



Independence

In the last three years it had become an old man's room. There were cheap plastic rails by the old bed leading to a wheelchair, which was ready to go but hadn't gone for weeks. A stout stick stood in the corner. It used to be enough to walk with but recently had only supported him as he spilled himself messily from one receptacle to another. A white tub full of meds stood on the bedside table. Charlie, at thirty, had all the pains associated with a long life lived to the full, but almost none of the experiences. Almost.

A year ago he had been able to wheel himself to the park and take out his stick for a walk in the fresh air. That's when he had met Sara. Sara without an 'h'. Sara without a lot of things in her life it seemed. Sara weeping silently on the park bench where he rested every day. He had had plenty of time to observe her as he made his painful progress up the path. Long wavy brown hair was the first thing he could see, falling over a tight fit pink-and-white knitted top that made him look twice. Her jeans too were tight-fitted but, sat down and hunched over as she was, he couldn't tell whether she was large or slim, small or tall.

She hadn't stirred as he sat, at an appropriate distance from her, on the bench. But he could tell she knew he was there from the way she tried to control her crying. He knew that people thought he had no right to sexual longings, and he behaved in the way that people expected. Life was hard enough without him

making it harder. But as he had watched the girl battle with her tears his life did begin to get harder. He could tell she was much smaller than him now he was up close, and with the slenderness of youth. How old he couldn't say, he didn't get out enough to set a baseline for his judgement, but maybe as young as fourteen, maybe as old as twenty.

Tentatively he had started to ask questions. She didn't answer at first but not because she didn't want them asked, Charlie could tell. He had spent his life having no choice but to listen to people. He couldn't walk away. Well not quickly enough to outpace anyone, so he had learned to listen carefully, with his heart.

Sara had calmed and started to answer. No, there was nothing he could do. She didn't have friends she could talk to about 'it'. The park was a nice quiet place to come, better than home anyway. Better than having her step-dad lording it over her. Charlie never found out why she was crying but he had his suspicions. He knew that mostly people in trouble aren't looking for a solution but for someone to share with. And so he listened and as he listened he ached. He ached for her youth and vitality, the life he had never had, but most of all he ached for her sweet, pretty face and slim, taut body.

He had had his first erection when he was twelve years old. The nurse who had inadvertently caused it hadn't realised why he had fallen into a fit. Later he had the humiliation of describing to the doctor what had happened, in front of his parents. It didn't help that Doctor Kendrick was, by this time, something of a family friend. His life expectancy then had been around twenty-five years old. When he met Sara he was twenty-nine.

He had drugs that slowed down his desires and stopped him getting an erection. He hardly needed the drugs any more because he was so conditioned, but

as he listened to Sara he felt the first sexual desire he had been allowed since then. His life had been pills and water, rice and medically planned meals for so long. Pills for the pain, pills for blood pressure and blood sugar, pills to send him to sleep and pills to keep him awake, and most of all pills to quell any thoughts of excitement that he might have. His mind and body had learned a careful equilibrium which no longer needed the thermostat of pills although he still had them in a bottom drawer in case.

It was the madness of this awakening that had caused him to talk to Sara the way he did. He had let slip his own problems as if by mistake and then waved them away to concentrate on comforting her. He coaxed her and teased her, and laughed with her when the laughs finally came, and he felt his equilibrium shift from that of the tightrope walker to the heart-skipping dynamism of the juggler. He complimented her and flattered her knowing, rather sadly, as he did that a pretty young girl like her would be used to it and could not hope to find a crippled old man like himself attractive. For old he was, in everything but age, and if he was honest a young girl like her would think him old if he was a healthy man.

