

**THE RIG
ONE - OH**

DEAN PITCHFORD

PUFFIN BOOKS

THE BIG ONE - OH

DEAN PITCHFORD

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THE GUEST LIST

Two.

I had two invitations left, and I intended to be very choosy about who was going to get them.

I could tell that word was spreading. As I stood at the door of the cafeteria at lunchtime, holding those two invitations and gazing out over the wide sea of possible party-goers, I felt that I, too, was being studied by hundreds of eyes, all eager to see my next move.

Then I heard: “*Hi, Charley,*” and my stomach dropped.

Jennifer Mobley was suddenly standing next to me, and her eyes were darting between me and the pieces of paper in my hand.

This was awkward.

But while I stood there, unable to think of what to say to Jennifer, the last two invitations were suddenly *snatched from my hand!*

“We checked our schedules, and we are free to party!” Cougar cackled. “I don’t like onions on my hamburgers. And this guy,” he said as he handed the last invitation to Scottie, “this guy’s allergic to ice cream.”

Cougar clapped me on the back. “But don’t worry; we know how to have a good time!” Then they ran off, hooting.

And just like that, my party list was complete.



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*TO PATRICIA,
WHO WAS THE LIFE OF EVERY PARTY*

My name is Charley Maplewood, and I'm 10.

Ten years old.

Today.

You'd think it would be a truly awesome event. An exciting turning point. I mean, come on!

TEN YEARS OLD!

That's a *monumental moment* in the life of a kid, *right?!*

Ha ha.

I mean, just look at what I've done in the last few weeks: I've shocked and embarrassed my family. I've left a trail of destruction and chaos in my path. And I've ruined what was left of my pathetic little life.

I've made such a big, rotten stinking mess of everything that I'll bet some people are surprised they even lived to see this day.

But I've got good reasons for everything I did.

I can explain.

Really.

But to do that, I have to tell you about a package I got a month ago. From my dad.

And I'm not blaming him, but I swear that, if it weren't for that package, none of this would have ever happened.

DAD'S TEN WORDS



The day Dad's package came, I skateboarded home from school as usual. I could probably get home faster if I walked, because I always fall off my skateboard about five hundred times on the way; but when I started skateboarding at the beginning of this school year, I used to fall off about a thousand times, so that's progress, isn't it?

I slid and skidded up our driveway and finally crashed on the front lawn, and then I let my dog Boing Boing out of the side yard where he sleeps and scratches himself all day.

Boing Boing is a big mutt. I would never have named him—or *any* dog—Boing Boing, but he started out as Mom's dog. He sleeps in my bed, so he's really more *my* dog now, but Mom won't change his name. So guess who gets stuck running around the neighborhood, yelling, "Boing Boing! C'mere, Boing Boing!"?

I sound like a video game.

That day Boing Boing flew out of the side yard gate like he always does, and he knocked me down with his wet kisses and huge paws. That's why I didn't hear Mrs. Cleveland coming, and why I jumped when she suddenly snapped, "*Child?!*"

Mrs. Cleveland is the plump, old, African-American lady who lives next door. She wears black socks with white tennis shoes, and she spends her days walking up and down the block jiggling other people's doorknobs and making sure that garages and mailboxes are firmly shut.

I sat up on the lawn and squinted up at her.

"Huh?"

"Is your daddy still overseas?" she demanded.

"I, uhhhh . . . he's in Scotland. Glasgow, Scotland. It's the capital," I stammered.

"Well, that's overseas," she sniffed. "You're gonna wanna check your mail, then," she said before she turned and marched off, using one of her late husband's golf clubs as a walking stick.

As usual, Mrs. Cleveland was right: I had gotten a large envelope from Dad, covered with lots of colorful Scottish stamps.

Whenever Dad sends a letter or something, I always spend a moment studying the stamps, trying to imagine what the post office looked like where Dad bought them and licked them and stuck them on. I try to picture what the weather might be like over there and where Dad goes after he drops my package into the mail slot.

Most days, I know, he goes to the restaurant where he cooks, because he's a chef. A really good one, too. My dad can cook *anything*. The place he works in Glasgow, Scotland, is a Mexican café, and, even

though he's not Mexican, he told me that the Scottish people are starved for good Mexican food.

At least that's what he said when he left home three years ago. I try not to think about that day.

In my bedroom, Boing Boing sniffed and licked at Dad's package until I opened up the big, puffy envelope. Inside, wrapped in blue paper that said "Happy Birthday!!" all over was a flat parcel that I figured out was supposed to be my birthday present.

Four weeks early.

Dad's usually within a month or two. He never remembers my exact birth *day*, but that's okay. I bet he's got a lot on his mind.

