

*Fishing Story*

The email arrives a year after Charlotte's death, almost to the day. *Dear Mr. Greer*, it begins. It is brief, courteous. It explains to him in a too-soft tone that Ainsley Cornwall was given his information because Charlotte had listed him as her next of kin. That she had recently learned Charlotte Byrd was her birth mother, and she was interested in learning more about her. At the end, it informs him that she'd grown curious several months ago and begun the process of looking for her birth parents; however, she'd held off on writing him after learning of Charlotte's death. It seemed impolite, she said, to interrupt his life this way.

Alex puts on his glasses and reads it again.

It reads like a student making a request of her professor. How does he respond to that kind of request? He sits in front of his computer, fiddling with his lenses. Charlotte never told him she had a daughter. In fact, he knew very little of her early life. Every story she ever told him had begun when she was nearly thirty. And until now, he hadn't considered that strange at all.

*Dear Miss Cornwall*, he writes. Does he even *want* to meet her? Ainsley wants to meet *him*.

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He agrees to meet Ainsley at a nearby café. He chooses it because across the street a decal of Charlotte hangs on the window of an old North Face outlet. It's been there since the store closed, the blown-up vinyl splayed across six panes. In it, Charlotte hangs by two fingers from the lip of Arizona sandstone, silhouetted by the golden hour. The shot captures her poised to throw herself over the rock.

He remembers how the camera crew scrambled to get that shot. He was standing on the ground for the whole photoshoot, craning his neck to watch Charlotte climb. The camera had to be hung from sixty feet of rope, with motion sensor set to take the picture. The cliff was almost too cold to touch, and at first Charlotte leaned against it, sliding the kinks out of her rope and stacking it at her feet.

He remembers that before she started climbing, she took his cheeks in her hands as she always did and kissed him. Then she took off, and he sat at the base of the cliff with chalk prints on his face, too awkward to start a conversation with the belay.

He arrives to find workmen are stripping the picture. They chip away at Charlotte's hands, peeling plastic from glass. He pauses in front of the empty building and smiles at his reflection, warped in Charlotte's overblown features. It's a shame—he'd always loved that decal. He shoves his hands in his pockets and crosses the street to the café.

When he finally steps inside, it takes him ten minutes to realize the girl at the corner table is Ainsley. She's a skinny kid of nineteen, with square lenses hanging crooked over her nose and freckles that make her seem younger. Nothing about her immediately sings of Charlotte. If he squints, though, he can see it in her eyes—those hawk's eyes that had stared at him as he drank his coffee in the morning. But everyone has their mother's eyes if you look close enough. He tries to imagine Charlotte, herself at nineteen. He can't.

Ainsley introduces herself with a firm handshake and thanks him for meeting her. Again, he feels like a teacher answering a homework question. She asks him to tell her a little about Charlotte—surface level things, her hobbies and favorite foods.

“Charlotte was a pretty famous climber,” he says, unsure what else to tell her.

“Yeah. I know. That's her on the window across the street, isn't it? I saw it on the news when she died.” Ainsley's voice is flat, girlish. Still, it has a grit.

He tells her, yes, that's Charlotte in the window. He tells her Charlotte loved climbing more than anything. She loved the mountains; she loved to fish. “She once caught a salmon as big as me,” he says. “But a bear took it.”

“It's funny,” Ainsley cuts in, “I never liked the outdoors.”

He hadn't either, before he met Charlotte. But for some reason it makes him angry to hear.

Ainsley sits on the edge of her chair, leaning with her elbows on her knees. “How did you meet her?”

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He met Charlotte four years ago in a diner in Snoqualmie: a tin-roofed shack called the Old Bigfoot Diner. Its neon sign had lost a couple letters, and the front porch had nearly collapsed. The place had burned down since last he'd seen it.

He stopped there for dinner on the way home from a hike. He wasn't "outdoorsy," per say. He certainly wasn't the blue-jeaned picture of wanderlust he saw in men's magazines. But he enjoyed a Saturday at the lake, and at the end of the day he enjoyed the local burger joints.

