

The Short Sad Life of Charlie Walker

By Rick Baston

Charlie glared in a half drunken stupor at the big man and growled. "I said I don't like the way you talk!"

"Shut up Charlie, I don't wanna hit you. The big man said starting to sit down again.

There was silence in the Arms as everyone watched the little man walk closer to the table where the big man sat sipping his beer. He stopped in front of the table.

"What are you; afraid of me Donovan?" Charlie said.

"No." The big man said raising his glass.

"Well neither am I!" Charlie shouted punching the glass out of the big man's hand.

The room tensed as the big man rose until he towered over Charlie. He looked down at him, his face flushed red with anger, his eyes flashing disgust. He grabbed Charlie by the shirt collar.

"You shouldn't have done that Charlie!" He exclaimed throwing Charlie across the floor.

Charlie landed with a crash on a table, scattering glasses as the table shattered and collapsed. He lay there, the room dancing madly before him; all the faces staring at him, his back aching. Slowly he hauled himself up, shaking off the numbness of the fall, fighting the pain of his back. He eyes focused on the big man.

He didn't get a second chance. His friends grabbed him and dragged him out the door and into the night air before he knew what had happened. Behind them a waiter was surveying the shattered table and shouting for them to come back.

The night air began to clear Charlie's senses as his friends hustled him down the dark road. He slowly realized where he was. Charlie dug in his heels, pushed his friends away and started running toward the Arms. They tackled him in the parking lot.

"Come on Charlie, leave it alone!"

"No Reg, I gotta go back! I gotta beat him!" Charlie shouted trying to get up.

"No you don't!" Reg said pulling him down.

They held him there for a while until he stopped struggling. Finally Reg said. "Are you all right Charlie?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

They got up, brushing the dirt off their clothes and walked away from the tavern. They walked along the road in silence, crossing the railway tracks and turning onto Waterloo Row before Charlie broken the silence. "You should have let me go back; I could have taken him!"

"Sure Charlie, sure. He was twice your size." Reg said.

"Size doesn't mean a thing. I could have taken him." Charlie said kicking a coke can in the gutter.

They walked a little further along the street until they came to the overpass. [It was dark brooding mass of concrete that separated the houses of the rich from the decay of the downtown.] They passed through it to the broad lawns on the other side.

"Hey, let's go for something to eat." Charlie said.

"No we're going home."

"See you around then." Charlie said leaving them. He walked rapidly down the street past the wide green lawn of the floodlit church to the bright emptiness of Queen Street. He walked on until he came to a restaurant with a flashing green sign. He

opened the door and went in.

He strolled past the counter and took a booth half-way down the side. His eyes focused on the half empty room as he waited for the waitress. Despite the lack of people the place seemed to be very noisy to Charlie. He looked at his watch, only nine thirty. It had seemed more like midnight to him. Finally a waitress came over and mechanically put a place mat and silverware in front of him, poured some ice water, took his order and left.

Charlie sat there idly playing with the ice water, swirling the cubes around, making wet circles on the place mat. The images of the Arms were just beginning to straighten out from their crazy dance. It was a stupid thing he had done, trying to fight Donovan. He was lucky that Donovan knew him; or he'd be a dead man now, a victim of Donovan's wrath. Yet he always did crazy things when he was drunk.

But he wasn't always drunk when he did crazy things. He'd done crazy things ever since he could remember. They were stupid things, dangerous a lot of the time and not in the least necessary to anyone but him. They mattered only to him as a chance to prove things to everyone.

There was the time he'd tried to ride the log through the rapids. No one else would do it, so he did it. He got on the log a mile above the rapids, standing straight and tall while everyone cheered him on. Then his old man showed up with a boat and took him off the log. It had spoiled everything. He couldn't face anyone for weeks.

Yet, he did it. He waited a while then with only a friend watching he rode the rapids, standing tall. He slipped just after he past through and broke his arm, but it didn't matter, he'd shot the rapids. His father wouldn't talk to him for a long time, but it didn't matter for he'd done it.

Things that weren't logical or common sense, those were the things he did. He swirled the water around for a while as he waited for his food. He waited, watching the last of the ice cubes melt, his reflective mood turning sour as he waited. He put the lukewarm water down and began playing with the fork.

He scratched the outline of the words on the place mat with the tines as he waited. When he grew tired of that he began quietly tearing the mat to pieces with the fork. Finally he grew tired of that and began toying with the tines of the fork. First he bent the middle tine backward, then he bent the other two forward; then he bent the handle into a curve.

He was ready to start on the spoon when the waitress returned with his order. She took one look at the place mat and the twisted fork, put the food down and left. She returned a minute later with a short, fat man, with a greaser haircut.

Charlie looked at him for a moment then dug into his French fries. The man reminded him a bit of his father. He pulled out a greasy handful of fries and shoved them into his mouth. The face of the fat man turned red and he growled. "What did ya bend that fork for pal?"

"Cause you guys didn't bring my food quick enough. I was hungry. I couldn't wait." Charlie said grabbing another handful of fries.

"We're busy tonight," the manager snapped. "You got to make allowances for

that."

"I see," Charlie said looking at the almost empty restaurant.

"Noreen add the place mat and the fork to his tab," the manager said starting to turn away.

"I won't pay for them," Charlie said wiping his hands on the plastic tablecloth.

"We'll see," the manager said stomping down the floor to the phone at the end of the counter. He dialed a number and five minutes later the police walked in.

They talked to the manager a second, looked at Charlie and then walked down to his booth. They were short burly men with graying hair. They looked at Charlie for a moment then one of them said, "Why don't you just pay the bill?"

"The service was bad," Charlie said watching a family enter the restaurant.

"Pay the bill," the other cop said.

"I won't pay for the fork or the place mat," Charlie said reaching into his pocket and putting a dollar on the table. He started to get up.

"Sit down," the first cop said.

He sat down.

"Put another dollar down on the table," the cop said.

Everyone was staring at Charlie by now. He looked at them for a minute then said, "No."

"You want to go to jail?" the second cop said slamming his hand on the table.

"No."

"Pay the bill," the cop said. "Pay it or you're going in."

Charlie looked at them for a moment, then at the blank faces staring at him. His face flushed with anger as he bit his lip and reached into his pocket for another dollar. He slammed it on the table, got up, walked past the policemen and into the cold air outside.

He walked rapidly down Quenn Street, his anger carrying him on through the night, past the scattering of pedestrians on the street, until he was almost to the end of the street. He began to slow down until he was walking normally again. He stopped in front of a store window to stare at the display. He looked at the suits in the window for several minutes before he saw her walking down the other side of the street.

She was a blonde, tall, well built; a princess to Charlie. He turned to watch her walk down the street enjoying every second of it. He watched her as she walked past him and away. He hesitated only a second before he ran after her.

His driving steps echoed down the street as he ran after her. It didn't take long before he caught up to her. She casually turned around for a second to see what the noise was before she continued on.

Charlie smiled at her, but she didn't see it. He stopped running and began walking briskly until he was beside her.

"Nice evening, isn't it?" Charlie said smiling.

She nodded but said nothing.

"Haven't seen you around these parts before," Charlie said as they crossed the street.

She looked at him, a cold stare on her face. Charlie's smile disappeared. After a moment he said, "You're not saying very much."

She stopped, turned toward Charlie. Her

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