And then she had become quiet, perhaps, he had thought, remembering the cause of her earlier tears. She had slowly, hesitantly, begun to ask him questions about his illness, about his life, always probing, always pressing closer to that painful secret of his loneliness. She had no independence, she said. She had no money and she wasn't allowed to work because her step-dad said he'd pay for everything. But, she had twined her hair around her fingers, he couldn't object to her doing voluntary work, could he, looking at Charlie anxiously to corroborate her fantasy. If she had volunteered to help someone, someone disabled who really needed help, then she could get away from home whenever she wanted. And if

that person gave her money for what she did for him, well then nobody would need to know. Would they?

And Charlie would give her money, oh yes, he would. Charlie would have given her the earth when he looked into her deep brown eyes, flicking up and down, suggesting, checking out whether he understood what she was offering. On that first day he really needed the help to get back to his wheel chair and to his room. Already the intoxication of talking to her, the heart-thumping secrecy of what they were saying, was making him weaker. She had helped him into his bed and sat on the end as he looked at her.

Charlie had lain exhausted on the bed at first, his frail body ravaged by the effort of the walk and conversation. Ignoring Sara he had closed his eyes, but when he opened them she had not moved, her petite frame sitting tense and erect on the edge of his bed looking at him, He saw some pity in her eyes and determined angrily to go through with whatever he was getting into. He pulled the sheets over his fully dressed body and began to talk, taking deep even breaths, telling her, in an oblique way, that he had something to offer. He had insurance money, put into trust by his parents and hardly used since he turned 18. He had disability allowance that Marie, his social worker, collected for him each week and put into the drawer, that drawer there, right under the vase of roses that she also liked to set out for him. Sara had opened the drawer and her lips had formed a little 'oh'. She could have taken it, taken it all there and then and he wouldn't have cared, but she closed the drawer and put her finger to her lips. She began to hum and he recognised a chart song he had heard on the radio. She swayed slowly, her slim hips twisting and turning, her arms raised high in naïve dance, and then she

lowered them and ran them down her sides. For the second time he felt himself stirred, his eyes following her hands and his head beginning to rock with the rhythms of her humming. She smiled as he fumbled at his trousers under the sheets like an adolescent trying to find a bra clasp. For a moment he felt a new strength coursing through his manhood as he placed his hands around it. Sara pulled off her top and he moaned, the scene playing out as much in his head as in his room. She wore a cotton, halter-top bra that showed little enough but it was enough. He collapsed, passed out, to wake minutes later to find her leaning over him, the sheet pushed to one side. Her top was back on and she had been to the bathroom to return with a wet flannel and some tissue paper. She was making a mess of cleaning him up and he was both embarrassed and touched.

She was whiter than his sheets and he realised that she had been afraid that he had died. He told her to take what she wanted from the drawer and was amazed, days later when he was well enough to get out of bed and check, at how little she had taken.

He had hardly believed that such intensity could exist outside of the pain that he experienced daily. He had cried during that first week, cried at what he had been missing, cried that it might never happen again, and then, thinking of Sara, cried that it might happen again. The pain he felt in his joints, his kidneys and his heart racked up even further but he had long ago stopped crying over pain.

A year ago. That was the last time he had been well enough to walk in the park. He had been afraid that she wouldn't come again but a week later the intercom buzzed and he saw her sweet face looking just as afraid as before on the screen, unaware that she was caught on camera. They talked again and he reassured her that she could visit as often as she liked, take as much money as she

wanted, but he would only be able to, he tried to put it delicately, appreciate her maybe once a week.

This time she was dressed more revealingly. A short skirt with tights and a cropped top, hidden underneath a long coat. He wondered whether she had deliberately, unnecessarily, dressed to excite him and then, as they talked, he realised that she was showing him her new clothes, the things she had bought with the money she had taken. The money, he reminded himself, that she had earned. She talked fast, about nothing at all, nervous and excited. She told him how her mum and step-dad had argued about her coming here. They had called that woman, Marie, the social services one Charlie had told her about, and she had told them it was a wonderful idea, how good it would be for Sara, and how good for Charlie. Charlie laughed, the spasms convulsing him and wracking him with pain. No doubt Marie would talk to him about it on her next visit. Then Sara went quiet and nodded to him.

