

## Char

by

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Her proper name was Charlotte but everybody called her Char, with a "sh" sound. She was six and knew about everything in the garden, though the proper Latin names of the plants escaped her. She especially knew about the creatures who visited the garden, many of whom she named. There was Danny Small, for example, who was a dragonfly, at least that was what her mother called it. Char had only seen it twice, and the second time it came right up to her face and zoomed its bright green wings at her. Then there was Pippin, a sparrow whom she fed regularly -- not worms, of course, because they were creatures, too, and did not want to be fed to birds, even to good birds like Pippin. Instead, she fed Pippin bread, a large amount of fresh bread because Pippin was a particularly hungry bird, which was surprising for one so small. There was also Dash, a neighbour's cat which had black stripes over grey and was called Dash because Char had to chase it away, shouting "Dash!" or "Scat!" on account of Pippin -- though actually she would have liked to talk to the cat. She named the tiny green tree frog she found on their Dogwood tree Peeps because it looked like it wanted to break into that kind of sound, though it never made any sound at all. Nor did it move a muscle while she talked to it about what it might like to eat. One as yet unnamed animal was a mole which had built lumps of earth on the lawn. Char's father said they would have to get rid of it, but Char asked her father to wait until she had told the mole what the trouble was. Perhaps then he would not dig

up any more lumps of earth. She had searched under three of the lumps without once seeing the mole, but sooner or later she knew she would look into a little moley face. Then she was sure she would know its name.

Of course, her favourite animal in all the world was the family dog, Squires. He was a Basset and very old -- over ninety according to her mother, and so he did not run and jump anymore, or even chase balls. But he liked to follow her around the garden when he felt up to it, gently wagging his tail as she spoke to him. She talked to him a great deal, teaching him about the colours of things because her mother said that Squires was colour blind. But he did not even look up at the sky when she told him that the sky was blue.

Pippin, the sparrow, was much on her mind because she had not seen him for a long time -- perhaps even a week. And then one Sunday when it was raining outside, she and her mother heard something hit the living room window. They looked out the window but they could see nothing.

"It must be a bird," her mother said and rushed outside, followed by Char.

They found it with its wing bent in a funny way sitting on the earth underneath the bay window. It was not Pippin, but a young robin, with a very bright red breast. When Char's mother reached for it it fluttered and flopped sideways. At last her mother had it cupped gently in her hands and carried it back into the house.

"I'm afraid its wing is broken," Char's mother said. She put the bird on the table. When Char made a little sympathetic sound at the bird, it gave one chirp, and lapsed into silence. Char's heart went out to it.

"Can we fix it, Mommy?"

"I don't know," said her mother, wondering where to keep the bird -- and then hearing the note of distress ... "But we'll certainly try."

They put together a small nest, a sewing basket lined with flannelette, and they laid the bird in the center. Char brought in a few leaves and twigs from outside to make it feel at home and nestled these around the bird. She could feel its warm body against the backs of her fingers.

When her father came in from his squash game, he looked at the bird and shook his head.

"We're going to heal its wing, Daddy."

"If the bird lives, Char, the wing might get better."

"But its going to live. It's not sick except for its broken wing."

"I understand, Char, but little wild things can die from sheer terror. Because it's so afraid," he added, seeing by her look that she wasn't sure what "terror" meant.

"But it has nothing to be afraid of!" Char cried. "We'll look after it."

"Sure you will, Char."

Before she went to bed that night, Char fed the bird some milk through an eyedropper, as her mother advised. But the bird would not even open its beak, and the milk dribbled onto the flannelette.

"You must take some," she kept saying to the bird, "you must take some, Ruddy."

She had named it Ruddy because her mother said it was a ruddy bird with its bright red breast.

That night Char did not sleep for a long time, and got up to see how Ruddy was getting along. She got very close to the bird and looked into its shiny little eyes

and told it to be brave, that there was nothing to be afraid of. Ruddy did not respond but had a faraway look in his eyes. Char decided that Ruddy must be thinking about the sky.

At last Char fell asleep and dreamt that she was a sort of bird. Anyway she could fly and she and Ruddy would fly from tree to tree in the garden. She knew, even in her dream that she was not a real bird, because she could not stomach the thought of eating worms. But the flying part seemed very real. It gave her a delicious feeling, soaring over the garden and swooping down close to her mother who looked alarmed and kept calling her in for dinner.

