fat

a one-act play by Bill Daugherty
Cast of characters:

Charles  50-something, morbidly obese, mannered, clever, rather grand, revels in his vocabulary, a human anachronism

Lemuel  35, black, meticulously groomed and erudite, devoted to Charles

Jimmy  the waiter, 20-something, friendly, very “neighborhood”

Setting:

2011, interior of a small West Village restaurant, a table & two chairs
Charles
(looking at Lemuel’s plate) “Are you going to eat that?”

Lemuel
“Ummm… yes… it’s mine, why wouldn’t I eat it?”

Charles
“I’m just saying that if you aren’t going to eat it…”

Lemuel
“Well, I am… okay?”

Charles
“Okay.” (after a moment) “It’s just that every time you say you’re going to eat something and you don’t and the waiter comes and he asks if he can take your plate, you always let him take it without offering me the courtesy of first refusal.”

Lemuel
“Really, Charles? Are we really having this conversation?”

Charles
“I don’t see any harm in a healthy discussion about waste management.”

Lemuel
(pushing plate aside) “Yeah, okay… I wouldn’t have used those words…”

Charles
“Well, that’s what it is if you really think about it. You’re being wasteful and I’d like to help you with a bit of culinary conservation.”

Lemuel
“I recall your doctor saying that it wouldn’t hurt you to cut back a bit…”

Charles
“It’s protein! A meatball is protein. Practically zero carbohydrates, provided they didn’t use any fillers – which I suspect they did.” (after a moment) “Did they?”

Lemuel
“How should I know?”
Charles

“Well, an educated palate could detect such things. I, for one, could tell if they used bread crumbs or what have you.”

Lemuel

“You’re not going to relent, are you?”

Charles

“Not very likely.” (with a sigh Lemuel puts up his hands in surrender and Charles snatches the last meatball with his fork) “Ha! Success! Thank you!”

Lemuel

“Be my guest.”

Charles

“Truly? Your guest? (making a sweeping gesture indicating the empty plates) I appreciate it, Lem. And I accept.” (with a glint in his eye and a wink, chewing gratefully) “Mighty generous of you. Mighty generous.”

Lemuel

“I didn’t mean I’d pay… oh for pity sake. Whatever! I pay for everything we do anyway, why wouldn’t I pay to have you eat my last meatball?”

Charles

(starts to sing) “One Meatball… One Meatball… you get no bread with One Meatball….”

Lemuel

(incredulously) “Please tell me there’s really not a song about a meatball.”

Charles


Lemuel

“You have a song for all occasions. Is there a song you don’t know?”

Charles

“Not if it was written before 1970… and selectively thereafter.”

Lemuel

“Amazing. There’s got to be something you could do with a talent like that.”
Charles

“One would think. But “Name That Tune” isn’t around anymore and God knows there aren’t any record… excuse me, CD stores around anymore. I am one of a dying breed, Lemuel. I still have actual records and I still actually play them. I know who Russ Columbo was. I even know who the Three Guiesedorff Sisters were, for crying out loud, but that and a quarter won’t even buy me a phone call anymore.”

Lemuel

“You could teach.”

Charles

“Teach what? And to whom? No one cares about the trivia I know.”

Lemuel

“You don’t know—”

Charles

(interrupts singing) “You Don’t Know... What Love Is...” Gene DePaul and Don Raye, 1941…

(grimacing) “Okay, now I’m really full. And they did use filler!” (starts to unbuckle his belt)

Lemuel

“Oh for... Charles! Don’t undo your belt here!” (looking around)

Charles

(lets his tummy expand) “Ahh. A waist is a terrible thing to mind.”

Lemuel

“You’re an horrible dinner partner.”

Charles

“Quite the contrary, dear boy, I am a splendid dinner partner. I am never without something clever to discuss. I’m informed and articulate. I have a knack for finding amazing restaurants and charming the wait staff into a giddy euphoria. I never send food back and I always make happy plate. I don’t belch or spill or pass gas and I can spot a boo-boo on a bill with a mere scan. So, Lemuel, I believe you’d have to concur that I am the consummate mate with which to sup – save my one indiscretion, which – when you think about it – is a harmless indulgence. No one is any the wiser that I’ve undone my belt to relieve a bit of the pressure – save you. And surely, after all these years of friendship, you could see your way to overlooking this solitary character flaw of mine.”

Lemuel

“You are wearying, Charles. Just out and out wearying. I don’t know why I even bother to admonish you.”
Charles

“Nor do I.”

(the waiter comes up to the table)

Jimmy

“How was everything, fellas?”

Charles

(indicating his empty plate) “Dreadful! I couldn’t eat another bite.” (smiling wryly)

Lemuel

(under his breath) “…were there one…”

Jimmy

(playing along) “I’m sorry, sir. Surely there’s some way we can make it up to you and your guest.”

Charles

(feigning embarrassment) “Ahh… but I am this fine gentleman’s guest this particular evening.”

Jimmy

(turning to Lemuel) “Could I offer you and your friend a dessert or an aperitif – on the house – for the lousy meal?”

Lemuel

“Nothing for me. And nothing for him, thanks Jimmy.”

Charles

“I believe I can make that call for myself.”

Lemuel

“Nothing more for either of us, Jimmy. Thanks, though. Everything was wonderful, as always. Just bring me the check.”

Jimmy

“Sure thing.”

Lemuel

“And be sure to charge me for Charles’ plate.”
Jimmy

“His plate?”

Lemuel

“Yes, unless I’m mistaken it had a pattern on it when you brought it to the table. I believe Charles has eaten that, too.” (Jimmy laughs and exits)

Charles

“Oh my, aren’t you the droll one tonight? The Calorie Nazi and Schecky Green all rolled into one neat little African American bundle of witticisms.”

Lemuel

“Come on, Charles. You’re going to have to start paying attention to what you were told. I don’t mean to be a nag, but it’s time, my friend. You’re no spring chicken anymore.”

Charles

“Like I need you to remind me of that! The dismissive deflection I get from the handsome young men I encounter daily is reminder enough of my dotage.”

Lemuel

“Well, Charles… you know you’re not exactly ancient…”

Charles

“Well, thank you very much, I’m sure.”

Lemuel

“What I’m trying to say, Methuselah, is that it isn’t necessarily your age that is putting the young men off.”

Charles

“What, pray, if not my graying temples and crow’s feet and ever-so-gracefully receding hairline?”

