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ANGELA M. BALCITA

Moonface and Charlie

I tell Charlie we should at least get ourselves some costumes. A fake mustache, a cane, a boa. Maybe some matching tuxedos. *Something*, I tell him.

“Don’t get crazy, Moonface,” he says. He looks at me and winks. His scruffy voice matches the stubble on his chin, and I’m in love with his eyes that sparkle like diamonds even when his eyebrows get in the way.

I always tell him that I think the story could be better, that we could add fireworks, go to parties with roman candles in our pockets and light them up when the questions start flying. Or wear tap shoes and do a little kick-ball-change after every punch line.

“Are you kidding me? What we’ve got is gold, baby. Gold!” He grabs my face. He kisses me hard on my cheek. Charlie is the showman. He’s got the wit and the delivery. He can play to a crowd without the props or the fancy sets. If we really did have an act, I mean, one that we actually made money off of, he’d be the manager, the one calling the shots. And I’d let him. He has a way of telling a story and running with it.

“So, show us the scar you got from the surgery, man,” someone from the audience will ask. Right now, the audience is usually our families and our friends. Sometimes strangers at parties.

Charlie lifts his shirt and says, “Surgery? What are you talking about? I got this baby from a shark bite when we were swimming off the deep seas of Palau. See the teeth marks?” He points to the little dots where the doctors had him in staples.

“Nawww!” the crowd calls. Some of them gasp in horror.

“Come on, Charlie, tell ’em the truth,” I interrupt. I furrow my brow, puff out my lips. Me? I’m all facial expressions. Charlie says I can change the mood of a room with just the look on my face. That and I follow cues really well. “We got shipwrecked on that island and we tried to kill each other for food. See, I’ve got one, too. He tried to get me first, but I went straight for that white meat, if you know what I mean.”

Then, I lift up my shirt to show the crowd my scar, also on my left side. And then, we demonstrate what that stabbing might have looked like had we really done it. We take turns pretending to jab a knife into each other's stomach, over and over again.

"Aaawww!" one of us yells.

"Aaawww!" the other one yells.

It has our families and friends rolling on their sofa cushions for hours.

At first, we tried to tell everyone our story, all serious and sweet, how I have this disease, how he gave me his kidney, how I was in bad shape. The sacrifice, the pain, yadda, yadda, yadda. But even when we talk to our audience honestly about the transplant, we can't help but crack the jokes because, as Charlie says, "How else are you supposed to look at life? *Seriously?*"

If you ask me, I'm not so into the slapstick. The corny jokes, the wink-and-nudge humor. That's more Charlie's bag. I try my best, but he's the one who's been stuck in Vaudeville ever since he was a kid. Once, at his mom's house, I found an essay he wrote in the third grade titled, "If I Could Be Anyone in the World, I'd Be Groucho Marx."

We have other acts, too, you know, and if I had my way, we'd be touring the cocktail party circuit headlining with my favorite one, the one where we call ourselves the smooth 1970s singing duo *Cocoa and Cream*. Tall, blond white guy and short, mocha-colored gal with dark hair, dark skin, flat chest, but nice ass, if I do say so myself, swaying softly in front of the crowd to the soothing tunes in our heads. And just when the crowd thinks they've got us all figured out, Charlie points to his chest and says, "I'm Cocoa. She's Cream."

The crowd digs it. They laugh. They shake their heads thinking, "They're sly! Aren't they just sly?"

"Oh, Charlie," I say, smacking my gum and batting my eyelashes. Then he sings our slow, number one R&B hit into a make-believe microphone. "*I have this empty space way down deep inside me / And it's where my kidney used to be / And I can't hold back . . . my . . . love.*"

I look out the corner of my eye for my cue. He gives me a nod, and that's when I know my line comes, "*Ooooh, yeah, my love is soarin' / Now, give me all your vital . . . organs . . . yeahhhh. . .*"

See, that's how to win a crowd over. Not with the part about the blood transfusions and the dialysis or the medicine and the

infections. Best to keep that stuff way down deep inside in a place where the crowd can't see it, or maybe lock it up safely at home, because if you think about that stuff here, you don't have much of a stage presence. In fact, you end up making yourself into a prop. The weeping willow. The bird that always sings the sad song. The crowd doesn't want to cry or feel your pain. They want to crack the jokes right along with you.

Take Charlie's mother. I mean really, *please* take Charlie's mother. If she's in the crowd, she'll say something like, "Now after all this, don't you think you should be married by now?" She plays to the crowd, "What do you all think?" She puts her hands in the air, looks at them and shrugs. The crowd nods their heads. "Yes, yes."

And while it's not usually my M.O. to talk about this stuff in the middle of the act, the crowd gets to me and I say, "Yeah, Charlie. Listen to your mother. Why don't we get hitched?"

