

CHARM

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"It's a good luck charm," announced Angela.

"Sure." Melissa tried to imitate her father's sarcastic laugh: a snort of air expelled with an eye-roll. "It's a paper clip with a rubber band."

"It's a charm," murmured Angela, studying her creation with concentration that negated any skepticism. It was an ability that infuriated Melissa: at will Angela could vanish into her own self-sufficient world of games and musings.

"It's nothing *really*," insisted Melissa, lunging to retrieve the twisted paper clip and her friend's attention. But although Angela was younger and smaller, she was also quicker than Melissa, and she ducked and scurried to the door of the room. "Come on!" She paused. "We'll give it to someone." Then she was gone.

Melissa looked around at the collection of artifacts that cluttered Angela's small room: little colored rocks and shells, an arrangement of stuffed puppets, a hanging wooden airplane: childish toys and trinkets with which any other eighth-grader wouldn't be caught dead. But Angela was small and young for her age: she hadn't had her period yet, Melissa knew. Melissa had had hers for almost half a year and those monthly spots of blood as effectively separated the two girls as if it had flowed from a physical severance. Things were different now, in ways that Melissa couldn't fully understand, never mind explain, but that were reinforced daily by numerous subtle events. The way the waiter had looked at her, for example, in the restaurant where she ate with her father that very afternoon: a narrowing of his eyes as he studied and defined her and assigned her to a category for which she had only recently qualified. He did it again when he brought their drinks: glancing at her sideways, then quickly away. She considered telling her father about it just to watch his reaction, but her father was busy watching his new girlfriend maneuver through the tables toward the bathroom.

"So are you going to marry this one?" Melissa had said, instead.

That's when her father snorted and rolled his eyes as though her question hardly warranted acknowledgment, never mind consideration. "Now what would possibly make you ask that?" he asked. He was cleaning his glasses – polishing them between the folds of his napkin and when he smiled toward Melissa it was clear that to him she was only a blur. He lifted the glasses toward the light for a quick inspection, then, satisfied, contorted the wire arms around his ears and turned fully toward her. "Or, I should say, *who* would make you ask that."

He said this kindly enough and even looked like he might reach out to pat her wrist but through the shiny lenses of his glasses his eyes were sharp and appraising, and instinctively Melissa drew her hand back and balled it into a fist in her lap.

"Mom had nothing to do with it," she said.

He tried to look surprised. "I didn't say she did, Pumpkin."

It was a nickname Melissa had always secretly liked but at this moment it made her furious. "Mom doesn't care what you do," she said. "Or who you fuck." It was a vicious comment but her father only hunched his shoulders and nibbled his mustache and rearranged his silverware on the table, and then his cell-phone rang and he snatched it from his pocket like an amulet and that was the end of that. Melissa sat fiddling with her fork, watching the other diners around them and wishing for a telephone of her own or some other device to transport her away.

A peal of laughter brought Melissa back to the project of the moment. Angela was laughing from down the hall, and the childish sound made Melissa wince. Angela didn't understand any of it, that much was clear. Still content to fiddle with her puppets and games, she might as well live on another planet. Melissa gave the propeller of the hanging plane a disgusted spin, setting the whole contraption dipping and swinging back and forth. She looked around the room one more time, then followed the sound of the laughter.

The room at the far end of the hall was the study for Angela's father and it had a quiet, patient atmosphere: dark polished wooden furniture, old Eastern carpets, heavy drapery drawn back from the tall rain-streaked window. No lights were on, but the gray rainy outside light fell through the window and collected around the desk. On the desk was a phone and a computer and on the chair, facing the computer, knelt Angela, her face bathed in pale screen glow.

"What's so funny?" said Melissa.

"Socrates." Angela didn't alter her concentration from the computer, glancing down only to check the location of keys on the keyboard.

Melissa slipped further into the room and looked around. Socrates, the Ducatti's fat calico, lolled on the deep cushioned chair beneath the bookshelves, but he didn't appear to be doing anything more amusing than breathing. He blinked condescendingly at Melissa. She extended her finger and Socrates sniffed it, then averted his head. Whatever he had done to make Angela laugh, he wasn't doing it now, and Melissa resolved not to inquire. If there was one lesson she had learned at school it was that curiosity was a weakness easy to

exploit. Instead, she picked up the charm from the table beside Angela's elbow and studied the awkward lopsided lacing of rubber bands around the paper clip. A small translucent bead was wedged into the webbing of the elastic but when Melissa touched it, it popped out and bounced on the floor. She retrieved it. Typical of Angela to create something so eagerly that it became haphazard. Melissa studied the bead between her fingers and saw that the hole could easily thread onto the paper clip itself. She accomplished this, working the bead past layers of rubber band so it was held in place but could still spin free. On the table were a couple of other beads that Angela had apparently intended to add to the charm, but had abandoned in favor of the computer. Melissa picked those up and threaded them, one at a time, onto the paper clip, arranging them symmetrically in a relatively balanced pattern. The whole thing looked a lot better now. Melissa lifted it toward the window, pleased by the soothing array of colors as the light passed through the beads.

