

Charity Never

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This is how I remember it.

The morning before my business flight to England, our two-year old daughter, Myra, started shrieking as if a Ninja assassin had infiltrated her room. I wrapped a pillow around my head and waited for her to exhaust herself. But the longer I waited, the more frantic her sustained volleys of wailing became. Unable to rouse Rhea, my wife, I stumbled out of bed and tripped over a toy plastic barn into Myra's room.

I flipped on the light. She was raving. She sat in her crib, hands clamped on the slats like an inmate. Tears had glued her eyes shut. I picked her up to soothe her, but she squirmed and shoved me away as if I were the source of her pain. In the chafing light, I hummed haggard lullabies to her, but all the while I was growing angrier at Rhea, who was slumbering soundly in our room.

As I rocked our daughter, I thought about the argument Rhea and I had had the day before. The resentment rattled a trunk of broken toys in my head. I found myself grinding my molars as I tried to lull our daughter back to sleep.

We had argued about the name for our soon-to-be-born daughter. At first, it had been an offhand discussion. But before long, the whole thing had escalated into a shouting match, and neither of us had been able to stifle the eruption. I had named our first daughter: Myra Dawn. So Rhea had tacitly laid claim to the right of naming our second daughter.

"Carmen," she'd cooed during her first trimester, sitting cross-legged on the couch and pouring through *1001 Fabulous Baby Names*, a book published by Hawthorne House, Inc., the company I work for. "Anne Marie," she'd intoned with maternal relish as thick as a milkshake. "Michelle, Daphne. Oh, here's one! I just love it! Listen: Simone. Doesn't

that sound majestic? Simone.” She’d repeated its mystic mantra: “Simone, Simone.”

To jam a boulder in her craw, I’d offhandedly mentioned something about naming our second daughter “Charity.”

“Charity?” she’d spat back. A black trace of sarcasm had laced her response: “Never!” She’d flung her rejection in my face like a dirty sock. Then she’d gone back to reading *1001 Fabulous*.

To spite her, I’d started blathering on about my list of names, names that were also characteristics: Felicity, Faith, Hope, Miracle. I’d insisted that they were exceptional names for a girl because they emanated timeless wonder and virtue.

Rhea had laughed in my face, and the whole thing had spiraled into a cat-and-dog fight. She’d yelled at me. I’d yelled at her, and Myra Dawn had started bawling like an air raid siren.

In an effort to deliver the knockout punch, I’d bumped up my business flight on the spot. I’d called Hawthorne House’s travel secretary and requested to fly right away, with Rhea and Myra fuming in the kitchen next to me. It was a childish thing to do, but I just had to get away. Then, the night before my flight, Myra Dawn went ballistic, and the guilt drove me from bed to try and comfort her. But she wasn’t comforted. I wasn’t either.

At the airport, I felt groggy and irritated. I wore a comfortable blue business suit with suspenders and a red tie splashed with drunken gold dots. My cavalier exterior included an umbrella and overcoat hooked over one arm. In my free hand, I swung my trusted and well-traveled oxblood leather attaché. Rhea handed me a paperback crime novel. We traded strained goodbyes at the security checkpoint.

“Call me,” Rhea said, bouncing Myra Dawn in her arms.

She looked beautiful. They both looked beautiful. Rhea wore her hair in two springy ponytails, like a college co-ed. Her freckled face glowed with a fresh application of makeup, and she had rolled up her overall cuffs to display her sculpted siren’s ankles. Her breasts and belly were swollen beneath her William & Mary sweatshirt in a way that made my head ache with desire and regret. I wanted to slap her, to tear her clothes off and make love to her on the security conveyor belt. The night of our anniversary, she had played up the college girl part to get me to promise her a cruise to Cancun. She was irked now, the way she was when we learned our second pregnancy would postpone our cruise.

"Sure," I said.

"Think about Simone," she said, planting a dry peck on my cheek.

"Think about Charity," I said, kissing Myra's forehead.

"Never," she winced.

"Think about it," I said, passing through the security check, waving. "I'll call you. I'll be home in two days. Maybe three. 'Bye."

I waved to them one last time and stalked toward the boarding gate. A storm brooded in my head, the way it always does when I leave Rhea and Myra in the oilslick wake of unresolved conflicts. But I'd gagged down too much animosity for one week. I needed to get away for a while, finish some pressing work, and recharge. I was running from trouble, plain and simple.

