

Charlie's House

A Novel

By EN Heim

All characters in this story have had their names and identities changed to protect their involvement. Any resemblance to any known character in this story is strictly by chance.

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Cover designed by GR Oliver

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I am very grateful to Charlie Chaplin to have had the opportunity to have lived in his house, or so called first house. The memories I experienced there will last as long as I live. The people I met and knew at the house gave me great insight into life. The parties we had there taught me how crazy life really is. And above all, what it taught me about going to the next chapter in my static life.

This story is in memory of Aaron Cohen.

Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.

A man's true character comes out when he's drunk.

In the end, everything is a gag.

Charlie Chaplin – 1889-1977

Life is like an insurance policy, no matter what happens there's always a deductible clause. *Anonymous*

Once upon a time on Hoover Street

1

In an unlit room, two men watched the evening news. Moe lifted his bottle of whiskey and took a sip, then snickered. Mike, his companion did the same with his bottle. They hadn't said a word since the news started, but watched and sipped their hooch. Mike was baffled by Moe's snickering. Mike gazed at Moe as he watched the TV newscast. He turned toward the TV to see what amused Moe. Perplexed, Mike returned watching the newscast.

The news anchor Gus was animated but with a serious expression across his brow, paused between sentences, turned occasionally to his co-partner and gave her a smile of encouragement. She was beautiful and vibrant, almost bubbly. He turned to the camera, "It's just like that folks. The police are baffled over the missing money that was found in a warehouse full of cannabis sativa...marijuana. It was reported to be in the area of five million. The police are now investigating the matter." Gus looked over to his co-partner. "Now I turn you over to our new addition...Alice." He gestured to her to take the camera. The director pointed to the on-camera.

Just out of school, Alice just began on-the-job training. She constantly looked over to Gus while she reported the news, and gave him an occasional smile for her support.

Alice looked around from side to side. Bubbly, she said, “Thanks Gus...you did a fantastic wonderful job reporting that story.”

She picked up her script, rattled it, and looked into the wrong camera.

Gus looked skyward. *Hmmm*, he thought, *over done. But she does have a perky nature and a good set of jugs.*

She noticed commotion in the wings and said, “Now we take this moment to hear these important messages.” The camera faded to a commercial.

Mike said, “What would you do if you found five million dollars Moe?”

Moe took a swig from his bottle. “Dunno Mike. It’s too much money for me to think of...*hic*.”

“Well I’ll tell’ya what, if I found that much money I’d run and keep running, just like them CEOs when they get canned. They get them big severance checks and head for God only knows where.”

“I hear most of’em live in Europe somewhere cheap like Romania, Bulgaria... Turkey.”

“I think I’d go somewhere south...maybe Argentina.”

“Why Argentina Mike.”

“I hear they have no extradition laws.”

The two men returned to watch TV and sipped from their bottles. Mike doesn’t know what to think of Moe: *How can anyone find humor in a TV newscast? It depresses me. What*

in the world does he see in that? He took a sip, looked at Moe and returned gazing at the TV shaking his head.

The news station was bustling with backstage personal bringing in new scripts and yelling, “Flash...newsflash, flash.” Across the TV screen, in large bold type, the word ‘NEWSFLASH’ flickered repeatedly for all its viewers to take notice.

The camera focused on Alice. She was talking to one of the news writers, takes the script he just gave her and faced the off-camera.

She said, “We have a newsflash here folks.” Then she looked straight into the on-camera; her expression was delightful, she smiled.

“It just came in this very second.” she paused and looked up to the off-camera and smiled. “Two newsflashes.”

Frantic, the director waved and pointed for Alice to look at the on-camera.

She turned to her Gus and talked off mic. “Gus, it looks like we have our day cut out for us. Can you believe it, two already yet?” She returned to the off-camera. She bubbles with excitement, turned to Gus smiling, then to her script, she read, “In Poughkeepsie...” Noticing the director pointing to the on-camera, she smiled again and turned to the on-camera. “...a storekeeper was arrested for laundering money.” She smiled. “They found in his possession one-hundred thousand dollars in twenties, fifties, and one-hundred dollar bills.” She smiled and turned to the off-

camera then to the on-camera. “Later that day, he was released for lack of evidence. The police said the money may not have been his.” Still perky, she smiled turning to Gus. “Now I hand you over to our illustrious award winning anchor Gus Tohrent.” She gave him a large toothy grin.

Gus began to talk, but the camera faded to a commercial. He looked blank at the director and mouthed, “What the hell was going on here? Do we have to put up with this again today?”

The director shrugged his shoulders. “As you know Gus, we have a new crew... if you haven’t noticed already.”

After three commercials and back on the air, Gus said, “Nice work Alice. I guess that’s the way it goes. You can never tell what’s going to happen these days.” He smiled turning to Alice. She responded with a large grin.

Alice was bubbly, perky. “Nice reporting there Gus. You do such a marvelous award winning job.”