Lemuel

“You’re waistline.”

Charles

“Nonsense. There are plenty of admirers of stocky men. Bears are in vogue now, don’t you read?”

Lemuel

“You’re not a bear, Charles. Bears are hairy and a little rawer than you. You’re not a bear.”
Charles
“I most certainly am a bear. If not a bear, then what?”

Lemuel
“Charles. You’re too doughy and smooth to be a bear.”

Charles

Lemuel
“Charles…”

Charles
“Are you saying that I am yeasty as well?”

Lemuel
“Okay, I’m sorry. You’re right. You’re a bear.”

Charles
“No, I’m not. I’m not hairy enough – you said so yourself. You’re right. I’m the bloody Pillsbury dough boy!” (pokes his belly and giggles ala Pop N Fresh) “See?”

Lemuel
“Okay, let’s change the subject.”

(Jimmy brings the bill and sets it on the table and begins to leave)

Charles
“Wait, Jimmy! Might I ask you something?”

Jimmy
“Sure, Charles.”

Charles
“Very well. You’ve known Lemuel and me for a while. I value your opinion. I do. So… now… would you, in your estimation… taking into consideration my girth and my years… would you say that I’m a bear or the Pillsbury doughboy?”

Jimmy
(laughs) “Neither.”
Charles

“Neither?” (encouraged) “Well, then… if I’m neither a bear nor a doughboy, then what would you say I am? Stocky? Husky? Beefy? Big-Boned?”

Lemuel

(under his breath) “A thick Madame…?”

Jimmy

“No… you know who you remind me of? You always have… “

Charles

“Charles Laughton?”

Jimmy

“Who?”

Charles

(shaking head ruefully and heaving a sigh) “Nevermind…”

Jimmy

“No… I was gonna say that guy… you know… made out of tires… what’s his name?”

Charles

“Good Heavens!” (incensed)

Lemuel

“Oh, my God! You’re right! The Michelin Man! He does! He looks like the Michelin Man.”

Charles

(in mock horror and yet somehow amused) “That will be all, Jimmy.”

(Jimmy leaves)

Lemuel

(still laughing) “He nailed it right on the head!”

Charles

(feigning rage) “You leave him 10% and not a penny more! The very idea!”
Lemuel

(putting money in the folder) “Well, at least the Michelin man’s not doughy.”

Charles

“No, but he’s a behemoth!”

Lemuel

“Charles… the doctor told you the last time we were in his office that you’re now considered—”

Charles

(putting his hand up) “Tut… tut…”

Lemuel

“Charles, he told you that you are officially morbidly obese. And it’s true. And you’ve got to address it. Eating the way you do is going to bring on diabetes and heart problems and…”

Charles

“You act as though I stuff my face 24/7. You know... there are times I simply just forget to eat.”

Lemuel

“No, there are times you simply forgot you just ate!”

Charles

“Oh, har! har! Well, I don’t appreciate the breach of my doctor/patient confidentiality.”

Lemuel

“I’m your healthcare proxy. I know more about you than you do! You can’t pretend what he said isn’t valid. You weigh nearly four-hundred pounds Charles and I, for one, don’t care to see you in an early grave. You need to go on a regimen and start working out.”

Charles

“That is not bloody likely to happen.”

Lemuel

“And you’re going to have to give up ice cream late at night and those sweet dessert wines you drink.”

Charles

“I’ve never given up anything I like. Why would I? Even during lent, as a youth, I would only give up things that I wouldn’t miss. One year it was Brussel sprouts, another it was crème soda – which I abhor to this day. Another year it was vaginas. I had never eaten, drank nor prodded any
of those items before I gave them up and certainly never since. I can give up things which I can live without but I would rather die from living with too much of the things I love.

Lemuel

“May I quote you?”

Charles

“If you can remember what I just said. For my memoirs?”

Lemuel

“No, for your headstone.”

Charles

“Nonsense. I’m donating my body to science and then I wish to be cremated – well, whatever is left of me.”

Lemuel

“Charles, what have you that someone could actually use? Your eyes are shot, your heart is enlarged, your lungs are damaged from all the years you smoked and your liver is likely pickled from your decades of drinking port.”

Charles

“Is this ‘be cruel to Charles night’? I’m beginning to feel more than a little dissed.”

Lemuel

“Charles, you may not use the word dissed. It sounds ridiculous coming out of your mouth. I won’t even use that silly word, so remove it from your arsenal.”

Charles

“Aiight.”

Lemuel

(rolls his eyes and sighs) “You know, Charles. I’m being completely serious now. You do realize that you’re too big to be cremated at this point.”

Charles

“Whatsoever do you mean? Since when is someone too big to incinerate?”

Lemuel

“It’s true, Charles. I read where a man your size was refused his request by the mortuary because he wouldn’t fit in their crematorium unless they chopped him up into pieces – which the family wouldn’t hear of.”
Charles

(bemused but also perplexed) “You’re serious?” (Lemuel nods) “This isn’t one of your tall tales, Uncle Remus, is it?” (Lemuel frowns and shakes head slowly) “Well, this puts a damper on my plans. Whoever would have thought…? (he puts his hands on his sizable tummy) “I figured I would burn for a fortnight… like so much whale oil from days of yore… but never that I wouldn’t be able to fit into the oven unless they butchered me like a wild boar at a luau.”

Lemuel

“Now that you know you can’t leave this earth the way you’d planned, might your dying conjure up enough incentive for you to go on a regimen?”

Charles

“Did Dom DeLuise have this predicament, I wonder?”

Lemuel

“Dom was Catholic.”

Charles

“I’m a recovering Catholic”

Lemuel

“He was buried.”

Charles

“In a piano crate?”

Lemuel

“No, Charles. Dom lost weight in his late years. He wasn’t nearly as big as he was when he was younger. If you recall, I was at his funeral.”

Charles

“Oh, that’s right, I remember. And his three strapping boys must have given you something to look at.”

Lemuel

“I do not cruise while attending funerals – nor weddings. As a matter of fact, I don’t cruise at all. Besides, they’re too young for my taste.”

Charles

“How young is too young?”
Lemuel

“My age or younger.”

Charles

“You’re what, Lemuel. Thirty-nine?”

Lemuel

“Thirty-five, fuck you very much.”

Charles

“His sons are all older than you, surely.”

Lemuel

“I like more mature men, you know that.”