Then Charlie makes a long face, one that droops way down to his knees, and he says to the audience, "I give her my kidney, and she still wants my heart. Women!" He sighs.

And I feel like I've got more to say, but I can't beat that. So I just gotta play off it, too. "I retract my original offer! Look, Charles, I didn't start loving you more right before the surgery. I had your blood-type tested long before we started dating. When I knew you were a match, that's when I made my move. Seven years ago! That's devotion, honey."

He smirks. His dimples tuck themselves deeply into his cheeks.

If my brother's in the audience, he pitches in his two cents, too. "What? My kidney wasn't good enough for you? You still owe me for that, you know. I've got a guitar picked out."

"Save it, hon!" I say. "That's another story!" You see? Everyone is a comedian. We've learned to look past the hecklers and go on with the show.

"So, I give her my kidney, and she finally gets better and quits whining in my ear about how sick she is. *I'm so sick. I'm so sick,*" Charlie whines in a high-pitched nasal voice that is supposed to resemble mine, but I don't think it's anywhere close. "*Poor me, poor me.*" He pretends to cry, wiping his cheeks free of the tears. And right on cue, I put up my dukes and give him a shot in the arm. I always miss and stumble clumsily to the side just like a good straight man should.

And that's how it goes.

And the crowd laughs.

And we're at the center of it all, the brightness descending on us like a big operating room light. Only this time, I'm laughing so hard, I don't feel any pain.

It seems like Charlie has always been looking for his straight man. A buddy, a pal, someone to keep around. One day, I'm riding shotgun in our car on the way to the market. I've got my tooties up on the dash, and I'm watching the small houses and lonely farms pass by in the window. Charlie turns to me and says, "Hey, Moonface, did I ever tell you about the time when I was fourteen and I asked my Aunt Wendy to buy me a pet mouse?"

"A mouse? Gross!" I say.

"Yeah, he was a little white guy with a little white tail. I named him Sergeant Keyknob and walked around with him sitting in my breast pocket. I thought he was so cute. Then one day, the little bastard turned on me and bit me hard on the finger until I started to bleed. After that I never touched him again."

"What'd you do? Kill him?"

"No, no, I kept feeding him in his little cage. Whenever my friends came over I always got them to pet him. *Go ahead*, I'd say. *He's a sweet mouse*. And then Sergeant Keyknob would bite them, too." He pounds his palms on the steering wheel as he laughs.

"Weirdo," I say. I look out the window, shaking my head at the rolling hills of the Midwest. Everyone always says that Iowa is a flat state. But since we moved here three years ago, Charlie says that those people just aren't looking closely enough. He points out where creeks cut into the grass to shape a valley and where a hill rises out of nowhere.

"The hip of a sexy woman lying on her side," he says. Sooner or later, I start looking out the car window to see the little dips in the earth and where the scenery takes me by surprise.

"Hey, Moonface!" he yells again so loud that I jump in my seat.

"What!?" I say.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my Aunt Wendy got me a ventriloquist doll? I named him Charlie O'Doyle."

"You mean you named your ventriloquist doll after yourself?"

“Yeah, why not? We looked exactly alike. Curly hair, freckles over his nose. And strangely enough, the guy sounded just like me. Ha!”

The road ahead curves in a way that is sharp and blinding. I don’t know what comes after this turn. Charlie’s not paying attention. He’s got his head thrown back in laughter. I cling to the door and to the dashboard and my toes press against the windshield. I watch the road closely waiting for a tree or an unexpected cliff. And just when I think he’s taking the turn too fast, he eases up on the accelerator and handles the steering wheel smoothly.

“Moonface,” Charlie says, “wouldn’t it be great if we could get ourselves one of those motorcycles with a sidecar? You’d have your own little seat. We could put cushions in there and a radio. But you’d still have to wear a helmet, of course.”

“Wait, why do I have to ride in the sidecar?” I protest with my arms crossed over my chest.

“It’s warmer in there. Safer, too. The safer you are, the less I’ve gotta worry.” He takes his right hand off the steering wheel and pinches me on the cheek (the one on my face, that is). And I know it sounds silly, but somehow I’m charmed by all this and I’m willing to ride in the imaginary sidecar and go with him anywhere.

“So how about you, Moonface? Any alternative childhood friends?”

“Hmmm, I don’t know.” I think to myself. I’ve been the back-up singer to my brother’s pretend band. The good cop to his bad robber. Growing up, if I wanted to be queen of the ball or the fairy godmother, that was a game I had to play by myself. I still wonder what it would be like to be the one with the tiara in my hair instead of the one most likely to be pulled off the stage with a cane. “You know, Charlie, I always used to fantasize about what it would be like to play the bride. White dress. The vows. My imaginary prince carrying me off somewhere on a white horse. To Iowa, maybe.”

“Hmmm,” he says.