Gus was baffled: *I didn’t do shit. What was she thinking of? But she does have a nice set. Oh well.*

She looked up to the off-camera. “Another oddity,” she said, “...another newsflash this morning.” She turned to Gus and whispered off mic, “Another one...this is unbelievable.” Then she returned to her script and continued to read, “On the way to town a monk was found dead along side the road by two teenagers.” She looked up to the off-camera, smiled, and then turned to Gus. She began to adlib the incident, “After roasting for three hours in the baking sun...can you believe the weather there was one-hundred and two.” She

nodded to Gus; he smiled back, and returned a nod of confidence to her. "...the coroner," she went on to say, "...had a difficult time getting the roasted corpse into the body-bag."

Gus frowned, shaking his head while the on-camera panned back and caught him mouthing, "Roasted corpse."

Alice turned to the on-camera and gave Gus a big smile. After repositioning herself in her chair, she looked into the on-camera and projected a bubbly grin. "The town's coroner," she said, "is puzzled over the monk's death. He said there doesn't seem to be any evidence that caused his demise." Gus said, "I guess that's the way it was Alice. Nice reporting. Keep it up." He smiled into the camera.

Bubbly and effervescent, Alice returned a toothy grin. "That's right Gus; you can't ever tell about life these days...it's so precarious." She smiled. "It's just so unpredictable...blue skies one day...storm the next."

"You're so right Alice...one day things look good and the next...well what can I say? Kaplooey, it's all over." He smiled and looked at Alice; his eyes cross giving her a blank stupid expression.

She returned a blank look, but said under breath, "I guess that's the way it was Gus."

Gus mouthed, 'I guess so,' and turned to the on-camera. "Now for the weather," he said. "I give you our weatherwoman Myopia Tushi." He turned to her, she was pointing to the weather map ready to give her report.

Myopia straightened her blouse, flipped back her long black hair off her blouse to expose the cleavage of her voluptuous breast, and returned a large grin to the camera. She began to speak pointing off to the side on to weather map. The camera faded to a commercial. A blank expression filled her face. “Uh...what’s going on here?” she uttered.

The director shrugged his shoulders. He motioned to the cameraman, waving his hand, which way to point it.

Mike turned to Moe. “Why in the hell do you watch that news station? It’s so screwy.”

“I like it better than the others stations because they are. I find humor in screwy things. The networks are too polished and spiffy. This dumb station can never get it together. That’s what I find funny in life.”

2

The next evening, it was the same thing, but by the time the news came on the air Moe and Mike were quite inebriated. After every verbal statement the newscaster spoke, Mike constantly interjected, “It don’t make no diff.”

Moe, his long time friend and companion, had a furrowed brow, but continued to listen to Mike’s rhetoric. And every time Mike uttered the phrase, *it don’t make no diff*, Moe grimaced. This nightly ritual has been going on ever since they’ve known each other.

Paying no attention to Moe, Mike continued saying after the newscaster opened his mouth. “Like I said Moe, it don’t make no diff what he said. It ain’t goinna do nobody no good no how, no way, regardless what nobody does. It’s the same if you roll dice. What comes up...comes up...take it or leave it...is what I say. That’s what life is all about Moe. What comes...is. No nothin’ about it. It just is. It’s just likethe newsman said; there just ain’t no reason for those cars to pile up like that and everybody dies.” *Bam*. He hit his fist. “It’s just like shit hitting the fan! There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“I can’t think like that Mike. You don’t make no sense,” said Moe. “Your thinkin’ is all wrong. People don’t think like that. There has to be somethin’ more than just random chance...a roll of the dice. There’s just no logic to your thinkin’. If you ask me, there’s rewards and punishments. As my old man used to say, ‘all there is in life are liabilities and benefits to everything we do,’ and that’s it Mike.”

“No. Life is simple Moe. It’s as easy as one, two, three. That’s all. Nothin’ more...nothin’ less. You hear me? It’s a toss of the dice.” Mike made a patter-patter sound mimicking thrown dies. “That’s all there’s to it!”

“I just think you’re totally wrong,” said Moe. “You’re full o’dreck. You hear...nothing more, nothing less...and that’s all. I’m outa here. I’m tired of your gobbledygook.”

“What kind of guy are you anyway?” said Mike as he watched Moe slog out the room. He turned back to the TV.

The television constantly goes night and day.

Mike continued muttering as he watched the nightly newscast. “I’ve known that idiot for nearly twenty years, and he still thinks like an idiot. And you’d think with all my convincin’ he’d think like me. No, he still thinks like an idiot. Hasn’t he realized by now life is just life? And it don’t make no diff no way, no how. It all happens regardless whatcha do. It just happens. Nothing more, nothing less. Some get it and some don’t. Some innocent dude will get the chair and some go scot-free. That’s just the way it is. No buts about it.”

Mike looked out the window, not concentrating on what was happening on the TV, just gazed into space as he skimmed the windows across the street. A cool breeze came through the window. He took a swig from his bottle and returned watching TV.

3

The Shalimar house was an immense house, three stories. According to the owner, Mr. Baktlfahrt, it was once owned by Charlie Chaplin. On the first floor of the house lived six people: Mike, Bibbie, Russ, Dawg, Kitzi and Dr. Langweilig. The mezzanine room was occupied by Ms. Starris Kinnite. On the second floor lived four people: Putnam, Mr. Talbot, Mrs. Dolmeier and Moe. In the attic apartment was where I lived, Ean Homes.

