

Charlotte

By Graham Crisp

Charlotte arrived a few days after I regained consciousness. She politely introduced herself and remained quietly with me as I began to gain strength.

I could only recall fragments of the fire that had so rapidly and ferociously ripped through the upstairs of my home. I had just left the bathroom when I was engulfed in thick grey smoke that tore through my body. I remember the ambulance and the green-uniformed paramedics covering part of my face and the upper area of my left arm with something that felt like clingfilm. Then nothing – until Charlotte gently called my name, and we were together.

I suppose I should have asked her why she had chosen me. I mean, there were two other girls on either side of me and another three opposite, but Charlotte had singled me out and at first I was grateful for her company.

Charlotte always stepped away when I was being examined. It seemed the right thing for her to do. She strongly suggested that we should keep our relationship just between the two of us and so I abided by her wishes.

It was on a Wednesday, on a wonderful bright sunny afternoon, that my bandages were removed. I could sense a high level of anticipation, as my consultant and a nurse approached me and drew the curtains tightly around my bed. I knew Charlotte was there somewhere. I could sense her presence.

The dressings fell away easily, and for the first time in several months, the left side of my face and shoulder were exposed to the world. Although the warm sun shone through an opened window, my face, shoulder, and arm were frozen. It was as if they were indifferent to the summer sun. A dull ache pressed down on my newly exposed skin. The consultant examined me, nodding slowly. I heard him prescribe some painkillers and something unpronounceable. The nurse nodded and slipped through the curtains.

My consultant's name was Mr Balay. Every time I heard his name being called, I had cheeky visions of him dressed in skinny tights as he danced across the ward, pirouetting and

leaping past the nurse station and onto his next patient, immediately followed by his junior doctor clad in a starched white tutu tip-toeing elegantly behind him.

The vision of Mr Balay's Swan Lake soon deserted as I observed a deep frown that began to form across his brow. He calmly explained that I was *heavily scarred* but the scars would *thin out* over time, and there was the option of some *surgery* at a later date. His voice lowered to just above a whisper: I should *prepare myself* before I took up his offer of a mirror.

Mr Balay gave me a thin smile and backed away. I was momentarily alone. The large hand mirror lay alongside.

Then Charlotte was with me.

I lifted the mirror to my face, and immediately dropped it back.

The word hideous sprang into my mind.

Charlotte was kind. She reassured me that I was far from hideous and that my hair, when fully grown back, would cover a large part of my face. And yes, I might feel that off-the-shoulder dresses would make me feel a little conspicuous, but that wasn't the end of my world. Charlotte's soothing reassurances calmed me. She made me feel consoled and comforted.

A few weeks later, fully dressed in a high-necked patterned dress, sporting puff sleeves and with heavy concealer liberally applied to the left side of my face, I prepared to leave the safe confines of the ward. The nurses and staff had lined up like a guard of honour; they each touched my hands and bade me good wishes as I headed towards the exit. Charlotte followed me out. I could hear her encouraging and supportive words.

Now I had Charlotte I felt I was ready to regain my place in the world. My confidence grew, and as my sixteenth birthday approached, I decided that I would celebrate it with a big party. Strangely, Charlotte wasn't very impressed with my plans. She tried to get me to change my mind, or at least scale things back.

Normally I would acquiesce to Charlotte but this time, I ignored her. No matter how much she nagged me, I planned my party and invited just about everyone I knew.

I danced with a well fit guy called Charlie. I recall we briefly kissed. As he left, we made arrangements to meet again. I felt whole again, the scars may still be visible on the outside, but inside I was at peace.

As the last guests left, I sat down at the bottom of the stairs and contemplated. The party had been perfect. Okay, I did notice on occasions that some of the invitees surreptitiously pointed at me, and whispered behind cupped hands, but I was now used to this and I certainly wasn't going to let it spoil my fun. And the best bit? My future date with Charlie. Was he going to be my first boyfriend?

I had enjoyed myself so much that it was only later that I realised that Charlotte hadn't been anywhere near me for the whole evening. I just shrugged, stood up, and climbed the stairs.

However, Charlotte returned when I entered my bedroom. I remember immediately sensing a foreboding atmosphere.

Charlotte was angry. She positively growled. She was hard and menacing. She said that the whole evening had been a complete disaster. That Charlie was only after one thing, and that the girls had sniped about my clothes and makeup behind my back.

Charlotte's taunts and torments continued relentlessly. Her previous gentle and supportive nature had been replaced by cruel threats, insults, and vile abuse. I pleaded with her to stop, but this just made her worse.

Things got so desperate that after another evening of vilifications from Charlotte, I found myself locked in the bathroom clutching a full bottle of sleeping pills. I could feel Charlotte's menacing encouragement, goading me to swallow. I gathered myself and dropped the bottle. The pills spilled out across the floor.

This was the final straw. I faced down Charlotte. I forcibly told her that I no longer needed her, or wanted her and that she should go. Immediately. I pushed her away.

Then I felt a sharp stabbing pain in my left shoulder.

But the insults stopped.

Charlotte had gone.

Recalling that decisive moment, I closed my eyes and ran my finger down the scars on the side of my face.

About two months after Charlotte's disappearance, on a wonderful sunny afternoon, I was sitting with Charlie on a park bench nibbling an orange ice lolly, when I heard a girl's voice. I turned around. From the back I guessed that she was around fifteen or sixteen. She seemed to be alone and it looked like she was talking to herself.

Thinking that she might be in some distress, I strained my ears to hear her words.
My blood ran cold.

Although her voice was hushed, I could clearly make out what she was saying.
“Look Charlotte, I can go out with whoever I like! You can’t stop me! And don’t call him that. Steve is a nice guy, he wouldn’t do anything like that. I don’t know what’s come over you, you were, you know, like, so kind to me in hospital – now you’re being really horrible! Just leave me alone!”

I tugged at Charlie’s arm and quickly dragged him away.