“So, why don’t we get married, Charlie? The kids, the house, the whole kit and caboodle. What do you think?”

“I think . . . well, that’s not our bit, pretty girl. Our bit’s the road. Making funnies. You and me. Laurel and Hardy. Abbott and Costello,” he says.

“Ricky and Lucy?” I plead.

“Yeah, maybe,” he says abruptly. He sits up straight in his seat and focuses back on the road. I try to keep from pouting, but I feel my lower lip thicken like one of those little cocktail hotdogs.

I can’t argue with the guy. He’s got nice eyes and strong arms that hold me tight. He treats me well, reaches things on the top shelf for me, pulls the car up to the door when it’s raining. He gave me a kidney, for god’s sake, and what’s a girl supposed to ask for after that?

The first time I met Charlie was at a party in college. Back then, I was a shy Catholic girl with a skinny face and legs like toothpicks. Charlie was smiling, drunker than a worm at the bottom of a tequila bottle. He was wearing a pair of those gold Elvis sunglasses with fake sideburns attached to them, sauntering up to every co-ed saying, “It’s me, baby. Your hunk-a, hunk-a burnin’ love.” All the other girls ignored him, but I couldn’t take my eyes off his curled lip and the way he swaggered when he walked, starting way down deep in his knees, and all the way up to his hips. *Boom, boom, step. Boom, boom, step.* When he finally came up to me, he took off his sunglasses, looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Priscilla, that you?”

I bet after that he thought it would be happily ever after, all jokes and silliness. All kissy face and googly eyes. I bet he didn’t think he had a sick puppy on his hands. Early on, I tried not to bring it up. Instead, I let him buy me drinks. I laughed at all his jokes. I mean, they were funny. I laughed so much I thought I’d bust my incision wide open. I was afraid to tell him about my kidney disease and about the first transplant I got from my brother when I was eighteen. But when I finally did, he didn’t crack a smile. In a crowded bar, he held his chin up with one hand, and reached across the table to touch my arm with the other. Later that night, he asked to see my scar. He put his lips to it, flush against my distorted skin. He kissed me there, and then all over.

I bet he thought that’s all he’d have to do. Get me a blanket when I got cold, pick up my medicine for me, and say, “There, there,” every now and again. I bet he didn’t think that after six years together, that I would get sick again, and that he would be the one to give me his kidney. I told him how hard it would be, but he wanted to do it anyway. And wouldn’t you guess? He got the works: the infection, the long, slow recuperation. Tell a guy who’s never been sick in his

life that he's got to have total bed rest for the next eight weeks, and I'll show you one grumpy fella. A year later, he still struggles to bend on his left side where they took his kidney out of him. "It seems the King has lost a bit of his swagger, 'Cilla," Charlie says with one hand over his ribs. And that's when the guilt hits me like the flu or like a needle in my heart. It hurts more than any procedure I've been through. More than getting an iv stuck in my arm, more than the gout, more than getting an enema. I tell you, I'd get an enema every day for the rest of my life if it meant he'd get back his shake.

After the surgery, everyone called him the "hero." I was the one he saved. My mother would introduce my brother and Charlie by saying, "This is my Hero #1, and this is my Hero #2." I looked at it that way, too. But you know what threw me for a loop? Long after the surgery, Charlie kept calling *me* Super Woman. "You and your amazing powers," he'd say. "They turn me on. *Grrrrrrrrrr.*"

"What are you talking about?" I'd say. "I'm as weak as a baby."

"Naaww, come on. You know what I mean." He's talking about the whole illness, the day-to-day. We were playing Russian roulette with this transplant, betting everything on our lucky number. My body could figure out that this kidney isn't really my own and start trying to get rid of it tomorrow. Then, it's back to everything that I've been going through since I was eighteen: on dialysis, off dialysis, drugs every day that make me thin, make me fat, make me hairy, make me hungry, make me lose my appetite. When we're at home, I try to leave that stuff out. I go back to playing my part. But Charlie has his own rules about that. Sometimes, he comes home and I'm throwing up into the toilet bowl.

"You okay?" he says.

"HU-uuuuhhhhhhh . . ." I heave into the bowl. I turn my head toward him. "Charlie, how did that one sound?"

"Moonface, how can I help you? What can I get?"

"HU-uuuuhhhhhhh . . ." I throw up some more. I take a breath. "My back-up singers?"

"Quit joking," he says. His voice is loud now and he's not smiling. "Do we have to go to the emergency room?"

I know I make him worry a lot. But I try to cue him in as to when to get serious and when it's going to be okay.

“No, Charlie. I’ve already called. No fever, nothing to worry about. Just a little bug.”

When I’m back on the couch, he puts up my feet and makes me tea. “How’d a skinny little thing like you get to be so tough?”