In the morning she found that Ruddy had died. She picked the bird up in her hands and its head flopped back. Its body was cold.

Char wept. Her mother had come downstairs in her dressing gown, and held Char to her, rocking her.

"The bird knew it could not get better, Char. It's very hard for a bird's wing to heal, and if it cannot fly it has no wish to live."

Char could understand that.

"Ruddy would not drink his milk," she said.

"We'll bury him in the garden after breakfast," her mother said.

Her father came down dressed for the office. Char was not sure what he did at the office except to "make money". Making money was very important and required a very large car which her father kept shiny clean.

"Ruddy died," Char said, going up to her father.

"I'm very sorry, Char," her father said, "but that's often the way it is with small creatures. Now Ruddy won't have to suffer any more."

She hadn't thought of that -- about Ruddy suffering. But of course it was true. A broken wing would hurt terribly. She shuddered to think how awful it would be to break one's arm.

After breakfast they buried Ruddy in the garden, placing a little cross in the earth above. Her mother called the place Ruddy's grave.

Summer was soon over, and in October Squires became very ill. He lay on his mat whimpering now and then. When Char spoke to Squires there was no answering look, or slow wag of tail, which would have told Char that he understood what she was saying. Squires did not look at her and refused all food offered to him, even milk, which he normally loved. The next morning Char's father took Squires to the Veterinarian.

"What will they do to Squires?" Char asked.

"They will find out what is wrong with him, first," her mother said.

"They will make him better, won't they?"

"I'm sure they will, Char," her mother said with a worried look.

"I want Squires to get better, Mommy," Char said and her voice was shaky.

That evening, just before seven, the phone rang. Her mother went to the kitchen to answer, and then called Char's father.

"You'd better take it in the den, dear."

Char finished her dessert hearing the distant muffled sound of her father's voice, and the occasional query from her mother in the kitchen. Her dessert was caramel custard which she much preferred over lemon custard, but she hardly tasted it.

She heard her mother hang up. Then her father called

from the den.

"Could you come here, Catherine?"

Char could not hear what they were saying, but she felt sure that it was about Squires. She knew that this was so when they returned with stiff faces to the table. She felt cold all over.

"Char," said her mother, folding and unfolding her napkin, "the Vet phoned to say that Squires was not going to get better, that he is suffering a lot and will only die. So we asked him to release our old dog -- to put him to sleep so that he will not wake up and will not have to suffer anymore."

"How does the Vet put him to sleep?" Char asked in a small voice.

"Just with a little medicine, dear. He will not know anything."

"He won't suffer anymore, Char," her father added.

Char cried helplessly. She would never again have a friend like Squires who listened so carefully to everything she said. He would listen with such a serious expression in his brown eyes, sometimes raising his ears just a little, or sometimes wagging his tail gently to encourage her to continue. He knew everyone of her secrets.

Later Char asked her mother: "Can we keep Squires in a grave in our garden?"

"I'm afraid not, Char."

"Why not, Mommy?"

"It's just not proper, dear, not for a dog."

But Char could never understand why it was not proper.

The days soon turned colder, grey days in which occasional winds blew leaves from the trees. None of her creatures was around. Danny Small had made no appearance

since early September. Peeps had also hidden himself somewhere for the winter. Pippin had flown away, her mother explained, to where it was warmer. Now and then she saw Dash furtively crossing the bottom of the garden. But he had been chased away so many times that he would not stay to let Char explain to him how everything had changed.

One Saturday her mother took Char downtown shopping for a new winter coat, and when they returned home carrying the box with the coat in it, she saw her father coming down the stairs. He was dressed in his Saturday togs as he liked to call them for working around the house, and he had a happy look in his eyes.

Char's mother held the coat up for him to admire, but he hardly noticed it.

"Very nice, yes, very nice," he threw out. "And now, Char, I've got something special I want to show you." -- an odd thing to say since a new winter coat was rather special. Char saw him wink at her mother, as he took her by the hand.

She stood in the doorway of her bedroom hardly able to believe her eyes. On the table in front of the window was a big tank filled with beautiful little fish.

"It's an aquarium, Char. Come and see."

Char had never seen an aquarium before. It glowed with light, and a column of bubbles rose to the surface. Inside the tank was a world she hardly knew existed. The fish were of various sizes, shapes and colours and they swam back and forth among waving green plants rooted in white sand. Sometimes the smaller fish disappeared behind rocks or within little houses fixed on the sand. There was even a tiny bridge down there. Char was entranced.