Charles

“If I knew it, I’ve forgotten. I have never seen nor heard of you dating anyone anyway, Lemuel. When is that last time you were out on an actual date?”

Lemuel

“I don’t know. Not long ago.”

Charles

“It must have been something you didn’t tell me about, then, because Lemuel – I am hard-pressed to think of the last time I saw you in the company of another gay man other than moi.”

Lemuel

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I’ve been… oh, I’m not even going to dignify what you’re saying with a reply. I’ve been out on dates. And recently-ish. I don’t tell you everything, you know.”

Charles

“Yes you do.”

Lemuel

“Yes, I do.” (sighs) “Well, either way I am not the subject of this evening’s—”

Charles

“Inquisition?”

Lemuel

“Intervention.”
Charles

“Oh, for God’s sake, you’re ever so much more like Takamata than you are Candy Finnigan…” (Lemuel looks at him puzzled) “…you know, the woman on the TV series…” (Lemuel shakes his head, still confused) “…Inter-fuckin-vention, dear boy. That thing on A&E… Oh, you really must start watching something other than CNN. You’re such a snooze when it comes to video-culture.”

Lemuel

“Oh please, Charles… you aren’t exactly the spokesperson for *A Current Affair.*”

Charles

“I may not know the latest hits of Lady GaGA, but — (he pronounces it with the emphasis on the second syllable – g’GA)

Lemuel

(shrieking with shrill laughter, covering his mouth with a napkin) “Oh, merciful Jesus! You did *not* just say that?

Charles

“Say what?”

Lemuel

“You…” (stifles his laughter with the napkin again, looking to be sure he’s not being noticed by the customers) “…you said Lady GaGA! Charles, it’s GAgA. GAgA!”

Charles

“Oh for pity sake, really?”

Lemuel

“Don’t you feel the fool?”

Charles

“Why should I? Quite the contrary. Who would call themselves Gaga? That means someone who isn’t all there… someone who is inarticulate and doltish… someone… oh… yes, I see. Perhaps it’s best that it *is* Gaga.”

Lemuel

“She cleared 62 million last year. I believe I’d call myself Buckwheat if I thought it’d make me rich.”

Charles

“But you don’t look like a Buckwheat.”
Lemuel

“Well, I should hope not!”

Charles

“No, you’ve got a lot more Farina in you… or perhaps Stymie Beard … but no… I see no trace of Buckwheat.”

Lemuel

“Well, I see this has digressed into a familiar pattern.”

Charles

“How so?”

Lemuel

“Oh, let’s not pretend I don’t know how you try to disguise what you’re really thinking by using something witty and snarky.”

Charles

“Whatsoever are you talking about?”

Lemuel

“Oh, come now Charles. Don’t sit there and imagine I don’t see the bigotry behind the way you refer to me using your thinly veiled references to stereotypical icons.”

Charles

“You were the one who said Buckwheat, not me!”

Lemuel

“Then you jumped on the bandwagon and had a field day. Uncle Remus? I didn’t miss that one, you know. Why didn’t you mention Step’n’fetchit while you were at it?”

Charles

“You’re being absurd.”

Lemuel

“Absurd? Am I? Who was it that called me Harriet Tubman last week after the concert?”

Charles

(giggles mirthfully) “Oh, now come Lemuel… that was funny! You know it was funny. You laughed uncontrollably. I distinctly remember you referring to the subway system as this amazing underground railroad…”
Lemuel
“I said ‘railway’.”

Charles
“Well, I heard railroad.”

Lemuel
“You, as always, heard what you wanted to hear.”

Charles
“I submit to you that it was indeed a funny comment made innocently and purely out of jest… a play on words that was utterly harmless.”

Lemuel
“And how about when we were in the laundry room of your building… when was it… sometime last month and I was about to put my clothes in the machine and you told me – “Excuse me… that machine very clearly says ‘Whites Only’… do you recall that?”

Charles
“Because it did. The sign was there because the cold water hose wasn’t hooked up and—”

Lemuel
“I am aware that the sign said what it said and, if you had bothered to look, you would have seen that I was only putting in my whites anyhow!”

Charles
“You are super-sensitive tonight, dear boy… what has gotten into you?”

Lemuel
“It’s just that you always go too far. You play the race card and you think it’s perfectly okay because you’ve got a black friend who has a fairly forgiving nature—”

Charles
“Lemuel… (trying to top him)... Lemuel… I find humor in most everything. Lord knows I’m my own biggest target. Ah, see? Even there! I’m an equal-opportunity bigot. All races, creeds and types are fair game as far as I’m concerned. This is not news. And if what I say bothers you, then why is it that this is the first I’m hearing of it in… how many years have I known you?”

Lemuel
“Eleven years, Charles. We’ve been… we’ve been friends for eleven years. Why do I know that and you don’t?”
Charles

“You have a knack for numbers and dates, I don’t.”

Lemuel

“You can remember that the Andrews Sisters recorded “One Meat Ball” in 1945 but you can’t remember that you and I met in the year 2000?”

Charles

“I cannot answer that. That would involve my having to understand why my brain functions a particular way and why certain synapses fire and others don’t. At this juncture, I can only hazard a guess that, to me – having known you for whatever length of time it has been – it seems I’ve always known you. I can’t think of a time I didn’t. How’s that?”

Lemuel

“Now you’re just being charming.”

Charles

“I’m being honest.”

Lemuel

“Honest is nice. Thank you for your honesty.”

Charles

“Thank you for the meatball. (after a moments contemplation) “I hazard that now you’re going to say that you didn’t think my idea for an all-black spin-off of Happy Days wasn’t funny either?”

Lemuel

“Nappy Days?” (smiles) “No, that was actually very funny.” (starts laughing)

Charles

Now is everything copacetic?”

Lemuel

“Oh Lord, that word!”

Charles

“Meatball?”

Lemuel

“No. The C word. You know I hate that word. That was my mother’s word.”
Charles

“Copa… oh… yes, yes… I forgot. I’ll try to remember to refrain from using any words your mother may have ever uttered in the duration of her lifetime. Sorry.”

Lemuel

“Don’t be obtuse. You’re entitled to use any word you like around me but you of all people surely realize that words have value and for some of us they trigger responses we’re not necessarily in control of. She used to use that word when she was feeling superior and she always used it incorrectly… and she’d always pronounce it incorrectly. She used to drive me crazy. She was an uneducated woman but she didn’t own up to it. She tried to mask it… or “maks” it, as she would have said… and instead of picking up a dictionary or actually reading a book – because she could read, you know – she would guess and she would conjecture and she would embellish with flowery and inarticulate verbiage that inspired me to never be like her.”