“Watch yourself, Charlie, that almost sounds like a compliment.”

“Tell me for real,” he says. Those eyes pierce into me. “What’s it feel like?”

“Like I’m an old lady,” I say. “Like I’m ninety, not thirty. I walk slow. I walk up steps and I can barely catch my breath. My ankles get swollen like little potatoes and sometimes the only shoes I can fit into are those orthopedic ones. Charlie, the last time we went home to visit your family, you went for a jog while I sat inside with your grandparents and we compared our cholesterol levels and blood pressure medications.”

“Awww, Moonface, I don’t see you like that. You’re a spring chicken.”

“Sometimes, I don’t feel like one,” I tell him. “Charlie, let’s say this is my new act. I might feel like an old woman, but I want to be one of those tough old ladies. The kind that will beat you over the head with her purse if you try to mug her. The one who can still dance at parties. Hey, maybe we can do the swing. Yeah, you can swing me up over your hips and I can kick up my heels. That’s the kind of old lady I want to be. The kind of woman who fights her old age, even if she’s just thirty.”

“Act any way you want. Complete . . . artistic . . . license,” he says, nodding his head. “Astound me and everyone else, why don’t you?”

So, it’s like that. Charlie’s always been by my side. In sickness and in health. He waits for me to signal to him when I get too tired at a party. I give him a quiet little nudge and he says, “That’s all folks!” When I’ve got a fever, I give him one little look, and he knows the routine. Pack up some things, hop in the car, check into the emergency room and wait. He knows to bring a book and find a comfortable seat. Some mornings when I feel good, I give him a smile so he knows his next line, “You’re brighter than the sun today.”

Not long ago, they put me in the hospital for some virus I apparently got from eating some bat turds, and while I don’t recall eating any bat turds, they say *Histoplasmosis* is in the air, too. And if it’s in

the air, you can bet your behind that I'll get it. That's another thing about getting a kidney: you pick up all these silly things. They put you on a medicine that keeps you from rejecting this weird thing inside you, but the flipside? You pick up every disease, every virus, every little thing that your body's supposed to fight off. Anyway, I end up in a hospital bed for three lousy weeks while they try to get that virus out of me, drilling medicine into my arms. And I tell you, it's hard to do comedy in a hospital. The place is a real buzz kill. A morgue for an amateur duo like us. And this time around, I'm tired and I've got no appetite. When I try to eat, I can't keep anything down. My face looks sallow; my body feels like a bag of rocks. I feel like I've got to do something about it. Charlie sits on the edge of my bed while I check myself out in a mirror.

"How's my lipstick? It's called *Dusty Road*."

"Too brown," he says. "Looks like you got shit on your lips."

"Bat shit?" I ask.

"Why you gotta wear that stuff? Stop trying to cover up that pretty face of yours with all that gunk. Why don't you just stick with the look you've already got going? *Hospital Chic*? We could put gauze around your neck like a scarf."

"Hey, even if I feel gross, it doesn't mean I have to look gross. Besides, what if my fans come to visit me? I can't ruin my image."

"Your image is intact," he says. "No one will argue."

I'm messing with lipstick because I don't want Charlie to see my lips quiver. I can take feeling tired, and all the doctor's appointments, but here is different. There's just nothing to work with. Here, the jokes land flat, somewhere between the consoling flowers and the overcooked meatloaf. No costumes, no audience, nothing to riff off of. When it gets too much, my eyes well up and I say, in a voice that's weaker than I'd like, "Oh, no, Charlie, here come the faucets."

"Pretend I'm the sink!"

He comes closer, over the edge of the bed. "Let it out, Moonface. Don't worry. This doesn't have to go in the act. Look at you. You tough thing. Where do you find the muscle to make it through all this? You're like the Great Wall of China . . . the Rock of Gibraltar . . . Hercules . . . Mount Everest . . . the Acropolis . . . the Golden Gate Bridge . . . the Statue of Liberty . . ."

“Yeah, yeah, okay, okay,” I tell him. Sometimes he doesn’t stop talking. My eyelids get heavy and I wipe tears off with my gown. Now, I just want to sleep, crash in this hospital bed and wake up somewhere else.

“And, Moonface, we’re in this show together, for better or worse. I’m counting on you,” Charlie says. He lays his head on my arm. His voice gets slow and soft like he’s getting tired, too. “You’re my honey bee . . . my sugar pop . . . my cinnamon girl . . . my Big Mama . . . my jellyroll . . . my Asian orchid . . . my sweet cheeks . . . my apple dumpling . . .”

“Asian orchid?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said, my Asian orchid . . . my Cleopatra . . . my brown sugar . . . my buttermilk biscuit . . . my raspberry scone . . .”

He starts to fade.

“My June bug . . . my pet Chihuahua . . .”

And I fall asleep, dreaming of him still calling me names.