

All in the Mind

The golden petals have faded, curled, and drooped, and, although Charlotte hasn't touched them since the day they were given to her, she knows that they are brittle and will break at the slightest touch. The once-fresh water has turned green and the blue vase has collected so much dust, it is barely translucent. They sit at one end of the windowsill in her bedroom, looking out onto the silent street on the hot day. (At the other end of the windowsill sits a star-shaped candle that she won at the annual carnival last summer. Although those are the only two items on the sill, they take up the length of the window.) The residents of Maroon County stay in on days like these, sipping at lemonade while watching the teenage lawnmower slave and cut the grass.

Charlotte sits nearby the window in a mahogany armchair, looking out into the pure blue sky. A summer breeze rustles the trees' leaves outside. Marmalade winds her way through and around Charlotte's bare feet then jumps on her lap and curls up. Charlotte stops twirling a strand of her shoulder-length brown hair and starts stroking the cat when there is a *clink! clink!* at the window. Carefully laying the cat down upon the floor, she stands, walks over to the window, and opens it, making sure not to bump the vase over. She leans out, arms tucked under her, looks down and smiles.

“Charlotte!” he whispers up at her.
“Come on, let’s get out of here!”

“Kevin, you know that my parents are just across the hall. I can’t sneak past them, especially with you. *Especially* after what happened last time.”

“Yeah, wasn’t that a great time?”
Though two stories above him, Charlotte could see Kevin wink at her, a smile touching the corner of his mouth before his face grows serious. “Fuck them. Don’t you want to have some fun?”

“I do.”

“Stick up for yourself, Charlotte. You’re not a child anymore. Next year you’ll be a senior and soon you’ll be going to college. You have to show them now that you’re ready to be on your own, that you can take care of yourself, that you can make your own decisions. You have to stick up for yourself, Charlotte. You have to stick up for *us*. They can’t keep us apart and it’s time that they knew that.” Kevin smiles again, but this time it’s a full smile, wide across his face, showing his teeth, and Charlotte’s heart melts. “I’ve missed you, Charlotte.” His voice is deep and soothing and as he calls her name, something inside of her flutters and she cannot help but smile.

“Okay. Let me just change and then I’ll be right down.”

“Charlotte.” His voice is higher as he says her name again. “Charlotte!” He

nearly yells it, the pitch even higher this time.

Charlotte stops her monotonous stroking and turns her head to look at her bedroom door from the mahogany armchair.

“Charlotte!” her mother calls again, this time opening up the door and staring at her daughter. “What is wrong with you? I’ve been calling you for awhile now.”

Shrugging, Charlotte looks at her mother, nearing fifty, with a blank face. “I guess I just got lost in thought. What did you want?”

“There’s a phone call for you.”

“I’ll get it in here, thanks.” As her mother closes the door, Charlotte gets up from the chair, carrying the cat in one hand, and walks over to her nightstand where her black cordless phone sits. Setting the cat down on the navy-blue comforter on her bed, she then picks up the base and looks at its side. Sure enough, the ringer is off. After setting the base back down, she picks up the receiver, takes a breath and says, “Hello?”

“Charlotte?” The voice on the other end sounds both excited and nervous.

“Yeah, Attica, it’s me. What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Listen, Charlotte. Tat and I have the best idea. Are you ready for this?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Road trip to Colorado, starting tonight. We can switch drivers throughout the trip and the passengers can sleep so we can drive all night without stopping. Once there we can stay with my cousin Vince, you know, the one who works at the ranch and I’m pretty sure he can get us a reduced price for all the activities. Do you remember last summer when he came up to visit me and he couldn’t take his eyes off of you? I’m sure he wouldn’t mind seeing you again.”

“What about work?”

“Fuck work and before you even ask, fuck your parents. You’re a senior in high school. You should be able to just get up and leave without having to answer to anyone. So are you coming or not?”

Silence. Charlotte doesn’t know what to say.

“Charlotte? You there? Didn’t you hear what I said?”

Shaking her head to clear her mind, Charlotte realizes she hasn’t heard a word her friend has said. “I’m sorry. Marmalade’s distracting me,” she quickly lied, looking at the cat who lay sleeping on her bed. “Damn cat is getting in my closet again. What were you saying?”

“Tat and I thought we could go out to the bookstore and grab a cup of coffee and roam around.”

"Gee, that's original," Charlotte says sarcastically.

"Well, it gets us out of this dinky little town on a Friday, anyway."

"Gina isn't much bigger."

"No, but there are at least places to go in Gina."

"Fine. You driving?"

"Yeah, I'll be by in about forty-five minutes. Tat's still at work."

"See you then." Charlotte carefully places the receiver back on the hook and walks across the room to her closet. Flinging open the doors, she flips through the t-shirts and tank tops, unsatisfied by every one that comes within her view. After a few minutes, she finally closes her eyes and holds out her hand until she grabs hold of a piece of cloth. Taking it off the hanger, she looks at the old tank top, lime green with a thin white ribbon weaved in and out of the material, creating an empire waist. She shrugs, figuring that it was the best she could do.