"It's pretty," said Angela, by her side. Melissa dropped her hand, embarrassed.

"It's dumb," she said. "Let's do something else."

"No. I've got the letter."

Angela lifted a sheet of paper from the computer printer and presented it to Melissa. It read:

**This is a
Good Luck Charm
It will bring you luck
Please keep it**

**

"It's still raining," said the woman.

"It'll stop," replied the man. He crossed the room and stood beside his wife, looking out the window at the gray and wet buildings outside. Tree branches swayed and shook their leaves in a sudden gust, but across the courtyard on the tarpaper roofs of the neighboring buildings, the puddles looked as though they might be rippled mostly by the wind. "It'll stop," he said again. "Trust me."

His wife didn't respond and after a minute, even though she hadn't stopped gazing out the window, he knew she wasn't thinking about what he had said or about the weather outside. He studied her shoulders, the set of her hips, the pondering angle of her head. He considered touching her, maybe massaging her neck and shoulders as he would have done in the past. But things were different now. It wasn't so easy to predict, anymore, how she would react.

"Come on," he said. "Don't be that way."

"Hmmm." She turned toward him, her eyes blank. Then she blinked and laughed a little bit. "How would you prefer that I be?"

"Well, we're going to a party. We should try to be... not happy, I guess. That's not what I'm saying. I just—"

"Do you think it's this city? Do you think the city is to blame?"

"Nobody is to blame, Ann. It's—"

"I don't mean the pollution and the noise." The woman turned and began to pace, determinedly, as though heading somewhere important. She stopped and turned and paced again, this time toward the wall where she came up short, face to face with the framed Renaissance print of the Pieta they had bought years ago in Rome. It looked like a Michaelangelo and the dealer swore that it was rendered by one of his students in the mid-1500s. At the time, they haggled over the price but they didn't really care about authenticity or origin. To them the transaction was just another detail of a newlywed adventure, and later, when they learned they had bought a clever print and not an original drawing at all, it only increased the value to them and they laughed together, discussing how they would tell the story to their children. Now she studied the composition without seeing a line. "It just wouldn't surprise me," She turned, "...if a child wouldn't want to live here."

The man closed his eyes and then opened them. She was still there, hip cocked, head tilted, impatient for him to explain it to her. "It's not *like* that," he objected. He crossed the room and lifted a hand to her face, but she was looking through him, her eyes blank, and he let his arm drop limp to his side without touching her. "Nobody is to blame," he said.

"We should go!" She looked around as though suddenly aware of great obligation. She glanced at her watch and became even more agitated. "Look at the time!" she stared at him, amazed, then circled the room gathering her belongings: her black woolen shawl from the back of a chair, her purse, her umbrella. "You have money?" she asked.

"We're not in a rush."

"We're late!"

The man watched helplessly as his wife circled the room again, and then vanished down the hall. From the bathroom came the sound of running water as she brushed her teeth. Everything seemed accelerated: the wet whisper of the bristles against her teeth, her gargling and spitting, the splash of water that would probably always remind him of the water, pink and clotted, splashing into the tub. The whole world seemed accelerated since that night – accelerated and disorienting and the man felt now as he often felt since it happened: that he was losing his balance, tipping forward down a vertiginous slope. He shook off the sensation as his wife returned: the click of her heels preceding, somehow, the flush of the toilet. She glared around the room as though daring any small item to ignore her departure.

"I think we should try again," she said in the elevator.

"Andrea, *please* try not to think about it. We can't try again even if we want to for three months."

"Even if we *want* to'?" she studied him as though he were the murderer.

"Andrea, come on. Of course we'll talk about it. Of course if you want—"

"You don't want?"

"I didn't say that."

"You never say that."

"Because I don't mean that. I don't say it because I don't think it."

"You don't say anything, is my point."

"I don't... Come on Andrea, *please*. I'm on your side. It happened to me too."

