



Stories of Courage, Laughter & Hope

Uncle Charlie



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A Story About Love

“Where there is
great love, there
are always
miracles.”

– Willa Cather

I remember being scared the first time I saw Uncle Charlie. I had just stepped off the school bus, and coming into the house from the brightness of day, I couldn't see. When my eyes adjusted, I was surprised to see a bed in the dining room. A strange, unshaven man, propped up by pillows, sat in the darkened room. For a second, I wondered whether I was in the wrong house.



“Patty, is that you?” my grandmother called from the other room.

I bolted into the kitchen.

“Nana, who’s that man?”

“Remember me telling you about Charlie—about how sick he got in the war and how they put him in the veterans’ hospital? Well, that man in there is your Uncle Charlie.”



“Last night, Patty, I had a dream,” my grandmother said. “In the dream, God spoke. He said, ‘Go get your son. Bring him home, and he’ll get well.’ That’s what I did. This morning, after you went to school, I took the city bus to the hospital. I walked right into that place, into Charlie’s room, took him by the hand, and said, ‘I’m taking you home.’”



Nana chuckled. “Good heavens, how we must have looked, charging down that big old hospital lawn—him in that gown, open and flapping in the back. Nobody stopped us. But nobody said a word, even when we got on the bus.” She paused. “It was like we were invisible.”

“Nana, Charlie didn’t look like he saw me. Maybe I’m invisible too.”



“Charlie saw you. It’s just that he’s got what the doctors call catatonic. I guess that’s their fancy way of saying the cat’s got his tongue.” She stopped rocking. “Don’t you worry now. Charlie will be talking. He just needs to know we love him—that he’s home.”



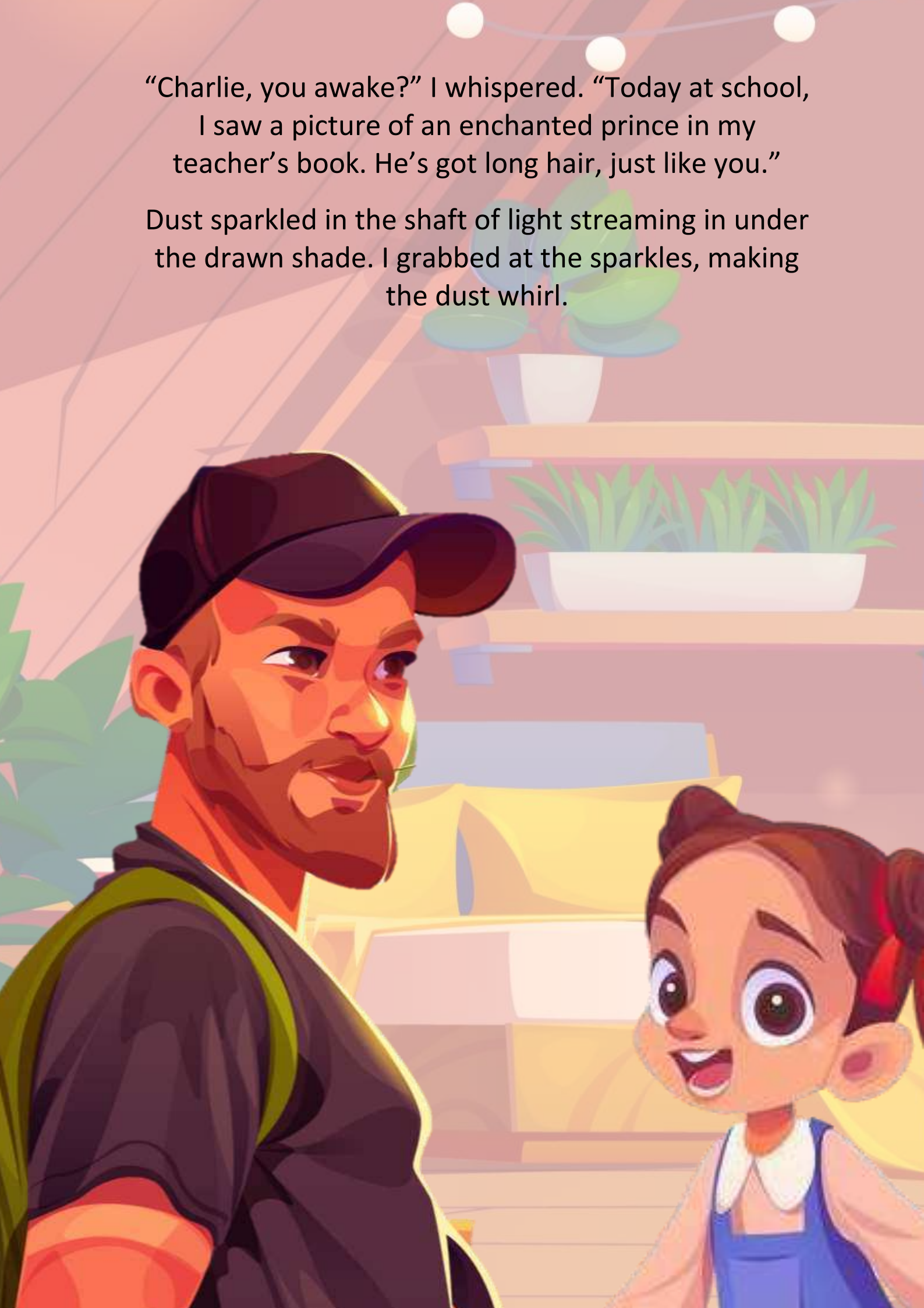
Frightened by the dark beyond the open kitchen door, I ran out the back door, leaped off the porch, and raced across the field, slapping my hips, pretending I was both horse and rider.

