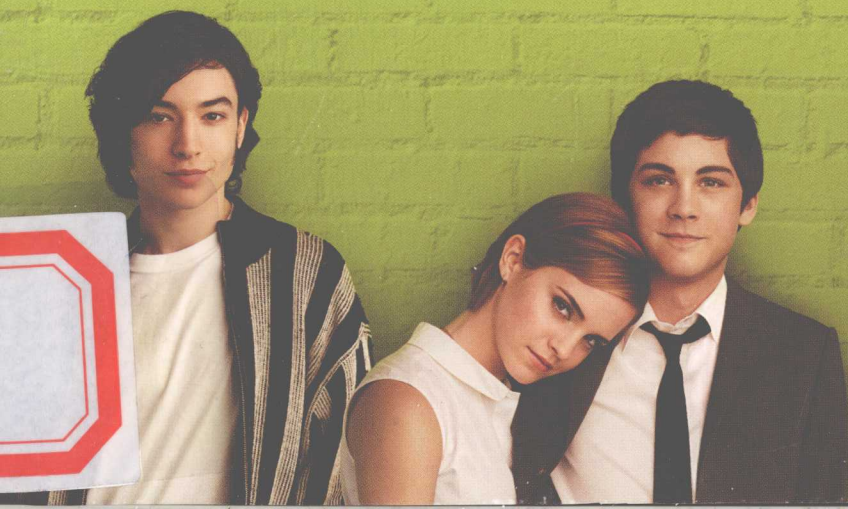


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the
perks of being a
wallflower

STEPHEN CHBOSKY



the perks of being a wallflower



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A PERSON/A PAPER/A PROMISE

by Dr. Earl Reum used with author's permission

A PERSON/A PAPER/A PROMISE REMEMBERED

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For my family

acknowledgments

I just wanted to say about all those listed that there would be no book without them, and I thank them with all of my heart.

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And finally . . .

Dr. Earl Reum for writing a beautiful poem

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1

part

August 25, 1991

Dear friend,

I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have. Please don't try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that. I will call people by different names or generic names because I don't want you to find me. I didn't enclose a return address for the same reason. I mean nothing bad by this. Honest.

I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands and doesn't try to sleep with people even if they could have. I need to know that these people exist.

I think you of all people would understand that because I think you of all people are alive and appreciate what that means. At least I hope you do because other people look to you for strength and friendship and it's that simple. At least that's what I've heard.

So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be.

I try to think of my family as a reason for me being this way,

especially after my friend Michael stopped going to school one day last spring and we heard Mr. Vaughn's voice on the loudspeaker.

"Boys and girls, I regret to inform you that one of our students has passed on. We will hold a memorial service for Michael Dobson during assembly this Friday."

I don't know how news travels around school and why it is very often right. Maybe it was in the lunchroom. It's hard to remember. But Dave with the awkward glasses told us that Michael killed himself. His mom played bridge with one of Michael's neighbors and they heard the gunshot.

I don't really remember much of what happened after that except that my older brother came to Mr. Vaughn's office in my middle school and told me to stop crying. Then, he put his arm on my shoulder and told me to get it out of my system before Dad came home. We then went to eat french fries at McDonald's and he taught me how to play pinball. He even made a joke that because of me he got to skip an afternoon of school and asked me if I wanted to help him work on his Camaro. I guess I was pretty messy because he never let me work on his Camaro before.

At the guidance counselor sessions, they asked the few of us who actually liked Michael to say a few words. I think they were afraid that some of us would try to kill ourselves or something because they looked very tense and one of them kept touching his beard.

Bridget who is crazy said that sometimes she thought about suicide when commercials come on during TV. She was sincere and this puzzled the guidance counselors. Carl who is nice to everyone said that he felt very sad, but could never kill himself because it is a sin.

This one guidance counselor went through the whole group and finally came to me.

“What do you think, Charlie?”

What was so strange about this was the fact that I had never met this man because he was a “specialist” and he knew my name even though I wasn’t wearing a name tag like they do in open house.

“Well, I think that Michael was a nice guy and I don’t understand why he did it. As much as I feel sad, I think that not knowing is what really bothers me.”

I just reread that and it doesn’t sound like how I talk. Especially in that office because I was crying still. I never did stop crying.

The counselor said that he suspected that Michael had “problems at home” and didn’t feel like he had anyone to talk to. That’s maybe why he felt all alone and killed himself.

Then, I started screaming at the guidance counselor that Michael could have talked to me. And I started crying even harder. He tried to calm me down by saying that he meant an adult like a teacher or a guidance counselor. But it didn’t work and eventually my brother came by the middle school in his Camaro to pick me up.

For the rest of the school year, the teachers treated me different and gave me better grades even though I didn’t get any smarter. To tell you the truth, I think I made them all nervous.

Michael’s funeral was strange because his father didn’t cry. And three months later he left Michael’s mom. At least according to Dave at lunchtime. I think about it sometimes. I wonder what went on in Michael’s house around dinner and TV shows. Michael never left a note or at least his parents didn’t let anyone see it. Maybe it was “problems at home.” I wish I knew. It might make me miss him more clearly. It might have made sad sense.

