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# The Long Weekend Update

Good night, and have a pleasant tomorrow.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

Congratulations! "You've just been hired to take Bill Murray's place on *Saturday Night Live*."

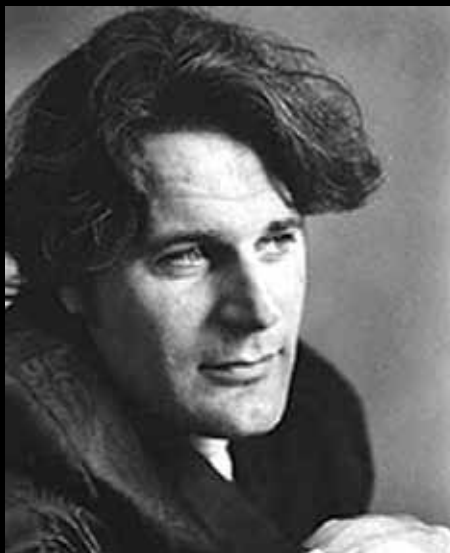
Even if you remember the 1980s, you may not remember Charles Rocket (1949-2005).

As Weekend Update news anchor for NBC's signature weekly comedy show, Rocket joined a taxi squad that included Eddie Murphy, Gilbert Gottfried, and Joe Piscopo as fill-ins for the legendary first cast. Disappointed fans of the show christened the group *Saturday Night Vile*.

In spite of their talent, the ill-starred replacements sputtered, and Rocket got the axe at the close of the 1980-1981 season. Infamously, he'd uttered a televised expletive during a skit, but the mystery behind his leaving goes deeper than that.

All of which is more fascinating to Mainers, because many of us didn't realize he was a Bangor native.

At 6'5", with a sweep of dark hair, sardonic wit, and bony profile, he brought to mind another tragic figure, F. Scott Fitzgerald. But who was he, really, in the beginning, when he lived with us downeast? What were the initial stages of Charles Rocket?



His Wikipedia entry jumps from his birth in Maine directly to his surfacing at Rhode Island School of Design. There, he crested the Providence underground arts scene, leading the band the Fabulous Motels and befriending future stars like David Byrne of The Talking Heads and movie director Gus Van Sant.

In a way, he became a part of *Saturday Night Live* so quickly, and departed so quickly, we were deprived of the luxury of time it might have taken us to realize he was (and is) the only Maine native ever to be an actual SNL cast member.

More intriguing still is the way his life ended. Darkness is surely at the

heart of many a comic genius. But how can we account for his walking into a field behind his house and turning up with his throat cut the next morning?

His last TV role was as a murderer on *Law & Order*. Had his life been similarly "ripped from the headlines," his bizarre death could have opened an episode on the series. Slide to a view of his fallen silhouette, inspiring us to wonder, who could have murdered him?

Except he wasn't murdered.

## MYSTERY

### IN ORBIT

At this point, the *Law & Order* episode might flash back to Rocket's defining mistake on *Saturday Night Live* as he impersonates J. R. Ewing in a "Who Shot J. R.?" skit sending up the TV series *Dallas* (opposite *SNL* guest host Charlene Tilton, one of the show's stars). At exactly the wrong time, Rocket leaves the script and wings it with, "I'd like to know who the f\*ck did it."

The shot rings around the world. A few weeks later, on March 7, 1981, Bill Murray returns to host the show to help recover plunging ratings and joke with the new ensemble members about their "vile" lack of pizzazz.

### A Tense Exchange

**BILL MURRAY:** You guys are good. I mean, you know, Charlie, you're very funny. I love those Rocket Reports.

**CHARLES ROCKET:** You really mean that, Bill?

**BILL MURRAY:** [more in sorrow than in anger] People are tellin' me you're imitatin' me, Charlie, though. I don't like to hear that. ... And, uh, watch your mouth. Clean it up. ... Okay?

And, uh, you know, Joe Piscopo, you're great. [someone in the crowd agrees] You know, the whole sports thing. The monosyllabic hollering and stuff.

**JOE PISCOPO:** Thanks, Bill.

**BILL MURRAY:** It's inspired, you know, but, uh, are you - are you gonna definitely stick with "Joe Piscopo" as your name?

**JOE PISCOPO:** Uh ... Well, I was born with it, Bill. You know, it's my name.

**BILL MURRAY:** Wow. [beat] Well, whatever. ... And, uh, you, Eddie. You're black. [Eddie just stares at him] And, uh, that's beautiful, man. That's beautiful. You can do whatever you want. *-snltranscripts.jt.org*

Jump cut to October 7, 2005. The field Rocket has walked into is behind his home in Canterbury, Connecticut. In what seems an extraordinary lapse of time, the medical examiner takes nine days before declaring his death a suicide.



to grow old gracefully, there's someone here who can.

"I'm his brother, two years older," James Claverie, of Exeter, Maine, says on the telephone. His voice is matter-of-fact, kind, a tinge of sadness and steel, decidedly not sardonic.

