

Fluctuation (unfinished)

by Jack CJ Stark

The alarm buzzed at 10:00am. Charlie had already been awake reading a book for a while but it was Saturday and he had no reason to get out of bed yet. Also, he had heard that teenagers stay in bed until the afternoon. He was 12 and not yet quite a teenager, so he figured he should probably get up before the afternoon, but not too early.

Charlie was never great at doing things the normal kids his age did. Things that appeared to come easy to them were an effort for him. He tried to eat copious amounts of junk food but it just made him feel sick after a couple of bars of chocolate. He didn't own a Playstation or had his own PC or laptop because his mum couldn't afford one. He hoped to get one for Christmas though. He didn't have a mobile phone as his mum thought he was too young and couldn't be trusted with one. He tried to watch TV for hours at a time but he found so much of it boring. It was either over the top drama, cooking shows, people trying to be funny (and failing at it), or men doing this weird shouting and talking at the same time whilst trying to sell you the latest attachment for your hosepipe or the latest amazing cleaning product that no home should be without. The type Charlie hated the most were the shows when groups of adults are really passionate about current affairs. At least that's what he thought it was called. It's when people talk about which politician recently said something they don't like. It all seemed like unnecessary drama to Charlie. If they don't like what someone said, surely it was better to just ignore them and get on with your own life? It seemed counterintuitive to him that the ranting man or woman would put so much effort into talking about someone they didn't like in order to make the point that we shouldn't listen to the person who said the thing in the first place. He would occasionally watch some cartoons or wrestling which he quite enjoyed but felt he was too old for that now, so he did it in secret.

Charlie had other things he enjoyed doing, but they were often solitary activities. He enjoyed reading. He took pride in being able to read a three hundred page novel in just a few days. He was the top reader in his class throughout junior school and his teacher would lend him

copies of her own books because he had read everything the school owned multiple times. He enjoyed painting and drawing but he wasn't very good at it. He wrote short stories when he found the inspiration but felt they were also not very good.

Charlie was the only pupil from his primary school to move to his secondary school last year. He didn't like it when he was told he would not be going to the same school as his old friends but his mother had told him he didn't have a choice, that it was a good school and that he would make new friends. This was all true, but it was difficult for Charlie to make friends and he felt his mum hadn't really taken into consideration just how unpleasant it was for him to try and fit in when everyone else in his class already belonged to an established group. Charlie had managed to connect with a couple of boys in his class, Scott and Daniel, but they lived a distance away from him so he rarely saw them after school or at weekend.

When Charlie's parents separated two years ago he had to leave the house he had grown up in on Old Lane. He and his mum moved in with her friend, Tracey, for a few months before moving to Walkerwood Rise. Walkerwood Rise was a narrow road surrounded on two sides by a wrought iron fence marking the perimeter of Walkerwood Park. It had a row of 5 terrace houses and no other homes or buildings. At one end was a busy main road that went into the town centre and at the other end was a small tarmacked area for cars to park and a path that led through some trees into Walkerwood Park. It would be easy to think that Walkerwood Rise got its name from Walkerwood Park but the truth is they both got their name from the nearby Walkerwood Reservoir. That was a fun fact that Charlie had been told by one of his new neighbours.

The house at number 5 Walkerwood Rise was smaller than the one on Old Lane. It didn't have a garage to put Charlie's bike in. It didn't have a front garden and the back garden was small with no grass in it. Inside, the house didn't have space for his mum to have an office, and it didn't have a dining room like he was used to. On the day they moved in Charlie heard his mum telling her friend, Tracey, that this will do for now until the dickhead gives us the money and we can get somewhere better. She said it with a fake smile, and Charlie knew she was trying to convince herself rather than Tracey. He thinks she was talking about his dad but any time he had asked about the situation she just told him not to worry about it and that she will make sure

everything is okay in the end. He wasn't asking for her to make things okay, he just wanted to know what was going on and whether he would see his dad again sometime soon.

Charlie wanted to spend this Saturday doing what he spent most of his weekends doing – reading in Walkerwood Park. He enjoyed being outside and the park had enough people using it that he could people watch (which he also enjoyed greatly), but it was not so busy that it was loud and distracting from a good story.

