

Charlie's Sleep

By Kaitlin Daida

Things didn't seem quite right when Charlie woke up. Maybe the sun was too bright or perhaps the colors surrounding him were too clear and vivid. He rubbed his eyes and blindly patted the bureau for his glasses. He knocked over an empty bottle of pills instead. Charlie paused. When had he used up all of them? An irritating buzz hummed in his ears. He supposed that is was the side effect of the sleeping pills. A cup of coffee would cure it.

Charlie stirred his coffee slowly that morning, disturbing the granules at the bottom of his mug as if he were stirring his thoughts. He looked across the table at the place where his wife used to eat. To him, she had been the most beautiful eater in the world. She would take small, delicate bites to savor each layer of taste by rolling and chewing the food in her mouth. Even when her arms quivered arthritically from the cancer, she was still the most beautiful eater. She was a lovely woman, but a real lady, decided Charlie. He sipped his coffee. No woman is a lady until she learns to eat like one.

Suddenly, Charlie couldn't stand the kitchen. It wasn't until he hobbled towards his dining room that he realized how much he couldn't stand the house itself. Everything was so common; the fog of significance had dissipated and all he was left with was a plain house. His wife's belongings became the skeletons of his memories with her. He could feel time peeling away each memory until only the residue of emotion was left. Even these feelings began to pass and Charlie hated the emptiness.

The murmurings in his ears were rising in a slow crescendo. He wanted to go to the park; he needed something real. He needed the smell of sunscreen, the cacophonous screams of children's play, the musty socks, the suffocating humidity, and the sticky fingers of popsicle-carrying babies. Heck, he wanted to see living people.

A gust of wind pushed him back when he shoved the door open. Sunlight flooded into the foyer, causing him to squint. Charlie stared into the blinding light and noticed a shadow on his lawn. "Hey!" he called. He stepped out, holding his hands over his head. When he looked up, a girl had emerged from the shadow.

It was like having a black and white television screen appear out of nowhere. The girl looked misty as if she were being projected on a transparent screen. She stood before him, a still piece in the moving world. The wind rippled through the grass, but never touched her. Her garments never stirred. Through the chatter of the Earth, he could almost hear the softness of her breath, rising and falling.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Suddenly, the sounds died. The wind still blew and she was still breathing, but he couldn’t hear any of those noises. Instead, he heard a clear voice utter, “He doesn’t seem to be doing so well. I don’t think he’ll make it.”

“Who’s there?” he repeated.

The girl looked at him and blinked. A tear rolled down the corner of her dark eye and she bowed her head. “I’m not going to hurt you,” beckoned Charlie. The girl looked up with an opened mouth as if to say something. Then, she vanished.

He stared at the spot where she had been. The more he looked at it, the stiller he became and the faster the world around him gyrated. It spun faster and faster, sucking out the colors. The light began washing out distinct lines and figures. The brightness was becoming unbearable, but he still gazed at the spot where she stood.

The voice began to speak again. “Charlie,” it whispered. He cocked his head and wondered if it was the girl’s voice. “Charlie,” it repeated, “please don’t die.” Charlie looked up from the spot where she had been into the light and fainted.

When he came back to his senses, he realized he was lying in front of his house. The spinning had stopped and the air was still. No one was on the street. In fact, there was not a soul in the whole neighborhood. He walked down a few blocks. With each house he passed, the older the houses seemed to appear.

The houses were dead. The windows that glowed like eyes in the night revealed no telling story of the habitants inside. There were no curtains for privacy or hopscotch games drawn into the cement. The houses were shells that echoed only the long lost footsteps of their former owners.

Then, Charlie came upon a rock. He remembered the rock because it was where he had purposed to Veronica. He touched it and imagined her slender frame still perched on it. Yes, they had loved each other for a long time and were old flames, yet her eyes

still held excitement and surprise when the sparkles of the ring danced on her finger. Charlie pressed at the cavity in his chest and wondered why he felt an ache mingle from that point to the rest of the body.

