

The Absence of Heat by Karl G. Rich

Charlie glanced at a small vortex of swirling black clouds above the convention center. Moments ago, a sunny day with no clouds or chance of rain dominated the blue sky of northern Ohio.

Oh crap, she's here. God, I hate that bitch.

A tiny voice broke his concentration. "Can I have a mocha-latte, three-quarters whip with an extra shot and two pumps of caramel?"

Charlie shook his head, leaned over his homemade coffee cart, and searched for the origin of the voice. On the other side a light green and yellow attired pixie stood firm, grinning and holding a five-spot. "Aren't you a little young to drink..."

The little girl's face changed from beaming to red, and then purple as she held her breath. When she let it out, she screamed, "Mom! The creepy little man won't give me coffee."

The line of convention attendees standing patiently to enter the center turned as one to view the vocal child. As a group—the attendees draped in a rainbow of colors representing an array of fantasy characters—their annoyance mirrored the child's shrill squeal. The vast majority of individuals in line had fake, polyester-padded muscles; undoubtedly, they were scrawny pubescent boys or sad adults reliving puberty. The few women in the crowd wore loud colors with enhanced busts and plunging necklines.

A Medusa-like-character strolled over to Charlie's cart. The snakes dwelling in her hair were Styrofoam and her make-up troweled on with a putty knife. "Is there a problem, Mister Coffee, *man*?" Medusa stared at Charlie. Maybe she hoped he would turn to stone.

"N-no problem, sister of Euryale and Stheno." *No sense in taking a chance and accidentally insulting the real Medusa in a human disguise.* He looked at the pixie. "Would you repeat your request, fey-born child?"

The child stared at Charlie—mute and glaring. She crossed her arms under her fake, Tinkerbell breasts, making them bulge.

When did Tinkerbell get...? Charlie whistled a high note like a teapot singing. "Alrighty then..."

The top of Charlie's cart held a unique espresso machine as ever seen in America, let alone Cleveland. He glanced at the temperature and pressure gauges. The needles

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hovered below the green indicator. He gripped the pressure pot with both hands, concentrating his powers, and held there until the needles rose into the green section. Steam hissed out of loose fittings as Charlie packed finely ground coffee beans and pressed boiling water through them. He steamed whole milk, added caramel and a dollop of whipped cream to the cup.

Medusa ripped the five dollar bill out of her child's hand and exchanged it for the beverage in a to-go cup.

"Would you like a lid?" Charlie smiled as he made change, handing back a buck twenty-five.

"No-thank-you." Medusa's lips made a fine line and her eyebrows scrunched together as she handed the child the cup. A single coin rattled into Charlie's tip jar.

Charlie smiled. "Why, thank you, ma'am."

The little girl held the cup in both hands as she stepped to the side of the cart and peered behind it. "How do you heat the water?" she asked. "Nothing's plugged in."

Charlie ignored the child's question. "How's your coffee?" He picked up a clean towel and wiped the serving station.

She slurped a sip. "It's ice cold."

"Would you like me to heat it up a bit?"

The little girl nodded and held the cup out.

Charlie glanced around. Medusa's massive backside faced them and the doors to Comic-con had opened. The marshaled forces of the tawdry and obsessed fantasy characters pressed closer to the entrance, mixed among them, sprinkled like weevils in flour, were real superheroes and villains. Where else in the world could arch-nemeses gather and reminisce about old times and settle old scores. His gaze lingered on a few he knew until the pixie cleared her throat.

He stuck his finger into her mocha-latte. The brew boiled over the lip of the cup. He stuck his finger in his mouth, smacked his lips, and then said, "Now it's perfect."

The little girl's eyes went wide, and she stepped back. The boiling beverage burned her hand and made the cup slip through her fingers, spilling the drink. She ran back to her mother.

"Tsk, ts. Waste of good coffee, if you ask me." He bent down and put his palm into the spilled beverage. The spilled drink evaporated, leaving a brown smudge.

"Scarring the children, again, I see."

Charlie shuddered at the feminine voice behind him. He stood and turned to face a statuesque woman dressed in black with Goth make-up.

"Scaring, maybe, I'll leave the scarring to you, Wendy Wetdream."