I immediately knew what was in the wrapping paper because Dad always sends me the same present: two issues of *Monsters & Maniacs*.

What?!

You've never heard of *Monsters & Maniacs*? What planet did you grow up on? It's only the greatest literature in the history of the world!

Monsters & Maniacs is a comic book all about zombies and vampires and madmen and stuff. It's got demons (like in Issue 113: "The Gates of Hell Are *UNDER MY BED!!*"), giant spiders (Issue 4: "Six Hairy Legs and *SIX FEET TALL!!*"), aliens (Issue 85: "On My Planet *YOU'D BE LUNCH!!*"), and the occasional headless babysitter (Issue 136: "What Have You Done *WITH MY CHILDREN?!*").

I loved them even before I could read the words, because the pictures were just so cool. Then, when we learned the alphabet in first grade, I'd run home from school every day and practice reading them.

My happiest memories always involve *Monsters & Maniacs*. Back when Dad was still living here, for instance, I used to grab a stack of issues and read that stack from top to bottom. Afterward I'd go downstairs, and Dad would grill me a cheese sandwich. And he'd let me flip it on the griddle.

Those were good times.

* * *

I wasn't in any hurry to open up Dad's issues of *Monster & Maniacs*, because I knew I had them all already. I get every issue the moment it hits the racks at The Comic Soup, the store where I spend all my allowance.

Instead I opened the card that was taped to the present. On the cover, above a picture of a boy sailing a boat, it said, "*Oh, good heaven! You're going to be eleven!*"

"*Ten*, Dad. I'm going to be ten," I groaned as if he were in the room with me. Then I opened the card and read where he had written, "Happy Birthday, Charley!"

And below that he had scribbled the ten words that kicked off this whole horrible chain of events:

“What are you going to do for your big day?”

As soon as I read Dad's words, my heart flipped over in my chest. My hands started to shake. I couldn't feel myself growing short of breath. Because thinking about what people do on birthdays—mine or anyone else's—always makes me remember something that happened three and a half years ago.

Something that scarred me for life and still causes me to wake up screaming.

I was invited to my first birthday party ever.

I was six.

We had just moved onto Apple Core Circle because my dad got hired to be the chef at the nearby Wagon Wheel Family-Style Restaurant. Dad and Mom argued a lot where we lived before, so I guess maybe they thought that a change of location might help them get along. Or a new job would help. Or something like that. I didn't pay a lot of attention then.

Soon after we'd moved in, I got invited to this kid Jamie Wiggerty's birthday party; I'd never even met the guy. One day Mom stopped to chat with his mother in the middle of the Pic 'n' Save, and the next thing I know, Mom's gushing, "Charley would *love* to come!"

She didn't even consult me.

When I pointed that out to Mom on the way home, she laughed, "C'mon, Charley! This'll help you make some new friends."

"That's so totally lame," sneered my sister Lorena once she heard the news. Lorena was twelve at the time, and she thought that *everything everybody ever did anywhere at any time* was totally lame.

She still thinks that.

Dad was more enthusiastic. "You'll have a blast," he assured me.

So I went.

Dad walked me to Jamie Wiggerty's house that terrible Saturday morning. The backyard was filled with lots of parents and kids, and when Dad saw some adults he knew, I was left alone to look around.

In the center of the lawn, on a gigantic picnic table, sat the biggest cake I'd ever seen, a humongous bowl of pink punch and piles of presents. There were streamers draped between all the trees, and kids were all running around, blowing noisemakers and swatting at balloons.

There was even a man giving all the kids pony rides, but the pony clip-clopped around his temporary corral so slowly that it looked like about as much fun as watching paint dry.

And, just as I'd figured, I didn't know anyone. So it was a good thing I had smuggled in some comic books.

"Geez, Charley! Can't you go one day without *Monsters & Maniacs*?" Dad groaned when he found me by myself, reading under a tree. "And your mother wonders why you have no friends."

Now, I had never heard it put that way before. First of all, I had never really stopped to think about it, but, yeah, I had no friends. But, hey, I was six; I figured I had time.

And second, I never realized that it was something Mom and Dad would even notice—me not having friends. I thought they had plenty of other things to worry about.

Dad stuck a curly party-favor noisemaker in my mouth, took me by the hand and led me across the lawn to the corral as Jamie and his friends watched.

The Pony Man squinted through the smoke of his stinky cigar as Dad lifted me up and set me down in the saddle. "You're the last one to ride the pony, Kiddo," Dad said.

I got the feeling that the pony wasn't too happy to have yet another squirming kid on his back. Dad totally sympathized; I wasn't thrilled to be there, either. But it seemed important to Dad that I give it a shot.

"See?" said Dad. "Nice horsie. Hang on, Charley."