Suddenly, Charlie remembered something. The rock had been removed years ago. Despite the fair weather, he rubbed at the cold sweat forming on his brow. The voice begged urgently, “We can’t let him go! I’m sure he can think!” Charlie shook his head and ran.

He didn’t stop running until he came to an old building. In its glory days it had been the most powerful newspaper center in the state. They said cash came in as quickly and as cold as the boss. Now, the building stood forlorn and abandoned in very much the same state its owner had been when one of his employees ratted him out to the cops for embezzlement.

Charlie pushed through the glass doors and came to an office. At the desk was a name plaque with no name in it. It had once held Charlie’s name. He drew circles in the dust with his feet. Even though the boss had committed suicide years ago, Charlie still felt like a failure. The boss never had taken kindly to him.

Charlie heard a gasp. Leaning against the doorframe of Charlie’s office was his old boss. The man looked old and haggard. The clothes he wore hung loosely off of his frail body and the arrogant smirk he used to wear was replaced with a permanent frown. The boss stumbled towards Charlie and muttered, “Well, I’ll be.” The tired man stretched out his arm to touch Charlie’s hand. His fingers inched closer and then passed through Charlie’s hand as if Charlie were a ghost.

The boss sat down on the dusty office chair and wept. “Oh Chuck,” he whispered, “I’m sorry that... that I didn’t give you that loan, you know, for your wife’s cancer. She had a miscarriage too, didn’t she?” He scratched his balding head. “I wouldn’t usually say things that deal with money in such a casual way, but looking back now, I missed so much of my life. I hurt so many people.” He began to laugh hysterically. “Ah Chuck,” he muttered. “I hope you can forgive me.” Charlie could only stare at his disgraced boss. The man giggled again. “If you want to know a secret,” the boss said with a strange look on his face, “then I have to tell you that I’m the devil’s brother!”

Charlie felt himself being torn away. The room was slowly vanishing from him and he saw walls begin to fly past. He watched it like a movie. Tape after tape began to overlap the others. "Don't leave, Chuck!" yelled the boss. He pulled a pistol from his jacket and pointed it at his own. "Good-bye!" he shouted and then pulled the trigger.

Charlie's landed on his face outside of the building. The girl was there. He took one look at her and threw-up. The girl knelt down beside him and wiped his mouth with her skirt.

"Do you know who I am, yet?" she asked. He shook his head and then vomited again. She took his face into her hands and said, "I'm Corinne, Daddy."

He lifted a trembling finger and muttered, "No, you're dead too, Corinne. In fact, you never lived. You died at childbirth." He pounded the ground. "Where am I?"

The girl took his hands. "You don't know how long I've wanted you to come home, Daddy," she said.

He gulped. "Am I dead?"

She shook her head and took something from her pocket. It was the empty prescription bottle that he'd knocked over that morning. "You took the whole thing last night, or rather, several nights ago," she reported. "You've been in a coma for about a week, now."

Charlie turned on his back and stared at the sky. He felt the dirt in his fingernails when he dug his fingers into the soil. He felt the acid building up in his mouth from fear. It was real to him.

"They don't want to put you through bizarre circumstances in order to test you," said Corinne, as if trying to answer his thoughts. "They put enough normal elements of your daily life into the test so that you don't become bewildered."

"Why are they testing me? And why do I hear voices?"

She laughed. It was the most beautiful sound he'd heard that whole day. "The test is actually *for you*," she said. "You're going to die before your time. When you get to heaven, they want you to know that you had something validating in your

life that you died for. Also, didn't you know that when a person dies, the last thing sense that goes is hearing?"

“Did I ever discover that purpose?” asked Charlie, directing the conversation from the thought of his being semi-dead.

The scene around them was gradually changing as they were speaking. The sky went from a soft blue to a violent red to a luxurious plum color. At the horizon, where darkness threatened to overtake the rest of the sky, a spot of white grew. Corinne turned to the sparkle on the horizon and smiled pleasantly. When Charlie turned, his heart twisted. In the midst of the white, glowing flames was a woman. Veronica.