Charlie put down the book he had been reading, silenced the alarm and got out of bed. He threw on some jeans, a t-shirt, his favourite black (now worn grey) hoodie and some old trainers that were in need of replacing. He made a quick stop off in the bathroom to use the toilet and brush his teeth. As he came down the stairs he could sense the house was empty except for him. His mum had recently started a second job so she left the house most days at 7:00am and didn't return until 8:00pm, except for Sunday when she only went out at 10:00am and came home at about 4:00pm, often with the weekly big shop in tow with enough food to only last them until Thursday. The house had an eerie silence when she was out that he didn't like. It made him uncomfortable and his imagination would run wild about who, or what, was in the silence waiting for him. With haste, he grabbed his black jacket from over the stair banister and straight out the front door slamming it shut on the lock behind him.

“Shit,” Charlie whispered to himself as he put his hand into his jacket pocket and realised his key was in his bedroom. There was nothing he could do about it now, he would have to wait until his mum got home that evening.

He walked to the end of Walkerwood Rise, through a gap in the fence and followed the worn footpath to the picnic area in Walkerwood Park. Charlie crossed the grassed area and sat on a low wooden bench. He had started to think of it as his bench. It was more of a raised wooden slab that had been weather beaten and was ready to crumble than a bench but from this spot he could see the whole park and so he liked it nonetheless.

At the main entrance of the park was a larger car parking plot, a 5-a-side football pitch, and a small play area with slides and climbing frames. Beyond that was a large grassy area with some small gravel paths and a skate park which was often occupied by groups of older teenagers on their bikes and skateboards. Charlie found these teenagers a little intimidating and so he

stayed away. The picnic area overlooked a river that ran along one side of the whole park and opposite was a large wooded area that Charlie called The Woods. The Woods were Charlie's favourite place to explore. He would spend hours climbing trees, falling out of trees, making dens, trying to tame the local wildlife and fantasising about living alone in a log cabin when he is older.

In the months that Charlie had spent people watching in the park he would see the same folk over and over again. Charlie assigned them nicknames and would spend hours thinking about what they did when they were not in the park, where they lived, who they lived with, and what their story was. On that morning several of the regulars were there.

The Secret Queen walked incredibly slowly through the park every Saturday at 10:35am from the Walkerwood Rise end and out through the main entrance. She would do her daily shop at the nearby supermarket and then retrace her steps home. The Secret Queen looked like a typical old woman. She was small, wrinkled, and had grey, short, curly hair. She wore a light blue coat, a long black pleated skirt and black flat shoes. Charlie was not very creative at coming up with nicknames and seeing as she reminded him of Queen Elizabeth II, The Secret Queen was the best he could do. She walked with a hunch, used a brown walking stick and pulled a black and red trolley behind her. The kind old people took with them instead of carrying heavy bags. The Secret Queen also happened to live at number 1 Walkerwood Rise. This is how Charlie knew she wasn't the real Queen.

Mrs Strict was doing her usual daily dog walking around the park. Charlie named her Mrs Strict because she reminded him of a schoolmistress. She had curly black hair that was starting to turn grey. She walked with her head forward, her chest pushed out with her bum and legs following the rest of her body. She always seemed to be frowning but at nothing in particular. She walked around the park 3 times every Saturday and Sunday with an old black and white sheep dog. On the first time round the dog walked quickly in front, sniffing and exploring everything around. On the second lap, the dog would walk at the side of Mrs Strict with less energy, but keeping up. By the third time round the dog looked knackered and would trail a few metres behind Mrs Strict who would continue to walk quickly and with purpose, inspecting

everyone and everything in the park. Charlie saw her one day when he was off school sick and thought she probably did the walk every day.

Fat Chris and Fat Chris' wife were a middle aged couple Charlie had seen a few times in the park. They seemed to enjoy a stroll at the weekend, often stopping to enjoy a picnic on one of the benches in the picnic area. Fat Chris was called Fat Chris because he reminded Charlie of his postman, who was called Chris. Fat Chris was, as is to be expected, fatter than Postman Chris. Fat Chris had recently started bringing his camera with him on walks and would take pictures of the squirrels, herons, plant pots, and other fauna and flora around the park. Fat Chris' wife looked bored when waiting for him. He would show her the photographs he had taken and she would fake a smile, pretend to be interested and encourage him to keep it up.

There were other park regulars that Charlie could not see at the time, such as Builder Bob, The Drug User, Grandma Edith, Homeless Jeff, and Tesco Dave to name a few.