One thing I do know is that it makes me wonder if I have “problems at home” but it seems to me that a lot of other people have it a

lot worse. Like when my sister's first boyfriend started going around with another girl and my sister cried for the whole weekend.

My dad said, "There are other people who have it a lot worse."

And my mom was quiet. And that was that. A month later, my sister met another boy and started playing happy records again. And my dad kept working. And my mom kept sweeping. And my brother kept fixing his Camaro. That is, until he left for college at the beginning of the summer. He's playing football for Penn State but he needed the summer to get his grades right to play football.

I don't think that there is a favorite kid in our family. There are three of us and I am the youngest. My brother is the oldest. He is a very good football player and likes his car. My sister is very pretty and mean to boys and she is in the middle. I get straight A's now like my sister and that is why they leave me alone.

My mom cries a lot during TV programs. My dad works a lot and is an honest man. My Aunt Helen used to say that my dad was going to be too proud to have a midlife crisis. It took me until around now to understand what she meant by that because he just turned forty and nothing has changed.

My Aunt Helen was my favorite person in the whole world. She was my mom's sister. She got straight A's when she was a teenager and she used to give me books to read. My father said that the books were a little too old for me, but I liked them so he just shrugged and let me read.

My Aunt Helen lived with the family for the last few years of her life because something very bad happened to her. Nobody would tell me what happened then even though I always wanted to know. When I was around seven, I stopped asking about it because I kept asking like kids always do and my Aunt Helen started crying very hard.

That's when my dad slapped me, saying, "You're hurting your aunt Helen's feelings!" I didn't want to do that, so I stopped. Aunt Helen told my father not to hit me in front of her ever again and my father said this was his house and he would do what he wanted and my mom was quiet and so were my brother and sister.

I don't remember much more than that because I started crying really hard and after a while my dad had my mom take me to my room. It wasn't until much later that my mom had a few glasses of white wine and told me what happened to her sister. Some people really do have it a lot worse than I do. They really do.

I should probably go to sleep now. It's very late. I don't know why I wrote a lot of this down for you to read. The reason I wrote this letter is because I start high school tomorrow and I am really afraid of going.

Love always,
Charlie

September 7, 1991

Dear friend,

I do not like high school. The cafeteria is called the "Nutrition Center," which is strange. There is this one girl in my advanced english class named Susan. In middle school, Susan was very fun to be around. She liked movies, and her brother Frank made her tapes of this great music that she shared with us. But over the summer she had her braces taken off, and she got a little taller and prettier and grew breasts. Now, she acts a lot dumber in the hallways,

especially when boys are around. And I think it's sad because Susan doesn't look as happy. To tell you the truth, she doesn't like to admit she's in the advanced english class, and she doesn't like to say "hi" to me in the hall anymore.

When Susan was at the guidance counselor meeting about Michael, she said that Michael once told her that she was the prettiest girl in the whole world, braces and all. Then, he asked her to "go with him," which was a big deal at any school. They call it "going out" in high school. And they kissed and talked about movies, and she missed him terribly because he was her best friend.

It's funny, too, because boys and girls normally weren't best friends around my school. But Michael and Susan were. Kind of like my Aunt Helen and me. I'm sorry. "My Aunt Helen and I." That's one thing I learned this week. That and more consistent punctuation.

I keep quiet most of the time, and only one kid named Sean really seemed to notice me. He waited for me after gym class and said really immature things like how he was going to give me a "swirlie," which is where someone sticks your head in the toilet and flushes to make your hair swirl around. He seemed pretty unhappy as well, and I told him so. Then, he got mad and started hitting me, and I just did the things my brother taught me to do. My brother is a very good fighter.

"Go for the knees, throat, and eyes."

And I did. And I really hurt Sean. And then I started crying. And my sister had to leave her senior honors class and drive me home. I got called to Mr. Small's office, but I didn't get suspended or anything because a kid told Mr. Small the truth about the fight.

"Sean started it. It was self-defense."

And it was. I just don't understand why Sean wanted to hurt me. I didn't do anything to him. I am very small. That's true. But I

guess Sean didn't know I could fight. The truth is I could have hurt him a lot worse. And maybe I should have. I thought I might have to if he came after the kid who told Mr. Small the truth, but Sean never did go after him. So, everything was forgotten.

Some kids look at me strange in the hallways because I don't decorate my locker, and I'm the one who beat up Sean and couldn't stop crying after he did it. I guess I'm pretty emotional.

It has been very lonely because my sister is busy being the oldest one in our family. My brother is busy being a football player at Penn State. After the training camp, his coach said that he was second string and that when he starts learning the system, he will be first string.

My dad really hopes he will make it to the pros and play for the Steelers. My mom is just glad he gets to go to college for free because my sister doesn't play football, and there wouldn't be enough money to send both of them. That's why she wants me to keep working hard, so I'll get an academic scholarship.

So, that's what I'm doing until I meet a friend here. I was hoping that the kid who told the truth could become a friend of mine, but I think he was just being a good guy by telling.