Her father explained to her about the fish. He

seemed a trifle uncertain as to their names and read from a little book. The smallest fish he called Tetras. They were bright red underneath and a bright sky blue above. The blue part of the Tetra shone in the dark, her father said, so that the Tetras could follow one another at night and not get lost. Then he pointed to little fish with great flowing tails and medleys of colours. These were Guppies who had tens of thousands of babies, even up to a million, her father said, looking serious. A school of horizontally striped fish came darting at one another across the tank. These were Danios, said her father, always chasing one another in fun, and so lively they sometimes jumped right out of the water. She liked the Danios with their scared, bright-eyed looks. Much more dignified, larger and rounder than the others, were three Angelfish, though they did not look very much like angels. The other smaller fish scattered out of their way, though the Angelfish pretended not to notice. Most timid of all were the Barbles with pink-red front halves and what looked like black undergarments on their back halves. They hid furtively in the greenery as though expecting immediate attack. Char couldn't imagine what they had to fear unless it was the Swordtail -- the largest fish in the tank. A brilliant orange-red, it carried what indeed looked like a sword on the underside of its iridescent flowing tail.

Consulting the aquarium book, Char's father taught her how to look after the fish. Char was not strong enough to change the water, nor could she reach in far enough to replant greenery which had come unstuck. But she fed the fish regularly with the required mixture of prepared food, supplemented by live shrimp and worms. She carefully checked water temperature and made sure the aerator and filter were working. Wanting the world of the



fish to be crystal clear, she often cleaned and polished the glass of the tank.

Little by little she learned to know the fish individually -- astounding her parents by her ability to note minute differences between each of the four Tetras or the five Barbles. These included physical traits such as the size and shape of the fins or the patterns of colouring as well as characteristics of behaviour and even temperament. The most timid of the timid Barbles who was always first to hide behind a plant or under the bridge at the mere sight of the majestic Swordtail or the puffed-up Angelfish was well known to Char. She named this wan little creature St. Clare because she had seen a picture of this saint in a life of St. Francis of Assissi and it reminded her of the timid Barble. Indeed she soon gave names to all her fish and Char's parents were at a loss to know where she had derived such remarkable titles. Winsome Prince, for example, was the Guppy with the longest and brightest tail. Happy Hatter was the most independent of the big-eyed Danios. Solemn Ruth was a snobbish Angelfish, and Lord Albert another. Char's mother questioned her about the names, but Char herself couldn't give an explanation. Char's mother discovered the answer one Wednesday when she came home from shopping earlier than usual. Char had just returned to school, having finished lunch, and Mrs. Talbot, the cleaning woman, who came once a week, was busily dusting the living room. She had turned the radio high. It was the daily horse racing news; Solemn Ruth had just come in second in the Fifth at Lansdowne Park.

Char's parents began to worry about Char's obsession with the world of the aquarium, though they were glad to see the happiness it had given her after the casualties of

of the Fall. She always came immediately home from school to attend to her Tropicals, as she called them. She seldom found the time to play with the other children, for there were few of them in the immediate vicinity. The closest was Tommy Hewlett who lived across the street, but he was a year older and rather truculent. Char's parents decided that they could change this situation by encouraging other children to come and visit. To set things going they would hold a Halloween party.

It was a simple affair. A number of parents were asked to bring their children around for hot chocolate after Trick or Treating. Char's parents sought to maintain the Halloween spirit by playing spooky music and lighting the room with flickering candles set in several ferocious looking pumpkins.

After the hot chocolate and marshmallows, Char's mother suggested that the children might like a special treat -- to view Char's aquarium. So they all trooped upstairs to have a look.

The children actually became quiet for a few moments at the sight of the gleaming aquarium with its flowing green plants and flashing, brilliantly coloured fish. They crowded close to the tank as Char, overcoming her earlier shyness, began to describe the fish to them. The children soon joined excitedly in the game of identification.

"This is Prancing Peter," Char said importantly, pointing to one of the Guppies. "He'll have a million babies!"

No one seemed quite capable of grasping this number.

"That's more than a hundred!" yelled Sammy Parsons, who was good at arithmetic.

"How can he possible look after them all?" asked Susan Norby seriously.