It had just turned November and the weather had started to feel like winter was coming. The areas of grass still under shade had a coating of frost. Charlie could feel his hands starting to sting in the cold. His gloves were also in the locked number 5 Walkerwood Rise. He rubbed his palms together, cupped his hands to his mouth and blew into them to try and keep them warm.

"You could do with some gloves," came a voice from behind him. He recognised the girl sitting on a fallen tree trunk. It was Rock Chick. He had seen her in the park a few times. She looked a couple of years older than Charlie. She had a cute face, with a little button nose and big eyes. She had straight blue hair down to her shoulders, but it had been pink the last time he saw her. She wore a worn out light brown leather jacket over a black dress with black skinny jeans, faded red converse boots, fingerless black gloves and a dark grey beanie hat. Across her shoulders and over her back loosely hung a black backpack.

"I... erm... I've got some," Charlie said with great uncertainty. He was not used to cute girls talking to him and he wasn't quite sure how he should reply.

"Then, you could put them on. Stop you're hands being so cold," she said.

"I don't have any. Well, no, I do have some, I can't find them. Well, er, I can find them, I know where they are, but they're in my house and I locked myself out." Charlie was not acting as cool as he had hoped to. Why did he tell her he had locked himself out? He needed to come

across as less of a fumbling fool and more of a cool kid himself. You know, like the cool kids that don't appear to be interested in much and take life as it comes instead of thinking about every little thing all the time.

"Ah, bit silly," Rock Chick tutted at him. He knew this already. He was failing at coming across as cool. Instead he worried he just looked cold, and silly.

"Here, have mine. You look colder than me," she said as she took off her gloves and held them out for Charlie to take.

"I can't take yours."

"Why not?"

"Because." Charlie felt his nerves really kicking in. The more he worried about coming across as stupid, the more stupid his replies seemed.

"'Because' isn't really a proper answer," Rock Chick stated with a tilt of her head and a sympathetic smile. "Give me three good reason why you can't take them." She waited patiently for a response.

"Well, because they are not mine, they are yours and... they don't belong to me," he reasoned as he turned his head to avoid any awkward eye contact. Rock Chick chuckled quietly to herself.

"That's sort of the same reason just said in three different ways. But if it makes you feel better..." She stood up and held a dramatic pose as though she was speaking to a large crowd from behind a lectern. "I, as the one and true rightful owner of these gloves in my hand, now transfer ownership to..." Rock Chick stopped and raised her eyes as though she was trying to recall something. "What's your name?"

"Erm, Charlie."

Rock Chick paused and a small smile rose on one side of her face as though Charlie had said something much more symbolic than stating his name.

"Of course it is," Rock Chick finally stated. "Okay," she said as she continued her dramatic performance, "I transfer ownership to Erm Charlie, to be the Glovekeeper and Protector of the Gloves from this day and all days to come."

Charlie could not help but smile. He gave a quick glance over to her and made eye contact before turning his eyes back to the ground. She was being silly, but in a cool kid way. He decided it best to just take the gloves already.

“See, I made you smile. Small acts of kindness for the sake of kindness. They make me feel happy, and useful,” Rock Chick said. She hopped over a muddy puddle and stepped over to Charlie who finally took the gloves from her as she sat on his bench next to him. He could smell her perfume. It was sweet and floral. He liked it. He liked her, which is why he was acting like a fool.

“Thank you,” he managed to say clearly and for the first time since she had spoken to him he felt like he almost came across as a normal person. Several awkward moments of silence passed. Charlie kept his head purposefully tilted down with his eyes looking at anything except her, fidgeting with the gloves.

“This is the point at which you put the gloves on, then the Long Glove Wearing Ice Breaker will finally be over and this exchange can stop being awkward,” said Rock Chick with a mocking but somehow kind tone.

Charlie giggled, nodded submissively and started to put the gloves on quickly. He worried about Rock Chick seeing his finger nails. He had always bitten them and was conscious of how gross they looked and he didn’t want her to be repelled in disgust. So he quickly closed his fingers into his palm so she could not see them, tucking in his thumbs.

“I’ve seen you around here before, haven’t I?” asked Rock Chick.

Charlie took a deep breath, swallowed a little too loudly and answered, “Yeah, I like to come here and people watch. I think you do the same. I’ve seen you sit in the picnic area with a notebook.”

“That’s my sketchbook,” she corrected him. “I come here to practice drawing people. I guess we both people watch, I just do it in more detail.”