Her hand went to her throat. "It's Windy, you little twerp. Windy Maelstrom." She approached and strolled around his husky frame, checking out the fit of his pants. "Eating a few too many biscotti and crullers, are we?" A small vortex spun like a mini tornado above her head. Every few seconds a small bolt of lightning flashed out of the extra-tropical storm. One bolt travelled and hit Charlie on his bald pate.

The barista reached up and rubbed his head with a finger tip, a small ice spot formed where the electricity had struck him. "Damn it, girl!" He rubbed the blood on his index finger with his thumb. The red tinge disappeared in a puff.

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Windy bent at the waist in front of Charlie, bringing her face close to his. She gripped his chin between fingers and thumb, and said, "Oh, snookums, that was a love tap." She patted one cheek and air kissed the other.

As Windy straightened, Charlie's eyes widened. "You've got to be kidding."

This time she held a hand on her creased chest. "Oh no, Charles, my dearest, if I wanted to incinerate you--"

"No, no, no, that's not what I talking about. You've become a stereotype."

Her eyes narrowed.

Charlie went behind his cart and ground more coffee. "How many cup sizes did you increase?"

Windy glanced down at the crevasse and the sagging Tetons hanging close to her navel. The black lace of her bustier barely covered the necessary and accented her sickly pale and wrinkled bosom. "Two, maybe three, a lady wants to look pretty..." She looked away, scratched her hip, and tugged an undergarment into place.

Steamed milk went into a cup of coffee with three sugars. Charlie covered the cup and handed it to Windy. "Your secret is safe with me, as long as you keep mine." He reached up with his thumb and gripped his front teeth. The pink plastic prosthetic fell out of his mouth and into the palm of his hand. A drizzle of saliva stretched from his lips to the teeth.

Windy recoiled.

"Sure beats toothaches," said Charlie. He grinned a gummy smile.

She assessed the nearness of any human being. Seeing none, she plucked a glass eye from its socket and held it out to the squat, aging man. She then picked up her wig an inch, exposing short grey hairs on her scalp. "The only things that are mostly real," she cupped the ends of her breasts and pulled them up, "are these, and they cost me a bundle."

The two old cronies laughed out loud, turning the heads of a few stragglers entering Comic-con and four men in black suits with sunglasses and ear-pieces.

Charlie wiped a tear from his cheek. "I barely make enough money to eat. How did you afford those?" He reached out to poke one of her breasts, but she slapped his hand.

Windy took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. "I drive the turbines for CP&L in Jersey when the wind is calm." She shrugged. "It pays the bills."

Charlie's jaw dropped. "You, who single handedly, sank the Spanish Armada by conjuring the worst storm in history. How--?"

"And you," she raised an eyebrow as she made air quotes, "who accidentally sank the Titanic—is making coffee." She waited for him to look away. "No one cares anymore, Charlie."

"Without us," he pointed at the convention center, "they would have nothing to blather about or blame."

A moment of silence stretched between them.

Windy stepped over and sat on the short wall behind Charlie's cart as he poured himself a coffee. She took her wig off and fanned herself with it. "Ya know what I really hated?" She crossed her legs, and something metallic clanked from within her.

He took a sip and frowned. "It's never hot enough," he muttered, and then looked

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up at Windy. "No, what."

"The insults. It wasn't bad enough we couldn't beat them, ever, but then those goody-two-shoes had to gloat."

Charlie smiled. "I remember--they called you Puffy Pushover when you failed to blow over the Empire State building, or what was that other name, Wispy Willow, Windy Windbane? I can't remember."

"Gnat's fart, *you moron.*" A flash of lightning lit out and flicked his ear. "As in Windy 'gnat's fart' Maelstrom couldn't whip up a gale in a pail of water."

His smile faded. "Your side never thought enough of me to insult me, and those superhero bastards laughed at me whenever I walked into the room. Seriously, how dangerous is a man that can only boil water?"

"Or make ice cubes. Other than that Titanic thing, I mean." Windy rolled her eyes.

"Come on, I was on track to make a killing."

"You sure were..." she snorted.

"Back then, New Yorkers paid extra to have glacial ice in their martinis. All I had to do was find a way to grab on to that boat and let them haul it into port for me. Who'd think they preferred to ram it instead, unsinkable, my ass." Charlie flexed his hands. "Besides, I can barely freeze a frappeccino now."

