

## Charlie

by Sue Hitchcock

“Charlie, go to bed! Your dad’s home. I can hear him swearing, looking for his key.”

Charlie went upstairs, but waited, looking over the bannister. He knew what would follow. Too often he had listened from his bedroom to the shouting and crashing. Then silence, in the morning his mother bearing the result disguised as best she could with heavy make-up.

When he was younger he would try to defend her and get injured by mistake, when he got in the way. She would be punched anyway. As he grew older, he was the focus of his father’s alcohol fuelled anger. Now he was as tall as his father, but still boyishly skinny and a fury seethed inside him, that he wasn’t equipped to use. His face showed the stress, hollow eyed and jaw muscles twitching as he clenched his teeth. He wanted to punish his father, punch him, kick him, bang his head on the floor, holding his ears. He would shout in his face, “you don’t deserve to live, you fuck. I’ll kill you, if you touch Mum again.” Then he would throw him out the door, next to the bins for the dustmen to collect. He could be used for landfill or sent to be recycled. Recycled into what? Bog roll? Dog food? He wanted to laugh at that, a sour, hopeless laugh.

Poor Charlie. He still had to go to college in the morning and try to concentrate. At least his mates amused him. He was quiet with them. He had no funny story to tell, and they didn’t mind, knowing his home life was painful. Jerry had guessed at it, when Chas had come round late one evening and asked to sleep on the floor. Chas, shaking had said his Mum had been taken to hospital, not mentioning his father.

The boss of the gang was Duane, an opinionated, but cheerful guy, who was never short of ideas. The number was variable, depending on whether Duane’s younger brother, Kez, wanted to come. Jerry sometimes had to work, when his mother wasn’t earning much, and Chaz missed him, but still even when there was only Ben and Gazza besides himself, they would meet to smoke a spliff behind the tennis courts in the park. At least it calmed him and helped him sleep.

After the occasion when Chaz's mum went to hospital, his dad was arrested and was not supposed to come anywhere near the house. Then one night he was there, shouting abuse in the street. All Chaz had been wanting to do to him came back, but the police soon turned up to take him away

"I'm going out, Mum. You'll be alright, now, won't you?" Chaz knew he wouldn't be able to sleep, his stomach knotted with anger. He went into the street where a few neighbours were still watching what was happening. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he lowered his eyes and hurried towards the town centre. The pubs had turned out and the inebriates were still socialising. Among them Chaz spotted Duane with a girl he hadn't seen before.

"Hello, my man. Meet Zilla."

"Cilla," she corrected.

"We've got some charlie, Chaz."

Cilla giggled, "Charlie for Charlie!"

Ben and Gazza trooped along with them and they found their way to a quiet corner of Macdonalds, where they spread some lines of coke and sniffed it with drinking straws. Charlie was hoping to feel calmer, more in control, but suddenly he felt more decisive.

Duane and Cilla were eager to find some privacy, leaving the three guys with unwonted energy. They made a bit of noise and disturbance in the precinct.

"The park, I s'pose."

They turned into the quiet side streets, still excitable, but Chaz started to talk. All his rage started to emerge and his mates caught the mood, none free of frustrations. At a bus shelter a drunk was threatening to topple, trying to read the timetable, leaning over on one foot.

"Stupid bastard!"

"What d'ya say?"

Chaz suddenly realised it was his father and gave him a push. He fell awkwardly, cracking his head on the glass. Chaz stared, but Gazza kicked him in the guts. All Chaz's imaginings became possible. He launched into the half-conscious body with the kicks he had stored since he was a child. One kick shattered the glass leaving the bleeding lump surrounded by shards. Gazza and Ben dragged Chaz away, chilled by their fear things had gone too far.

"You can't go home. They'll be on to you."

"And you'll have to lose those trainers, they're covered in blood. You can have my old ones."

"Get the bus out in the morning! I'm going to miss you, man."

Chaz sniffed, "go to my mum and tell her I love her."