He didn't have to tell me that; I gripped those reins so tightly my hands turned white.

"Say 'Giddyap!' " Dad urged. "The horsie won't go until you say, 'Giddyap, horsie.' "

Thanks, Dad. That was all Jamie and his friends needed to hear. They began to shout, "Giddyap! Say 'Giddyap, horsie!' " "Make the horsie giddyap, giddyap, *GIDDYAP!!*"

They got louder and louder, stomping their feet and screeching like chimpanzees. While the Pony Man was blowing cigar smoke my way, Dad kept urging, "Say 'Giddyap!,' Charley! 'Giddyap!' " and I was trying to yank the noisemaker from between my clamped, gritting teeth.

Can you understand how I could get confused?

I took a deep breath which I fully intended to use to say, "Giddyap!" Instead, I blew powerfully into the noisemaker, which made an awfully loud honk.

Which the pony didn't like one bit.

Not only that, but the curled-up party-favor uncurled, and the little feather at the end of it must've tickled him in a place that he didn't like to be tickled. Because that pony threw back his head and whinnied like he was being poked with a burning torch, reared back on his hind legs and then, while hanging on for dear life, he—I mean, we—took off like a shot.

BAM!

That pony and I plowed through his flimsy little corral. We rocketed across the lawn—with Dad and the Pony Man chasing us—and we trampled Mrs. Wiggerty's perfect flower beds. We zigged this way and we zagged over there, galloping straight for clumps of kids, who ran, shrieking, in every direction.

Parents began chasing us, too. They were slipping on the grass, crashing into chairs and smashing into each other. They were waving their arms and screaming out suggestions: "Say, 'Whoa!' " "Pu

his reins!” “Grab his bridle!”

Then, suddenly, everybody seemed to get organized and formed two lines. The kids and parents were closing in on us, cutting off our escape. They formed a single path that led right up to the picnic table, where they knew we’d have to stop, because there was no way the pony could gallop fast enough and leap high enough to clear that picnic table.

Was there?

Later, the Pony Man would tell Dad that, in all the time he owned him, he had never seen his pony leap so high before.

Sadly, it wasn’t high enough.

It amazes me to this day that the pony and I both walked away from the crash without a scratch. Of course, we were covered with cake and frosting and punch and birthday candles and ribbons and wrapping paper.

And, yeah, there were hot dogs and presents and potato chips and pickles scattered as far as the eye could see.

Jamie Wiggerty was crying into his mother’s dress, and when they saw that, a few other kids started sobbing, too.

So Dad and I left real fast.

I never pinned a tail on a donkey, I never got to eat ice cream and cake, and I never sang “Happy Birthday, dear Ja—mie!!”

And after that, I never got invited to another birthday party.

I shook off that horrible memory and steadied my trembling hand, in which I was still gripping Dad’s birthday card. To ease my panic, I read his message out loud:

“What are you going to do for your big day?”

And when I realized what I had just asked, I gasped, “Wait a minute!”

That made Boing Boing look up.

“It *IS* my big day!” Boing Boing tilted his head in drowsy confusion and went back to sleep, but my mind was racing with this startling new understanding:

I was gonna turn ten. Me. Charley Maplewood. Ten years old. No more single-digit birthdays—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

NO!

I would finally move into double digits—and then I’d never go back again.

How awesome was that? Life-changing, even.

I began to think that maybe it was time to put the disaster of Jamie Wiggerty's birthday party behind me.

Maybe it was time to move on.

Maybe I *should* do something for my "big day."

But what?

Later that afternoon when Mom came home from work, I watched her closely and decided to wait a few minutes before starting a conversation.

See, Mom's the bookkeeper at Fittipaldi's Appliances, where they sell stoves and TVs and vacuum cleaners. Even though she gets a whopping twenty percent employee discount on anything in the store, she also has to deal with Mr. Fittipaldi, who can be very . . . loud. Mom never speaks badly about Mr. Fittipaldi's temper, but I can always tell if she's had "one of those days."

If Mom groans when she pulls off her shoes and shakes her head as she flips through the mail, I know that I should wait before I open my mouth. But if she notices what I'm cooking for dinner and she sniffs at the pots on the stove and goes, "Mmmm, smells good," as soon as she walks in, then it's pretty safe bet that I can ask her anything.

That day, I decided to wait. And, while I waited, I continued chopping parsley.

People find it strange that I do the cooking in our house, but I don't see why. After all, Dad's a cook. I watched him a lot before he was gone. He left behind lots of great pots and pans and spoons and things, but he took his favorite knives with him.

Without any help, I can reach the front burners on the stove. For now, I still need to stand on a kitchen chair to reach the back burners, but, if I keep growing on schedule, I should be tall enough to do that by next summer.