Love always,
Charlie

September 11, 1991

Dear friend,

I don't have a lot of time because my advanced english teacher

assigned us a book to read, and I like to read books twice. Incidentally, the book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If you haven't read it, I think you should because it is very interesting. The teacher has assigned us a few chapters at a time, but I do not like to read books like that. I am halfway through the first time.

Anyway, the reason I am writing to you is because I saw my brother on television. I normally don't like sports too much, but this was a special occasion. My mother started crying, and my father put his arm around her shoulder, and my sister smiled, which is funny because my brother and sister always fight when he's around.

But my older brother was on television, and so far, it has been the highlight of my two weeks in high school. I miss him terribly, which is strange, because we never really talked much when he was here. We still don't talk, to be honest.

I would tell you his position, but like I said, I would like to be anonymous to you. I hope you understand.

Love always,
Charlie

September 16, 1991

Dear friend,

I have finished *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is now my favorite book of all time, but then again, I always think that until I read another book. My advanced english teacher asked me to call him "Bill" when we're not in class, and he gave me another book to read. He

says that I have a great skill at reading and understanding language, and he wanted me to write an essay about *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I mentioned this to my mom, and she asked why Bill didn't recommend that I just take a sophomore or junior english class. And I told her that Bill said that these were basically the same classes with more complicated books, and that it wouldn't help me. My mom said that she wasn't sure and would talk to him during open house. Then, she asked me to help her by washing the dishes, which I did.

Honestly, I don't like doing dishes. I like eating with my fingers and off napkins, but my sister says that doing so is bad for the environment. She is a part of the Earth Day Club here in high school, and that is where she meets the boys. They are all very nice to her, and I don't really understand why except maybe the fact that she is pretty. She really is mean to these boys.

One boy has it particularly hard. I won't tell you his name. But I will tell you all about him. He has very nice brown hair, and he wears it long with a ponytail. I think he will regret this when he looks back on his life. He is always making mix tapes for my sister with very specific themes. One was called "Autumn Leaves." He included many songs by the Smiths. He even hand-colored the cover. After the movie he rented was over, and he left, my sister gave me the tape.

"Do you want this, Charlie?"

I took the tape, but I felt weird about it because he had made it for her. But I listened to it. And loved it very much. There is one song called "Asleep" that I would like you to listen to. I told my sister about it. And a week later she thanked me because when this boy asked her about the tape, she said exactly what I said about the song "Asleep," and this boy was very moved by how much it meant to her. I hope this means I will be good at dating when the time comes.

I should stick to the subject, though. That is what my teacher

Bill tells me to do because I write kind of the way I talk. I think that is why he wants me to write that essay about *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

This boy who likes my sister is always respectful to my parents. My mom likes him very much because of this. My dad thinks he's soft. I think that's why my sister does what she does to him.

This one night, she was saying very mean things about how he didn't stand up to the class bully when he was fifteen or something like that. To tell you the truth, I was just watching the movie he had rented, so I wasn't paying very close attention to their fight. They fight all the time, so I figured that the movie was at least something different, which it wasn't because it was a sequel.

Anyway, after she leaned into him for about four movie scenes, which I guess is about ten minutes or so, he started crying. Crying very hard. Then, I turned around, and my sister pointed at me.

"You see. Even Charlie stood up to his bully. You see."

And this guy got really red-faced. And he looked at me. Then, he looked at her. And he wound up and hit her hard across the face. I mean hard. I just froze because I couldn't believe he did it. It was not like him at all to hit anybody. He was the boy that made mix tapes with themes and hand-colored covers until he hit my sister and stopped crying.

The weird part is that my sister didn't do anything. She just looked at him very quietly. It was so weird. My sister goes crazy if you eat the wrong kind of tuna, but here was this guy hitting her, and she didn't say anything. She just got soft and nice. And she asked me to leave, which I did. After the boy had left, she said that they were "going out" and not to tell mom or dad what happened.

I guess he stood up to his bully. And I guess that makes sense.

That weekend, my sister spent a lot of time with this boy. And they laughed a lot more than they usually did. On Friday night, I

was reading my new book, but my brain got tired, so I decided to watch some television instead. And I opened the door to the basement, and my sister and this boy were naked.

He was on top of her, and her legs were draped over either side of the couch. And she screamed at me in a whisper.

“Get out. You pervert.”

So, I left. The next day, we all watched my brother play football. And my sister invited this boy over. I am not sure when he left the previous night. They held hands and acted like everything was happy. And this boy said something about how the football team hasn't been the same since my brother graduated, and my dad thanked him. And when the boy left, my dad said that this boy was becoming a fine young man who could carry himself. And my mom was quiet. And my sister looked at me to make sure I wouldn't say anything. And that was that.

“Yes. He is.” That's all my sister could say. And I could see this boy at home doing his homework and thinking about my sister naked. And I could see them holding hands at football games that they do not watch. And I could see this boy throwing up in the bushes at a party house. And I could see my sister putting up with it.

And I felt very bad for both of them.

Love always,
Charlie

September 18, 1991

Dear friend,

I never told you that I am in shop class, did I? Well, I am in