Charles

“Friend, I hate to be the one to point it out to you, but your verbiage is as flowery as an Italian funeral… albeit articulate.”

Lemuel

“Thank you pot said the kettle. But I know what the words I use mean. I have a respect for the language. I used to read voraciously as a child. I read the entire Encyclopedia Britannica… every volume… three times.

Charles

(overlapping him) “… three times…”

Lemuel

(waves him away) “It was an ancient set whomever had lived in the apartment before us had left. They were too heavy, no doubt, and were left behind as so much flotsam, but for me they were an escape from the mundane. From the circumstance of my birth. That I should be the only son of a woman who… (after a moment) Now see, I’m off on my Oedipal tirade again… Yikes! But that’s what I mean, Charles. One little word can do that. It’s like, for some, the smell of baking bread or honeysuckle can recall a memory from childhood. For me, it’s words. Language. Every time someone near me says, “Can I ask you something?” I nearly lash out in raw rage.”

Charles

“Why do you think that is?”

Lemuel

“I’m not sure. Dr. Kellerman says it’s because I hold my expectation of others far too high and that, should anyone offer me anything less than exactly what I demand of myself, I’m completely and utterly despondent. I take it personally when someone can’t hold an intelligent conversation.”
Charles

“Well, that *does* make sense.”

Lemuel

“What does?”

Charles

“Well, the fact that you are so anal retentive about language.”

Lemuel

“I most certainly am not!”

Charles

“You most certainly are, Lemuel… and to a lesser degree, so am I. We share that and we always have. I have a very good vocabulary at my disposal and I can use it to great effect. I, too, pride myself on my command of the English language and to some extent, German and Latin as well. I believe that the demise of language skills, both spoken and written, will eventually lead to the demise of our civilization. I know we see eye to eye on that topic and I have a feeling this is our bond, my boy. Oh… beg pardon… is “boy” offensive now, too?”

Lemuel

“Not in this usage… schmuck.” (takes a sip of his iced tea. he pauses doesn’t look up) “But do you think that’s why you and I have remained close? Is that our only ‘bond’, do you suppose?”

Charles

“Certainly not. You and I are simpatico on a great many things. I know I for one prefer your company over that of nearly anyone else I know.”

Lemuel

“That’s *nearly* very kind of you to say.”

Charles

“I mean it.”

Lemuel

“It would be even more flattering if you had a circle of friends from which to choose.”

Charles

“Oh my, my… where did that come from? Are you having your time of the month? I’m quite certain that whatever I did to set you off was not enough to warrant this degree and duration of grilling. I can take a good-natured ribbing. We both can. I’ve always admired that about you. But are we really to the point that character assassination is the next level of intimacy for us?”
Lemuel

“Intimacy, Charles? Intimacy? We are many things to one another but we are not, nor have we ever been, intimate.”

Charles

“How can you say that?”

Lemuel

“Because that’s the nature of our association with one another. I know nothing intimate about your life. You know all the hoary details from my past and yet you have never once, not even at my prodding, opened up about your childhood or your younger years. I don’t know if you had nor have any siblings. You’ve never told of past relationships you’ve been in – if any. I can only imagine from what I’ve seen of the scattered pictures—”

Charles

(singing) “... of the smiles we left behind...”

Lemuel

(talking over him) “— the photographs you have in those dusty frames on your dusty shelves what secret lives those people in them lived. You smile and you not-so-politely change the subject but you never let me in.”

Charles

(singing) “…I hear you knockin’ but you can’t come in...”

Lemuel

(plowing on) “I am, by no stretch of the imagination, intimately invested in you, Charles.”

Charles

“Point taken, Lemuel. Point taken. And you’re right. You are most assuredly right about my not letting you in. But please don’t take it personally.”

Lemuel

“How am I to take it then, Charles?”

Charles

“The same as everyone else. As it comes. And that’s the best I can do.”

Lemuel

“Can do or will do?”
Charles

“What makes you so curious about my past, Lemuel? Seriously. What’s in the past is in the past. We’re in the here and now.”

Lemuel

“We happen to be occupying space in the present day, Charles, but we certainly – neither you nor I – we certainly are not of this current regime called contemporary America.”

Charles

“Indeed, our collective sensibilities may be a bit more Edwardian.”

Lemuel

“If not Victorian.”

Charles

“And betimes Medieval, no doubt. But my point is… (hesitates) Hmm… what was my point?”

Lemuel

“You were saying how the past—”

Charles

(interrupts) “Oh, quite right, dear boy. What happened before we met is really of no consequence if we don’t have a shared past. Anything I would relate to you that happened before our meeting would be of no significance to anyone who wasn’t there at the time. What good would my memories do you?”

Lemuel

“Charles, are you kidding?”

Charles

“I most certainly am not.”

Lemuel

“The past has everything to do with who we are. It shapes the very fabric of our lives as we live them today. We are a product of our past… and it’s not a qualitative thing… it just is.”

Charles

“So what do you hope to get at, Sherlock, in your cross-examination of me in regards to the dark recesses of my mind? Do you want to know what happened to me that got me to the zaftig state I am in today? My corpulence, as it were? Is that it? (smiling uncomfortably) Do you think if I told you I had a mother who fed me in order to praise me or a father who starved me for affection… it would help you to some Freudian epiphany in regards to yours truly? Perhaps my overbearing uncle was too free with his belt when I misbehaved, ergo that’s why I undo my own
– to relieve the psychic restraints it imposed on my subconscious mind. That would be an insight, wouldn’t it? Were that true. I don’t talk about my past because it reminds me of what I am no more… and it’s really that simple. And not simple at all. I haven’t arrived at this stage of my life without having put some thought into what got me here. But I am here and so re-hashing some unfortunate garbage with someone who would only feign interest in it and then reel from the enormity of it all would ultimately accomplish nothing but making me feel vulnerable and ugly in the eyes of a friend I have tried, desperately, to be anything but. (mopping the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief) (after a moment) I am aware of what my ambiguous nature might appear to be to some casual onlooker—"

Lemuel

“Casual onlooker, Charles? Surely at this point I am more than just a casual acquaintance with more than just a casual interest in knowing something about what made you ‘you’.”