Charlie wasn’t sure he agreed with her but didn’t say anything. He finally raised his head and glanced over to Rock Chick. She was looking around at the people in the park.

“I like to give people nicknames and come up with back stories for them,” Charlie confessed and then instantly worried he sounded like a stalker. “I’m not a creep though,” he quickly defended himself.

Rock Chick laughed, and nodded as though she was agreeing with him. He hoped she was agreeing that he wasn’t a creep.

“So, what is my nickname?” she asked.

Charlie’s eyes opened widely and a look of panic came across his face. Should he tell her? Will he definitely start to sound like a creep if he does? She would probably understand. Or maybe she won’t. Oh no, what to do? It was at this point that Charlie realised several seconds had passed without an answer and he definitely needed to say something quickly. Like, anything. Right now. Speak Charlie, speak.

“Rock Chick,” he blurted out with instant regret. He laughed nervously desperately hoping she would also laugh, which she did.

“Haha, I do like rock music, and I guess I do dress like a typical rock chick. I’m not as cool though.”

If she wasn’t cool Charlie didn’t know what was. She was so much cooler than he could ever wish to be. He would never wear black jeans and a leather jacket. He had never dyed his hair pink or blue. He had never given someone his gloves and done small acts of kindness for the sake of kindness. And most importantly he would never instigate a conversation with someone he didn’t know.

“I see you with a book most of the time, where is it today?” Rock Chick asked.

Charlie started to wonder how many times she had seen him in the park, how many times she had taken notice of him and if her sketchbook had sketches of him in it. This made him feel uncomfortable so he decided it best to not think about it.

“It’s in the house. I locked myself out,” Charlie finally answered.

“Yeah, we established the great locking out of the house incident earlier on, before the glove handover ceremony,” Rock Chick quipped.

She was so witty and clever. These jokes seemed to come so easily to her. These are the sort of comments Charlie would think about hours after a conversation with someone and wished

he had said them at the time. But Rock Chick was actually saying them, with great confidence. He laughed politely.

“Anyway, I need to go,” Rock Chick started to stand up. “It’s been nice talking to you Erm Charlie. And now when we see each other around we can talk and hang out to pass the time instead of silently stalking everyone.”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” Charlie smiled.

“I’m sure it would. And next time it won’t be awkward and you will be comfortable enough to look me in the eye for more than a second,” Rock Chick stated as though it was fact and that Charlie had no choice in the matter.

“Maybe,” he said still with a smile on his face as he lowered his head again in submission. “Oh, what’s your name?”

“I quite like Rock Chick, that’ll do for now,” and she walked away down the gravel path and out of the park without looking back.

Charlie was a little offended that Rock Chick didn’t tell him her name. She knew his and it felt like this gave her power between the two of them. Well, she mocked him as Erm Charlie, but he secretly found that quite sweet. He sat for a few minutes thinking about Rock Chick, all the things he could have said to sound cool and interesting and questioned why she had spoken to him in the first place. There was no doubt he thought she was beautiful and he could feel an attraction to her but did she feel the same? Is that why she spoke to him? Or was he just over thinking it? And what did she mean when she said ‘Of course it is,’ and ‘I’m sure it would’? Charlie did this a lot after a social interaction with someone. He would think about every comment or remark, their body language, what he had done and what it all meant. He had a love/hate relationship with his own thoughts. Was he now over thinking his over thinking?

Anyway, he decided he had a lot of hours to waste until his mum would be home and he couldn’t spend the whole time sat on his bench with his crazy thoughts. He had trees to climb, and a den to build. Lunch time was a difficult time for Charlie at school and so it was common for him to spend the breaks hidden away in the school library (or Multi-Media Resource Centre as the sign above the door read). There were some computers that students could use and he enjoyed watching YouTube videos to pass the time. Last week he had watched a video on how to

build an outside A-frame shelter using logs, twigs, branches and ferns. He really wanted to build one as a reading den. Also, the physical work would stop him from getting cold. He didn't have to worry about his hands being cold though, they were quite warm now.

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Some of the overnight frost had melted, and the ground was soft under Charlie's feet. The Woods were densely populated with Ash, Birch, Elm and Oak trees. Over the last few weeks The Woods' rooftop had made its yearly change from shades of green to bright oranges and reds to dark browns and greys and now the leaves had started to fall to the ground leaving behind bare branches that stretched and mingled with each other.

