

Unread News

Charlie Row is waiting for his paper. It is twenty after five.

“Late.” His whispered complaint, a shout in the quiet, echoes aloneness. Just bare walls and furniture bounce back his voice and the blackness all around is so heavy, he can feel his knees, bending and buckling. The sweat, coming up from his skin, stings his eye, stinks of fear. With no noise and little light, Charlie Row is disappearing. When the paper is late, Charlie Row will sometimes disappear.

“But not really,” he says to himself, holding his hand to his face to prove its opaqueness.

And then he hears the thwack-thwacking of tires on pavement, sees the bright from the headlights pushing out the dark. He watches, thinking it all very mysterious. The way the car shuffles, stops. The way he cannot see the men inside; how the window slides down with an even, electric hum. And then one gloved hand, body otherwise invisible, drops news from window to curb.

When the street is dark again, Charlie pads out, in measured strides, to the place where his paper rests. He puts the thing, wrapped in plastic, under his arm, retraces steps to reenter, same as he left. The door clicks closed behind him. He switches on a light, finally able, and then stands to look on his living room.

It is all gray, like a storm cloud settled. An easy chair, big and worn, occupies the far corner. There is not much else, but a coffee table, one cork coaster. Sheer, cobwebbed curtains cover the front window, and on the opposite wall, Charlie’s words. Four tall, leaning columns, floor to ceiling, of unread news. He adds his latest paper to the pile.

Feeling better but not quite able to breathe, Charlie sits, sipping coffee. He stares at his built bars, his newsprint insulation. He likes for things to be aligned - coffee mugs in cupboards,

sock sets in drawers, toothbrush, toothpaste, and shave cream. All things are like little soldiers, standing at attention. A place for everything.

Dissatisfied and bored, Charlie putters to work.

Down the first floor hallway he walks, enters a room. It too is the color of ash. There is a computer monitor, already awake, cursor blinking, setting atop an uncluttered desk. There are sharpened pencils in a tray, never used. And next to that a fish bowl, with a fish swimming, serene. A gray-green lounge waits for the sunken-in man-frame to sit. He does, tightening the belt of his robe. Charlie pats the glass rim of the tank, as one would a dog. And he begins to type.

“Beautiful waterfront view. Quiet nights.

Experience it! Call 555.5787”

By noon, Charlie has tired of his data entry. He submits done work and stares, for a bit, at the scaly thing as it circles, tailfin working. She has not much to do. But the fish cannot stop swimming. Mimicking her lips, Charlie stands to stretch, at the same time trying to know her name. It is hard for Charlie to see her and that she is kept, a swimming light in dark gray; he breaks for lunch.

In his refrigerator, there are three plates, ready to eat, covered in plastic wrap; a gallon of milk; some bottled water. Charlie decides on the first plate, but he can barely taste it, doesn't know that there is even a thing to taste. He chews, twenty-three chews, swallows.

Not a thing more lonesome than a meal for one, Charlie tries not to look at the empty chairs around him, or the space where a woman might stand, pouring drinks or tying aprons. He tries hard not to see how the sink never fills, how the drawers don't carry the junk that would make them look lived in. He eats with eyes shut, but he can see. He is all alone.

With his last bite, the phone shrieks, and Charlie moves to answer it.

“Charlie, I’m pulling up.”

Hanging up, shuffling to the front room, Charlie peers through the curtains to see his sister, so bright. She is the only one that ever comes. She is the only one that can see him.

She raps on the door and opens it quickly.

“Charlie.” Her smile is like butterflies; it flutters happily, a winged thing flying toward him. She rushes over, removing her gloves, her scarf. She kisses his cheek.

“Did you eat Charlie?”

“Just finished.” He seems to slow down when she comes.

“That’s good, you like it? I made it for George last week, and he just ate it up.” She is clearing his dishes.

“Yeah, it was real good.” He can’t tell her the truth.

“Let’s sit,” Sara says.

It feels better having two to a table.

“So how are you Charles?”

“Good. Working. A lot of work.”

“Yes, good, good. So catchy, those ads.”

Charlie smiles and knows that they are awful. But he loves his sister and her sincerity even in lies. She is proud of him, of his nothing.

“How are the little ones?” Charlie had banned his nieces from the house eight months ago.

“Great,” Sara says, “they love ballet. And books. Like you Charlie, they love books.

“I don’t read anymore.”

“But you still love books, Charlie.”

“Mm, yeah.”

“Look at them all.” She points to his open pantry, a library.

Shelf after shelf, three books deep, he keeps his collection. Like every other thing, they line up just right. It took him months to make, and now he cannot read for fear of disrupting the sense he has made. It doesn't make much sense.

“We should go out sometime,” she says, “there is this new spot, supposed to be the best eats in town...this place is so drab.”

Charlie looks around, nodding.

“We should paint - a project. Get all those stacks and dust bunnies out of the way, brighten the place up. You might be able to have some old friends over or something.”

“It's not so bad,” he says of his space.

But it is; it really is so bad. Not fit for a lady. Not fit, even, for a full-grown man, disappearing.

“No. I guess it isn't,” her voice is quiet. “You need a new robe.”