Charles

“I didn’t mean to implicate you in that broad statement, Lemuel. Of course you’re more than that… much more. But it will not make me any more interesting a friend or character study, I promise you, were I to unlock the ghosts I’ve neatly tucked away.”

Lemuel

“Perhaps not, but it would give you dimension, certainly.”

Charles

(indicating his tummy) “My dimensions were what brought about this tawdry little tete-a-tete on life in the first place, if I’m not mistaken.”

Lemuel

“Don’t deflect, Charles. We not talking circumference. We’re talking facets.”

Charles

(sighing) “You are positively relentless! Can’t you just accept the fact that I am not comfortable dredging up dead moments of my life for you – or anyone? Can you not fathom that you aren’t the first to call me out on this evasive tactic I’ve put into practice? Many have pried and many have failed.”

Lemuel

“Ah, but if at first you don’t succeed… pry, pry again…”

Charles

(looking Lemuel straight in the eye, willing him to back down. to no avail. finally, with great resolve) “You are infuriatingly persistent! Suppose I tell you one thing from my past. One tidbit that will give you a glimpse into what I’ve deemed irrelevant. Would that put you at ease… or at the very least, at bay?”
Lemuel

“I make no promises. But it would be a start. It would confirm, for me, that you feel I’ve earned the privilege of even the slightest divulgence on your part. I would consider it a step toward the intimacy we lack, Charles.”

Charles

“How are you to know that what I tell you would be the truth? What would prevent me from weaving some fanciful anecdote in order to appease the Miss Marpel in you?”

Lemuel

“Because I know you to be truthful to the core and that fabricating something – even in the spirit of meaning well – is not how you operate.”

Charles

“Indeed.”

Lemuel

“I get to ask the questions.”

Charles

“Questions? Question. Singular. And why is it your choice and not mine? After all, it is my life we’re putting under the microscope.” (he shudders outwardly)

Lemuel

“The initial question may lead to other related questions but they would all be under the sub-heading of the one line of inquiry.”

Charles

“I’ll bet you were a master at Stratego.”

Lemuel

“Clue was my game of choice. But yes… I seldom lost.”

Charles

(looking at watch) “Well, get on with your one question before it’s time to order a breakfast omelet and a frappe. Now, think hard, Agatha, make it count.” (wearing a broad, plastic smile)

Lemuel

“Oh, I already know what I want to ask. Only this time you have to answer it. I asked it the first time you invited me up to your apartment – two years after we had become friends, I hasten to add. (clearing throat admonishingly) You dismissed me summarily with the wave of your hand and told me to mind my own business but now you’re obligated to tell me. (leaning forward in his chair) On the top shelf of your shelving unit there is a photo of two men in a handsome, albeit
filthy, mahogany frame. It was obviously taken at the beach. One man is blond and shirtless with a big, Aryan smile and the other is a rather somber but intriguing young man in a sexy Speedo with desperately curly, dark hair. Who are they and when was that taken?”

Charles

(his smile is gone) “Aks another question.”

Lemuel

“No, Charles. That is my question. That is what I want to know.”

Charles

“Rather than lie, I choose not to tell you.”

Lemuel

“Charles, this is hardly a game of kiss and tell. I won’t blab about it if you did either one of those young men. Or both of them. Who would I tell, anyway? (gasps) Oh wait… oh my God! Is that it? Were you the third wheel to that pair of hotties? Were you the tois of the ménage? Were you the spongy crème filling between those two vanilla wafers? Oh, do tell!”

Charles

(not smiling. not looking at Lemuel. not looking anywhere) “You’re wrong, Miss Chrystie. Wrong, wrong, wrong.” (finally looks at him) You’re not going to back down, are you? (Lemuel shakes his head) Then thou shall have the fruit of thy quest. (clearing throat) The photograph of the two young men to which you allude was taken at Myrtle Beach, North Carolina in the summer of 1979. The blond was a young man I met while in college. His name was Ted. His last name was Stephens. He was on the swim team and was a Kansan who landed himself an Ivy League scholarship through swimming and was the captain of the team for his junior and senior years. He was quite popular and well-loved by all who knew him.” (folds his hands)

Lemuel

“Look how easily… if a bit stiltedly… those words came tumbling out, Charles! Very good. And who was the stud-muffin with him? Was it his ‘secret friend’ that he couldn’t tell his Jayhawker family about and who he had to keep hidden from the fellas on the team?”

Charles

“You’re a very bright, perceptive and maddening inquisitor, my friend. Quite so to all of the above.”

Lemuel

“I knew it! This is like some homosexual archaeological dig. I’m unearthing a part of your hidden past. This is like finding Tutenkamen… nay, Nefertiti… preserved and unseen by human eyes for centuries. What a delicious find. Now… who was the other fellow? What was his name?”
“Chuck.”

“Charles, Lemuel.

“Ohhh… Chuck. That’s a strapping name. Befitting such a ruggedly handsome yet pensive alpha male. It’s also the only name, by the by, that one doesn’t put into “The Name Game Song” in polite company.”

“You hopeless square. “The Name Game”. You know… “Chuck… Chuck… bo-buck… Banana Fanna...fo...”

“Tasteless and crass. Tasteless and crass.”

“Leave me to my infantile escapades for a bit longer, Charles. You have no idea how much I am relishing this moment. Now… this Ted and this Chuck… how close were you to them?”

“I’d say very close.”

“Lovely, lovely… and remember, all these questions pertain to the initial question so they are all still a part of our deal.”

“Understood. Proceed with your line of questioning so I can take my leave and never speak to you again.”

(dismissing him) “Nonsense. Now… Inquiring minds want to know… were you intimate with either of them?”

“Yes.”
Lemeuel

“By intimate I mean, did you do the deed with either of them – not did you include them in your personal life as you so unceremoniously have not done with me?”

Charles

“Yes.”

Lemeuel

“While they were together?”

Charles

“Yes.”

Lemeuel

(practically squealing) “This just gets better and better. Now, I believe I know you well enough and have been privy to your perusal of the passing fare on Christopher Street often enough to know that Ted is definitely more your type than Chuck. So, I would venture an educated guess that the one you were having clandestine coitus with was none other than shirtless, aquatic Ted Stephens from Kansas.”

Charles

“Correct.”

