

To Be Charissée

It was during the first course that Carol announced that she wanted the woman's name for herself. "I've never been satisfied with this ordinary one of mine," she said to her companion, who halted the heavy soup spoon inches from his mouth. Though he was accustomed to Carol's way of beginning a conversation from the middle of somewhere to which he was not privy, this time it both startled and alarmed him.

"Charissée," Carol stretched out the first syllable with a sound that came from deep in her throat and then attempted a trill that was weak and fell apart. She straightened her back and thrust out her chest and her companion wanted only to wrap his free hand around one of the breasts that pressed against Carol's peach-colored mohair sweater. Pumpkin soup dribbled onto his red silk tie.

"Oh, Charles," Carol winced, "how ugly. You're like a little boy." She took the large cloth napkin from her lap and dipped its corner into her own ice water and then reached over to her companion and dabbed his tie until only a series of dark purple circles remained.

"Why do you call me 'Charles'?" he asked.

"Charissée and Charles. They go well together, don't you think? Unless, of course, you

want me to find you a name as exotic as Charissée.”

“But I’m not interested in a different name, my dear.” He sensed that it was not wise to use her name—not her given one or the one of the moment. “I’m not like you. I’m happy with what was chosen for me. For what I’ve got.”

“But your birth name is so ordinary, Charles. So like an American. So unlike, unlike...” she paused here and looked over at the waitress whose uniform bore the name card on which ‘Charissée’ was written,

“Charissée.” This time Carol shortened the first syllable and kept it high in her throat, while holding the second between her teeth. She moved her head toward her companion’s ear and he could feel her breath on his cheek.

They were seated near the mahogany sideboard where large silver pitchers of water waited to be carried to patrons who sat at small tables scattered among tall tropical plants and who, like Carol and her companion, whiled away their Saturday afternoons with choice wines and small portions of exquisitely prepared and elegantly presented delicacies. Sometimes, it was smoked salmon on tiny potato pancakes with sprigs of watercress and shallots; at other times, it was curried chicken salad atop a bed of broiled pineapple and raisins, surrounded by the greens and oranges of melon and the deep hues of fresh berries; always, there were cheesecakes with deep brown crusts of nuts and butter, drizzled in vanilla sauces and adorned with chocolate confections. Every portion petite. Every plate over-sized and gold-rimmed.

“Where do you suppose she’s from?” Carol asked her companion.

“Who?”

“The waitress, of course. Charissée.”

“Our waitress? I didn’t notice.”

“Look. There she is. At the table to your right.”

The waitress’ back was to them. Her small frame, with its modest curves failed to fill out the dark green skirt of her uniform, while her naturally-straight dark hair that curled around the back of her head in a swirl held in place by two cherry wood sticks adorned with cloisonné balls, revealed a dark nape that did not suggest tanning but something more permanent. Something deep and rich.

“I can’t tell,” he said. “Why does she interest you, my dear?”

“I want my life to be like hers,” Carol said.

“You want to be a waitress?”

“That’s not what I mean, silly. I want to come from someplace exotic. Perhaps the Bahamas. The Philippines. Bali. I want to carry stories no one can fathom.”

He continued to study Carol’s face. They’d known each other since childhood, and he rarely thought to look at her in the manner he would a new acquaintance. He thought Carol pretty enough—well, perhaps a bit plain with her round cheekbones and green-gray eyes, her almost-blonde and wispy hair that tended to wilt in damp air and lose its shape at the first hint of wind; nonetheless, pretty enough, for him. He knew he didn’t turn heads anymore—not that he ever really did. Sometimes people mistook them for brother and sister. Once someone inquired whether they were twins—fraternal, of course—and he’d been amused. Carol had not. There were times when he realized she didn’t want to be who she was, that she didn’t want to be thought of as his.

Of course she wasn’t his. She was no one’s. And less and less her own person. More so all the time.

“Wonder if she’ll give me her name if I ask her? Do you suppose she’d trade with me?”