When you enter the house, the vastness of the foyer and the mezzanine Tiffany stained glass fascia was breathtaking.

The sheer size of the foyer with staircase flanking the left wall passing the mezzanine room looms two stories up to the attic some twenty-five feet. The centerpiece of the ceiling was a Tiffany stained glass dome. It gave the foyer a soft warm glow when lit or illuminated. To give added warmth to the interior of the house, it still had its functional gas-jet lights. The house was equipped with electricity in the early 1920s, but Charlie Chaplin, as the saying goes, liked the warm glow of the gas burning light fixtures and kept them. Since the last sale of the house, little attention had been placed on the gas-jets, and had never been turned on or used. Mr. Baktlfahrt doubts if they still worked. He kept them because it added charm and character to the old turn of the century house.

The house has a large attic with a mysterious room, a small cellar that contained only a water heater, a one-time ballroom, and eight rooms converted for rent. The ground floor was seven steps up from the sidewalk and looked over Hoover Street. It once was located across the street. Once sold, it was moved to its present location.

The present owner, Mr. Baktlfahrt often mentioned the mystery the house held, but didn't hold much truth to it. According to him, it was what the house had that was worth a fortune. Some old-timers said it was what Charlie Chaplin forgot to take with him when he left, and was hidden somewhere under the floorboards, or in the walls between the studs. Many a tenant came with the hope of finding it, but left in vain.

Outside next to the main door, hung a makeshift sign that read: The Shalimar. This pink, grotesque, non-descript stucco building was built at the end of the nineteenth century. It didn't look like any of the houses around it: a hodgepodge of Greek revival, Romanesque, and turn of the century Moderne. The adjacent buildings are typical of early twentieth century architecture, wood frame craftsman style, one and two story rambling single family or duplex houses.

To the right side of the house was the common entrance and driveway, which lead down to the garages. The four-car garage has never been used, other than storage by Mr. Baktlfahrt's personal things, and a potter that spent most of his time brewing beer rather than making pots. He was not popular with three of the tenants. They said his beer was too green to drink. Rarely ever seen, he came and went unnoticed. If he made pots, it was usually late at night.

The main entrance to the house faced Hoover Street—a large four and half-foot wide single door, which was rarely used. The driveway lead past the servant's entrance and descended to the garages on the other side of the house. Above the entrance was an overhang that was the mezzanine apartment. It was once said to be the library or study. It has stain glass windows on the outside and the inside entrance to the room. One cannot see out of them, they are made of opaque Tiffany stained glass, as the owner Mr. Baktlfahrt has said, "Real Tiffany, not ersatz, but za real stuff...vonehundred und fünfzig percent." Mr. Baktlfahrt was German and a survivor of WW2.

From the foyer was a hallway that leads to the main kitchen of the house. As you enter the hallway, there was a telephone niche and the first tenant's room; it was occupied by Dr. Langweilig.

The telephone in the niche was a pay phone for the house. It always seems to be occupied by one person. This person never seemed to end his conversations. You would think with all the calls he made, he would have his own cell phone, but no. This mysterious man was vaguely seen by some, while others paid no attention to him.

What puzzles me about this vague man, where did he live? Some said he didn't live here at all. No one has ever seen him go to any room. He just seems to be on the phone constantly. All the rooms in the Shalimar are taken up with known tenants.

If anyone wanted to use the phone, it was better to go down to the gas station on Olympic Boulevard and use theirs. Sometimes I waited at least fifteen minutes to twenty minutes for him to get off. When finished, he was back dialing the same number: 933-259-1151, wherever that is. It surely isn't here in LA. And. I'm sure it must cost a bundle to call that area code.

When talking to this person, all you get in return was a strange snarled expression. I had the feeling did this guy really exist? He seemed to be living in his own space, not anyone else's.

The whole house was weird. This old house had seen a lot. If the walls could speak, they could tell you all sorts of

tales. The ghost in my attic could tell you a lot too. But, he seemed to be more interested in rattling chains around his space all night long.

4

Gazing out the window, Mike saw a gush of water descend to the ground; it hit a parked car—*whoosh*. Mike hung out the window to look at the splash. It dried quickly in the heat of the morning sun. He smiled, looked up. He said, “What a bitch. She did it again...*hic*.”

Moe walked into Mike’s room. Mike looked at Moe, and was astonished he came back so soon.

Mike turned back to his window and chuckled, “She did it again Moe. I saw it with my own two eyes.”

“No kidding,” said Moe.

“Yeah, just saw it. It came down on Mr. Talbot’s car...splat, kaboom...all over it.”

Moe said, “When she goinna learn?”

Mike said, “Moe, when she finally decides to fly back home...to that outa space place.”

“Venus.”

Mike chuckled looking back to Moe. “You want to go down to the park? I need a little change. Lookin’ at four walls is crimpin’ my brain. And the view out my window isn’t stimulatn’ my gray matter either.”

“Why, so you can expound on you bullshit rhetoric?”

“No, I just want to get outa this dump.”

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