Posing as People

Three Stories, Three Plays

Orson Scott Card

Scott Brick | Aaron Johnston | Emily Janice Card
CLAP HANDS AND SING

By Orson Scott Card

On the screen the crippled man screamed at the lady, insisting that she must not run away. He waved a certificate. “I’m a registered rapist, dammit!” he cried. “Don’t run so fast! You have to make allowances for the handicapped!” He ran after her with an odd, left-heavy lop. His enormous prosthetic phallus swung crazily, like a clumsy propeller that couldn’t quite get started. The audience laughed madly. Must be a funny, funny scene!

Old Charlie sat slumped in his chair, feeling as casual and permanent as glacial debris. I am here only by accident, but I’ll never move. He did not switch off the television set. The audience roared again with laughter. Canned or live? After more than eight decades of watching television, Charlie couldn’t tell anymore. Not that the canned laughter had got any more real: It was the real laughter that had gone tinny, premeditated. As if the laughs were timed to come now, no matter what, and the poor actors could strain to get off their gags in time, but always they were just this much early, that much late.

“It’s late,” the television said, and Charlie started awake, vaguely surprised to see that the program had changed: Now it was a demonstration of a convenient electric breast pump to store up natural mother’s milk for those times when you just can’t be with baby. “It’s late.”


“Don’t sleep in front of the television again, Charlie.”

“Leave me alone, swine,” Charlie said. And then: “Okay, turn it off.”

He hadn’t finished giving the order when the television flickered and went white, then settled down into its perpetual springtime scene that meant off. But in the flicker Charlie thought he saw—who? Name? From the distant past. A girl. Before the name came to him, there came another memory: a small hand resting lightly on his knee as they sat together, as light as a long-legged fly upon a stream. in his memory he did not turn to look at her; he was talking to others. But he knew just where she would be if he turned to look. Small, with mousy hair, and yet a face that was always the child Juliet. But that was not her name. Not Juliet, though she was Juliet’s age in that memory. I am Charlie, he thought. She is—Rachel.

Rachel Carpenter. In the flicker on the screen hers was the face the random light had brought him, and so he remembered Rachel as he pulled his ancient body from the chair; thought of Rachel as he peeled the clothing from his frail skeleton, delicately, lest some rough motion strip away the wrinkled skin like cellophane.

And Jock, who of course did not switch himself off with the television, recited:

“An aged man is a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick.”

“Shut up,” Charlie ordered.

“Unless Soul clap its hands.”

“I said shut up!”

“And sing, and louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress.”

“Are you finished?” Charlie asked. He knew Jock was finished. After all, Charlie had programmed him to recite it, to recite just that fragment every night when his shorts hit the floor.

He stood naked in the middle of the room and thought of Rachel, whom he had not thought of in years. It was a trick of being old, that the room he was in now so easily vanished, and in its place a memory could take hold. I’ve made my fortune from time machines, he thought, and now I discover that every aged person is his own time machine. For now he stood naked. No, that was a trick of memory; memory had these damnable tricks. He was not naked. He only felt naked, as Rachel sat in the car beside him. Her voice—he had almost forgotten her voice—was soft. Even when she shouted, it got more whispery, so that if she shouted, it would have all the wind of the world in it and he wouldn’t hear it at all, would only feel it cold on his naked skin. That was the voice she was using now, saying yes. I loved you when I was twelve, and when I was thirteen, and when I was fourteen, but when you got back from playing God in Sao Paulo, you didn’t call me. All those letters, and then for three months you didn’t call me and I knew that you thought I was just a child and I fell in love with—Name? Name gone. Fell in love with a boy, and ever since then you’ve been treating me like… Like. No, she’d never say shit, not in that voice. And take some of the anger out, that’s right. Here are the words… here they come: You could have had me, Charlie, but now all you can do is try to make me miserable. It’s too late, the time’s gone by, the time’s over, so stop criticizing me. Leave me alone.
First to last, all in a capsule. The words are nothing, Charlie realized. A dozen women, not least his dear departed wife, had said exactly the same words to him since, and it had sounded just as maudlin, just as unpleasantly uninteresting every time. The difference was that when the others said it, Charlie felt himself insulated with a thousand layers of unconcern. But when Rachel said it to his memory, he stood naked in the middle of his room, a cold wind drying the parchment of his ancient skin.

