

# **Dogwood: The Stories That Shaped and Shattered My World**

By Olivia Meade

The year was 1929. It was late April, just before the spring gave way to summer, and before hard times would strike in the fall. Hope was in the air in Adkin, West Virginia, and a boy named Charlie was born on the evening of the 26th to Benjamin and Patsey Meade. He was the third of four children- three boys and a girl.

Growing up during the Great Depression in a coal mining town, Charlie quickly learned the value and importance of hard work. His father worked as an electrician in the mines, and despite the intense labor and hours, he would bring home roughly \$100 a month to support a family of 6. Patsey would patch their shoes with cardboard and the holes in their pants with old dishrags.

Financial hardships aside, his always seemed to be a rather whimsical childhood- surrounded by the mountains sprawling outwards, sparkling streams, a tight-knit community of neighbors and friends, free to roam wherever and whenever they pleased. The children would escape into the mountains and spend their days playing in an Appalachian daydream surrounded by the dogwood flowers, free from the harsh realities of the Depression's milieu. My grandfather, Charlie, often spoke of these times as some of his fondest memories.

Charlie grew up and went to war in 1945 at 17 years old. He never saw real combat but played an essential part in the rebuilding of several island towns in the pacific. Upon returning home to West Virginia, he got a job working in the coal mines, just like his father. One day, he was working on the family car when he heard a woman's voice say "Hi, Marvin!" He turned around to see Patricia for the first time.

"Well, you're not Marvin."

He always said he knew she was the one from that moment. I suppose he had the right idea.

My grandparents got married in 1952 and moved to Cincinnati shortly after. They had four children- three girls and a boy. One of those little girls was named Jeannie, and Jeannie grew up to be my mother. My mother and father were not married when I was born, and my father wasn't around as much as he should've been- but Charlie anticipated that. He used to say he knew I was going to need a father, and if mine wasn't going to show up, he would.

My mother was a nurse and worked long hours at the hospital to be able to provide for us, so she needed a lot of help from my grandparents. I spent most of my childhood with Charlie, in some form or another. I was brought along on adventures near and far- long hikes through the woods where we would explore, Saturday mornings fishing at Caesar's Creek, road trips from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Gulf, and often simple afternoons after school spent in their living room or back yard. All the while laughing, encouraging, teaching, and sharing tidbits of the precious things in life. Most of all, I loved his stories. Charlie was an incredible storyteller, and he made the power of a good story known throughout my childhood. I was taught that words were strung together with the intent to paint a delicate picture in the minds of the listeners, and now, many of these frames are forever stained within my mind. Bare feet running through mountain soil, the legend of the dogwood, the sizzle of a telephone line in Okinawa, echoes from deep within the earth, the flapping wings of butterflies upon meeting the love of your life. All wrapped in layers of nostalgia and emotion, his words still paint the landscapes in my dreams sometimes. My grandfather bought me my first guitar when I was 9 years old, and encouraged me to practice the art of storytelling in my way.

The same year I found my love of music, doctors found cancer cells clustering in Charlie's esophagus. The vessel of so many thoughts, words, phrases, and stories, slowly ravaging itself. He fought the battle for nearly 4 years- weekly doctor's visits, various forms of chemo and radiation, a plethora of pills and side effects. Eventually, he was

presented with two options: he could stop treatments, and ultimately live a shorter but more fulfilling life, or continue the treatments, feel sick the whole time, and still die.

When Charlie told me his decision, I felt my earth begin to shatter. I felt like I was losing a parent because I was. Charlie was my father for the first 12 years of my life, and the thought of living without the man who molded me was shocking. It was my first encounter with the impermanence of life- he always seemed invincible.

Towards the end of that summer, we took a family vacation to a small waterfront town in North Carolina. On our last night there, I remember sitting on the pier with him as the sunset glistened on the water, ears filled with the sound of his voice sharing the legend of the dogwood. I had promised him we would go fishing as soon as he was up to feeling better, so that's exactly what we did. We sat on the pier with our poles until the sun went down. I don't even remember if we ended up catching anything- that wasn't the important part.

One night about 6 months later, I came home from school crying because a girl in my class had been ruthlessly teasing me.

"Quit crying," he said. "I want you to listen to me. Don't pay any mind to that horse shit, leave it down in the dirt where it belongs."

