

Magic Beans

Charlie was minding his own business the day it all started. He was wearing a leather rancher's hat on his head, as it was raining. A young man driving a clapped out hatchback had stopped at a red light and yelled through the window, 'Hey, old man – great hat

Charlie caught up with him at the next set of lights and made a snap decision – possibly the first one of his life. 'Have my hat,' he panted, thrusting it through the open window of the red Fiesta. The lights changed and the car roared off, flashing its rear lights by way of thanks. Well, that was easy, Charlie thought. He'd never liked the hat. Liz, his wife, had insisted he buy it, as a souvenir of the one and only time they had visited Australia, to visit their daughter and grandchildren. The idea grew like a giant stalk in his head – why shouldn't he give away everything he owned? He didn't need it – all he needed were a few magic beans and the ability to climb.

He opened the front door and kicked the umbrella stand. That can go, he thought. Who has umbrella stands, these days? You couldn't put a modern telescopic number in it. It would get hidden, be forgotten, go mouldy. He lugged the stand to the top of the drive and left it there, for someone to walk away with.

Liz was sitting in her chair worrying at her knitting. The wool that had started out as a soft, cream colour was now greyer than the remaining tufts of hair on Charlie's head. 'I've given my hat away,' Charlie announced, 'And I'm not going to stop there. Liz, are you listening?' Liz looked up from her dropped stitches and gave him a quizzical smile. She had become quite deaf. He stooped in front of her, ignoring the fact he would have difficulty straightening up. 'Liz,' he said, 'are you with me? Shall we do it- give away everything?' She looked at him and the seconds ticked away. 'Do it,' she said. He needed no further encouragement.

Someone had filmed him in the street, offloading cushions and other fripperies. Soon, he was a minor U-Tube sensation, a moving picture of charity in action. The day he invited all-comers to take the furniture had attracted a local reporter. She had insisted on interviewing him.

‘Our readers love a human interest story,’ she said. ‘So, could you tell me why you are giving everything away?’

‘Mind your own business,’ he replied. ‘Do you want any picture frames – they’re in good nick.’ She went away clutching a carrier bag of goodies.

‘Flaming Nora – why ever did we buy this?’ he said to Liz, showing her the gaudy china cow with the cracked lid that was supposed to be a butter dish. ‘And where did we buy it – Blackpool, or Devon?’ Liz peered at the offending cow and said, ‘Devon.’

A man tried to offer him 50 quid for the sofa, but Charlie refused. ‘Take it,’ he said. ‘It’s quite comfy but you can’t rest a mug of tea on its arms – they are too rounded.’

Word got around. Some mornings there would be as many as five cars or vans parked outside, waiting for Charlie to open up. As the house grew emptier, some of the people grew disgruntled. He overheard one young woman say to another, ‘Don’t bother, I’ve been inside and only the tat is left.’

Now that they had no picture frames, Charlie and Liz used their old photos as drinks coasters, as they had no coasters, either. Their wedding photographs mostly had rings of tea or coffee staining them. He wandered out one morning and spotted a woman wearing Liz’s best coat. She smiled and raised a hand in greeting and he waved back. If he hadn’t given his TV away, he would have realised he was quite famous.

‘What’s next to go, Liz,’ he asked. ‘Shall we empty the attic or the garden shed?’

Liz pondered the question and replied, ‘The garden shed.’

The man who took the sit-on mower was thrilled. He had a gardening business and it would save him time. He offered to mow Charlie’s lawn once a week, but Charlie told him he didn’t mind the long grass.

‘Great Gods,’ Charlie exclaimed as he raised his head above the parapet and into the attic. ‘Where and when did we accumulate so much ruddy stuff?’ It took him a week to empty and he was rather proud of his newly emerged calf muscles. All that climbing up and down steps and stairs had given him the legs of a young man. ‘Ooh, young man,’ Liz had commented.

It amazed Charlie that people would take anything and everything, I mean, what was that woman going to *do* with three jigsaws – all depicting steam trains, none containing their full complement of pieces.

One night, as Charlie and Liz lay side by side on the mattress – they had given away the bedstead and the mattress was on the floor, he turned to her and said, ‘Liz, this reminds me of when we were newly-weds.’ Liz had giggled and snuggled up to him, ‘Newly-weds,’ she said.

The phone never stopped ringing these days. If it wasn’t a reporter wanting a quote, it was a stranger enquiring if he was too late to take the chest freezer from the garage. Charlie told him the freezer had been snapped up, but there was a rusting barbecue and a never used wok if he was interested; Liz didn’t hold much truck with stir-fries.

One morning, he knelt in front of Liz; he could do this now without fearing straightening up, his new calf muscles had seen to that. He held her hand and asked, ‘is it a good day, Liz?’ She had frowned, and without meeting his eyes, said, ‘What’s the time Mr Wolf?’

Charlie had his answer. For the past year, she had been able to repeat some of his words, but now, her confusion was complete, unlike those jigsaws he had given away. She thought she was seven years of age again, and sometimes, he saw fear in her eyes when she looked uncomprehendingly at him. He made the phone-call and when he replaced the receiver, he tried to hug her. ‘Get away from me you dirty old man,’ she yelled.

There were television cameras to record her departure from the house they had lived in for 53 years. Charlie watched as the wheelchair that carried his wife, rose slowly but smoothly into the rear of the adapted van. He heaved his rucksack onto his back and pushed his way through thrusting microphones. He strode down the street and didn’t look back. He had given the most precious thing away, but had kept the promise he’d made, on the day of her diagnosis. ‘Charlie Metcalfe,’ she had said. I want you to swear to me – the day I don’t recognise your face, I want you to walk away. Go anywhere, go to Australia and our Janey, but don’t look back.’

Charlie didn’t need stuff, not even a wedding photograph because he carried Liz in his bones. He jiggled the magic beans in his pocket and headed for the airport.