"There were eight of us. Five of us, includ-

“ I just remember **laughing** around him, **always** laughing. He was so **clever** and **dark** and his **voice** was **soothing** and **disturbing** at the **same time**. He always looked so **dashing**. He always seemed so **genuinely happy** to see me. And I always **lit up** around him. ”

—Former-*SNL* cast member Julia Sweeney's blog entry on Charles Rocket's death.

*Who takes nine days?*

In the spasm of media coverage in the weeks that followed, there's no mention of a cutting instrument near his body.

Rocket (the former Charles Claverie) "apparently didn't leave a suicide note," wrote Michael Starr of *The New York Post*. "He'd been married to the same woman, Beth, for 33 years and had a son, Zane. No trouble at home was reported." As only the *Post* could relay it, "Rocket, 56, has finally made headlines," though it conceded the actor had continued to work "more anonymously in lower-profile movie and TV roles."

Everywhere, he was hiding in plain sight.

He was on the *Max Headroom* TV show. He played Bruce Willis's brother in *Moonlighting*. He starred in a music video for the Tom Petty hit, "Yer So Bad." He landed roles in *Dumb and Dumber* and even played Lieutenant Elgin in the Oscar-winning *Dances with Wolves*. The great bulk of his credits came *after* his *SNL* reversal. So what hurt him so deeply he couldn't continue? What's the take-away, as they say in Hollywood? Or should there be one?

### CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

Though Rocket himself can't teach us how

ing Charlie, were born in Bangor, because it's close to a dairy farm our family has owned" for generations. "My grandfather—my mother's father—was big on family. I have 39 cousins on my mother's side, and I know each of them by name."

The dairy farm is in the Exeter area "between Newport and Corinna," he says.

After he and Charles were born, "We didn't live here very long, three years. We started here, then moved to Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and back to New Hampshire again. We went to high school in Hampton"—Winnacunnet High.

Asked if he, too, played an instrument when he was younger (Charles played accordion for the Fabulous Motels), James says "trumpet" as though he'd thrown one into a lake 20 years earlier and watched it sparkle to the bottom. "It's been a long time."

No, he says, "I never went to see [Charles] perform at *Saturday Night Live*."

While he's certain his brother was fired for bad-libbing, he doesn't rule out Rocket's being disillusioned on the show beforehand, "something to do with writers, things like that." As for whether his brother hid his feelings about it, "I couldn't tell you. I thought he was happy, always the class clown. He kept

working. He let it all roll off him like water off a duck's back. He kept everybody entertained and in a good mood."

Asked if he's sunny like that himself, James says, "No."

Without varnish, James remembers Charles coming back to Maine to visit family, "many times," with all the years blending together. "I can see him—it's like it's always the Fourth of July. We always came [to Maine, near the dairy farm] in the summertime for a week or two."

When asked for the last time he saw him here, James says, "Oh, Lord, Charlie was up here in the 1990s. He, his wife, and kid were living in L.A. His wife wanted to live closer to her family, in Rhode Island," so they moved back East and "bought the place in Connecticut. Basically, LA was a better place to get the kind of acting jobs he wanted. I think that was part of it."

What's the other part? "I don't know," James says. "I've asked myself so many times, how he could have done it? His wife was looking for him and found him the next morning. They found the knife. He slit his own throat. It's inconceivable to me."

The next day, he calls back. "When I said that, I really don't know that that's true. I think I satisfied my curiosity by believing that. All I know is, they said he used a knife."

It's a dark place, like standing at the edge of Lake Sebasticook at night. Maybe the best approach to the unspeakable is to improvise, no matter the consequences:

How many times have Eddie Murphy and Gilbert Gottfried made jackasses of themselves since SNL (not even counting Murphy's donkey on *Shrek*), embarrassments be damned? Think of Gottfried's unforgivable tweet after the tsunami last year in Japan: "I just split up with my girlfriend, but like the Japanese say, 'There'll be another one floating by any minute now.'" Doesn't he wish he'd simply dropped the F-bomb? Hell, Joe Piscopo's probably opening a shopping center right now, and when you think of it, there's a dignity to that.

As for Charles Rocket, we're all trying to understand how "here" relates to "from away." Sometimes people slip between those worlds. As Mainers, we're looking for ways to understand.

"I hope I was some help to you," Claverie says. Suddenly, our bright place "here" becomes a concern for all of us. After all, somebody has to run the dairy farm. ■



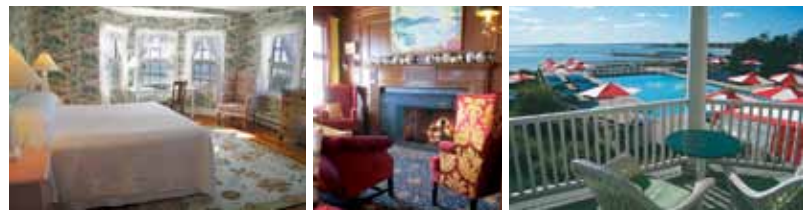
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