I chuckled through the tears as he wiped one from my cheek. "No matter what happens, darlin', everything's gonna be alright. I promise."

Afterward, we went into the kitchen and per usual, told stories and drew a few pictures. We shared and laughed, and as my mom came to pick me up, he hugged me extra tight. "Remember what I told you- everything's gonna be alright."

I smiled and nodded, assuring him the message was received.

The next morning, he couldn't walk. Hospice nurses were quickly called in and had morphine flowing through his veins in no time. The villainous stash of emergency

end-of-life medicine kept in our refrigerator for exactly this occasion finally making its debut. I was in an assembly around 1 pm when I was called out of school early. My dad was there to pick me up- he never picked me up from school. By the time I arrived, they all knew this was the end. I went upstairs to his bedroom to say my final goodbyes while he was still coherent.

“Hey, Papaw,” I said with as much strength as I had, through a curtain of uncontrollable tears and heavy breaths. “I love you so much. Thank you for everything.”

“I love you too, darlin’. I love you too.”

By the end of the day, he was gone. I was holding his hand when he died. This was a gut-wrenching kind of hurt I had never experienced.

I felt my world split in two. I had never lost someone so close to me, so important, so influential to who I was at my core. The person who taught me to read, to adventure, to ride a bike, to understand the importance of history, to recognize the stories worth telling, to follow my heart, to love wholeheartedly- gone.

A few months went by, and my family had arranged a memorial service for him on the weekend of April 26th- We wanted to celebrate his birthday one last time. We drove to Virginia and held the service at the church his great grandparents had built, where he would often spend his summers with his grandmother. The day before the service, my youngest cousin and I approached his grave for the first time. Looking down at his name etched in stone felt so permanent, so final. Something inside me decided to run- so I did.

I ran through the graveyard, hopped the fence, and kept running. Footsteps tracing over the same holy ground Charlie had at my age- running wild through the foothills, stuck inside a daydream. Run. Run. Run.

According to Appalachian legend, timber from the dogwood was used for the crucifixion of Christ. God gave the dogwood thin, curling branches so the tree would never

be strong enough to use for a cross again. The pure white petals stained with pink around the edges symbolize the sacrifice that was given and has long since been considered a sacred tree to many. Regardless of the truth, its beauty alone is enough to consider the dogwood so.

I eventually found myself at the bank of a stream. I sat, I laid down, and I cried. I closed my eyes and the stories came flooding back, along with tears, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the setting all around me. The mountains, the streams, the freedom, and the dogwood tree above me, in full bloom. The stories were still there, in full color. All I had to do was tell them.

After what could've been minutes or hours, I picked some of the white and pink blossoms- his favorite- and began the trek back. I stopped to admire everything around me- it felt like home. Upon returning to his tombstone, I said a silent prayer and laid down the dogwood blossoms- a symbol for life, death, and resurrection. I like to think the dogwoods still dance in the wind around him, singing to his soul.

Two weeks after he died I booked my first show, and I was ecstatic. The gig was only two hours at a City Barbeque, but it was something. It felt as if he wanted to reassure me that, once again, everything was going to be alright.

Although I lost Charlie in 2012, I gained an understanding of what it means to truly appreciate the people in your life. Despite being in college, I try to spend as much time with my family as possible. My father and I have repaired our relationship, and he has truly filled the shoes my grandfather never thought he would. I still make sure to call my mom and grandmother every day, and every time we speak the last thing said is "I love you".

Losing Charlie at 12 years old made my accomplishments in the coming years bittersweet. I finally faced my fear of rollercoasters, got my driver's license, fell in love for the first time, graduated high school, and started college with a full ride, but I couldn't tell

him my stories. Sometimes I still want to call him, but instead, I just project these thoughts outwards, hoping he'll hear me. Somedays, I think he does.

When I was filming my video essay to apply to college, the prompt was centered around the art of storytelling, and why they are important to me. This was a nice reminder of who first encouraged my love of stories, and why I never want to stop trying to tell the best ones I can.

Charlie taught me to never give up, to work hard, to appreciate the little things, to tell valuable stories, to listen and understand, to spend time in the wild, to love unabashedly, to help those in need, to hold your loved ones close, and to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do. February 3rd marked 10 years since he passed, and I still hear his voice guiding me gently, softly, encouraging me to spread my wings and explore.

To you, Charlie.