The flight was long, and I slept most of the way, watched the in-flight movies, and did some drowsy reading. I sat next to a Polish gentleman in a cinnamon cardigan who told me the tragic story of his alcoholic sister, a woman he called "Meesha," how she died of sclerosis of the liver before they could "make things right" with one another.

On the way over, as we soared over futuristic cathedrals of purple clouds and the moonlit ocean, I thought about them: my wife and daughter. The feud had wrenched open a personal Pandora's box in both of us. And why had we fought? Over a name for our next daughter? *What's in a name?* I asked myself, forgetting the writer and reference. *What did it matter what we called her?*

My wife's list of names materialized on an imaginary chalkboard in my mind: Simone, Carmen, Daphne. Then mine: Charity. I thought about it, saw the cute babbling doll face that would match the name, felt the fingers curled around my one large finger, listened to the crying gurgles. *It would fit*, I thought. *And why'd she laugh at me? She always laughs at me. I like Charity. Charity's nice.* It wasn't so much that I hadn't liked Rhea's list of names as much as it was that she'd laughed at and utterly rejected mine. When I latched on to that thought, I felt the resentment wedge back into my throat and lodge itself in my intellect like a hunk of bad cheese. *It would be Charity*, I thought. *Yes: Charity.*

As we touched down in Gatwick, I told myself that Rhea would never laugh at me again. *Besides*, I thought, passing through customs and shuffling out into the gray drizzle of Thursday morning in London, *she'd grow to like it. My wife needs to understand me*, I thought, stepping on to the

Gatwick Express to Victoria Station. *To appreciate me*, I told myself, *to understand where I'm coming from*.

I stayed a day in London to get over jet lag and the next day caught a train from St. Pancras to Sheffield. On arriving, I confirmed some appointments by phone from Sheffield Central and caught a bus, a No. 59, to Darnell. I'd traveled to Darnell many times before, so the route and the bus numbers were like reading my own social security number. I caught the No. 59 downtown, near Hole-in-the-Road. At the city's buzzing hub, top-heavy red and beige double-decker buses jostled like groggy circus animals, waiting to pick up passengers. Black taxis crawled in and out, horns braying. A few stumpy benches lined the walks there, and there was a big black statue of some important figure—I confess, I don't know who—over which jittery pigeon colonies clambered, whitening out its sculpted surface with splattered refuse.

I like Sheffield. It's a colossal bother, but there's something about the bustle, the congestion, and the pigeons that makes it an ideal charade into which to vanish. Whenever I return, I take the city and, like its enigmatic ebony statue, wrap the urban mantle of feathers, exhaust fumes, and concrete around me like a cloak of anonymity and just go—walk, take a bus, hop a train—to where I want. I can be who I want to be.

That day, I felt the same. I sat on the No. 59 to Darnell, practically invisible. For a blitz of time, I'd forgotten about Rhea and our fight, our unborn daughter's litany of names, the screeched hullabaloo. My past and future had blended into the city's wonderful, nameless roar. I sat in my seat, chewing on a sandwich I'd bought at Cobb's of Doncaster. It was a farmer's cobb: turkey, beef, mustard. I was idly vetting the pastiche of people on the bus. It was the usual for the late afternoon crowd: smokers, anachronistic punks, fossil men wearing their caps like the past, women in plastic hoods, mothers lugging bags of oranges, eggs, bananas, and tea.

Automatically, I ran over the trip in my mind. I'd done it before. I could see my route like a red laser darting across a map—leaving town center; the bus crawling away like a sick mammoth, and then doddering up toward Manor Top; leaving Manor Top, and then harrumphing down Prince-of-Wales Road; the gears grinding, the bus leveling out at the bottom of Prince-of-Wales Road, passing under a pigeon-stained flyover, and then hitting the shopping hub of Darnell. Once at Darnell, I'd find one of our many U.K. booksellers—R. F. Finch's—do the song and dance I had to

do there, let the chit-chat break off before it got wearisome, and then reverse the whole thing. It was a simple and yet intricate bit of business.

The faceless day wore a mizzly cowl. People hurried by, shoulders hunched, hands crammed in pockets or umbrellas parrying the wind. The upper level of the No. 59 was smoky, too smoky for my liking. Darkly, I considered scenarios that would allow me to make up with Rhea without having to admit I was in the wrong. The whole problem revolved in my head like a three-dimensional puzzle, accompanied by the off-key sigh of deflating bagpipes. No matter how I reconfigured it, I couldn't get the win-win solution's cubic pieces to snap together.