Lemeuel

(raising arms above his head in mock victory) “Yes! My powers of deduction are keen and cunning. I have managed to squeeze a morsel of self-confessed depravity from the human stone! I have viewed the veiled, mysterious past of my veiled, mysterious friend and found him to be a collegiate Jezebel with exquisite, albeit pedestrian, taste.”

Charles

(taking offense) “Pedestrian?”

Lemeuel

“Come on, Charles. Think about it. Ted was like a walking Ken doll. Tanned and flawless and All-American. The gay man’s poster boy of the unattainable embodiment of idyllic manhood. The fish tale old homosexuals long to tell when they reflect on their sordid past and recall trophy schtupps for one another.”

Charles

“Schtupp? You can say schtupp and call me a schmuck but I can’t say dissed?”
Lemuel

“Yes! (continuing) But take me, for instance. As obvious a choice as Ted might be for some, Chuck is the one who I would have tried to bed. The dark glasses, hiding the windows to his soul. The tank top, revealing just enough of his lean torso to be tantalizing without rubbing our nose in it, like Aqua-man. And the Speedos. See, here is where we separate the man from the toy. Ted wore a pair of swim trunks but Chuck… Chuck had embraced his sizable manhood with blue stretch lycra… for all the world to see… fashionable yet flamboyant.”

Charles

(amused) “I see.”

Lemuel

“For whatever reason you chose Ted over Chuck is on you – for you alone must live with the shame one bears for the man that got away –  And please! No lousy Judy Garland impersonations, Charles! But you must tell me. Did Chuck know about you and Ted?”

Charles

“Without question.”

Lemuel

“Scandalous! Did they break up because of you?”

Charles

“I can’t answer that.”

Lemuel

“You just did! Oh, my goodness! A home wrecker! I never would have imagined… but now, see, Charles. With this bit of new insight I have into your character – or lack thereof – I have a renewed sense of… well, I don’t know. It wouldn’t be respect, exactly. But nor would it be disgust, for you certainly went for what you wanted. Still, it’s fascinating to think to what lengths we go – especially when we’re mindless, horny youths – in order to have what isn’t rightfully ours.”

Charles

“Ah, but there is where you’re wrong, dear boy. He was unequivocally mine.”

Lemuel

“Eventually perhaps… but, okay… so here’s my final question and then you’re off the hook, my friend. If he was yours, why did you let him go? Where is that fine specimen of a man today?”

Charles

(smiling a vacant smile) “He is dead.”
Lemuel

“Oh, I’m sorry to know that. When did he—”

Charles

(interrupting) “You said that was your last question and I told you the answer you sought. He’s dead and that’s the end of the tale and the end of this cruel intrusion.”

Lemuel

“Oh Charles, in the name of all fairness—”

Charles

“This evening has been anything but fair to me since I swiped your meatball.”

Lemuel

“Charles… you can’t just leave me hanging like this. I want to know how he died. What happened to him? Did Chuck die, too?”

Charles

“I hope so.”

Lemuel

“You hope so? Why would you say something like that? Do you know if he is? Why are you being so cryptic now that we’re at the dénouement of the tale? Spell it out for the less facile of mind, Charles. Is Chuck dead?”

Charles

“If one is dead when they’ve been buried, then yes… Chuck is dead.”

Lemuel

“This is really confusing, Charles… and you’re making it so. (with a bit of agitation) Okay… (choosing his words carefully) How do you know, for sure, he is dead?”

Charles

(pointedly) “Because I buried him.”

Lemuel


Charles

(slowly brings his hand to his heart and presses it there with the other) “Here.”
(slowly understanding… mouth slightly agape… unable to speak) “Oh…” (he manages)

(they sit in silence, staring into one another’s eyes, communicating volumes and saying nothing. finally Charles breaks the silence, shaking himself into existence and wiping away a bothersome tear with the back of his hand.)

Charles

(trying to clear the air) “So…TMJ?”

Lemuel

“Excuse me?”

Charles

(animatedly – using air quotes) “Was that TMJ?”

Lemuel

“Oh! Jesus, Charles. It’s TMI! TMI means ‘too much information’… TMJ is a medical condition that causes your jaw to lock.”

Charles

“Ah, so. Well, in that case I wish you had TMJ. We’d have been spared this unpleasant little distraction.”

Lemuel

“I’m sorry it was unpleasant for you, Chuck… but—”

Charles

(banging the table with his fists) “Don’t you EVER call me that again!”

Lemuel

(uncomfortable with the looks from other patrons) “I’m sorry, Charles. It just… My goodness, I’m… I’m sorry.”

Charles

(slightly trembling) “No one calls me that anymore. Chuck no longer exists. Chuck has been dead for over thirty years. He died when Ted died. He died a little bit every day as he watched Ted wither before his eyes. Chuck’s life slipped away in little dribs and drabs as he watched that beautiful young man become a hollow, graying corpse-like shell of what was once a Varsity God. A simple human being of impeccable character with a zeal for life like none other Chuck had known… who was reduced to a muttering, moaning bag of bones. Eventually unable to recognize anything but Chuck’s hand on his cheek. That he knew. That Chuck could offer him.
Chuck stood by on the sidelines when the Stephens of Oneida, Kansas swept in at the last moment and whisked their son off to a specialist back home who could help him with his particular strain of cancer much more effectively than the hacks at Sloan-Kettering could. Everyone knows that Oneida, Kansas is the epicenter of medical advancement in our nation. In the middle of the night, before Chuck even had a chance to say good-bye, they carted off what was left of his Ted. Medi-vac’d him to the Midwest so they could no doubt persuade the local coroner, when the time came, to fudge the death certificate a bit. Keep it from ringing of anything unpleasant – like the truth. What was it they put in the obituary? Oh yes… “succumbed to a rare disorder of the blood.” Well, that was partially true. But it wasn’t rare. Not back then, it wasn’t.

He was buried on the 21st of October, 1984. Laid to rest, as well, was his life companion and only true love of his twenty-three years on this planet, one Chuck Triolo. And slowly, Lemuel… gradually… Charles emerged. He came hesitantly out of the shadow of Ted’s death and claimed a handful of life with each layer he shoveled on top of Chuck. It wasn’t earth that buried the aforementioned. No, indeed, it was food. The one constant in life… well, my life anyhow. The palatable necessity of existence. In order for Charles to subsist, he needed sustenance. In order for Chuck to remain buried, he needed to be weighed down and secured beneath layers of human stratum. Oh, it took a goodly amount of time before I achieved the balance of life and death you see before you. Understand, Lemuel, that I entombed a part of myself which had died… just as surely as my Ted had in Oneida Methodist Hospital… 1500 miles from the touch of a familiar hand on his wasted… precious… cheek.