He looks down and laughs.

And she laughs too.

Before Sara leaves, she brings some canned soups, two slices of pumpkin pie. At the door, she touches his chin, wraps her arms around his neck. There is something that siblings know, where things come from inside the other. Why things are, and why they aren't right. And they know, that it will get better.

When they were young, he protected her, Little Sister. When she hit her head, tripped, he healed all her bumps and bruises with a white tipped magician's wand. And he told her made up

stories about places and people ten times more beautiful than the ones they knew. Charlie Row wished he had the heart of his youth. He wished that he didn't need his sister's wand.

Whenever Sara went, her brother would sit alone at the table, thinking of little he and little she. In these thoughts he tasted - honeysuckle centers and grape juice. He could smell - line dried linens, the cold dirt of digging. And things weren't gray, but the reds and yellows of autumn. And then he would remember what it was he was. And he would fall asleep, his time travel.

But this day, his nap is interrupted by an anxious knock. Charlie covers his ears, sinks his head between his shoulders. He waits. Again comes the sharp knocking. He groans, stands, shuffles to the door, hands still sleeping in the pockets of his robe. Looking through the peephole, he sees a man, nervous, juggling a briefcase, an unmarked cardboard carton, and an upright vacuum. The wind is blowing, and it might have taken this small man up in it, were he not weighted down by these baubles. The man has a nice face, large eyes that look on the verge of tears. He wears a bowtie. A man worse off than Charlie? Perhaps.

Charlie Row opens the door, just a crack. The cold comes in, and on it, the voice of the tiny man.

“Hello. My name is Stu Cromley.”

“Hello Stu.”

“Might I come in? I've quite a collection of things here. Variety enough to please any man.”

Stu stares, holding his shoulders broad, anticipating the loud crack and whoosh of another thing slammed.

But he will not hear it. Charlie opens his door wide, offers the man admittance. It was his eyes. Charlie could not close the door on them. And the little boy bowtie.

Charlie directs the stranger to his table in the kitchen, the only place for more than one man to sit. Stu places his boxes and cases near a chair. He unbuttons his long coat and begins.

“This is the Mackset 3000.” He holds up the vacuum. It seems he hates every moment of selling.

“Cordless, bagless – it never loses suction – and at a mere eight pounds, it is perfect for quick cleaning.” The man fumbles in his suitcase, walks across the kitchen to the living room carpet.

“These,” he says, pouring dark dirt in a line before his feet, “are coffee grounds.” The man stamps on them. Grinds the grounds with the heel of his shoe. Charlie is only moderately interested. He looks away, and then back down to the stepped in coffee mess.

“Well what is this?” Charlie feigns disgust. And the man just laughs, uncomfortable.

“No worries, with the Mackset 3000, no stain is a stain for long.” And he runs over the mess with his Mackset. And again. And again. But still the stain remains, and he looks at Charlie with those almost crying eyes ever closer to tears.

“Well, oh. This isn’t the way, it isn’t the way.” Stu rushes to his briefcase, pulls out a pitch script. He reads it over, mumbling hurriedly, including exclamations, tracing the page with a fingertip.

Charlie just sits, watching.

“Coffee grounds!...No worries!...Mackset 3000!...not for long!...” And then quiet. “The coffee grounds – hardwood. Salt and sand for the carpet. Salt and sand.” The man’s eyes are wide, looking to Charlie in shame.

“So sorry,” he says. “We’ll fix that...just...” Stu is rummaging in his cases again. His hands cannot find a thing to hold, not a right thing, to take the stain away. They are trembling, too.

“No worries,” Charlie says.

Cromley collapses in his chair. He puts his head in his hands.

“Have you ever owned a goldfish?”

Stu, not looking, shakes – no, he hasn’t ever.

Charlie leaves the kitchen, and when he returns, he holds the glass bowl, within it the tiny gold fish.

“Her name’s Charlotte,” Charlie says, “mine’s Charlie Row. This one’s a gift from my sister - she thinks I’m lonely, cooped up. So Sara got me this girl. Do you believe it? I look the type?”

Stu having yet to raise his head, peers up, turns slightly – no, Charlie doesn’t look the type.

“She’s good company really, better than most. Quiet. Doesn’t dirty up the place. She’s even got a sense of humor, this one.”

Neither man said a thing for a moment.

Then, from Stu “You said she’s funny?”

“Well, I tell her jokes and things.”

“Hm.”

“She needs a bigger tank I think. So she can move around, you know.”

The men look at Charlotte, swimming in slow circles.

“Don’t worry about the carpet. I’m thinking about fixing the pad up anyway. You like pie?”

And the men ate. And they watched Charlotte. And they decided she really did need a new space. With maybe some colored pebbles and plastic castles. And maybe a mate.

“Or maybe we should free her,” Charlie says.

“But it’s thirty degrees out there, and where?”

“You’re right, you’re right...but what about those goldfish ponds, like at restaurants? They’re pretty spacious. And she’ll make friends,” Charlie was feeding the fish; she would come up slowly to the surface, nibble.

“I suppose.” Stu loosens his collar.