Charlotte is just finishing brushing her hair when Attica pulls up, Tat in the front passenger seat. Charlotte grabs her crochet purse and car keys, even though she isn't driving, and starts to head out the front door.

"Where are you going?" her mother inquires from the living room.

"Barnes and Noble," Charlotte calls back, irritated for having to stop.

“It’s nine o’clock already.”

“Yeah, so?”

“You have work in the morning.”

Charlotte rolls her eyes since she knows her mother cannot see her. “I’ll be fine, Mom. I’ve worked longer days with less sleep.”

“Who’s driving?”

Charlotte’s face flushes red. “Why are you interrogating me?” she says to her mother, her voice rising in anger. “For God’s sake! I’m seventeen years old! I don’t need to be questioned like this. I can live my life and suffer whatever consequences. Just get off my back.”

“Charlotte, I –” her mother starts but is interrupted.

“I’m going out and that’s all you need to know.”

“Charlotte...”

“What?!”

Her mother walks into the entrance hall and looks at Charlotte. “I said have a fun time.”

“Oh,” Charlotte says, a bit confused at first, but then she realizes that her mother hadn’t been interrogating her so intensely. “Thanks.” She opens the door and steps out from the cool house into the warm, damp air. She breathes deeply, enjoying the scent of blooming flowers and cut grass, still clinging in the air from that afternoon.

Jogging up to the Buick, she gets in behind Tat and says hello to her friends. "Let's get the hell out of here," she says.

They reach the parking lot of Barnes and Noble fifteen minutes later and creep around the lot for another ten, trying to find someplace to park. "I guess this is the place to be on a Friday night," Tat says as she ties up her long black hair on their way inside. Charlotte's friend looks at her over the rim of her thick black rim glasses and stretches her lips, which are caked in dark red lipstick, into a straight line. Charlotte always thought that Tat looked like a poet and had the kind of life that she could write about and people would be interested in reading. Just her name Charlotte found interesting. Short for Tatalina, the name came from her parents visiting Catalina in their prime in the sixties. Stoned and high the entire vacation, they kept calling the island Tatalina. The word stuck with them since and thought it would be funny to name their first born it.

Charlotte had a less interesting reason behind her name. Simply, her mother's favorite book was *Charlotte's Web*. When she was young, Charlotte even had a stuffed pig that she slept with, but being too young to say much without a lisp, his name was "Wibah" instead of Wilbur. Her mother used to read from the book every night, even when she was a newborn, until about age thirteen, when Charlotte started thinking like

she was too old to be read to anymore. But she always kept Wibah on top of her bed by the pillows as part of the arrangement and slept with him in her arms at night.

The three girls walk through the entrance doors together and then instantly split up to go to their favorite sections of the store. Watching Tat, Charlotte knows her friend will grab a mocha before heading over to the poetry section. Attica will browse the music section, looking for new songbooks she can memorize for the acoustic guitar. Charlotte first heads over to the recommendations – she usually bought one book from there and most every time, she liked the book. The one time she didn't was when it turned out to be basically porn – no plot, little character development and too much sex.

After reading the book, she went back to the store to see if she could hunt down the disgusting pig that had recommended it. As she stood by the book trying to read the name on the small description, a cashier came up to her. Picking up a copy of the book, the cashier asked Charlotte if she read her recommendation. Charlotte wanted to rage at the woman. How could she pick such a disgusting book that didn't even have good descriptions of the sex? It was worse than most porn! She wanted to yell for her money back. But she just smiled, said a meager yes, and left.

Charlotte walks slowly through the store, looking more at the people there than the books. *I'll never be able to find Tat and Attica when it's time to go*, she thinks sullenly. Turning down a random aisle, she finds herself in the travel section. As she scans the books, she notices a guy dressed in jeans and a Beatles T-shirt standing by her. Charlotte glances at him a couple of times. Dark roots are showing under his blond hair. He is about half a foot taller than Charlotte and she imagines that his muscles are well-defined under his T-shirt.

Charlotte glances one last time and this time, she catches his eye. She looks away quickly, embarrassed.

"Hi," he says, turning his entire body towards her. "I'm Joshua."

"Hi," she says back, wanting to be polite. "I'm Charlotte."

"What a beautiful name," Joshua says, smiling and showing his straight teeth.

Charlotte wants to say something brilliant to impress him but all she can think to say is, "So, do you like the Beatles?"

He laughs, not too short to be snobby, but not too long to be rude. "Yeah. They're decent. What about you?"

"Yeah, I like them, but my parents can't know. You would think that growing up in the sixties they would have been with the hippie movement but they were – and still are – very conservative."

“Thought the long hair and tight jeans were the devil’s doing?”

“Exactly. They’ve loosened up some since then, though. They let me wear what I want.”