'Are you ready?'

He struggled to control his breathing and nodded back. He had expected a repeat of last week, had promised himself that he would try to enjoy it more, savour the moments, but she didn't start the slow, teasing dance. She simply took hold of her top and pulled it over her head, holding it high for several seconds. She wore no bra and her breasts were small, not at all as he had pictured. He felt his heart sprint painfully towards some imaginary finish line as his hormones overcame his mind's natural defences. She walked to the bed and turned back the sheets, exposing his frail body and he was ashamed but unable even to speak. Then her small, soft hands slid down his body and he found he had no control over his arms or legs. She was clumsy but he had no way of telling her as a new pain

shot through him. And then pleasure overtook the pain and he lost consciousness.

When he woke she was standing in her coat, waiting patiently for him. She wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, she wouldn't take his money without asking. He tried to talk and his voice was a nearly silent croak, so he patted the bed and she walked obediently over. He thanked her and tried to explain to her how she had hurt him and saw tears welling up in her eyes. He found the strength somehow to make her understand that the pleasure was far more than the pain, that he mentioned it only in the hope she could be a little gentler next time. And then he told her that he had to rest and to remember that she could take as much money as she wanted from the drawer.

Both Marie and Dr Kendrick noticed a downturn in his health but took no action as if to say, well, it's what we expected, you've been living on borrowed time, Charlie. Secretly Charlie felt like saying that until recently he hadn't been living at all. He lost his virginity two weeks later. It was shattering both physically and psychologically. Sara had tidied up and called Marie, and Charlie had spent the next two weeks in hospital. Dr Kendrick couldn't understand the speed of his deterioration. Marie brought Sara round to see him in hospital and said how lucky it was that she had volunteered just when she did.

Sara had continued to come round, sometimes two or three times a week. She did what they knew that Marie expected her to do: a little tidying, reading aloud to him when he was too tired or the drugs made it impossible for him to do it himself. She tried to persuade him to get satellite TV or the internet but Marie had the Doctor around to veto both. It was another month before he could get an erection and then Sara was too afraid of hurting him to go far.

She undressed for him though. Even when he could do nothing about it he

asked her to do that. His eyes greedily took in her slender body, her smooth flawless skin and she posed for him happily, smiling and talking about everyday things, or sometimes singing or humming like she had the first time. She had opened up his life, bringing the outside world into it, and he realised that it was worth dying for.

These last few months she had allowed him a little more, not full sex again, not after that first time, but she had been researching she told him, on the internet. She'd never be found out, she said, because her step-dad ... well the stuff she found was nothing compared to what *he* looked at. They discovered that if she took it slowly his body could cope better. He could reach a climax without losing consciousness, not so intense but more rewarding for both of them. Finally they had agreed that they would try again, Charlie 'resting' for weeks before hand. They planned it together to take place on their anniversary, a year to the day from that meeting in the park.

This afternoon she had come, earlier than usual. He saw her on the cam, saw her wave goodbye to her friends and saw her quickly change out of her school uniform in his hallway. He realised that he had made a decision long ago, and that now was the time to carry it out. When she knocked politely, as she always did, he was standing, his stick propping him up. Sara looked surprised and he smiled and stepped towards her almost falling into her arms. There was no slow seduction, the huge dose of painkillers he had taken would help. He took her clothes off for the first time. They hardly talked at all today, and she was at first taken aback and then, laughingly, astonished at his eagerness. He felt, for the first time in his life, his masculinity, the power and virility of being a man and he took her fast, racing against time.

He would have liked to spend longer with her afterwards but they both knew that he would be exhausted. He simply thanked her. She thought it odd that little thank you. He left another thank you, found by Marie the next morning, thanking her and Dr. Kendrick, and most especially Sara, tucked in an envelope with his Will.