She didn't reply, just sneered at the absurdity of his claim and then wouldn't look at him. He didn't pursue it; it was no use anyway. He watched his wife gazing up at the floor numbers sequentially descending, from right to left above the door of the elevator. She was tapping her watch and watching the elevator numbers, and thinking about neither. It was amazing, the man thought, how something like what had happened to them could so completely alter their lives. It was everywhere, all around them, because it was in them, and it effected everything the way a weak foundation effects every strut and beam of a house. Even arguing was not the main thing. They could argue all the time, sometimes heatedly but more often in long exhausting bickering loops, without ever applying their full attention; without ever being able to commit that part of their brain that remained cycling and recycling, like a computer vainly trying to process damaged information.

He followed his wife out of the elevator, distantly impressed by the resolute erectness of her spine: her shoulders thrown back, her strides long and confident. She had maintained this attitude of rigid efficiency throughout the ordeal, never even crying. It was he who had crumbled. He felt ancient, following her now through the lobby and out the door of their building. He felt like an ancient stranger, feeble and stooped and shuffling along in her determined wake.

"What's that?" said his wife, stopping abruptly so that he bumped into her. Around them the street was gray and deserted. The sidewalk was mottled with damp splotches from the recent rain. Wet cement smell permeated the air. "What is it?" said his wife, pointing with her umbrella at a folded piece of paper arranged in the center of the sidewalk. It was an odd looking piece of paper. It wasn't a random scrap of trash because it was held in place by two stones as though to keep it from blowing away in the breeze. Secondly, there were words written on the paper in red marker. The words said: 'Pick me up.'

"What is it?" said his wife.

"I don't know."

"It says to pick it up." She leaned closer, studying the page as though she might do just that.

"I wouldn't," he said quickly. "It's probably a prank. There's probably dog shit inside."

"Do you think?" His wife prodded the paper with her umbrella, trying to push back the leading edge. "There's something inside," she announced.

"Just leave it. They're probably watching us." He glanced around, suspicious, and saw two girls on a neighboring stoop and knew immediately that

they were responsible. "It's them," he said. "It's those kids. Come on, just leave it."

His wife looked up, first bewildered, then focusing on the two girls who were both peering intently in another direction. "Hey!" she called. "Did you do this?"

The smaller, closer girl, looked over. "What?" she said, her voice small and timorous through the wet air.

"This," demanded his wife, jabbing her umbrella at the note. She enunciated carefully as though addressing a vital point that must not be misunderstood. "Did - you - do - this. Here."

"Just leave it alone," the man whispered violently. "Please. It doesn't matter." The girl had jumped down from the wall and looked like she might approach and so he raised his voice. "Why don't you kids grow up!"

The other girl jumped down too and came stomping down the sidewalk beside her friend. She was angry – shaking her head and muttering, and as she approached she glared at the man. "It's not *bad!*" she said accusingly. "It's a *good* thing." The small girl was watching them also, her odd excitement touching him like a breeze.

"Good?" said the man's wife. She studied the two girls who stood, now, only a few feet away. Then she knelt on the sidewalk and parted the edges of the paper, and as the man leaned forward and saw the computer printed words and the twisted piece of wire, he felt again the pull of vertigo, as though his life were entirely out of his control and teetering on this small decorated object. His wife studied the charm for a long moment, kneeling on the sidewalk and bowed forward as though she were praying. Then she looked up at the two girls. "Come here," she said, and surprisingly it was the older, angry one that stepped forward. The girl remained rigid and defiant, but she allowed his wife to brush her face with two fingertips and brush back some strands of hair behind one ear. "It's beautiful," his wife said. "Can I really have it?"

The girl nodded, and then she began to cry. She released slowly, by increments – not returning the embrace but not resisting either until she was supported solely by his wife who rocked back and forth and murmured small unintelligible reassurances. The man thought his wife would start to cry also, but she didn't. She rocked back and forth patiently, on her knees, for a long time, until the girl stopped shuddering and pulled self-consciously away and then his wife wiped the girl's eyes and for a moment studied the narrow smudged face between her palms until the girl recoiled again, and then his wife released her and bowed her own head and seemed to collect her composure. She placed the charm carefully in her purse and rose to her feet. And not until the two of them had proceeded silently down the block, side by side like an old married couple united by decades of shared experience... not until they rounded the corner and were out of sight of the two young girls did she finally turn toward her husband and wrap her arms around him and release her own massive grief against his chest.