The bus still wasn't moving. Dismayed, I leaned my head against the glass, watching the doomsday stream of people outside. They hurried past the buildings: Cobb's of Doncaster, Barclay's, Oxfam, W. H. Smith's, and a flurry of tobacconists and off-licenses. I gazed through the dizzy flutter of pigeons, waiting impatiently for the packed bus to crawl away from the curb. I looked over at the anonymous black statue, counting and classifying the pigeons on its head and shoulders: white, gray, mixed, speckled, genetically diseased, crippled. I counted thirty, wishing the bus would move, growing more and more annoyed as we waited. The square was packed, and the buses and taxis were gridlocked. All around me, passengers complained along with the engines.

On the lower level, someone swore and got off. I watched the young man who had disembarked—hair sculpted in filth, angular, in a green army jacket and plaid pants, motorbike boots, chains, Union Jack appliqué stitched to the left shoulder—stalk off into the flawed mural of the crowd. I watched him for as long as I could. He looked back and raised his hand in a reversed peace sign—the British bird—barked something vulgar, and disappeared around the corner.

Then I saw them.

At the moment that I saw them, I realized that they'd always been there, but I hadn't been focused enough on the scene to pull them out of the crowd. I saw them both because *she* was walking toward *him*. On the sidewalk, a homeless man crouched cross-legged on the sidewalk like a grungy, emaciated Buddha. He sat with his back against Barclay's granite facade, his grimy shoeless feet splayed out like prosthetic limbs. And the woman. She strode directly toward him. As I watched her, I realized the homeless man had no idea he was the target, but I knew she was aiming at him, a warship bucking a gale of bodies to reach home port. She wore a

conservative maroon uniform, a kind I'd never seen. She wore no bonnet, but her uniform—knee-length skirt, blazer, deep maroon dye and somber navy blue borders—classed her as some kind of religious volunteer or civil servant. Her blond hair hung in greasy streaks around her face. She wore smeared glasses that showed slits for eyes. Her movements projected a weightless but direct energy, and not the fatalistic schoolmarmish languor you might have expected from such a volunteer. Her skin was the color of cold cream. Caught in the drama, I watched her stride through the crowd like a duck churning up a waterfall. I watched every step, as I chewed on my farmer's cobb. In the rows up front, others on the stalled No. 59 were watching her, too.

The more I tracked her swift vector, the more interested I grew. It was as if the city of Sheffield had jumped the cogs in the grandfather clock of the cosmos. For some reason, I felt, this man and woman were destined to meet, and the puzzle of time would be solved or confounded at their meeting. As she approached, I could see she carried something heavy, something the passing crowd had previously obscured. Her thin but muscular frame tilted to the right to compensate for the burden that swung in her fist. She was plain, but she wore the determined look of a stone saint. Her nose was narrow, and she wore no makeup. Her hair was parted in the middle, and it trembled like grass in the breeze of the streaming crowds. She wore black shoes and light-blue elastic stockings she had yanked up to her knees. I had suspicions about her motives, but the strange mix of militarism and resignation in her manner confounded me. *There aren't people like this anymore*, I told myself, looking around at the reactions of others, still wishing the bus would move. Camouflaging my scrutiny behind my sandwich, I squinted to see what she was carrying. I expected to see in her chaste grip a massive gong of antediluvian design with which, on reaching the homeless man, she would bang out over the city an invocation to the apocalypse. She reached the homeless man and knelt. As she did, I could see the observers in front of me on the upper level of the No. 59 lean forward and scrutinize her, as I did. The heavy object she carried was a bucket filled with soapy water, which she set down on the sidewalk. Out of the bucket, she produced a bright orange sponge. In the double knot of her fists, she wrung out the excess water, and—as we murmured on the bus—began to wash the homeless man's feet.

With the businesslike detachment of a bricklayer, she worked the sponge over his ankles and heels, slowly at first. Then, as she sensed the re-

silience of the filth's tacky armor, she began to rub with more ardor, gritting her teeth, jerking her torso forward like a piston. All the while, the homeless man gave no sign that he registered in his mind the significance of her actions. She worked at his feet, trying to scour away the evil crust of Sheffield grime. Like a scullery maid, she worked her sponge. But still he sat motionless, watching dumbly, staring with concrete eyes through the whirl of suds and benefaction.

He chewed robotically on what looked like a stale wedge of bread, examining his feet as if they weren't attached to his body. His ragged hair and matted beard shot from his head and chin like a mane of smoke. His Victorian chimney sweep's face was creased in soot. His pants were slashed from the knees down, and he wore the tornado rags of a trenchcoat around his shoulders. From our seats, we watched the narrative unfold in silence, as if someone had pressed our fingers to the pulse in the city's wrist.