"Naturally, he's very busy," explained Char.

"He's busy alright," interrupted Tommy Hewlett who towered over the other children. "He's busy eating them."

There was a general air of stupefaction, but Tommy Hewlett had spoken with total authority.

"He eats them all," he repeated. "Every one."

"Is that true, Char?" Susan asked, more serious than ever.

Char did not know what to say; not able to contradict Tommy Hewlett, she was appalled at the idea of a father eating his own offspring.

"Well, even if it was true," Susan Norby said sharply to Tommy, "he couldn't eat all of them. There would be quite a few babies left."

This did not absolve the monstrosity of the act as far as Char was concerned, though it seemed to satisfy Susan. Tommy was really a horrible boy and Char wanted nothing more to do with him.

As soon as the party was over, Char told her father what Tommy had said about the infanticide practised by Guppies. Uncertain about Guppies, her father could only say that some fish (making the point that it could be mothers as well as fathers) ate some of their young when they were very hungry and that was all the more reason to feed the fish regularly and adequately so that they would not feel so inclined. Her mother added that Tommy probably made such a remark because he did not have an aquarium and was therefore jealous of Char. Despite these explanations, Char couldn't feel as friendly as she had toward Prancing Peter.

The first snow came in early November and it was during recess at school that a number of the boys, who had been pelting one another with snowballs, decided that

it would be more fun to wash girls' faces in slushy snow. Char had been hit on the back of the head by a large snowball and was trying to hurl one back at the brute of a boy who had thrown it, when she found herself flung to the ground and lying on her back, hands pinned above her head in the snow. She was looking up into the pink face of the hateful Tommy Hewlett. He had her pinned and half buried in the snow and no doubt was enjoying his momentary power over her.

"So what will you do if the electricity goes off?" he sneered at her. "All your fish will freeze to death."

"Let me go," Char yelled. "That won't happen."

"It will. It has before. All we need is a real big storm like it happened once!" He was yelling back, his face only inches from hers.

"It won't stop that long. They'll put it back on. I'll take my fish to my Daddy's office."

"You know what's going to happen to your stinking fish?" Tommy shouted, his face contorted. "They're all going to die! They're going to be radiated in a nuclear war! They'll turn to jelly!"

Char had heard the words "nuclear war" before and knew only that they meant something horrible and unmentionable. She remembered her father watching television when the words "nuclear war" were said. He turned off the set, looking very distressed.

"There won't be a nuclear war!" she cried.

"There will so be!" Tommy screamed hoarsely, almost touching her face with his horrid red one. "Everybody but stupid little mutts like you know there's going to be one! And all your fish will go belly up! Then they'll turn to jelly. They'll all die! Everything's going to die! You're going to die, too!"

He raised himself enough so that he could force her over on her stomach, and then he shoved her face deep in the snow, just as the bell rang. He jumped up and ran off.

Char did not go back into the school. She was crying so that it hurt deep inside her chest. She stumbled home sobbing and choking. When Char's mother saw her on the back porch, she flung open the door and pulled her inside. Holding her close, she rocked her little girl, wondering what could have happened.

It was some time before she could find out anything from Char. She had given her a warm bath, made her a cup of hot chocolate, and tucked her into bed.

"Now, honey, tell Mommy about it. What happened to you, dear?"

Char's dark eyes looked at her mother from a white, pinched face.

"Is there going to be a nuclear war, Mommy?"

The question shook Char's mother. "Of course not. Who told you that?"

"Tommy Hewlett. He said it will turn my fish to jelly. He said everything will die. He said I will die. Will you die too, Mommy?"

"Tommy Hewlett is a bad bad boy for saying those things to you. Listen, Char ..." For she could not bear the look in her child's eyes ... "There will never be a nuclear war. You must believe me. Never, never."

She took a deep breath. "I want you to believe me, Char, because I know and all sensible people know that such a thing will never, never happen."

"Why did Tommy Hewlett say that to me, Mommy?"

Char's eyes filled with tears, but she suppressed her desire to cry out. She decided not to tell her mother about how Tommy Hewlett held her down, how he shouted into

her face, how his own face looked so strange and terrified, how he shoved her deep in the snow. She did not tell her mother that Tommy was crying, too.

"I don't know why he said that, Char," her mother said. "I don't know why he said that."

The snow was falling again outside. Char's mother drew the curtains tight.

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