

**21*****Wayne's Advice***

Cindy calls Wayne at 7:25 the following morning and receives a groggy, hung over hello. The urgency in Cindy's voice rolls Wayne out of bed. He takes a quick shower, skips the shave, and tosses on some clothes. Twenty-three minutes later he is knocking on Cindy's door. She hands him a large cup of coffee and they walk.

"I am so hung over. We took the gun to Miller's last night and...hey, where were you by the way?"

"Never mind that Wayne, I have to tell you something."

"What is it?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure how to say it."

"Come on, it's me. You can tell me."

"I'm in love with Charlie."

"That's it? You dragged me out of bed to tell me you are in love with Charlie? NO DUH! A blind man could see that you two belong together."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Kind of, yea."

"So do you think Charlie feels the same way?"

“Love is truly blind.”

“Wayne I wish you wouldn’t joke. This is serious.”

“Yes I think he feels the same way!”

“Has he ever talked to you about it?”

“Of course not. Guys never talk about that stuff, especially Charlie.”

“How do you know then?”

“I don’t know how, I just know. Don’t take my word for it. Go ask him yourself.”

“It could screw up everything.”

“If you ask me, not telling him will screw things up more. Go talk to him. Everything will be fine, I promise.”

After sending Cindy off, Wayne ducks into Dunkin’ Donuts for a necessary second cup of coffee. It did not occur to him that Evette might be at Charlie’s house. Why would it? Charlie is definitely not the type to hook up at a bar. At best Charlie might get a kiss on the lips, which given his track record with women can be considered a home run. Wayne orders his coffee and sits down to read the newspaper. The Science and Technology section is in Thursday’s paper, and Wayne likes to clip articles for Charlie.

**22*****The Encounter***

The sound of the doorbell pulls Charlie from his dream world. Evette opens an eye. She nudges him in the side. “Charlie, someone is at the door. What time is it?”

“Almost eight.”

Evette jumps out of bed and scrambles up her things. “I’m going to be late for work again.”

“Join the club,” says Charlie groggily.

Charlie puts on a t-shirt and wraps a towel around his lower half. He moves sluggishly toward the door, wiping the sleep from his eyes. He opens the door and squints into the morning sun.

“Hi Charlie,” says a familiar voice.

“Cindy? Cindy! What are you doing here?”

“That’s not a very warm hello. Can I come in?”

“It’s kind of early isn’t it?”

“It’s not that early. What’s up with you anyway?”

“I’m not dressed. Can I call you later?”

“I’ve seen you in a towel before.”

When Charlie turned on his computer that terrible Friday morning at SPI he felt betrayed by the world. When Evette appears from behind his door in full view for Cindy to see, he knows he has betrayed himself. The pain of the former pales in comparison to the latter. Evette breaks the earth-shattering moment of silence.

“Charlie, I have to get to work.”

Charlie tries to be polite. “Cindy, this is Evette. Evette, this is Cindy.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” says Evette as she slithers out the door. Cindy steps aside avoiding eye contact. With Evette safely gone she raises her head and searches for Charlie’s eyes. His head is down. Her eyes are brimming with tears – two parts heartbreak, one part anger.

“I’ll be in the basement,” she says with all the control she can muster.

Charlie doesn’t follow. He should, but he cannot. He needs a moment to think. He is a novice in these matters. What can he possibly say to her? *Tell her it didn’t mean anything; tell her you were drunk; tell her you love her fool.* Charlie understands the source of the tears he saw in her eyes, and he hates himself for being the cause. He has blown it. His naiveté offers no compass and fuels his impatience. He must act now, before it is too late.

Wayne looks at his watch, and hastily gets up to leave the Dunkin Donuts. He bumps into a girl who is rushing into the store, and nearly knocks her over. Wayne notices how disheveled she is. Her hair hasn’t been brushed, and her makeup looks at least a day old. Still, she is attractive – even in the bright and unflattering morning light. Then it hits him.

“You are the girl from last night! Evette, right?”

“Yup. It’s me, in the flesh. Wayne, if I remember correctly.”

“That’s me. What are you doing in this neighborhood? Do you live around here?”

“No, I stayed over at Charlie’s house.”

“Really?”

“Really. He’s a great guy.”

Wayne has a terrible thought that comes out as a question. “Evette, did a friend of his – a girl – happen to see you leaving his house?”

“Who Cindy? Yes, I bumped into her as I was leaving.”

“Evette, I need to go. It was nice seeing you. Take care of yourself, okay?”

Wayne runs into the street, then slows his pace in the direction of Charlie’s house. Not good, he thinks.



Cindy calls out to Charlie with her mind. No reply. Charlie is upstairs laboring over his next move, just beyond the reach of the gun's signal.

The sonic gun has no warning label, and Cindy has no way of knowing the dangerous consequences of using it without the presence of another's mind in close enough proximity. Cindy is in trouble. She is drowning in a sea of nothingness, desperate for something, someone to grab on to. She needs Charlie's mind, any mind, and her thoughts beg for a connection. An excruciating pain shoots through her temples. She screams out to him. In a panic she fumbles with the gun trying to find the off switch. Infinity swallows her. She slips into unconsciousness and collapses on the floor clutching the gun.

