

Charlie

Every toy awaits to be unwrapped on Christmas morning by a smiling child. A child who stayed up all night hoping to see Santa Claus, but fell asleep on the stairs, who was carried to bed at 1 am by Mom or Dad, who sang carols up and down the block the week prior with her friends. Oh, how Charlie wanted to see the smile on little Finley Adams' face when she pulled apart that pretty red ribbon wrapped around his head.

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Charlie didn't remember much from whence he came. The first thing he could recall was seeing was a smile spread across Mrs. Lin's face. She cut the thread attached to him and handed him over to Mr. Lin. Mr. Lin had dark hair back then. And he didn't have those eye shadows like he does now. But, he always had those smile lines next to his eyes. He must have been smiling forever.

The pair named him Charlie.

Charlie spent the next three months sitting next to Mrs. Lin. She was in bed most of the time and she would lean Charlie on her growing belly. He wasn't sure what a baby was, but Mr. and Mrs. Lin called it Ruby. He could hear little kicks of the baby. He was closer to Ruby than anyone else. He told her stories of when he saw Mr. Lin smiling. He told Ruby that the smile was for her. He told her all the things he noticed about Mr. and Mrs. Lin: how they would spend Wednesday nights listening for her little kicks, although Charlie heard it all the time. And how Mr. Lin would sing to her belly in the mornings.

The following weeks were full of excitement, but Charlie couldn't understand why.

"Ow!" Mrs. Lin let out a yelp as she reached for a dish on the rack above the sink.

Mr. Lin rushed over, "Honey, what's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," she chuckled. "Just kicking is all." Charlie was confused. It was painful kicking but it was good?

"Oh," Mr. Lin sighed. He leaned down to kiss Mrs. Lin's belly. "Well, don't go too hard on your mama," kiss, "just enough to let us know you're there."

Mrs. Lin smiled at him. "Could you just reach that plate for me?"

And the day finally came. Mrs. Lin had been feeling mild contractions all day.

"My water broke, Eddie," she gasped. Charlie heard it from inside the shelf.

"Shit," Mr. Lin ran over to the kitchen.

"Get the bag," she urged him.

Charlie saw an unnerved Mr. Lin yank open the shelf and let in light. Charlie barely had the chance to greet him as Mr. Lin snatched the bag he was peeking out of. They rushed to the car. Mrs. Lin was already out there and Mr. Lin threw the bag in the back of the car.

“Shit, shit!” Mr. Lin almost swore under his breath. “Keys –”

“Ed!” Mrs. Lin shouted as he yelled as she tossed him the keys.

“Agh,” he fumbled with the keys as he caught them. They both got in the car and Mr. Lin started the ignition. “That is why I love you.”

“Funny, love you too. Drive please.”

“Going, going,” he laughed as he pulled out of the driveway.

The hospital was witnessing a boring day, until the Lins came in.

Charlie heard the doctor's feet scuffling quickly to Mrs. Lin.

He went with Mr. Lin to the bathroom once Mrs. Lin had been settled in a room.

Mr. Lin splashed his face with water. “The hell. This doesn’t work.”

Charlie tried to comfort Mr. Lin. *Mr. Lin, it's okay. Just think. Don't be stressed. Mrs. Lin needs you right now. Straighten up and go sit with her. Let's go.*

Mr. Lin rang out his hands. “Alright, Leo. C'mon. It's not even you who's pregnant. Let's go.”

That's what I just said.

He looked at himself one more time in the mirror, grabbed his bag, and left the bathroom.

Mr. Lin opened the door to Mrs. Lin's room to find doctors rushing around his wife.

“What's wrong?” he asked worriedly.

“Nothing, Mr. Lin,” a young nurse looked at him. “Your wife is dilated ten centimeters already. We're bringing her to the delivery room.”

“Oh – ok,” Mr. Lin stuttered.

“Just leave your things here and you can grab it when the baby comes.”

Mr. Lin just nodded in response.

The baby never came. Mr. Lin came back several hours later. No Mrs. Lin. No little Ruby. Mr. Lin brought Charlie home and put him in a box and back on the shelf – a shelf that Charlie got to know very well in the next thirteen years.

One day, he left the shelf, but not the box. Mr. Lin brought Charlie over to a different shelf in his workshop. Charlie heard little footsteps and big ones just the same. He heard as Mr. Lin's voice became hoarse. The melodies Charlie had heard for years grew quieter and cracked. He could hear cheer, but not joy. Mr. Lin would sing to the little boys and girls that came in the store. His voice helped the crying toddlers calm down. Charlie was proud of Mr. Lin. The old man had not been happy for a long time. It took a whole year for him to cry when Mrs. Lin didn't come home. And he let it happen and Charlie cried with him from within the box within the shelf. Now Mr. Lin was making other people happy.

Mr. Lin pulled Charlie out of his box on a Wednesday morning. It was the first time Charlie had seen lights in many years. And the workshop. Oh, how glorious it was. A few

beautiful handcrafted toys sat on the highest shelf. Mr. Lin would make nearly one hundred during the year to sell during Christmas time. Each was hand carved and painted. They didn't always sell out, but Charlie couldn't see why. They were the prettiest in the workshop by far.

