

Losing Mum and Pup by Christopher Buckley (excerpt)

HE WASN'T READY FOR VISITORS, so for company it was just me and Danny. Danny lived in my old apartment above the garage. For twenty years, Mum and Pup had rented it out to tenants, to help pay the taxes. One tenant, in the 1950s, was a man named Charles Blair.

One fine summer day in the early 1970s, we were having lunch on the terrace, Pup, Mum, me, one or two guests. A car pulled up the driveway. "I wonder who that could be?" Mum said. A tall, lean, handsome man approached. My parents peered, then exclaimed almost in unison, "Charley! For heaven's sake!"

It was Charley Blair, their old tenant. He was in the neighborhood and thought to stop by. What makes this otherwise quite dull story of interest is that Charley, while living over our garage, had been a top pilot for Pan American. On the side, he was working for the CIA, training Francis Gary Powers how to fly the U-2 spy plane. (Powers was shot down by Soviet missiles, resulting in one of the more embarrassing episodes of the cold war.) Charley, meanwhile, continuing to cut a dashing figure, had gone on to marry the actress Maureen O'Hara (my personal platonic ideal of womanhood). After that, he started an air-boat service in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Not quite end of story. Meanwhile:

Charley sat and reminisced with us over iced teas for, I suppose, forty-five minutes or so, at which point Pup said, "How's Maureen?"

"Oh, fine," Charley said. "She's in the car."

"In—the car?" my mother said, appalled. "Do you mean to say, all this time you left her in the *car*?" It was a warm summer day.

"Yeah." Charley shrugged. "She'll be fine, really."

Mum and Pup protested vehemently that he must ask her to come in. Charley shrugged reluctantly, as if asking one of the world's most famous actresses—his wife, incidentally—to join us at the table would be an intolerable imposition. My parents would have none of it, and at length Charley was prevailed upon to fetch his suffocating wife. He returned with the radiant, if slightly wilted, Maureen O'Hara. Eudisia, our ancient beloved, toothless Cuban cook, word having reached her in the kitchen of the arrival on *la terraza* of *la grande estrella Señora O'Hara*, rushed in her slippers to the window that looked out onto the terrace and remained there, watching intently for the duration of the visit.

I gathered, from things I read here and there in later years, that the two of them were inseparable, to the point where Ms. O'Hara got a pilot's license so that she could accompany Charley as co-pilot on his flights. One day, picking up my *New York Times*, I saw on the front page that Charley, unaccompanied by his wife, had been killed in the crash of one of his boat planes.