

Charlotte's Conversion

The bells had been silent at St. Bartholomew's for six years now. They'd been taken down when the church was converted and given to St. Mary's, across the meadows, where Charlotte sometimes heard them trying to blend in with the chimes for morning service.

The tower where they'd once rung was now a wonderful little turret room, with views on four sides, and light that streamed in through the windows. This was where Charlotte sat and painted. Her easel and stool were all the furniture it needed.

Downstairs, the pews were pulled out and the pulpit was demolished. In their place, sofa and television stood. The font was still there, in the kitchen area, but Charlotte never used it for washing up. She did have some soul. That didn't stop her swearing at the church cat though.

"Damn," she said to her adopted pet, "I wish I could get this perspective right."

The painting wasn't going well. But it was the reason why Charlotte had brought the old church in the first place, selling her small town terrace, where she'd been surrounded by people, and shapes and colours, to set up a studio where she'd have space.

"Here, I can see as far as the horizon," she added. "Everything out there is in my view. If that doesn't make me a good painter, nothing will."

But though she spent day after day mixing different shades of green, month after month applying them to paper, the landscapes she produced just didn't look real.

In spring, her blossom was too formal, didn't have the random layout she'd been trying for; in summer her trees looked like they were posing stiffly for a photograph; in autumn she couldn't keep up with the speed the leaves fell, scrubbing the work every time she looked out of the window to see another bare branch; and as for winter, when everything was black and white, well Charlotte just didn't know why she bothered. She scratched the stark outlines of trees with a pencil, before giving up and throwing it in frustration at the cat.

There was one colour Charlotte was coming to rely on rather heavily; red, as in red wine. Every evening she would wash the cares of the day away with a couple of large glasses, and in the winter when the dark came so much earlier, Charlotte seemed to be drunk half the day.

It was one Sunday morning in early spring that she awoke with a pounding headache to the sound of pounding on the front door. She fell out of bed, found a crumpled robe on the floor and stumbled to the entrance hall, where she opened the double doors with a loud creak.

There was a smartly dressed man standing outside, staring at Charlotte in disbelief.

“Yes?” she croaked.

“I’ve come to church,” he said. Then he looked past her, at the sofa instead of pews, and a cluttered sideboard in place of the altar, and realised that it was a house.

“It’s been converted,” said Charlotte, “I live here now.”

She lifted a hand to tuck her hair behind her ears, only to find a dirty paintbrush there.

“I used to come here,” the man replied. “Must have been seven years ago. Sorry to bother you, I didn’t know.”

He gave her a sort of salute, and turned to walk back down the path. Charlotte watched him go. It seemed sad, suddenly, that her house was not a church anymore. She wandered into the kitchen, where she found herself washing the paintbrush in the old font. Perhaps it was time to clean up her act.

The cat watched as Charlotte painted all day in the attic room. There didn’t seem to be so much swearing. Nothing was thrown. The artist hardly noticed her furry friend; she stared hard out of the window, closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again to consider her canvas, there was a softer, dreamier look there.

“Eureka!” cried Charlotte, as the sun began its descent behind the budding trees. “I’ve finally painted the world as it really looks.”

She stood back to survey the canvas proudly. It was the same picture she’d done a hundred times, the same view from the same window, but this time it had the look of real life about it.

What was different? One little detail; there was a person in it. A man walking across the meadows; the chap who'd tried to come to church this morning.

As the bells for evensong started to chime out from neighbouring St. Mary's, Charlotte climbed stiffly down from the tower. She combed her hair, so there was no paint in it, and opened the ancient front door.

The man was coming up the lane, an ex-parishioner who had been visiting friends in his old town, enjoying a walk through the surrounding fields again. Charlotte met him at the church gate.

"I was wondering," she said, "if you'd like to come in and look around. I don't get many visitors, and neither does the church. I think it might be lonely."

The last rays of the sun were shining through the stained glass windows and making splashes of coloured light on the floor, as Charlotte led her guest into the living room.

"I'm Bart," he said. "I was christened here."

She showed him the font, and made him a cup of tea in the church kitchen.

"I see you're an artist," he said, as he sipped it. "There used to be some great pictures on the walls here."

They'd been removed during the conversion, and whitewashed over.

"I've been spending my time looking out of the windows," Charlotte answered. "But I might focus more on what's inside now."

They sat on the sofa and Bart told her about the people who used to fill the pews, for the weddings and funerals, till the old church started to come back to life.

When their knees touched Charlotte felt, for the first time since she'd lived there, like saying a prayer.