“What’s wrong?” asked Jock.

Oh, yes, dear computer, a change in the routine of the habitbound old man, and you suspect what, a heart attack? Incipient death? Extreme disorientation?


“Living or dead?”

Charlie winced again, as he winced every time Jock asked that question; yet it was an important one, and far too often the answer these days was Dead. “I don’t know.”

“Living and dead, I have two thousand four hundred eighty in the company archives alone.”

“She was twelve when I was— twenty. Yes, twenty. And she lived then in Provo, Utah. Her father was a pianist. Maybe she became an actress when she grew up. She wanted to.”


“Don’t show off, Jock. Was she ever married?”

“Thrice.”

“And don’t imitate my mannerisms. Is she still alive?”

“Died ten years ago.”

Of course. Dead, of course. He tried to imagine her— where? “Where did she die?”

“Not pleasant.”

“Tell me anyway. I’m feeling suicidal tonight.”

“In a home for the mentally incapable.”

It was not shocking; people often outlived their minds these days. But sad. For she had always been bright. Strange, perhaps, but her thoughts always led to something worth the sometimes-convoluted path. He smiled even before he remembered what he was smiling at. Yes. Seeing through your knees. She had been playing Helen Keller in The Miracle Worker, and she told him how she had finally come to understand blindness. “It isn’t seeing the red insides of your eyelids, I knew that. I knew it isn’t even seeing black. It’s like trying to see where you never had eyes at all. Seeing through your knees. No matter how hard you try, there just isn’t any vision there.” And she had liked him because he hadn’t laughed. “I told my brother, and he laughed,” she said. But Charlie had not laughed.

Charlie’s affection for her had begun then, with a twelve-year-old girl who could never stay on the normal, intelligible track, but rather had to stumble her own way through a confusing underbrush that was thick and bright with flowers. “I think God stopped paying attention long ago,” she said. “Any more than Michelangelo would want to watch them whitewash the Sistine Chapel.”

And he knew that he would do it even before he knew what it was that he would do. She had ended in an institution, and he, with the best medical care that money could buy, stood naked in his room and remembered when passion still lurked behind the lattices of chastity and was more likely to lead to poems than to coitus.

You overtold story, he said to the wizened man who despised him from the mirror. You are only tempted because you’re bored. Making excuses because you’re cruel. Lustful because your dim old dong is long past the exercise.

And he heard the old bastard answer silently, You will do it, because you can. Of all the people in the world, you can.

And he thought he saw Rachel look back at him, bright with finding herself beautiful at fourteen, laughing at the vast joke of knowing she was admired by the very man whom she, too, wanted. Laugh all you like, Charlie said to his vision of her. I was too kind to you then. I’m afraid I’ll undo my youthful goodness now.

“I’m going back,” he said aloud. “Find me a day.”

“For what purpose?” Jock asked.
“My business.”
“I have to know your purpose, or how can I find you a day?”
And so he had to name it. “I’m going to have her if I can.”

Suddenly a small alarm sounded, and Jock’s voice was replaced by another. “Warning. Illegal use of THIEF for possible present-altering manipulation of the past.”

Charlie smiled. “Investigation has found that the alteration is acceptable. Clear.” And the program release: “Byzantium.”

“You’re a son of a bitch,” said Jock.

“Find me a day. A day when the damage will be least—when I can…”

“Twenty-eight October 1973.”

That was after he got home from Sao Paulo, the contracts signed, already a capitalist before he was twenty-three. That was during the time when he had been afraid to call her, because she was only fourteen, for God’s sake.

“What will it do to her, Jock?”

“How should I know?” Jock answered. “And what difference would it make to you?”

He looked in the mirror again. “A difference.”