No one outside the bus noticed them. The herds of Sheffield nobodies stampeded by, too hungry and hurried to care. After the woman finished one foot, she started on the next. A prim escutcheon across her back and shoulders—"Sisters of Salvation," in filigreed gold embroidery—reflected the dull light like damselfly wings. Her energy had begun to wane. She plunged the sponge in the bucket, wrung out the dirty water, and attacked the remaining foot, pumping her elbows as if trying to eradicate every Satanic stain in the world. Damp snail curls of hair clung to her forehead and cheeks. Even after she switched to the other foot, the homeless man chewed meditatively on the wad of his bread, scrutinizing the woman's actions from another dimension.

Farther forward in the bus, someone couldn't take it anymore and laughed out loud, pointing. It was a young man in an old Puma T-shirt and shimmering shamrock warm-up pants. Suddenly self-conscious, the young man went silent, plucked a cigarette out of a pack, and lit it, spinning away from the window. Turning from the laughing young man, I looked out the window again.

The sister had finished. Having scrubbed her befouled corner of the world free of dirt and sin, she stood, gathered herself, and prepared to leave. All of us, including the young man who'd laughed, leaned toward the windows and examined the homeless man. It was indeed a miracle. He still sat on the sidewalk, as dismal and smoggy as an English day. But at the end of each leg was affixed a glossy pink doll's foot. In place of two dis-

gusting naked feet, he now possessed two new ones, bright as plastic, as if a fairy toymaker had snapped on replacements.

Still he didn't act as if anything had changed. Quickly, the Sister of Salvation collected her bucket and sponge and walked to the gutter. Her forehead sparkled with perspiration, lending an angelic glister to her common features. At the curb, she knelt again and poured out the dirty water. She wrung out the sponge with both hands. The grimy water drove a black torrent of muck down the gutter, flooding filth into filth. The gutter was already running like a septic wound, poisoned with dark green foam, brown slime, and pulpy yellow gunk. As she emptied her bucket, she appeared to be humming something cheerful to herself, a hymn perhaps. A transfigured look of bliss had settled on her face. I waited for a flock of angel pigeons to descend and pluck her skyward.

But then he flew—at her. An electric shock from the sidewalk jolted him forward, and he lunged. We all shrank back from the bus windows. Helplessly, we watched him hurtle like a ragged ghost toward the unsuspecting Sister of Salvation. On the lower level of the bus, a woman screamed. With the agility of a panther, he ambushed the Sister from behind. He seized her in a bearhug around her midriff. She didn't scream. She jerked: once. The burst of electricity that jumpstarted his body paralyzed hers from crown to sole. In his embrace, she twitched and then stiffened into a wax statue.

“Do some' it, love,” said an old man on the bus.

“Aye,” others said. “Gi' o'er.”

Nobody stopped to help. Nobody on the sidewalks outside broke stride as the urban wildman grabbed the Sister of Salvation, who had crumpled to a sitting position. He began to strip off her shoes and socks like a frenzied ape shearing the rind from an orange. First, he clawed at the laces and yanked off her shoes. The Sister had melted into stupor. She stared at a bare patch of cement, unable to move. Her shoes sailed over the crowd into the street. One bounced onto the roof of a waiting taxi. The cabby got out, retrieved it from the roof, examined it quizzically, and tossed it into the gutter.

Then, ignited by a lust for action, the homeless man peeled off the Sister's light blue stockings. Her naked feet and legs shone like white columns in the gray revelatory light. Despite her public defrocking, she remained stunned. With a dignified air, the man cupped the Sister's un-

spotted feet in one of his paws and, one at a time, began to smear them with handfuls of mire from the gutter.

The bus became a hive of shock and amazement. A few outraged horns bawled, and taxis gunned their engines. Shouts of dismay clashed with the traffic's feeble protests, but nobody intervened. Handful after handful, he smeared the toxic gunk from the gutters onto the Sister's legs and feet. With each scoopful, he grew more animated, more determined. He seemed to sing as he worked, incomprehensible songs of mythic revivals and ancient world orders. Soon, her feet, ankles, and calves were sheathed in go-go boots of gutter slime. Convinced his job was complete, he stood and wandered off, leaving her to sag on the curb like a wrecked mannequin. He melted into the slipstream of the crowd, and still she didn't move, a blank stare on her face, the orange sponge gripped like a counterfeit relic in her white-knuckled fist.

