

## **Charlie**

**By John Biglands**

“Hello, Charlie,” says Ella, with a smile. “Is it a nice one tonight?”

Charlie doesn’t answer. Charlie never talks. Ella stares at his huge, pink eyes. Why isn’t she frightened of Charlie? He does look kind of scary. The yellow horns, curving up from his head like inverted commas, the lines of haphazard teeth, and then there’s his size. Ella has no idea how big Charlie is. He seems to fill the whole room as he looks down at her in the bed. Yes, Charlie should be quite scary. Why isn’t he? Perhaps it’s the fur? Yes, that’s it, she decides. It’s just not possible to be scared of anyone who’s completely covered in green fur.

Charlie bends down and lifts Ella from the bed. She nuzzles her face into the softness of his chest as he cradles her in his huge arms. She closes her eyes and listens to the slow, heavy thunk of his heart.

Tonight it is a nice one. Ella is at the playground. The swings are super-sized and take her out over the treetops. At one point she falls off and lands face-first, but the ground just bends underneath her like a trampoline and throws her back into the air. This becomes the new game. She bounces higher and higher, the trees shaking as the ground stretches beneath her socks.

Scratch is there of course. She spots him at the top of one of her bounces. His yellow eyes staring malevolence at her between the trees. But he comes no closer tonight, and she soon forgets about him. She just keeps on bouncing. Then she has an idea. At the top of the next

bounce she holds out her arms and stays floating above the park like a helium balloon. She giggles. She loves the ones where she can fly. Then she sees Charlie galumphing towards her across the fields, dragging his hands across the grass like some enormous, green gorilla. Ella sighs. She never gets to fly for long. But it's impossible to be cross with Charlie. He is, after all, entirely covered in green fur.

Sometimes, it isn't a nice one. Ella can tell from the look in Charlie's eyes. When he picks her up, he strokes her like a kitten. Sometimes, he even kisses her forehead with his huge, purple lips before he sets her down. That's when she knows it's going to be especially bad.

Then she's running through endless, grey hospital wards full of chemical smells and blinding strip lights. And, whenever she looks back, there he is: Scratch. His mouth a forest of syringe needle teeth, his voice a dull bass note.

"It won't hurt." That's all Scratch ever says.

Slower and slower she runs, her muscles gradually morphing into useless, gelatinous blobs, until she can no longer move. Then she turns to face those smiling, yellow eyes.

"It won't hurt."

Charlie has a song. There are no words, just a sweet, humming tune that never seems to begin or end. Sometimes she hears it while Scratch is still chasing her. It's not that Charlie ever exactly rescues Ella. There's no clashing battle between the monsters, nor does he lift her from

Scratch's jaws in the nick of time. She simply finds herself in those monstrous, green arms, weeping into the softness of his chest and listening to his gentle humming. Often, she's still singing Charlie's song when she wakes up. Once, she even thought she heard one of the nurses whistling it on the ward.

Today though, something's different. She's remembering things. Usually, she forgets. But today, as Charlie picks her up from the hospital bed, she can still recall her mum smiling at her and stroking her hair, and Dad wearing his 'be strong' face. And she remembers looking at the doctor, just as she went over. She remembers watching the perfect line of his teeth melt into a familiar, needle-sharp smile.

Ella buries her face in Charlie's fur, but something's wrong. She looks out from the security of Charlie's arms and sees Scratch, still grinning at her.

Ella flinches. This isn't right. She's never seen Scratch whilst she was still with Charlie before.

"It won't hurt," says Scratch.

She looks up at Charlie and two big, yellow teardrops drop onto her face. They smell of lemons.

"Charlie?" she said.

He shifts her gently in his arms and sets her down before Scratch.

"Charlie!" she screams.

She feels Charlie's giant hand stroking her back, and she hears his soft singing. Then he pushes her towards the lines of teeth.

"It won't hurt," says Scratch, opening his jaws.

It doesn't hurt. It reminds Ella of the time she fell into a river on holiday. A shock of cold punches all of the air from her lungs. She curls up into the foetal position and tightens her fists into balls. Then, after a long silence, she opens her eyes.

She knows this place. She recognises the persistent beeps from the bedside machines and the too clean smell of the ward. She's spent many nights here. She shivers as she stands up.

In the bed in front of her is a boy, not much younger than Ella. He's surrounded by tubes and machines. She winces as she sees the way the plastic forces his mouth open, how the needle raises the skin of his arm. She knows how that feels. She wants to rescue him, to pull all those foreign things out of him and see him swing out over the treetops. To see him fly.

She walks over to his bedside. He seems so small. As she slides her hands under his back she notices that her arms are covered entirely in orange fur. But she doesn't wonder for long. She lifts him up, the tubes melting through his body like ghosts. She cradles him in her arms and begins to hum Charlie's song. The boy opens his eyes.

"Hello," he says, with a smile, "Is it a nice one tonight?"