And besides, if I left it up to Mom, we'd have chili dogs 365 days a year, so doing all the cooking is really more out of self-defense.

After Mom unpinned her hair and shook it out, I sensed that it was finally okay to speak, so I asked her what she had planned for my "big day."

"Your 'big day'?" She blinked.

"My birthday."

"Oh, honey! Your birthday's not for a month. We've got time."

Just then Lorena came barging in the front door. My sister's in tenth grade now, and she's still in pain.

At that time, she had a job after school at the Chick-A-Dee Restaurant, selling fried chicken and coleslaw and sodas. I had a feeling she was only working there because of Brad, her supervisor, who's seventeen and has lots of spiky black hair. The way he'd zip around the Chick-A-Dee kitchen shouting orders into his little "talk-to-me-People!" headset had convinced Lorena that Brad was the coolest thing since ice cream.

Lorena walked in on my discussion with Mom just as I said, "But Dad sent me a birthday card, and he wants to know what I'm doing for my 'big day,' and I don't know what to tell him."

Lorena made a little snorting laugh. "Why's Dad sending you a birthday card this early? Man, I

sucks with dates.”

I think Lorena is still really angry with Dad for leaving. She sneers whenever she says his name public, but sometimes I hear her and Mom whispering behind her bedroom door late at night. And when they do, Lorena’s usually crying, so I know better than to stick my head in and ask, “Hey, what’s up?”

Lorena scrunched up her nose as she passed by me and glanced at what I was cooking. “Sloppy Joes?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Lamb curry with spinach.”

She groaned. “There’s never anything to eat in this house.”

It was then that Mom first noticed I had a stove full of bubbling pans and pots. She whirled around to my sister. “Lorena!”

“What?”

“Didn’t you give your brother my message?”

“I’m not your secretary,” Lorena muttered.

That steamed Mom. “I gave you a cell phone for emergencies, so when I call and ask you to tell your brother that I won’t be here for dinner . . .”

“Well, I’m sorry,” huffed Lorena, “but Brad called me to do an extra shift at the Chick-A-Dee, so I had other things on my mind, okay?”

Mom opened her mouth to answer, but then she thought better of it, so she just took a deep breath and turned to me.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I have a date tonight.”

“Oh?” I asked. As if I didn’t know what was coming.

“Yeah. Vince is taking me for Szechuan.”

Lorena rolled her eyes and groaned.

And, although I didn’t say anything, that was pretty much how I felt, too.

Mom met Vince Champagne a couple months ago at some fancy-dancy market he manages called The Paradise Pantry. Mom went there to get a deli platter for a party at work, and Vince was pricing cheeses in the dairy cabinet when Mom walked by. They started talking about imported cheddar and California Swiss and the next thing you know, they were going out.

Now, I realize that Mom is probably lonely. Actually, I know she is. More than once I’ve come downstairs after midnight to find her still up, doing her crossword puzzle or blowing on a hot cup of tea and staring across the living room. She always assures me, “No, nothing’s wrong,” but I’ll bet she’d like someone else to talk to besides me and Lorena and Mr. Fittipaldi.

But why Vince? He’s got a thick neck, like he must’ve played football at one time . . . until he

decided that he'd rather stack vegetables in pyramid-shaped piles. He's the kind of guy who slaps people on the back when he meets them and then laughs too close to their face. He'd always grab my hand, squeeze it and shout, "C'mon, Charley! Gimme a *man's* handshake!"

It made me nuts.

Mom wanted to change the subject from Vince, so she suddenly came up with, "You know what Charley? I just remembered: your sister had a party . . ." She turned to Lorena. "Didn't you? When you turned ten?"

Lorena was chewing on an ice cube. "You mean at our old house? The time when the sprinkler went off, and me and my girlfriends all got covered in mud and grass, and so you hosed us down in our party dresses? That time?"

Mom decided not to relive that memory.

"Well," she bubbled, "your brother might want a party."

Lorena screwed up her face. "Why? Who would he invite?"

"It's up to him," said Mom.

"But he doesn't have any friends," Lorena insisted.

"Don't say that!" Mom hissed, as she left the kitchen.

Lorena followed her, protesting, "Well, he *doesn't*." She didn't even care that I could hear her.

Then Mom popped her head back in the kitchen door.

"Honey? You've got friends, right?"

The way that she asked it, biting on her lower lip with just a hint of worry in her eyes, made me realize that it must be important to her.

"Sure do," I smiled. And I went back to stirring my lamb curry.

She exhaled, winked at me, and went upstairs to get ready for Vince.

The question that she raised, though, was an interesting one. I decided that it was worth further study.

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