Joshua leans in. He smells of musk. “Do they let you date who you want?”

Not knowing what to say, Charlotte just stands there, blushing and smiling. “Well,” she finally stammers out, “I guess they’re fine with it as long as they meet the guy first.”

“So what time shall I come by tomorrow?” Joshua asks.

“Tomorrow? That’s awfully soon.”

“Sunday then?”

“On a school night?”

Joshua’s eyes grow wide and puppy-dog like. “Please don’t refuse me.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Charlotte asks, snapping out of her day-dream.

The guy with the Beatles T-shirt looks at her strangely and says, “I said ‘Excuse me.’ You’re in my way.”

“Oh,” says Charlotte. “Sorry.” She steps back and he pulls a book from the shelf and leaves. *Great impression*, she thinks, mentally slapping herself on the forehead.

Looking closer at the books, Charlotte spots one on Colorado. She picks it up and flips through it.

“Whatcha got there?”

Charlotte jumps, gripping the book. “Attica!” she says harshly, turning around.

“Don’t sneak up on me!”

“Sorry. I thought you knew I was behind you.”

“It’s okay,” Charlotte says, calming down. She shows her friend the book. “Ever think about going to Colorado?”

“Nope, never. Always wanted to go to California, though.”

“Do you have a cousin named Vince?”

The question is out of Charlotte’s mouth before she realizes what she’s asking.

“Nope. Why do you ask?”

“I thought I heard you mention one before.”

Attica looks at Charlotte questioningly.

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“Okay, I’m heading over to the fiction. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Okay.” Charlotte takes the book and puts it back on the shelf, trying to decide where to spend the rest of her time.

Forty-five minutes later, the three girls meet up by the discounted books.

“So how many guys did you pick up this time?” Attica teases Tat, who usually gets asked out by several guys when the girls go out somewhere.

“Just one, actually,” Tat replies, pointing towards the checkout. “The blonde. His name’s David.”

“Looks more like a Joshua to me,” Charlotte mumbles, but the other two don’t hear.

“Cute,” comments Attica.

“He’s got potential. What do you think, Char?”

Charlotte shrugs, “He’s okay I guess. Can we go now? I’m not feeling well.”

Once inside her room back home, Charlotte takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. She smells the smoke of the cigarette before she sees the smoker leaning partly out of the window. “Kevin,” she says, not bothering to turn on the lights as she walks over to him, “you’re still letting the smoke in the room.”

“So?”

“If my parents smell it, I’ll be in deep shit.”

He flicks the rest of the cigarette to the street below and ducks back in. They stand facing each other, silence vibrating the house. Kevin’s about half a foot taller than she is so he smiles down at her as she looks up at him.

“I’m glad you came,” Charlotte whispers. “How did you get in?”

“I climbed up to the window. You left it open. I think you were expecting me.”

“If I had been expecting you I would have moved that junk on the windowsill.”

“Are you calling those flowers I gave you junk?”

They both look over at the withered flowers and laugh softly. “Yeah, I am,” Charlotte answers.

“I told you. You should have watered them.”

“I remember the day you gave them to me,” Charlotte says, catching Kevin’s eyes and holding him there with her look.

He laughs. “Valentine’s day.”

“I had no idea you were even going to do anything. I didn’t even know you had been watching me. Who would have thought that the quarterback of the football team was interested in little ol’ me.”

“I would watch you from the back row in Pre-calc, listening to your conversations with Tat about how you can change the world, help the environment, help other people, be a better person as a whole, and such. It just amazed me that someone could be so passionate in this dreary town that drowns people and their dreams. You are something special and I noticed it. I wanted you to notice it too.”

Charlotte smiles and, leaning even closer to Kevin, whispers, “I do now.” He grins, showing his teeth again and she closes her eyes and puckers her lips.

“Charlotte,” her mother whispers, sticking her head through the crack of the open door. “I just wanted to make sure you got back okay, that’s all.”

Charlotte turns around towards her mother, squinting at the light coming in from the hallway into her dark room. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight.”

After removing her bra from under her tank top and pulling off her pants, Charlotte shuffles across her room to her bed, past the closed window and the sill, where her star candle sat and Marmalade lay sleeping. She pets the cat softly, not wanting to wake it up, and then crawls under her navy-blue sheets.

She lies on her side, turning her back to the wall, and hugs Wibah closely to her chest. She closes her eyes.

“I love being so close to you,” he whispers in her ears, hugging her from behind. She can feel his chest moving up and down against her arched back. She explores his thin, hairy arms with her hands while his bare feet find hers and intertwine them. “I’m going to miss you when we go away to college in a year.” He kisses her lightly on the cheek and she smiles.

Slowly, Charlotte opens her eyes when the soft wisp of something on her cheek won’t go away. When she realizes that it’s only Marmalade’s tail, she lets out a sigh,

gives Wibah a squeeze and says, "I'll miss you, too."

-Liz Sidley