He stopped there for dinner on the way home from an easy hike. He wasn't "outdoorsy," at least not yet. He certainly wasn't the blue-jeaned picture of wanderlust in men's magazines. But he enjoyed a Saturday at the lake, and he enjoyed the burger joints that cropped up in every mountain town.

Recalling that night, the first thing he remembered was her limp. Charlotte Byrd sauntered into the dive bar with a nasty limp, a tear in her cargo pants exposing her bloodied-up knee. Dust covered her shirt, and scratches lined her hands. She looked exhausted but unbearably smug, grinning ear to ear. She ordered a pint and a cheeseburger.

For a moment, he simply stared at her. Up close, her features were stern. Her crimson hair looked almost like blood in the diner-light. She resembled a Roman god of war. In his imagination, she gallivanted like a travelling knight. When she caught him, the rush of fear hit him like a brick to the chest.

Charlotte held his gaze and folded her arms over her chest. "Can I help you?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. "Are—are you all right?"

She let out a throaty laugh. He hadn't expected the sound of it. In his memory, rich and enticing.

"I'm having a fine afternoon, thanks," she said. Then, even less expected, she held out her hand. "I'm Charlotte."

He'd seen her before, somewhere. It nagged him. That night, after writing down her phone number on a gum wrapper and driving home in a daze, he would see her face on the cover of an outdoor

magazine. He'd picked it up a month ago, at an airport lounge. And on the front, Charlotte perched on some wire-thin tower of rock the way frat guys sit on bar stools.

Charlotte Byrd, it read, Cerro el Muerto. A summit view from a free climbing legend. And on the tail end of some adventure, she'd stopped at a dive bar in Snoqualmie, and enchanted him like a creature out of a storybook. She'd commanded that room, that dusty diner that smelled of cigarettes and bacon.

He called her the next day.

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Ainsley arrives at his apartment on Saturday, at 12:30 sharp like she'd promised. When he opens the door, she's standing there with a blue backpack, hugging her arms to her side.

"Is it still a good time?" she asks. She peers over his shoulder, and at once he feels strangely guarded of the place: this apartment he moved into after Charlotte died, the space he carved without her.

He waves Ainsley into a blue easy chair and pours two cups of tea before sitting down across from her. He listens to the click of her lacquered nails as she fidgets in her seat. She says almost nothing, except to thank him for the tea.

He sighs. "You wanted to hear more about Charlotte."

"What was she *like*?" Ainsley blurts out. It comes out in a high-pitched voice, as if she's embarrassed to ask.

"Brave," he replies, because that's the easiest. "Adventurous. Passionate." He tries to think of more adjectives, words that satisfy the woman he wishes Ainsley to see. He comes up short—*what was she like?* She got out of bed to watch thunderstorms. She touched him with callused hands. When he held her cheek in his palm, she was soft.

"She was an unnerving person to love."

Across the table, Ainsley chuckles. "I bet."

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One summer weekend, a month into their engagement, Charlotte took him fishing. They were travelling outside Boulder—she was climbing; someone was sponsoring it. She'd spent the week taping up her fingers and tending to sore limbs, but on her rest day, she wanted to fish.

The river roiled and foamed with snowmelt, and the bank had barely enough room for them to stand. His shoulder pressed against hers every time he went to cast. Mosquitos swarmed them like a screen over the sky.

Charlotte squinted, cast, and smiled as her line met its mark. Once she'd picked an eddy, she landed it every time. She fished the way she climbed, almost mathematically. He paused his own reel to watch her, to hear the sure whiz of her line.

At some point, she asked him if he had a fishing story.

He stared at her. "A what?"

"A fishing story," she said matter-of-factly, as if it were a pen, and she wanted to borrow it.

"I went fishing a little as a kid. Not like this." He gestured to the grand expanse of the Rockies. "It was more like, my dad bought a tub of worms and drove us to the canal."

"That's not a fishing story," she said.