That wouldn't be too difficult, would it, Charles?" Carol didn't wait for an answer, but took a small sip of her Chardonnay—she always drank dry whites and insisted that their temperature be just right—and continued. "Where is there a rule, a law, if you will, that prohibits two consenting persons to trade names? What can it hurt?"

"And do you propose we find a 'Charles' for me? That we give him my name in return? My checkbook? My mailbox? My lease?" He felt his voice grow tense and rise in pitch.

"Is that what worries you? That you'll lose your lease? You may, anyway, you know. The talk of condos is almost always in the elevator. Maybe not in front of you, but when I come up to see you, your neighbors don't hold back."

At this her companion did not respond, but thought how often they both used such digressions to derail the topic at hand. And what had it gotten them? Not a thing he could name.

The waitress whose name Carol now coveted stood between them. Her dark brown eyes were large and well-spaced, her skin flawless except for the one small mole below and slightly left to the center of her mouth. The rose brocade vest and stiff white shirt set off her features with a dramatic flair worthy of the room the three of them inhabited. When she spoke, there was a hint of another language supporting her careful English.

"Shall I pour more wine?" she asked.

Carol nodded and her companion continued to sip his soup, which had formed a thin crust on its cooled surface. The waitress took away Carol's service plate and returned with a towel she wrapped around the wine bottle that sat in a carafe of ice at the far corner of the table.

"How do you pronounce your name?" Carol asked.

"*Cha-rees-a.*" the waitress said, giving it three syllables with the third emphasized in the manner of the French 'ee'.

“It is even more beautiful than I thought,” Carol said. “How did you come by such a luscious name?”

The waitress looked both amused and stunned. “Come by it? You mean who gave me my name?”

“Well, yes. I suppose I do.”

“My father,” the waitress answered.

“And do you like your name?” Carol asked.

“I suppose I do. It’s what I’ve always been.”

“So, you’d say it suits you?”

“Suits me?” The waitress looked to Carol’s companion, as though wanting him to intervene, but he continued to sip his soup, which he now watched carefully as it went from its shallow bowl to his mouth.

“I mean,” Carol said. “I mean, would you like a different name instead?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Let me suggest you might someday,” Carol said. “Let me give you my card, and if ever you do, let me know.”

“Yes, madam.” The waitress nodded her head in what appeared to be a form of deference and took the card from Carol and tucked it into a pocket in her skirt. “Shall I take your plate, sir?” She was speaking to Carol’s companion now and had moved to his other side, as if to avoid more interaction with Carol.

As the waitress disappeared behind the sideboard, Carol leaned forward and allowed her breasts to rest on the white linen tablecloth. Her right hand touched her companion’s. In the low voice of a conspirator, she said: “Perhaps she will let me have her name, after all. Perhaps she’ll

get used to my name now that she has it in her pocket. She may even want to trade with me before I bring it up.”

Her companion said nothing, but thought to himself that he'd not known Carol to be so forward about one of her fantasies before. Always he'd thought she was just playing with absurdities, just wanting to find a way to fill up their afternoons, the preludes that lead to whatever drama Carol invented for their cover games. He'd never thought she'd lost sight of what was real and what she made up, but now, he wondered.

What had his mother once told him? *Be careful with her*, she'd said. *They're an odd lot, her family*. His mother sitting on their wide porch. Her feet propped up on the railing. A book in her lap. An iced tea or, perhaps, bourbon on ice looking as though it were tea, on the wicker table at her side.

His father often said his mother read too much. Lost track of what she heard and what she read. Mixed them up and then pronounced “truths” that were no more than machinations of her imagination. But he'd not known for sure. Not known whether his mother knew something about Carol's family that was for real. And so, when he found himself wanting to bring up with his father that very question of his and Carol having a life together, with marriage and children and all that went with it, he'd hear his mother's raspy voice and the odor of bourbon would seem to lurk only a few feet away and he'd catch himself. And he had no way to know for sure what she'd really known, for she was dead before he finished his second year of college. It was unfair, he thought, to lose one's mother before the important questions had been answered.