For months, I avoided the dining room. Finally, I became accustomed to Charlie's silence. After that, I played in Charlie's room. His blanket-covered knees were the "towers" of my castles.



“Charlie, you awake?” I whispered. “Today at school, I saw a picture of an enchanted prince in my teacher’s book. He’s got long hair, just like you.”

Dust sparkled in the shaft of light streaming in under the drawn shade. I grabbed at the sparkles, making the dust whirl.



“Look, Charlie, I’ve caught us a handful of sun. It’s got millions and billions of tiny stars in it.” I held out my fists. “I’ve caught some for you.”

“Patty, I’ve got something for you,” Nana called from outside.

Before leaving Charlie, I put my favourite doll—with its red nail polish and half-baked head—next to him and tucked them both in.



“She’s a princess. I’m leaving her to keep you company.”

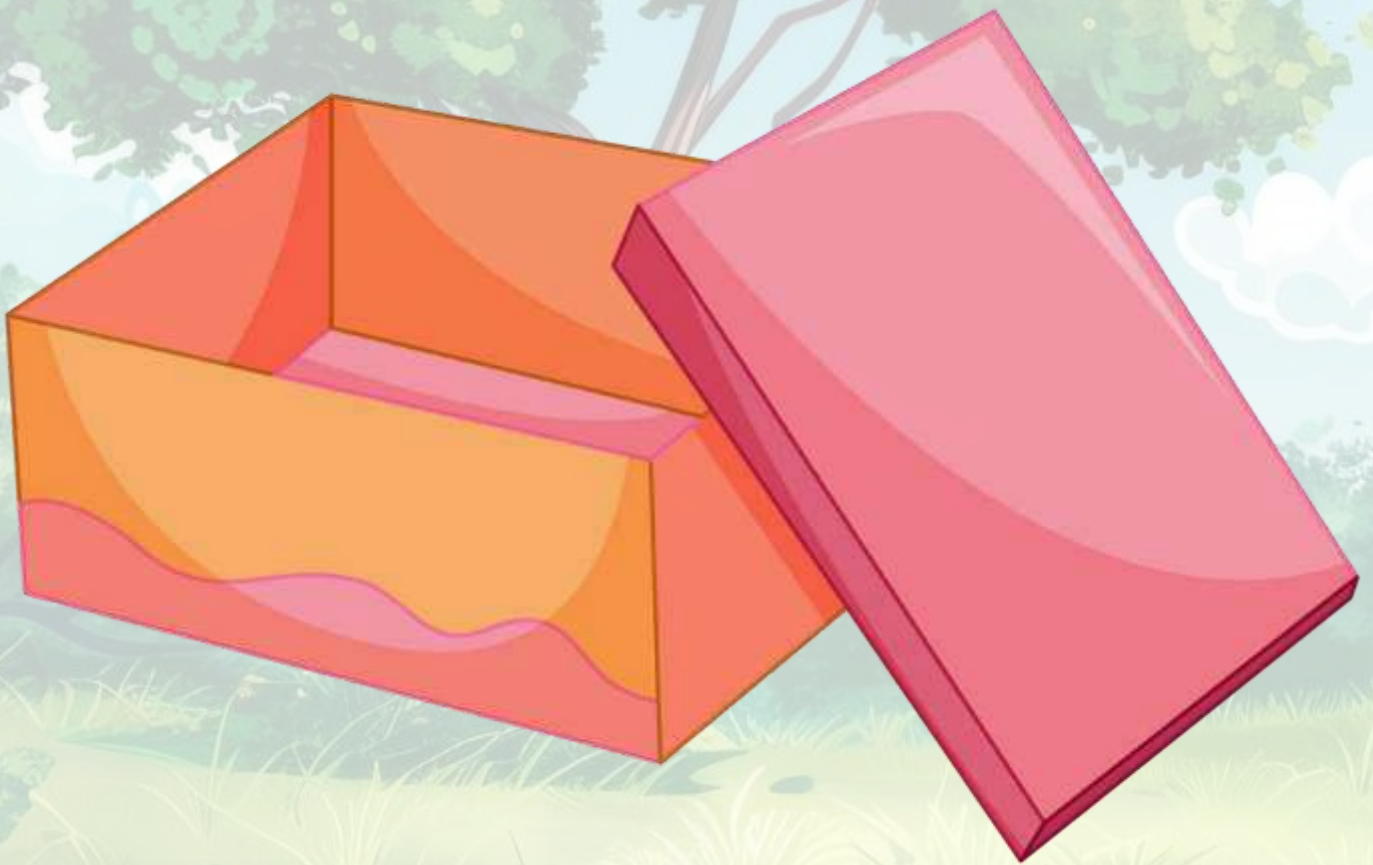
“I found this little bird under the old oak,” Nana said.
“Its eyes are still closed. It must have just pecked out of
its shell. There’s a dropper in the medicine cabinet in
the bathroom. Use that dropper to feed him ground-up
sunflower seeds and water.”



She handed me the bird. “Empty out a shoebox and be sure to put something in it for lining. What are you going to name him?”

“Little Bird. I’m calling him Little Bird, just like in the song.”

I went inside and dumped the shoebox with my rock collection onto the rug.