Mr. Lin looked down upon the little bear, straight into his brownie eyes. Since that day, Mr. Lin had never touched Charlie, so much as really even looked at him. He flipped the little blue bow forward to reveal a dark blue embroidered *C* at its corner. "Ah, Charlie. Long time no see, my friend. I'm sorry I kept you in there so long. But, I figured your fur is still fluffy and there's a child out there with a lot of love to give to a fuzzy best friend. It's time to find you a home."

That's okay, Mr. Lin. I forgive you. Charlie wholeheartedly agreed it was time to have a home. Sure, he'd miss Mr. Lin, but he wanted to give a child what he never had the chance to give to Ruby. He'd do it for Mr. Lin and for Mrs. Lin.

Mr. Lin placed him atop the highest shelf in Mr. Lin's Workshop and Charlie sat, ready to be claimed.

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Mommys and daddys came in all day to buy their little angels the newest toys: Singh's Snowcone Machine, Little Lucy Laughs, Trains & Trucks, and even Sally the Unicorn. All of them had been lined up at eye level in the aisles, and had almost been sold out.

Ms. Linus came into the workshop, exhaling after successfully wiping the majority of the snow from her hat. She approached Mr. Lin at the front desk, pouring out onto his desk half a dozen coins. Mr. Lin pointed her in the direction of Charlie's aisle.

Ms. Linus frowned down the aisle for nearly a minute until she glanced upwards and saw Charlie. Charlie with the fuzzy belly, two brownie eyes, and a little blue bow. Ms. Linus bought him immediately and put him in her bag.

Charlie could barely see out of Ms. Linus' purse. She had walked to a construction site where out of nowhere came thirty little kids. Charlie saw a little girl in a faded pink corduroy dress slam into Ms. Linus with a hug. When asked what she did today, she began rambling on and on about her open-air sewing class. How she was working on trousers for a dolly or stuffy, which she had asked for for her Christmas present. Charlie knew they'd be best friends. How wonderful it would be to have a nice pair of trousers to go with his little blue bow.

Ms. Linus and Charlie decided to keep him a secret until Christmas morning. That Christmas eve, Ms. Linus came out of her room at 12:30 am to pick up Finley, who was fast asleep, from the staircase and put her to bed.

Ms. Linus brought Charlie downstairs alone.

"Well, teddy bear. Here we go. You are the only present under the tree this year."

Am I? Charlie felt special, seeing as there were no other little toys around him and he would be Finley's only teddy.

“Be sure to make Finley real happy. Can you do that for me?”

Yes, yes. For Mr. Lin. And for Mrs. Lin. For Finley. And for you. My pleasure.

Ms. Linus tied a pretty red ribbon around Charlie’s head, wrapped him in a soft purple blanket, and placed him under the tree.

But it wasn’t morning when Charlie got to talk to Finley.

“Hello,” he heard a high voice stumble down the stairs. “Ooooooh,” Charlie could hear her smile muffled by the blanket.

When Finley peeled back the purple blanket, he saw her face clearly for the first time. She had brownie eyes just like him and her hair was in messy pigtails. A wide smile was plastered on her face.

“Hello, sir,” she whispered. “I’m Finley. I don’t wanna wake us Ms. Linus. Do you have a name?” She waited for an answer.

Charlie.

The little girl folded the blue bow forward. “Well, there’s a C. C for Connor?”

Not quite.

“C for Cooper?”

Nope.

“C for Charlie?”

Yes!

“C for Christopher.”

Charlie.

“Christopher. I like Christopher.”

Well, Christopher it is then.

“Sir Christopher is even better.”

I sure like being a sir. I like it.

“I hope you like it. I think it suits you perfectly,” she giggled. “Christopher, I made you a pair of trousers. They’re not done yet, but you’ll surely have them after Christmas.”

They played for nearly an hour. Sir Christopher and Finley were pirates at first. They stole the bad pirate’s booty. Sir Christopher and Finley maintained then that they were good pirates and distributed it back to all the townspeople it was stolen from. Then, they were fairies. Finley had green wings like Tinkerbell and Christopher had blue ones because of his bow. They almost flew to Neverland, but Finley fell asleep on their way. So, they fell asleep together.

Finley woke when she heard a rumble from far away. She blinked away the tiredness and realized how late it was. “Alright Christopher. I’ll go to sleep now. Pretend I went to bed earlier,” she giggled as she put her finger over her lips and re-wrapped him in the purple blanket. *Okay, okay. But only because we had so much fun.* Christopher promised.

“I’ll be here to get you tomorrow morning.”

He waited for the sun patiently, when the little girl would excitedly uncover him from the purple blanket and hold him close to her. And he decided he would take care of her and protect her when she was sad and celebrate with her when she was happy.

When the morning came and the light peeked through the blanket, Christopher's anticipation was overflowing. He heard a knock on the door and a barrage of footsteps coming down the stairs. But, instead of little feet rushing towards the tree, Christopher heard scared voices. "C'mon," someone whispered. We have to make it to the train." The door of the house slammed shut. All was silent. No one was there. And after some time, Christopher fell asleep.

When he woke up, Christopher would barely see; soot was covering his brownie eyes. He was no longer fuzzy and his blue bow was nowhere to be found. The tree behind him was demolished and he realized he was no longer inside. Wood and splinters were strewn across the floor and there was no sign of Finley or Ms. Linus. Maybe she'd come back from her trip and pick up her Christmas present. So, Charlie laid there waiting for Finley.