So here they were. Twenty years later. He and Carol having lunch in the grand old hotel that might have hosted their wedding in one of its ballrooms, perhaps the one on the other side of the main lobby where even now the music of a small-sized orchestra played for the thin, pale bride

he'd watched rise from the back door of a navy blue limousine only an hour before. For, as usual, he had arrived on time for their lunch and so had sat down on one of the stately but rather uncomfortable settees that had adorned the lobby for as long as he could remember, only their striped satin upholstery changing every decade or so. Carol was, of course, late and he wondered at himself for continuing to be punctual, but then he might miss the drama she most certainly was inventing as she searched for a parking space or dropped her keys in the gutter or forgot to take her purse from the back seat, which meant a retracing of steps, or whatever. Always, there was near-calamity surrounding Carol's movements, and he liked to observe them from a safe, solid place, such as the lobby of this granite and marble hotel foyer or from the window in his flat that faced the street she invariably rushed along whenever she came to the city by train.

He no longer drove—had only driven a few months past his mother's death. And then, each time he'd approached his parents' driveway, he'd heard the screeching of tires and felt the out-of-control swerving of the station wagon she'd been driving the night she took it over the cliff and into the nearby Brandywine. Now, he preferred not to go near his childhood home at all, not by train or as his father's passenger. Now, he preferred to stay in the city, in the few blocks that marked its restoration and that included both his apartment and the historical museum he curated, and, of course, this grand hotel with its carved mahogany beams and wainscoting and its fine collection of ivory and porcelain that stood in glass cases perched on massive granite pillars—the specimens every bit as exquisite as those he studied at Winterthur. Their histories tied to the same family. A family full of insatiable appetites. Plagued by a host of insanities. Notorious for the violent episodes that rarely skipped a generation.

Carol still lived in her family's home, only a few doors from the house he could not abide to visit. She had stayed, she said, waiting to leave until and only when she married. Such an

old-fashioned idea he'd thought and still did, but he long ago stopped challenging her about it. Oh, she'd gone away to school—first to Bryn Mawr and later to Columbia—and she'd lived in dormitories and then apartments and for a while in a house she shared with some friends. She'd given the life of a single independent woman a try, she'd say, and she'd found it lacking.

Sometimes he imagined her attached to her mother—a woman he'd avoided ever since he could remember—with an invisible filament that stretched no more than a hundred miles and that, if pulled taut, began receding toward its source somewhere along the river of their childhood—the very river where his own mother's body laid for almost two days trapped inside of a tomb made from power windows and automatic door locks. Sometimes he imagined his own line of filament having snapped and that it was not that he didn't want to return, but that he couldn't. Will or inability? Necessity or preference? Fear or rationally-cautious? Such questions amused him. Passed the time while he waited.

Carol had been only twenty minutes late. There were times when it stretched past an hour and he'd have to go into the dining room without her, lest they lose their table. But always, she'd arrive before luncheon was no longer served, by 3:00. He could recall only one time when he ordered without her, and then he knew what she'd like, so ordered for her as well. Carol had assumed he would. She expected such things of him. Perhaps of everyone. The bridal party had arrived and assembled in the ballroom in that brief twenty minutes and Carol had missed the parade of gowned attendants and now speculated on them from the hundred or so feet that separated their table from the ballroom's entrance.

“Do you think they'd notice if we went in? If we just danced among them?” Carol asked and then answered with another question. “If we didn't drink their champagne or eat their food, why would they?”

Perhaps she spent too much time alone, he mused. Was too much by herself in that musty old library that also housed all those stuffed birds, most of them dead for over a hundred years, the doors closed to the public, except on rare occasions. Perhaps she didn't want to hear his answer, feared it would interfere with what she was planning, would sound more parental than she could tolerate.

"I think we should try it. I'll be Charissée," she said the name with only two syllables, "and you'll be Charles. Let's see. Charles Douglass. Yes. Douglass. With two "s's". I'll be your wife." And then she looked at her ringless left hand and said, "I know. We'll be brother and sister, Charles. We'll be an incestuous pair, you and I, and when anyone asks, we'll tell them we live here on the tenth floor and that neither of us desires—or needs—other lovers."