Charlie liked all the seasons. He enjoyed the feeling of the cold air filling his lungs and playing in the snow during winter. He liked to watch The Woods come back to life with new shoots and buds during spring. He enjoyed the hot, long, lazy days of summer. His favourite season of all though was autumn. Charlie had read a book about a family of mice that lived in a field and how autumn was their time to gather and eat as much food as they could, ready to sleep through the winter months. He had thought about how the trees and plants that lived in The Woods did the same as the mice in the book. They spent the summer feasting on the bright sunlight, and then dropped their leaves to save energy ready for the long sleep of winter. He had thought about how the seasons are like the waking and sleeping of nature and how winter could not exist without summer, autumn without spring.

Charlie spent about 10 minutes trying to find two trees close enough together that he could prop up a log between them, but not so close as to give him no space in the den. He found the perfect two trees about six feet apart from each other. Each tree was thick and strong and would hold his den easily. These were going to be his supporting trees. He spent the next half an hour searching for logs of the correct size and thickness and made a small pile next to the supporting trees. He wasn't really following too much of a plan as he wanted to learn as he went along but he could remember the basics from the videos he had seen and he was sure that would do.

The man in the video had used a folding toothed saw to cut branches and logs to the perfect size but Charlie didn't have this luxury. He didn't have any shop bought tools. His only tools were the rocks and twigs laying around him. He had watched the man in the video break small fallen tree trunks by lodging them between two other trees and leaning backwards. This is how Charlie intended to break his. He saw a fallen tree on the ground that was about fifteen feet long and a few inches thick. This was going to be the main support for the A-frame.

Charlie kicked and broke off most of the small branches coming from the trunk. He bent down and picked up the log and was surprised at how heavy it was. 'It didn't look heavy,' he thought to himself. He struggled to keep the log balanced but finally managed to wedge it between two tree trunks. He shuffled to the end of the log away from the trunks and pulled backwards with all his strength. The man in the video snapped his trees very easily. Charlie did not. Instead of hearing a snap and a break, the log just bent.

Mr Woodhead had taught Charlie's class about Newton's Third Law of Motion in physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Learning about something in class and remembering it when pulling backwards on a log wedged between the trunks of two trees are very different things. The log sprung forward, flinging Charlie with it. He couldn't stay upright despite trying his best effort and his body hit the cushioned ground hard. Except his knee, which landed hard on a rock that protruded up from between the fallen leaves and branches.

"OW!" Charlie shouted out loud to no one in particular. His knee was throbbing and he was sure it was probably bleeding. He looked down and saw a small tear in his jeans. His skin was grazed but disappointingly not really bleeding. Still, it hurt and so Charlie rubbed it with his glove covered hand and took a sharp intake of breath while scrunching up his face. He realised his top notch dramatic performance was lost as no one was around to see him so he quickly brushed the dirt from his body and got up.

This whole den building project was much more difficult than it looked. Charlie liked to think of himself as a strong-willed boy who would work hard through challenges and come out successful at the end. The truth is that he lacked commitment to anything that was physically taxing. He thought this is probably why he enjoyed reading so much. Maybe he could save the £3.00 pocket money he got on Sundays and buy a pop up tent instead. He could still cover it with leaves and ferns and make it look like a natural, well-built den. He had no intention of showing it to anyone so it didn't need to be perfect anyway.

Instead of looking for fallen logs, Charlie switched his attention to finding ferns. He couldn't remember if he had actually seen any in The Woods, but it was a woodland area and so there must have been some. He turned away from the direction of the park and headed deeper into the trees. A short distance later Charlie arrived at a steep banking that went down about ten

feet before levelling out again. This spot of land had less trees and was more open to the sky above. He thought that if he was going to find ferns it would be in a spot like this but he could not see any. Instead he could see a small mound of leaves and twigs that looked out of place. He decided to investigate.

Charlie used a few smaller trees to steady himself as he walked and slid down the bank towards the pile of leaves. He had taken what he considered to be a rather nasty fall already today and didn't want to take another. When he got to the bottom he stood tall and took a moment to look around. He wasn't quite sure what he was looking for. He was conscious that he didn't look very graceful traversing the bank and so he figured he was just checking to see if anyone had seen him. Occasionally he would see photographers, dog walkers, or other like-minded explorers in The Woods. No one was around and all he could hear was the road close by to the park, the wind slowly making its way through the bare branches and the birds or squirrels in the trees.