Charlie is still laboring at the top of the stairs when he hears Cindy's faint scream for help coming from the far end of the other world. He rushes down the stairs. Halfway down, as he penetrates the gun's perimeter, he is jolted into the other world. He loses his balance and trips the rest of the way down the stairs. He arrives at the bottom unharmed, and quickly gathers himself. He reaches out with his mind in search of Cindy's presence. He sees her island far off in the distance, and she is accelerating away from him at an alarming speed. He reaches out again for her with all his power. He yells to her, but there is no reply. He feels the gravity of the gun, now a force beyond even his control, tugging to swallow him. He pries the gun from Cindy's hands, and with tremendous effort he turns it off.

Cindy is lying limp on the floor. Her eyes are closed, and her eyeballs undulate from side to side beneath her eyelids like she is in active REM sleep. Charlie kneels and holds her. He shakes her, gently.

"Cindy. Come on Cindy, snap out of it! Please Cindy, can you hear me?"

Charlie hears a tremor of footsteps from above descending the stairs. It is Wayne. "Charlie, are you down there?" Wayne calls out.

"Wayne, it's Cindy. She's messed up. Something's gone wrong with the gun."

Wayne sees Cindy on the floor. "Shit. I'll call 911," and then he charges back up the stairs.

Terrified, Charlie weeps. A tear falls and lands on Cindy's lips. He kisses her gently. "Cindy, wake up. Please don't leave me. Come back. I love you. I always have."

Cindy opens her eyes using her last breath of life. She struggles to speak. "I love you Charlie."

And then she is gone.

Charlie stares down at the deadly device he is holding in his hands. He sways like a drunk trying to stand up straight. He places the sonic gun on his workbench and pulls out a hammer from his toolbox. He raises the hammer. He has to murder the murderer. The sweat of panic makes his hand slippery. He wipes it dry. He looks at Cindy lying cold on the basement floor. How beautiful she is. Her hair is spread against the floor forming the soft current of a meadow brook. Her arms are stretched out like a child asking for a big hug. Her face is cold and pale. Time is moving in slow motion. The basement roars. He brings the hammer down with thunderous force, but milliseconds before impact he aborts. He cannot bring himself to smash the device. The pain of conflict splinters his brain. Charlie is alone and adrift. A cold storm of chance has un-tethered his soul. How can he destroy it? He cannot.

"Someone, anyone, please help me!" he shouts in between gasps for air. "Someone, anyone, please." Charlie falls to his knees, and with both

hands covering his ears he sobs. He squeezes his head hard, as if the pressure could change reality.

Wayne comes barreling down the basement stairs. “Charlie, the ambulance will be here in five minutes.”

Charlie looks up at his friend with pain brimming in his eyes and shakes his head no.

## *Epilogue*

*2048*

Two million onlookers, Pilgrims, line a four-mile stretch of Bloomfield Avenue to pay their last respects in person to the great one, Charlie Childs, the man who changed the world with telepathy. The Pilgrims are clothed in skin-tight transparent insulation (the customary fashion of the day), and wave white silk flags embossed with the global Symbol Of Unity. The CTT (Community Thought Transmitter) broadcasts the second movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony, Eroica. A dozen soldiers from the Mind Guard carry Charlie's gold leaf casket down the avenue. Across the country and around the world, every man, woman, and child are following the proceedings. The CTT's have been networked and a single broadcast over the Frequency of Thought is available to all. The world is silent, but a glorious celebration is taking place on stage in the other world.

Shortly after Cindy's death in 1998, Charlie received some investment money and began manufacturing sonic guns. By 2010 he owned twenty factories and employed ten thousand workers. In 2020 he sold his company to the government at the insistence of the President himself. Tripp made a billion dollars selling Charlie his modulators, and

Charlie loved to write him large checks. Charlie never understood exactly how the gun worked, but it didn't matter. It worked, and that was more than enough to make him the most envied man on the planet. But toward the end of his celebrated life Charlie had grown to resent his sonic gun, and he came to fear the direction in which mass telepathy thrust society.

During the last decade of his life Charlie was relegated to being little more than a poster boy for the Scientific Establishment (S.E.), which in 2022, became the dominant political party in the nation; and ten years after that, in the world. Although Charlie no longer had the security clearance to know for certain, he suspected that the S.E. was working on mind control technology that could alter a person's perception of reality to a terrible end, if desired. Several of his colleagues conveyed reports of strange behavior occurring in the Midwest. In one instance it was reported that an entire town spent a day walking on their hands and knees, convinced they were dogs. Based on this report, and others like it he feared that something terrible was in the making, but it was too late for him to do anything about it.

On March 24, 2048 Charlie Childs dies. It should be known that at the moment of his passing he was dreaming about some other, other world; convinced that Cindy was there, waiting for him to come her.