For a second, I thought of running to her aid, but thoughts of my imminent appointment, coupled with fatigue, buckled an invisible belt across my lap and strapped me to my seat. I looked down; I hung my head between my hands. The floor was littered with cigarette stubs, candy wrappers, and food packets. I was desperate for the bus to pull away from the station.

Then, as if prompted by my thoughts, the bus hitched forward, and everyone expelled a collective sigh. A few people cheered. The No. 59 to Darnell was lumbering away, past the black statue and pigeons, away from the trauma and grief of the busy sidewalks. In my bowels, I felt the raspy baritone engines rev and mumble. I looked out the window for the Sister of Salvation, wishing her some kind of benedictory saving grace in the teeming indifference of the crowds.

She was gone.

Quickly, I scanned the moving sidewalks, hoping to spot her maroon uniform coursing like a fleck of martyr's blood among the fleet of cars, buses, and taxis. As we entered traffic, I craned my neck back to see the black statue of the unknown dignitary, but his stoic expression indicated that she had disappeared, that perhaps she had never really existed. I examined the faces of my fellow commuters, but they were all staring at the floor, as I had done, as if avoiding the face of the future.

They were avoiding her.

Like a supremely disheveled dream, she walked unsteadily down the aisle of the upper level on the No. 59 to Darnell, trying not to inhale a

wall of cigarette smoke. She carried her soiled shoes and socks in one hand and like a refugee searched the rows for an empty seat. The bus swayed like a creaking galleon, nosing its way through the traffic toward Manor Top. A fine fog glazed her eyes, and I could tell she'd been crying, though not hysterically. Smudges of brown muck dotted her China doll's cheeks. She chewed her bottom lip as she hunted for a place to sit.

Now that she was closer, I could see how young she was. Her feet and legs were still smeared with street slime. Using the poles and seat backs for support, she stepped over the trash in the aisle, as if tiptoeing across the spires of one hundred miniature holy cities. She was sniffing, trying to keep any further weeping boxed up. Still, as she came closer, I could see that a grim smile as level as the horizon had replaced her shocked expression. A veil of clarity and haggard reason shrouded her eyes. She was no longer the dumb doll from the street. She was simply searching for a seat where she could plant herself amid the ruins of the day.

Then I realized that all the seats were taken. Despite what we had all witnessed, no one had yet offered her assistance. Out of instinct, I rose. A coil of energy lifted me from my seat, and I grabbed my coat, attaché, and crushed sandwich paper. Stepping to the side, I indicated with a gentlemanly gesture that she could have it. For a moment, as the No. 59 rocked drunkenly back and forth through the towering urban sprawl, we faced each other in animal silence. The Sister of Salvation gazed through me toward the bus's emergency exit door. I gestured for her to take my seat. She glanced into my eyes, searching for a hidden fire from a prehistoric ritual, seeking the secret the city hadn't yet translated into scripture.

Our impasse drew the attention of the entire upper section. Everyone stared. Then, as if channeling her own spirit, she widened her eyes and cocked her head to one side, weighing the intrinsic merit of my actions on a tiny golden balance. She smiled. Disarmed, I smiled back and motioned toward my seat again. In one movement, she shifted her dirty socks and shoes to her other arm to free her right hand. The slap she shot across my face delivered a thunderclap that severed earth and heaven. Like a taxi backfire, it scattered the pigeon congregations on both sides of the bus, sent them flapping for the sanctuary of the skies and the sunny cathedral heights. My head rocketed to the right. My cheek swarmed with pain. Reeling, I dropped my attaché in the aisle.

“Ow dare ya?” she raved in a halting Yorkshire accent. “*Can’t find me own seat? Can’t bear to stand, eh?*”

“Sorry,” I muttered, holding my ringing face.

“*Can’t stand on me own!*” she screeched above the noise of the bus, shaking her socks and shoes at me. “*A helpless woman, eh?*”

This is how I remember it.

Except that when I got back to my room, I called Rhea. She answered the phone, and I could hear Myra Dawn calling to me in her baby language in the background.

“I miss you,” Rhea said. “It’s weird—”

“I’m coming back,” I said. “I’m—tomorrow—”

As we talked, the timbre of her voice seized on the wedge of resentment beneath my breastbone. She spoke, and I watched out the window as a crusade of pigeons ascended, only to be consumed in the gray fire high over Sheffield, city of cities.

“Simone’s fine,” I said. “I was—just—”

“Charity’s good,” she said.

“Charity?” I challenged, a laugh catching in my throat. “Never.”