"Then what is?"

"The big one. The one that got away. Listen—" And she told him the story of her first time witnessing the Alaskan salmon run: how they wriggled up the rivers in frenzied crowds, how the sun never fully set, and night was the color of wine. And the currents were so glutted with fish she could cast an empty line and let it drift until it hooked something, and that was how she caught her first salmon.

At that point she held up her hands to show him the length of it, nose to tail. At least two feet, and then she adjusted them wider. He had never even seen a whole salmon. His jaw hung open at the size.

Charlotte continued, "I didn't have it for long. As soon as I'd reeled it in I heard the sound no fisherman in Alaska wants to hear." Suspense dripped out of her. It took her forever to tell stories, but he didn't mind.

The grizzly bear was at least three times her size, grunting at her from the opposite shore. It saw her fish and prowled straight for her. She tried to frighten it with a blank pistol shot, but it had already seen its prize. And she abandoned her king salmon, and all her gear, there on the bank.

“You shot a blank?” he asked.

Charlotte nodded. She was grinning. And at that moment he realized—Charlotte hadn’t been *afraid* of the bear. She wasn’t foolish—a fool would have fought for his fish. But she didn’t tell the story as if she’d nearly died. She had abandoned her gear because that was the safe thing to do, but when he listened to her, he knew Charlotte hadn’t feared that bear at all.

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Charlotte lived the way all dead mountain climbers lived, and the fact that she died was not surprising at all. A slip, a loose bolt, that’s all it takes. And then, the kind of memorials he used to see on Charlotte’s Facebook page, for friends and idols she’d lost to the rock.

“She died in the Himalayas,” he tells Ainsley. She sits forward, listening intently, still nursing her tea.

“On Everest?” she asks.

“*God no.*”

She draws away from him and looks down at her lap.

“No,” he says again, softer. “On Annapurna. She never wanted to summit Everest.”

“Why not?”

Charlotte had once told him she was afraid of Everest. It was perhaps the only place she was afraid to die. *Everyone who dies on Everest is remembered for dying on Everest*, she’d said—left to mummify with every other frozen corpse marking the way up the Hilary Step.

He tells her, “No idea.”

“I’ve never heard of Annapurna,” Ainsley says.

Alex shrugs. “It’s just another mountain.” Then, for the first time in months, he reaches for Charlotte’s drawer—the desk drawer where he keeps her old photos. He finds a 2x4, a spare copy of their

wedding photo, and hands it to Ainsley. His eyes focus on the ceiling. In his peripheral vision, Charlotte's hair stands out against the white background.

Ainsley squints at the photo, furrowing her brow with such familiar concentration the hair stands up on his arms. He sees Charlotte hunched over a coil of rope, running her fingers over the fibers in search of weakness.

But Ainsley's hands are soft and uncallused. She pinches the photo delicately in one corner.

"She doesn't look how I imagined," she remarks. She presses her lips together and passes the picture back.

Alex cups the glossy paper in his palm, the only image he has of Charlotte *not climbing*. In it, she stands beside him in a soft white blazer, craning her neck to kiss his cheek. Her red hair sits in a pile against her neck, bluebells tucked into the sides. He can see the weathered creases the sun left on her face, her freckles aged and faded. He remembers her slender but here she is wiry, like a stray dog.

He tucks the picture back in its nest. He doesn't want to see it anymore. He doesn't want to look at Ainsley, with Charlotte's green eyes and someone else's button nose. She looks like Charlotte, but she doesn't. Or maybe after a year dead, Charlotte doesn't look like herself anymore.

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He remembers Charlotte's funeral with stark clarity. It was a weird, alcoholic affair, filled with climbers and climbing-writers who flew in from God knows where. Some of them told him "I'm sorry for your loss." Most of them said, "at least she died doing what she loved." Which was exactly what Charlotte had said every time she heard about another climber's death. Alex wondered if they planned to go to each other's funerals, or if they just showed up—a whole congregation come to collect one of their own.