As Charlie got closer to the mound he thought to himself that it looked almost man made. The leaves piled together would never have fallen that way naturally. Sometimes the park rangers would collect the leaves from the public spaces and dump them in The Woods, but they would never come out this far. There are much easier places to dump leaves.

Charlie took a few steps closer and it was at this point he saw a small piece of worn denim poking out from beneath the leaves. Maybe someone else had made a shelter and it had collapsed on top of their spare clothes. Why would someone bring spare clothes to a shelter in the woods? And there were no trees close to the mound to act as supports. This wasn't a fallen shelter.

Curiosity overtook Charlie and he decided to investigate what was underneath. He took a deep breath and realised that he was starting to feel a little scared. He had spent many days in The Woods looking for an adventure and now he had found one he was not going to run away. At least that's what he kept telling himself as to not let the fear take over. He bent down to pick up a close by branch and carefully walked over to the mound.

Using the branch in his hand Charlie poked gently at the top of the mound. It was soft and springy, and it was obvious to him that something was under the leaves. He started to brush

some of the leaves away. Underneath was a dirty blue checked shirt under a dark grey thick coat. The clothes covered a still, lifeless body.

Charlie took a shocked intake of breath and a few steps back. He stumbled and fell down to a sitting position, catching himself with his free hand. He quickly looked around again to see if anyone was watching him. Secretly, he had hoped a dog walker was passing this time. Someone he could call to for help. But no one was near. He slowly raised to his feet and gingerly prodded the body which gave no reaction from having a stick stabbed into its belly. As Charlie made his way along the body removing more leaves he got to the head. He brushed away the leaves covering the body's face and recognised it as Homeless Jeff. A thin washing line was wrapped tightly around his neck. His face was swollen and his blue lips were apart. One eye was shut but the other was slightly open. A small trickle of dried flaking blood was coming from one of his ears.

Homeless Jeff was regularly seen in Walkerwood Park. He had once sat next to Charlie on Charlie's bench but the two had not spoken to each other. He smelled really bad, had been carrying a can of lager and breathed heavily as though he had been running and really needed to cough. Charlie was scared of Homeless Jeff and so he had got up and walked home after a few seconds.

Now Homeless Jeff's dead body lay in front of Charlie. He was more scared of him dead than he was when he was alive. It was the first dead body Charlie had seen and he wasn't sure how to handle these feelings. He struggled to stay calm. Panic was setting in. What should he do? Should he run and phone the police? Should he go and get someone else? Maybe Fat Chris was still in the park and he could run and tell him and then Fat Chris would deal with it and Charlie wouldn't have to. Would the police arrest Charlie for poking the body and tampering with a crime scene? Oh shit. He had tampered with a crime scene. Even if he did tell Fat Chris the police would still want to talk to him. They would interview him and ask him lots of questions and he would be alone because his mum was still at work and maybe his dad could be there instead but he didn't have a number to contact his dad and would he even get his one phone call and what if he said something wrong and it would later be used as evidence against him in a

court of law? He didn't even have a lawyer, he was 12 years old. 12 year old kids didn't have lawyers.

Snap! Charlie heard a branch break behind him. He swivelled around on one heel trying to see who had made the noise but he couldn't see anyone. Maybe someone had seen him and it looked like he had murdered Homeless Jeff for sitting on his bench that one time. Maybe he was being framed for murder. Charlie tried to reason to himself. Homeless Jeff probably killed himself. He had hanged himself and his body had fallen to the ground. But how did he get under a pile of leaves. No, this was murder. Charlie was a murderer. Well, he wasn't, but people would think he was.

After a few minutes of panic watching his environment, Charlie decided it was best to leave the body, wait for his mum to get home that night and then he would tell her. She would believe the truth and she could phone the police. She could be around when he would be questioned and his answers taken as evidence to be used against him in a court of law. Yes, that was a smart thing to do. So he brushed some leaves back over Homeless Jeff's dead body, clambered back up the bank and headed towards the open areas of the park.

As Charlie reached his bench he looked at the spot that Homeless Jeff had sat in. He thought about how Homeless Jeff had intruded on his personal space by sitting there. The truth was, it was probably Homeless Jeff's bench long before it was Charlie's bench. Charlie hadn't minded when Rock Chick sat on it, so why did he mind when Homeless Jeff did? Either way, he didn't feel like sitting on the bench anymore so he made his way to the picnic area and sat at one of the benches there and waited.