Charlie pours the fish, water and all into a clear plastic bag. He leaves his kitchen, makes his way towards the door. In the living room, he turns. Stu is still sitting, arranging his boxes and supplies.

“Well?” Charlie says “You coming?”

“Coming?”

Charlie just holds out the fish for Cromley to see.

“I’d like to. But I really should get back to work. I’ve yet to make a dime this afternoon. People don’t much like a man goes door-to-door these days. They don’t want to buy.”

But this stranger wanted to free a thing. Charlie could see.

“I’ll take a vacuum, and one of whatever else you’ve got in that box there.”

“Well great, I have some papers for you here –”

“Look, first we free the fish. Then we come right back and I sign those papers.”

Coming to his car, putting key in lock, Stu stops to watch Charlie, in robe and slippers walk to the very edge of the black topped drive, Charlotte in hand. He just stood, looking left and right, right and left, shivering with the wind. Charlie Row didn't quite seem real outside of the gray. In his frayed flannel he had been a part, inside, of a long running black and white movie. And now, outside, he was still gray, but the trees rustled and leaves dropped colors at his feet. Charlie Row hadn't been past the point where he stood in a full eight months.

"Mr. Row?"

"Yeah, coming."

They ride, not speaking. There is something in the journey that asks for quiet. Charlie sees how even in months, changes come. There are houses for sale that were once loved and lived in. There are cut down trees, stumps where spruces once were. There are babies where there were none before. And the cemetery has new headstones. He has spent a lot of days not knowing.

Charlie enters the restaurant, Stu at his heels looking nervous. A hostess greets them.

"Table for...two?" She is looking at Charlotte, golden scales glimmering. And at Charlie, hair sticking up, fuzzy slippers.

"Well, really, I'd like to free this fish."

"Sir, I'm not sure what you mean."

"In the pond," Stu steps from behind Charlie, "with the other goldfish." The woman looks at Stu, an overgrown boy with the pained expressions of a man.

"Okay, I'm not sure that - one moment." She goes from behind the reservation table and is out of sight. Another woman stands, staring, silent, behind the tall desk.

“What if I just slip her it, no one would know, right?” Charlie says to the woman. And she gawks, unblinking, chewing at the corner of her mouth, one eyebrow pasted up in a high arc.

Charlie is trying to unfasten the knot he’s made in Charlotte’s mobile home, when a suited man sticks out a hand.

The first hostess is back at her place behind the desk, and the two women are looking at one another, blinking a language, pointing with their eyes.

“Dan, pleased to meet you Mister...”

“Charlie.” The men shake hands.

“Mister Charlie. What might I do for you?”

“I’d like to release this fish, Charlotte.” Charlie holds her up for the man to see.

“Your habitat is quite beautiful sir,” Stu says. “Charlotte’s never seen the likes of this.” He is smiling, nodding, trying to disassociate crazy.

“It is, it is,” the man thought for a moment.

Charlie is still trying to untie the bag.

“Well,” the man says finally, “we don’t want to make this a habit.” He peers into the bag Charlie holds. “But I suppose it is a good looking fish. I’ll take him.”

“Her. Charlotte. Of course, great.”

Charlie holds the water filled sack to his nose. She is just swimming, unaware. Maybe that orange-gold fin waved a goodbye?

“It’s a nice place,” Charlie’s voice is hushed as he kneels to the pond.

He gives up on the tie, tears open the bag and in she goes. Charlie watches her swim, quick, under a lily leaf. Stu is standing, watching.

Charlie waits for a while longer. But he doesn't see Charlotte. He takes this as a sign of her contentment and stands, tightening the belt of his robe.

"Have a great day gentleman," Dan smiles, standing strait, his right hand clasping his left.

The men walk into the cold towards the car.

Once on their way, Stu flicks the radio on. After a few moments of listening, Charlie scratches his nose, looks at Stu.

"Soft rock?" He shakes his head, his lips are lemon soured.

"So?"

"So? Soft rock. Gives me the creeps."

"You're wearing a house coat."

"Yes."

"And we just released a fish –"

"Charlotte."

"We just released Charlotte, into a pond. In a restaurant."

"Yes."

"Then soft rock, not so creepy."

Charlie leans into the soft of his seat, closing his eyes. Stu straightens his bowtie. And the two ride quietly to Charlie's place.

It is dark now. The wind is still working its way through the trees, through the cracks under doors and around windowpanes. But Charlie looks freshly painted, signing Stu's forms in his colorless kitchen. The two part, old friends.

Next morning, Charlie Row is waiting for his paper. It is twenty after five.

But all the lights in his house are on, having already pushed out the dark. And when he sees the slowed vehicle approaching, he beats the thing to his curb.

There is an even electric hum, a gloved hand, and then an old white face. An old white face, and soft white hair, and a crocheted purple scarf.

“Hello Mr. Row. Haven’t seen you in ages.”

He takes his paper. He is fully dressed, combed and brushed.

“Sometimes, you outgrow your pond.”

The two nod to each other and smile. The window goes up, hum.

Inside, Charlie pours himself a cup of coffee, and unfurls his news.