So, out of respect for the dead, Chuck remains as miraculously uncorrupted as some iconic saint-under-glass in Italy. Nor have I besmirched his memory with sordid recollections that would only mock and torture his sensitive soul which I know remains – submerged deep within. I have protected him all these years from well-meaning people such as you, Lemuel. I’m almost sure your intentions were good but you forced my hand by playing the friendship card and, at the end of the day, I wonder if it was worth it for you because – because frankly, friend – it wasn’t for me.”

Lemuel

(weeping silently) “Oh, Charles… I had no idea.”

Charles

“I know that, Lemuel. I made sure of it.”

Lemuel

“But you were so young and so…”

Charles

“So not fat?”

Lemuel

“No, that’s not what I meant. I meant that life had only just started for you… you were only 25 years old.”
Charles

“You have no idea, bless your soul, what it was like for a gay man in the early 1980’s in New York City. Oh sure, you’ve seen Hollywood’s obligatory homage’s to the gay plague. “Parting Glances” – highly overlooked and deeply moving low-budget film… put Steve Buscemi on the map. Pity it didn’t pay enough for some orthodontia. “Philadelphia” – a nice turn for Tom “I’m the modern day Jimmy Stewart” Hanks to prove he was pro-gay and understood our plight. “Longtime Companion”. I can’t remember much about it except wishing I could crawl inside Campbell Scott’s impossibly hazel/grey eyes. But no, Lemuel, those days were not about looking forward to what life held in store for us. We all figured our number was up any day and we laid in waiting for the first spot to appear on our leg or arm… or praying that a persistent cough would be nothing a little Robitussin couldn’t tackle. There was all this speculation about “incubation periods” and “vigilant strains”. So Chuck, having been intimate with a “carrier”, kept literally checking off the days of the calendar until two years of black X’s stared back at him and asked him “now what”?

Lemuel

“So…you ate your way to Charles.”

Charles

“Very good. Nicely put, young Lemuel. Yes, I ate my way to Charles. Once I started packing on the pounds, I was summarily dismissed by any potential boyfriend and/or “carrier” and I immersed myself in pursuits of the mind and not of the flesh. My weight, dear friend, has rendered me virtually invisible. That is a truth every delectable young man on the street who sees right past me will eagerly verify. (after a moment) Are we done?”

Lemuel

“Well… what do you mean by “done”? You mean for tonight?”

Charles

“Yes. And for good.”

Lemuel

(hesitating) “For good? Really?”

Charles

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, Lemuel. Don’t be so dramatic. Not our friendship, certainly. Just this prying and unearthing business. Leave it be. I’m maintaining. I’m doing what I know how to do and I can’t upset the balance I’ve precariously struck within myself. So no more stories. You had your question and you learned far more than that one question should ever have merited.”

Lemuel

“I have never put boundaries on our friendship, Charles. Never. How can you, after having taken this huge step with me tell me ‘no more”? How is that fair?”
Charles
“Fair to whom? Who’s life is this anyway?”

Lemuel
“Yours alone, it would seem. God forbid you should open up and share it with me!”

Charles
(angered) “Godammit, Lemuel! What do you want from me? Do you think you are going to solve what is wrong with me by trying your dime store psychiatry on me? Peddle your notions somewhere else. I know who I am.”

Lemuel
“But you forgot who you were.”

Charles
“For a bloody good reason, Lemuel! I lost enough! I lost all I ever cared about. I lost it all and I built something out of the ruins that resembles me and is a reasonable facsimile of me and it is all I have to offer you. It is all I care to offer you, how’s that? Don’t go digging around all this cellulite to try to rescue the young man that is no more. This is what you get, Lemuel. You get fat, charming Charles the survivor. The erudite Michelin man. But I’m afraid your brooding young stud with the curly hair and the bulging Speedos is as faded as the photograph. Sorry to disappoint you but you either take what you see before you, in all my fatness, or then…”

Lemuel
“We’re done?”

Charles
“That’s not what I wish, Lemuel.”

Lemuel
“But it’s what you mean.”

Charles
“It is what I would do in order to preserve whatever I have left with which to function. I would do that for me because I am the only one for whom I responsible. I am the one I come home to at night – each night – and I am the one with whom I wake up.”

Lemuel
“If you are lonely it is the by-product of shielding yourself from anyone who might have relieved you of it.”

Charles
“I never said I am lonely. I said I am alone.”
Lemuel

“You are alone because you don’t see what is before you… you’re too concerned with trying to hide what’s inside you.”

Charles

“If I can’t hold on to whatever it is that I’ve forged for myself, then I would have nothing whatsoever to offer another soul. Even if just in the form of an amiable dinner partner.”

Lemuel

“You honestly believe that?”

Charles

“I do. (waits then asks) What’s wrong with our status quo?”

Lemuel

“So much is wrong with it, Charles, if you have hidden all of this from me for all these years.”

Charles

“You make it sound personal. This isn’t about you, Lemuel. I’ve done nothing to you and kept nothing from you. I have been as available and constant a companion to you as you have been to me. I haven’t shared my buried past with anyone up until this evening… and up until this evening, everyone else has had the decency to allow well enough to be enough.”

Lemuel

“Everyone else? Who is everyone else? Where is this everyone of which you speak? Please tell me, Charles. I would like to know. In all the years we’ve been friends I can count on one hand the number of people you’ve introduced me to. You don’t belong to any clubs or organizations. You don’t throw parties nor attend parties I’ve invited you to because you say you’ve got commitments. What commitments? You’re retired. You live on a pension that is rather handsome and your rent is negligible. You’ve had the same rent stabilized apartment since 1986. You could go somewhere… travel… explore Brooklyn, even! You haven’t even gone on one of those stupid Perillo tours to Italy you’ve been threatening to take since I’ve known you because it would mean you would have to put yourself out there among the living. You aren’t living, Charles, you’re existing.”

Charles

“You’re one to tell me how to live, are you? Ye of myriad friends and admirers! I never seem to have any problem with your schedule being free when I feel like grabbing a quick bite with you on the fly.”