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The nights were starting to creep in earlier at this time of year. Charlie estimated it must have only been about 6:30pm but it was already dark. He had spent most of the afternoon sat in one spot in the picnic area too afraid to go anywhere else. He had watched regulars come and go, and worried every time he saw someone he didn't know that they would be an undercover cop coming to take him away. Or even worse, that they were the murderer picking their next victim.

The dark was one of Charlie's many fears and so he finally got up from the bench, walked along the narrow gravel path, through the gate and on to Walkerwood Rise. He was surprised to see that his mum's car was parked outside the house and the lights were on inside. She must have come home early. What if she had received a call from the police to say that her son had been seen with the body of a murdered homeless man and she was waiting for him to come home? Standing and thinking about the possibilities was not helping, and so he decided to knock on the front door and face his destiny. Whatever that may be.

The front door slung open.

"What are you doing out at this time of night? And why haven't you got your key? I don't know why I bother," snapped his mum. She was mad a lot since Charlie's dad had left them and unfortunately Charlie often received the brunt of the anger. She looked flustered and red in the face and after turning away from him without waiting for any answer he saw that she was on the phone to someone. She raised the phone to her ear and shouted down it. "I don't know what you were even thinking! I need this job, Mark, and you doing shit like that is going to get me fired."

Mark was Charlie's dad. Something had happened which meant his mum had to come home early from work and his dad was clearly to blame.

"You can't do that! On what planet is that ever going to get me to come back to you? You know I've probably already lost my job, right? Now what am I going to do? I've got bills to pay and I'm working every hour god sends to make sure your son has a roof over his head and food on the table!" she continued.

Charlie found it a little odd that his mum had referred to him as 'your son'. He was his dad's son, but he was also his mum's son. He was their son. Plus, he would rather her not work every hour god sends and instead be around with him a little more. Other children his age spent

time with their parents having family outings and holidays. Since his parent's separation he never really got to see much of either of them. He would think about how he was punished because his parents had fallen out. How his life had been torn apart through no fault of his own. How he had to go to a new school on his own and how his bike now had to be in the kitchen instead of in the garage. It wasn't just his parent's break up. It was his as well. The family had broken up and he was forgotten through most of it. For his mum, making sure he had a roof over his head and food on the table was most important. For Charlie, having his parents was most important and recently it felt like he didn't have any. He didn't see his dad anymore and his mum was always out at work. What had he done to deserve this?

"Oh really?! Forget it. Fucking forget it Mark, as usual I'll pick up the fucking pieces of your mess because you, YOU, can't get your fucking act together," she screamed and threw her phone across the room. It smashed against the wall and fell to the ground in several pieces. She fell to her knees and started to sob into her hands.

"Mum?" Charlie asked in a quiet and scared voice.

"What Charlie, what?!" she shouted, still in a rage. Charlie lowered his head, partly in fear and partly because he didn't want to see his mum act like this. She was supposed to be his comfort blanket. She was supposed to be the one to run to when horrible things like finding a dead body in the woods had happened and now she was shouting at him and he was scared of what she would do next.

"Er, nothing. It doesn't matter," he said with a slight shake of his head. His eyes still facing down to the ground. His mum sighed loudly.

"Where is your key? How many times do I have to tell you that I don't want you out 'til all hours when it's dark?" she barked at him. "If it carries on young lad I'll take that key off you and you'll spend weekends sat in, instead of being out with your friends. We'll see how you like that. Get out of my sight before I lose my temper!"

She had already lost her temper. Charlie knew she wouldn't take his key from him. He needed it to get in after school. And he hadn't been out with his friends. He had been out spending time alone because he didn't have friends. But she was too busy barking orders at people to notice this. He decided now was not the best time to tell her about Homeless Jeff. Now

was not the time to tell her anything. He walked past her, up the stairs and straight to his bedroom.

He was so hungry that night. He hadn't eaten all day but he didn't feel comfortable enough to go down to the kitchen to make a sandwich. He tried to read but his mind kept coming back to Homeless Jeff. He tried to watch TV to distract his thoughts but it didn't work, and so, at 8:32pm he lay in bed, listening to his mum crying downstairs, and cried himself to sleep.

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