversed, I still watched my cholesterol levels, wore my seatbelt, and yielded on yellow—when I probably should have been taking up cigarettes, heroin, and risky sex.

When I finally decided to pursue professional help for my feelings, I’m sure a part of me was seeking permission not to do something I was apprehensive about. Instead, the voice on the other end of the phone dampened my hope with an initial disclaimer that she was a volunteer, not a therapist—and an ally, not an advocate.

“We don’t give advice,” Maeve explained with a lilting brogue. “We’re here to listen and support you.”

It had been a few weeks since I buried Mel. I sat at my desk with the phone pressed against my ear.

“Really?” I said. “So, if I decided to polish off a fifth of Jameson with a Drano chaser, you’d say ‘Cheers?’”

“You have a plan?”

“If I did, that would not be it. I assumed someone working a suicide prevention hotline would try and talk me out of killing myself.”

“Is that why you called?”

“Maybe I was looking for some reason to live, something I’m missing.”

Maeve thought about this for a moment. “Are there others who’d be unable to go on without you?”

“Not anymore.”

“No friends, family, loved ones?”

“You are the only person on the planet who would know I was gone.”

Her voice lowered an octave. “That sounds very lonely.”

“Actually,” I said before ending the call, “I’ve never felt so free.”