Climbers talked about death often. Charlotte was no exception. When Uli Stick had died, she'd said, "He must have had a bad climb. It's a shame; he was one of the greats," and then she'd stirred sugar into her coffee.

Charlotte had been cremated. Not because she wanted to be; she'd never specified. Because she'd fallen so far they didn't have a choice.

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"You think if she didn't die, you might've had kids?" The question takes him by surprise. Ainsley kneels by the door, tying her sneakers. She watches him beneath the hood of her raincoat.

The question feels strangely like an invasion of privacy, like a line in the sand that he hasn't crossed himself. He's not sure why, considering all he's told her, but this time he draws away. "That's too personal," he says gently.

Ainsley cocks her head. In this light, her blonde hair has a copper tint to it. "Okay," she says. "Ask me something personal, then." Her voice seems less tentative now, deeper than it was when he first met her.

He hesitates before asking, "why did you decide to look for Charlotte?"

Ainsley shrugs. "My sister suggested it. It felt weird to do it before I left home, though, so I waited. When I asked my dad, he said my birth mother had left information if I ever wanted to get in touch with her as an adult. I followed up." She pauses. "I'm surprised you didn't know."

Alex furrows his brow. "Why?"

"It just seems like something you tell your spouse. 'Hey I had a kid twenty years ago; one day she might decide to contact me.'" Ainsley lowers her voice in a husky imitation of the woman in the 2x4 photograph. She's not that far off.

"She didn't have to tell me." He crosses his arms tightly over his chest. Charlotte never *had* to tell him anything.

Ainsley purses her lips. "Look, I'm not trying to insult her. It just seems like she didn't tell you much about herself."

"I was her husband. I knew her well enough."



Ainsley drops her eyes and continues tying her shoes. She works more slowly than she needs to, and he wonders if he was too short with her. She's only nineteen. She's as old as Charlotte had been when she was born.

"You didn't answer my question," she says before opening the front door.

Alex sighs. "I thought about starting a family with her," he says. "I imagined it would happen one day."

He imagined it distantly, like a folk song. He imagined moving to the country—somewhere with mountains, where Charlotte could climb without having to travel all the time. With the kinds of pine trees he liked to read under as a child. He imagined Charlotte a lot with these faceless children of theirs, teaching them how to catch lightning bugs in a jar. Teaching them how to climb, how to check the rope for weakness.

He never told Charlotte those wispy dreams. He was going to, when she got back from Lhotse. In the months after her death, he berated himself for not telling her sooner, just to know what she would say. It frustrated him, not knowing if she'd wanted the same thing, that he'd never had the courage to ask. Then, as the weight of her absence settled, he decided he was grateful their imaginary children had no faces.

"I'll send you some photos of her when she was young," he tells Ainsley. Not that young. The Charlotte he knew intimately was so much older—more recent—than the Charlotte who'd been Ainsley's mother. They'd inhabited the lives two different women.

He doesn't ask Ainsley what she thinks of Charlotte, now that she knows. He leans on the door frame and watches her walk down the front steps of his building, backpack slung over one shoulder. She disappears around the block, and he steps back inside.

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In a hotel bar in Juneau, Charlotte told a stranger her fishing story: the thundering meltwater, her empty fly-hook, a run of fish so thick it turned the water pink. She held up her arms, three feet apart, to

show him the size of the fish, as it had thrashed his toothy head. Did he know its jaw left a bruise in her arm? That's how heavy it was.

And the bear lumbered toward her, with silvering hair and a great hump on its back. It didn't grunt; it roared. It forded the river. She fired two shots into the sky before leaving her fish as an offering.

Alex leaned into her shoulder and listened, enraptured as the first time she told him. Later, in their room, he said, "the story was different than when you told me."

"How so?" She was sitting on the bed, a magazine balanced on her knees. He studied her but couldn't read her face.

"The fish got bigger," he said.

Charlotte smiled at him. "That's a fishing, story, love." Her eyes twinkled in the weak hotel light. "It's supposed to get bigger."