Carol's face glowed. She drank the rest of her wine in one large gulp and pushed her chair away from the table as if to leave, coming within inches of bumping into the waitress with the back of her chair.

The waitress stepped back quick enough to avoid a disaster while Carol fumbled with her napkin that had fallen to the floor. She waited with a plate in each hand. Only when Carol appeared to be fully settled did she step forward again.

"The Belgian endive," she said, as she placed a cold crystal plate of pale greens and even paler fruits in front of Carol. "The Moroccan lamb is very hot," she said to Carol's companion. Her hand was wrapped in thick white terry and she slid the plate from it very slowly, her body bent over between the two. Carol studied her movements as though in training. Then, as the waitress brought herself upright, Carol touched her arm.

"How did you learn to do that?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

“To serve food with grace,” Carol said. “I mean, I almost always spill something when I serve even the simplest things. I mean, how does one become a waitress?”

“We are trained. Sometimes by a restaurant. Sometimes by a school.”

“And you? How were you trained?”

“By my father.”

“And where is he?”

“Excuse me?”

“Where is your father now? Would he train someone like me?”

“I’m afraid he couldn’t. He’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. So is mine. I think we have much in common.”

The waitress smiled and nodded. “If everything is all right....”

“This is fascinating,” Carol said to her companion, not waiting for the waitress to leave.

“Imagine me, a waitress. With a new name. A new identity! Oh, Charles, I’m so glad we came here today.”

“I do hope you are aware of what you’re doing, my dear,” he said, but the look in her eyes suggested she didn’t, and he sensed their afternoon slipping away. Usually, Carol’s imaginings were contained between the two of them, and the few times she’d involved someone else so directly, some other quality to them emerged. Something less predictable.

The music from the ballroom had grown louder and more boisterous. The white satin of the bride’s dress came into view every few moments and he longed to leave Carol for the life he imagined across the foyer. Instead he turned to her and asked whether they should take a suite.

“It’s so cold and dreary,” he said. “Let’s have champagne sent up.”

“But we promised we’d make an appearance at the wedding—at least for a respectable

showing. They're expecting us, you know. Mama answered for us over a month ago, I'm sure. I saw her take it to the post."

"Carol..." he began.

"Charissée, please, Charles. Charissée. I insist."

"Charissée, then. Can't we get a room? Can't we cuddle and make love and sleep the evening away like we used to do? Like old times?" This time he reached over and brushed her breast as he caressed her shoulder. "You are so pretty today," he said. "Did I tell you? Did I tell you how much the peach complements your skin? I want to hold you, my dear, but not with all these people watching." He looked around as he spoke, as though they were being watched by everyone in sight, which of course, was not the case at all.

"Just one dance, Charles?"

"Just one. But first, shall we eat?"

"Do you know what Mama would say?"

"No. What would she say?"

"That we've been engaged long enough. She'd say you need to give me a ring."

"Why would she say that?"

"Mama'd say she's tired of my living with her, that's what she'd say. She'd say I'm growing too large for her wedding dress and we'd need to get on with it."

"And you, my dear Charissée? What do you say?"

"I say we buy the bride's dress when her day is through. Maybe the bridesmaids' dresses, too. Maybe the band will stay and we can take care of everything here and now." Carol's smile seemed directed at something far away from the two of them.

"But first a nap, don't you agree?"

“Oh, yes.” Carol’s eyes shifted squarely towards his for the first time since she’d arrived.

“I shouldn’t want bags under my eyes and lines in my smile.”

At this her companion allowed his shoulders to drop and he began to hum along to the orchestra. For the first time since their meal had been set before them, he savored the aromas that swirled around him: exotic spices mixed with the reassuring scent of charred red meat, a hint of cinnamon, the promise of saffron and, from across the table, Carol’s familiar perfume, a commingling of orchids and lilies—a fragrance he had chosen for her years before. He breathed deeply and fully, and with intention. He thought about how much he and Carol were alike, and how, now, in this very moment, they were as close to a far-off world as they would ever really need to be. After all, one had only to look around: it had all arrived long ago. Long before either of them existed.