A disembodied voice giggled near Charlie's ear. "You're such a moron, Boiler Man."

The barista raised his hand and shooed the voice away. "A pesky fly is buzzing my head."

"Do we have company?" Windy struck out with a lightning bolt. It contacted a solid object behind Charlie.

"Ow! Damn it, Maelstrom, stop it." A lithe man dressed in a light grey lycra-suit appeared from nowhere.

"You're such a whiner, Inviso-man. Why don't you go rob a bank or something?" Windy yawned.

Charlie tipped his cup back and finished his coffee. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Did you notice the Treasury Department Gestapo-thugs, BM?" Inviso-man faded to transparent and pointed to the four men conspicuously standing by the convention center entrance.

Charlie eyed the men. "I pay my taxes. They won't bother me, nut bag."

Inviso-man faded out of sight. "They will if they think you and Gnat's Fart are part of Torpedo Man's and my gang."

"Oh, Jesus Christ, what are you and Phallic Boy going to do?" Windy randomly struck out with lightning bolts until Inviso-man yelped.

On the street a limousine accompanied by sirens and motorcycles stopped in front of the convention center.

"We're going to kidnap the President's geeky son." Inviso-man shimmered between sheer and visible.

Charlie sighed. *I've had a good thirty years of peace and quiet. It's been good. I don't need this.*

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"When I give Torpedo Man the signal, he'll take out the guards and I'll swoop in and grab the brat." Inviso-man rubbed his hands together.

Charlie glanced over at Windy. Her eyes went wide and she covered her mouth with one hand as she shook her head. "Do you see what I mean, Windy? Even the villains think I'm impotent. He thinks he can tell me his whole plan with impunity."

A young man stepped out of the limousine wearing a Super Ratman costume.

"What do you think, Gnat's Fart?" Charlie held out a fist to his old nemesis. "Do you think I should try and do something bad—on purpose—for a change?"

"Why not, Diarrhea Man?" she said, knuckling his fist, making a shower of sparks.

The President's son drew nearer. He waved at the diminished crowd, using the regal technique of elbow-elbow, wrist-wrist.

Inviso-man put two fingers in his mouth and inhaled deeply.

Charlie gripped Inviso-man's head and concentrated. Steam wisped from the man's ears and his hair stood on end.

The transparent villain's eyes went wide and then closed as his body stiffened.

Windy picked up Inviso-man's feet, and the two villain/superheroes carried the unconscious man behind Charlie's coffee cart.

The President's son walked by with his entourage and into the convention center followed by the four Treasury agents.

A tall and slender man fell from the sky, landing on his feet. He wore a grey tube with an upside down ice cream cone on his head.

"I wonder if he ever looks at himself in the mirror." Windy said *sotto voce* as she waved at Torpedo Man.

He waved back. "Have you seen Inviso-man?" He pointedly ignored Charlie.

"He's checking out the east shore way." Charlie pointed at the limo. "He said that one's a decoy."

Torpedo Man stared at Charlie for a moment. "Cool, thanks, Windy," he said as he bent his knees, leaped into the air and disappeared.

"What a tool--"

"Bag!" Windy slapped Charlie on the back. "I haven't had this much fun since I made Saddam swing at the end of his rope."

Charlie reached into his tip jar and counted the money. "I got enough money for a couple of beers and a cheese sandwich over at Melts. Care to join me?"

Windy glanced over at Inviso-man. "What about him?"

"I don't want to have lunch with *him*." Charlie raised his eyebrows. When she only smirked at him, he said, "He'll be up in an hour or two. I only cooked a few of his remaining brain cells, not all of them."

"What about your cart?"

"You push. I'll keep a watch out for the cops since I don't have a vendor's license." Charlie closed the umbrella and tucked it into holders on the side. "Ready?"

"You know what, Charlie?"

"What?"

"Saving people is more fun and less stressful than killing them."

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"Who'd a thunk it," he said while steering the cart.
"Yeah, too bad I didn't figure it out earlier." She put her arm around the short man's shoulder. "Your place or mine after lunch?"
"I'm staying at the Ritz."
"How's that possible?"
"I'm not that honest," said Charlie.
"Hmm, that beats my single-wide in Lakewood," Windy scratched her scalp through her wig.