

Original Chapter 51. *This chapter was the final chapter of early drafts, and followed the current Chapter 48. Charlie discusses the difficulties of writing the final chapter of an autobiography.*

Original Chapter 51: Final Chapter

In any autobiography, the last chapter is the most difficult to write. Look back at a life, and there's no summing up that can do justice to its loose ends. Look ahead, and the biographer's voice grows timid without history's dark lessons to guide the way.

If there's something in the end of an autobiography, it's this. Autobiographies are born in a question that we ask ourselves: how did I get to this point? We look back over the path and tell ourselves a story. This is how it happened. *This is who I am.* That identity hovers over the end of any autobiography, no matter how much we seek to escape, no matter how evasive or selective in our disclosures.

At the end of their books, Nick White, Skye Lurie, and the others were drawn as sharply as if they had sat for two months for a Renaissance portrait artist, their natures changed forever by the experience of telling their lives.

Telling our stories is a way of re-setting the clock. Our biographies offer us the next best thing to having a new life: finding another identity and beginning again. If escape lies at the start of the American story, this large hope lies at the other end.

It was this chance that Paul Barkley wanted at the end of his life. He had managed years before to escape his own origins, and after a lifetime of chasing, had arrived at the bright and glittering realm atop the social strata. There he found the carelessness that is only possible with great wealth and fame, and he discovered, too, a world that would never let him in. So he set out to escape again, this time from the very man he had become in flight.

My last image of Paul Barkley is a man dancing. That night in March, just minutes before he was killed, he moved with a special lightness, as if unbound by whatever had been holding him back. He was in love with a beautiful woman, who loved him in return. And, as so often before, he was buoyed by the thought of a deal that was going to change everything. He had decided to restart his life, and he had turned over the means of it to someone who knew all about it, a writer of a minor order who was looking for a new chance of his own.

The other identity at the end of this story is that of the writer, the storyteller, the life-story guy. Years ago, when Jill and I

were fighting, she said, “You talk as if everything you know in life you learned from writing other people’s autobiographies.” She said this as if it were a limitation, and maybe she was right. Maybe they were what I had in place of something of my own.

But that’s over. Here I am now, the untethered Charlie Teller, shorn of the tools of my trade, devoid of name dropping, no longer haunting a drying-out star of one stage or another, not dancing like Paul Barkley, but limping, and yet no less light, and waiting to hear some other wisdom.