“Hey, Charlie, look what I’ve got!” I put Little Bird in the empty box. “Watch him for a minute. I’ve got to get the dropper.” I placed the box in Charlie’s lap.

When I returned with the dropper, the box was lying on the floor—empty. Charlie had dropped him!

“Charlie,” I whispered, trying not to cry, “where is Little Bird?”



Cracking open his cupped hands, Charlie smiled as he stared down at the tiny, hunger-stretched beak peeking up between his thumbs and forefingers.

That evening, when I was mashing potatoes, I said, “You know what, Nana? Charlie’s taking care of Little Bird.”



“I know it. I saw him. And you know something else? He’s making humming noises, like he’s singing.”

Nana was getting Charlie’s tray ready when Charlie walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table. He was dressed in overalls and a plaid shirt. It was the first time I’d seen him in anything other than pyjamas.

Nana opened her eyes in exaggerated surprise. She looked so silly that I started to laugh.



Then Charlie made the first sound—other than snoring and coughing—that I had ever heard him make.

He laughed.

Slapping his knees, he laughed until tears ran down his cheeks. Then he reached into the big pocket of his overalls and took out Little Bird.



“Look,” he said. “Isn’t this the sweetest, most helpless little thing you’ve ever seen?”

Nana almost fell off her chair. Then she started to cry.

I wasn’t surprised, because I knew that even though he had been placed under a spell, the spell couldn’t last.

They never do.





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