

"CHARLES WITHOUT REBECCA"

by Troy Lynn Pritt

The sun coming in through the mini blinds gave warmth and a golden glow to the bedroom. Charles awakened and sat up stiffly on the edge of the bed. His need to wait for blood to reach his brain and clear away his dizziness was in a tug of war with the urgency to pee. Stumbling to the toilet he tried unsuccessfully to keep from spraying urine off the side of the bowl onto the floor. He kept newspapers on both sides of the commode because of this.

Coming out of the bathroom, he looked around the bedroom and frowned. The sheets and pillowcase were a yellowish gray. He knew that he ought to change them and put clean sheets and pillowcase on the bed. That was so hard for him to do. There were dust balls and dirt on the hardwood floor and cobwebs at the ceiling level. A roach darted across the floor. Various articles of clothing were slung across the quilt rack and on the coat rack. His dresser was a clutter of old receipts, business cards, appointment cards. half packages of mints and antacids, weekly pillboxes, several sets of keys, tie bars, a watch, pens, and his reading glasses.

The frame of the dresser mirror was filled with old photos of Rebecca, their two sons, and four grandchildren. When he saw himself in the mirror he frowned again. He decided to shave. There was nothing he could do about being wrinkled and stooped though.

"Oh, Rebecca, I miss you. I need you! How can I go on?"

The bedroom suite had belonged to Rebecca's grandmother. After she died, he had gone to Rebecca's parents and bought the bedroom

suite, the china, and the silverware. He had to pay far more than he could reasonably afford. When he brought them home, he had never seen Rebecca so happy. She jumped and squealed with joy. "Oh, Charles, I love you so much. You are the most thoughtful person on God's earth. How can I ever thank you?"

Her dresser and dressing table were bare except for her picture on top of her dresser. He was in the hospital with pneumonia several months after Rebecca died. His sons came to visit him one time. While they were visiting him in the hospital, the daughters-in-law were busy removing everything that belonged to Rebecca - clothes, jewelry, make-up, toiletries, even the crocheted clothes hangers.

"Edgar, what happened to all of Rebecca's things? I came home from the hospital and they were all gone."

"Sally and Nadine did that for you. They thought it would help you."

Charles had never heard Rebecca say an unkind word about anyone. On that occasion he remembered one shocking exception from years back, "One of our boys married a witch, the other married a bitch. I just can't decide which is which."

Rebecca's dresser and dressing table were islands of cleanliness in that room. Anytime dust settled on them Charles wiped them clean.

After he had shaved, he took clean underwear and socks from his dresser and a pair of trousers and a shirt from the quilt rack and put them on.

In the kitchen he took a frozen waffle from the freezer and put it in the toaster. He put a foam cup of water in the microwave. When it boiled, he dropped a tea bag into the boiling water. When the

waffle had been pushed down twice, he smeared peanut butter on while it was still hot and put a couple spoonfuls of applesauce on top. He used a paper plate. Only a fork and spoon to wash at the end of the meal.

He was feeling particularly good today. He opened the front door and stepped outside. It was a clear day - crisp and chilly. A good day to carry out his plan. Bearing down on him like a boulder rolling down a mountain was the imminent certainty of being put into a nursing home against his will. What kind of life was that? Rebecca had promised him on many occasions, "Charles, you will never have to go to a nursing home as long as I am alive." Now - he had no one.

Yesterday he had been at the doctor's office for his semiannual checkup. At the conclusion Dr. Hazelton said, "Mr. Winston, it is time for you to stop driving."

The doctor had told Oma Crutch the same thing. When the doctor saw her driving to the store, he called the police. The police went to Mrs. Crutch's home that same day and took her driver's license from her. A person living alone can't survive in this town without a car. There are no buses or taxicabs.

A social worker had been to his house several times in the past six months. She had signed him up for Meals on Wheels and that had been a big help to him. He didn't have to depend on fast food and the deli section at the store except on the weekends.

Miss Breensten, the social worker, also saw that he was not able to keep the house clean and arranged for housekeeping aides to come twice a week. He had to pay \$25 each time. They didn't do any real housekeeping for him. Only one of them would change the sheets on his

bed for him. None of them would sweep or mop or clean the bathroom. They would piddle around in the kitchen, walk through the house and say something like, "Lawdy, what a messy house." Then they spent most of the hour on the phone or complaining because his television didn't have cable. "I'm missing my favorite soap. I'm not coming back here!" When he told the social worker not to send any more aides, she became angry and threatened to send a health department inspector to his house.

He really couldn't take care of himself anymore and he had no one who would help him. It was time to go to the mountain. "*Rebecca, I miss you so much.*"

He put on his jacket and knit cap, and took the large afghan Rebecca had crocheted for him, a folding chair, bottles of water, trail mix bars, and a couple miniatures he had been saving. Then he went out to his car. The gas gauge was on Full. He had picked a mountain in a state park about a hundred miles north. It was too cold now for picnics and lovers and too early for hunters. In a couple hours he should be there.

It took three hours to drive to the state park. As he drove he turned over in his mind the decision he had made. The only alternative was to go to the nursing home and live out his remaining days with other people making all the decisions for him. Strangers would bathe him and dress him and shave him in their way and at their convenience. If they cursed him or hit him because his bladder or bowels made them extra work, who would care? Would God forgive him? Jesus told Peter, "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will

gird you and carry you where you do not wish." (John 21:18) Did that mean Peter should willingly surrender himself to captivity? No, he had made the right decision. May God be merciful if he had made the wrong decision.

When he arrived at the park it looked deserted. So far, so good. It was late afternoon. The sun was still bright but was low in the sky. It was colder here than it had been in town. He rolled the afghan like a bedroll and draped it around his neck. He stuffed the trail mix bars and miniatures into his jacket pockets and put a bottle of water in each pocket. Dragging the folding chair behind him, he started up the trail. The sign said "Scenic Overlook 2/10 mi." The scenic overlook was out of sight around a bend in the trail. He knew it was there. In happier times, he and Rebecca had once stood up there for a long time watching the sunset....and kissing. *"Rebecca, do you remember when we were here?@"*

Even before he reached the point where the trail curved, he had to stop. He was trembling all over from the exertion. *"Maybe a trail mix bar will help."* He leaned against a tree and slowly ate the bar, then took a long drink of water. The cold air made him have to pee. Then he started off again. His ascent was slow. *"But what is the rush?"* Before he reached the scenic overlook he had to stop several more times.

At the scenic overlook he unfolded the chair, sat down, and put the afghan around his shoulders. It was sunset and the sky was bold splashes of purple and orange across a background of bluish gray. The shape of the tree line was dark gray. A stream far below looked like molten silver. The air was filled with the cries of birds and

animals - warnings and challenges. He smiled, drank the miniatures, and savored the warmth as they went down. Then he drew the afghan tightly around him and soon was loudly snoring.

Several days later a park ranger saw his car in the parking area. At the scenic overlook she found the lifeless body of Charles Edward Winston, wrapped in an afghan, seated in the chair. A layer of snow covered him. A smile was frozen on his face.