

The Birdcage - Maya, Year 11, NSW

The ballroom was a whirlwind of silk and polite laughter. Girls hid behind the facade of the upper class; a facade so secure and inviting like the old drapes that adorn the room. The gilded bars of a birdcage - beautiful, but confining. The air was thick with the sweet scent of roses, mingling with heavy perfume, and the buzz of fake conversation hummed like a swarm of bees.

Charlotte forced a smile, turning her gaze towards the dance floor, where couples twirled and spun beneath delicate arches, their laughter ringing out in harmony with the orchestra.

Her mother, ever the puppeteer, whispered in her ear, “My my, won’t you look at all the lonely girls, Charlotte. If I were them, I’d be seething with jealousy at the sight of a fellow girl engaged. Come on now, let us depart from the company of those... unsuitable... for us. You are so lucky to be engaged.”

“Yes mother,” Charlotte sighed.

Lucky. Charlotte choked. Glancing at the gentlemen her father had ordained for her—a man of wealth and status, everything she was supposed to desire, she felt as empty as a lemonade glass left in the sun. He was handsome enough, but her mother’s words were iron in her heart, clanging painfully. The gentleman in question caught her eye and winked. He reeked of cigarettes and dandified masculinity.

Discarding her dance card on a nearby dessert table laden with sweets, Charlotte glanced at the crisp envelope gripped tightly in her hand. Inside was a ticket for the first steam train out of this isolated English town, but more importantly, a manuscript, bound by paper strings.

Feigning innocent curiosity, she tilted her head towards the striking paintings embellishing the walls, but offered them no glance. Her piercing eyes scanned the room, like a bird’s vigilant watch of an open sky, as she steadily made her way out of the judgemental hall and into the enticing study.

The room was a garden of forgotten dreams, where aspirations lay like wilted petals across the floor. Crumpled paper leaped to fashion her a rose carpet - not of opulent velvet or gleaming silk - but woven from words. Heavy, suffocating words that had once held longing and hope, now abandoned. The lamps were weary sentinels, their pale light illuminating long twisted shadows that danced along the walls, lingering, persistent, like whispers from ghosts of forgotten wishes. As Charlotte carefully navigated through the dust coated furniture, felt a faint hum from the shelves – the buzzing of hopes so close yet far; attainable yet unreachable; tempting yet futile.

Her fingers itched. The longing to write clawed at her insides, but her wings were pinned to her body. She smoothed the wrinkles in her gown, imagining her mother's horror at her absence from the dancehall.

What a frivolous ordeal this is, she thought bitterly. For a well-brought-up young woman to be caught writing a novel — how utterly inappropriate!

Abandoned publication forms were broken promises that screamed to her. The words on the page were familiar yet foreign, and the author's name on the papers sat on her tongue like an old coin, worn and tarnished. Charles. It had been Charles for years, hadn't it? She had hidden behind that veil of deception - it was easier, but it choked her all the same.

She studied the train ticket in her hand. A symbol of escape, of freedom, a way out of the life she had known. No longer would she be trapped by the meticulous care of appearance, her life dictated by the cold hand of etiquette. She would be free! But even freedom came with its own cage—a barbed wire that would detain her, squeeze her independence and dreams already on the verge of obsolete out of her like a lemon, until every last drop fell into a deep, dark pit.

The stories she had written would sink to the bottom of the ocean. The ink, so confident in the path it traced, had now blurred like a watercolour painting. How many times had she written under the guise of Charles, pretending to be someone she was not?

She looked down at the parchment, yellowed with age like those centuries-old chains that still bind women, daughters, sisters - to a destiny they did not choose. She wanted to write, she really did. And she did write, so many stories! But how could she bring herself to publish them, under someone else's name?

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Just weeks before, she had sat in this very room, trembling, when her father summoned her in the dead of night. He had found one of her stories.

“A woman? Writing stories like this?” he scoffed, waving the pages like they were dirty linen. “I won't have it. You'll marry Mr. Wright in two months. It's the right thing to do. No more of this fantasy.”

She had bowed her head then. “Yes father.” It was in the quiet that followed, under the suffocating weight of her parents' dreams, that her own began to rebel. By candlelight she scribbled, the flame casting shadows of a version of herself she was yet to meet. A girl who said “yes” to her truth.

What happened first in whispers - writing her name in margins, slipping pages of her stories to trusted servants, one of whom had sent it to a publisher in London. Then came the letter. A real offer. A real chance.

That was when Charlotte realized: she didn't want to run away because she was afraid. She wanted to run because she was finally free.

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A soft knocking on the door jolted her from memory. Her housemaid, Martha, peered into the study, her eyes sparkling with something Charlotte couldn't name - pride, maybe. Hope. "Miss Charlotte," came the gentle voice. "The post just arrived."

Held carefully in Martha's dainty hands was a letter. Charlotte's fingers shook as she received it, recognizing the handwriting before she even broke the seal.

"To the author—your stories made us weep. We would be honored to publish your novel. Please confirm whether you would like to proceed under the name 'Charles.'"

For a long moment, she just stared at the words. She had dreamed of this moment, but never dared believe it might come. Not like this. Not so soon.

She exhaled slowly.

Her hands tightened around the parcel — but not in fear. She smiled.

"Thank you Martha."

"Miss, shall I send a telegram to confirm?"

"No," Charlotte whispered. Then louder: "Not yet."

The air shifted. The silence grew sharper, like the space between a lightning flash and the thunder that follows. Charlotte walked to the writing desk. The ink bottle gleamed in the lamplight, dark and still, as she dipped in her pen. Her hand hovered above the manuscript's cover. And then, with quiet defiance, she wrote one word.

Charlotte.

Not Charles. Never again.

Behind her, the sharp click of heels shattered the stillness. Her mother stood in the doorway, the door wrenched open, and red with fury.

“Charlotte, come out here at once. You impertinent—”

But Charlotte didn't flinch. She didn't turn. She didn't answer.

Let them wait.

She had a train to catch, and a story to finish, and a sky to spread her wings and soar.