Lemuel

“Did it ever occur to you that I might make myself available to you when you call because I want to be with you? God knows why! Is it so far-fetched to believe that I really do have other friends but I choose to be with you, Charles, over anyone else? Because I can get out my cell phone – I
have one of those, you know… (before Charles can comment) …and they don’t give you cancer…”

Charles

“You don’t know that.”

Lemuel

“They don’t give you cancer, Charles – and I can show you that I have no less than 150 phone numbers of friends and associates in my address book. You don’t have a cell phone because you have no one to call. (lets that sink in) No, I choose to be with you, Charles. I want to be in your company. When I’m not with you I wonder where you are. When I’m out shopping and I see a shirt and don’t know whether I should buy it or not, I wonder what you would think of it. ‘Would Charles like this on me?’ I know… stupid, right? You never notice anything I wear. I can recall the exact time, place and precisely what you were wearing the night we met. You had on that nasty brown Fred MacMurray circa My Three Sons cable knit cardigan and your sloppy beige tweed pants and Bass Weejuns. What did I have on? Well? What was I wearing that night, Charles?”

Charles

“How could I remember something as trivial as that? You always look well put together.”

Lemuel

“Put Together? Who says something like that? Oh right, you do… and I know that about you. And I like that about you. For all that there is to not like about you, and there is plenty, I like you in spite of it, Charles. For your finicky, curmudgeonly ways, I choose to be with you. I overlook your being a tightwad… sorry… “frugal”…”

Charles

“I’m a woman of limited means, Gov’ner.”

Lemuel

“You have more money put away, I’ll wager, than Madoff made off with. But that’s not the point.”

Charles

“Get to your point, then, the Golden Girls are on at nine.”

Lemuel

“They’re re-runs, Charles. You’ve seen every episode a dozen or more times. They have a catastrophe and then they eat cheesecake. But we’re as predictable as they are, Charles – you and me…”

Charles

(looking mournfully at the dessert case) “… without the cheesecake tonight, sadly…’”
Lemuel

(ignoring him) “We’re like re-run of some craftily written but none-too-deep sit-com that no
one but the two of us would bother tuning in to watch. The setting is nearly always the same. It
nearly always – in fact, practically never centers on anything but a meal. And the conversation,
though witty, is banal and doesn’t broach on important matters. Never matters of the heart. And
now I realize that after all these years of finding you charmingly able to wriggle your way out of
paying the bill – save for rare occasions like my birthday – I am an accomplice to the murder of a
vital, attractive, once-alive young man whom I just discovered – in ages past – thrived within
you and who I’m now not allowed to speak the name of for fear of the wrath of Triolo! I have
been an accomplice in the burying of one life and the self-destruction of another. You will eat
yourself into the afterlife before you will dare to try to nourish what is actually eating you,
Charles.”

Charles

“Well, I see you’ve succinctly sewn up all the frayed and tattered edges of my life in one grossly
myopic assessment and I’m supposed to just sit here and take it? This berating? This humiliating
Cliff-notes version of my being as told by some casual—”

Lemuel

(incensed) “Here we are back to that word, are we? Casual? How casual am I, Charles? Casual
enough to be relied upon for a respite and some rhetoric but not casual enough to take the hand
of when we walk home after a meal together? Casual but not casual enough to return the simple
courtesy of an “I miss you, too” at the end of a phone call? Or to, of all the unspeakable casual
acts of random friendship, return a casual kiss on the cheek once it’s been proffered to you –
perhaps not quite so casually? (now weeping) Exactly how much more casual need I be before
you love me, Charles?”

Charles

(sloughing it off) “Pish-posh… don’t magnify pleasantries beyond what they’re intended to be.”

Lemuel

(dumbfounded) “Pleasantries? Charles? Are you… are you really that thick? Do you mean to tell
me that you… (brushing away tears) Here I was believing after all this time that I was doing all
the right things… giving off all the right signals… dropping all the proper hints… but I wasn’t
your type and that was that. But seriously, Charles? Did you really not…?

Charles

“What in God’s name are you talking about, dear boy? You’re talking in circles.”

Lemuel

“I’ve been running in circles! Jesus Christ, Charles! I have just professed my love for you – not
in so many words – but couldn’t you have the decency to read between the lines? To concede
that I’ve made myself clear somewhere along the way?”
Charles

“You love me as I love you and certainly no more or no less. And I would think that would go without saying.”

Lemuel

“You’ve spent a lifetime going without saying. Where has that gotten you? Where has that gotten us? You’ve snuffed out the part of you that hurt, Charles, but in doing so you snuffed out the part of you that loved. Had you only told me that years ago! Oh, God! What a bore I’ve been! I’ve been such a fool, waiting for you to see me in the way I see you… thinking, oh… he’ll come around. Maybe if I lose the ‘fro. I tried dreds. I lost the dreds and I tried corn rows. That was still too “black”, I feared, so I shaved my head completely – hoping my nappy head wouldn’t cloud your being able to see that there was a man of no particular color standing before you. A man who could see past your weight… who found your ways irritating but endearing… who considered the handful of years you have on me to be a good thing… and that you would learn to love me through my good heart and by being an ubiquitous fixture in your life. Another ten cent, word, Charles! Ubiquitous. What brother from Brownsville uses that word in a sentence? I improved… I ameliorated myself… believing that if not my heart then my keen mind and my command of the English language would win your heart. (shaking his head and smiling at what is evident) But I was too late. I was a lifetime too late. Your heart had already been given away once… and then when it got broken, you took it upon yourself to give it a proper burial. And it became your daily ritual. One I observed more times than I could ever count and yet knew nothing about. One forkful at a time. (he takes a moment… waiting for some sort of reply or reaction) Wow. This has been a most enlightening… if nearly intimate evening, Charles. (still nothing) And in the awkward silence that abounds, I see it is now my cue to take my leave.” (he gets up and starts to put his jacket on, longing to be told to stay) “I’d offer to see you to your door, Charles, but it’s across the street. I know you know the way. I’ll… well, I’ll be seeing you…”

(Lemuel leaves)

Charles

(not looking up. singing) “… in every lovely summers day… in everything that’s light and gay… I’ll always think of you that way…

…a powder blue cardigan and white corduroy slacks with penny loafers…and a Mod Squad afro…

I’ll find you in the morning sun and when the night is new… I’ll be looking at the moon…”

(opens menu) (blackout)