I won’t do it, he told himself as he went to the THIEF that was his most ostentatious sign of wealth, a private THIEF in his own rooms. I won’t do it, he decided again as he set the machine to wake him in twelve hours, whether he wished to return or not. Then he climbed into the couch and pulled the shroud over his head, despairing that even this, even doing it to her, was not beneath him. There was a time when he had automatically held back from doing a thing because he knew that it was wrong. Oh, for that time! he thought, but knew as he thought it that he was lying to himself. He had long since given up on right and wrong and settled for the much simpler standards of effective and ineffective, beneficial and detrimental.

He had gone in a THIEF before, had taken some of the standard trips into the past. Gone into the mind of an audience member at the first performance of Handel’s Messiah and listened. The poor soul whose ears he used wouldn’t remember a bit of it afterward. So the future would not be changed. That was safe, to sit in a hall and listen. He had been in the mind of a farmer resting under a tree on a country lane as Wordsworth walked by and had hailed the poet and asked his name, and Wordsworth had smiled and been distant and cold, delighting in the countryside more than in those whose tillage made it beautiful. But those were legal trips. Charlie had done nothing that could alter the course of history.

This time, though. This time he would change Rachel’s life. Not his own, of course. That would be impossible. But Rachel would not be blacked from remembering what happened. She would remember, and it would turn her from the path she was meant to take. Perhaps only a little. Perhaps not importantly. Perhaps just enough for her to dislike him a little sooner, or a little more. But too much to be legal, if he were caught.

He would not be caught. Not Charlie. Not the man who owned THIEF and therefore could have owned the world. It was all too bound up in secrecy. Too many agents had used his machines to attend the enemy’s most private conferences. Too often the Attorney General had listened to the most perfect of wiretaps. Too often politicians who were willing to be in Charlie’s debt had been given permission to lead their opponents into blunders that cost them votes. All far beyond what the law allowed; who would dare complain now if Charlie also bent the law to his own purpose?

No one but Charlie. I can’t do this to Rachel, he thought. And then the THIEF carried him back and put him in his own mind, in his own body, on 28 October 1973, at ten o’clock, just as he was going to bed, weary because he had been wakened that morning by a six A.M. call from Brazil.

As always, there was the moment of resistance, and then peace as his self of that time slipped into unconsciousness. Old Charlie took over and saw, not the past, but the now.

A moment before, he was standing before a mirror, looking at his withered, hanging face; now he realizes that this gazing into a mirror before going to bed is a lifelong habit. I am Narcissus, he tells himself, an unbeautiful idolator at my own shrine. But now he is not unbeautiful. At twenty-two, his body still has the depth of young skin. His belly is soft, for he is not athletic, but still there is a litheness to him that he will never have again. And now the vaguely remembered needs that had impelled him to this find a physical basis; what had been a dim memory has
him on fire.

He will not be sleeping tonight, not soon. He dresses again, finding with surprise the quaint print shirts that once had been in style. The wide-cuffed pants. The shoes with inch-and-a-half heels. Good God, I wore that! he thinks, and then wears it. No questions from his family; he goes quietly downstairs and out to his car. The garage reeks of gasoline. It is a smell as nostalgic as lilacs and candlewax.

He still knows the way to Rachel’s house, though he is surprised at the buildings that have not yet been built, which roads have not yet been paved, which intersections still don’t have the lights he knows they’ll have soon, should surely have already. He looks at his wristwatch; it must be a habit of the body he is in, for he hasn’t worn a wristwatch in decades. The arm is tanned from Brazilian beaches, and it has no age spots, no purple veins drawing roadmaps under the skin. The time is ten-thirty. She’ll doubtless be in bed.

The lights are on, and her mother—Mrs. Carpenter, dowdy and delightful, scatterbrained in the most attractive way—her mother opens the door suspiciously until she recognizes him. “Charlie,” she cries out.

“Is Rachel still up?”

“Give me a minute and she will be!”

And he waits, his stomach trembling with anticipation. I am not a virgin, he reminds himself, but this body does not know that. This body is alert, for it has not yet formed the habits of meaningless passion that Charlie knows far too well. At last she comes down the stairs. He hears her running on the hollow wooden steps, then stopping, coming slowly, denying the hurry. She turns the corner, looks at him.

She is in her bathrobe, a faded thing that he does not remember ever having seen her wear. Her hair is tousled, and her eyes show that she had been asleep.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I wasn’t really asleep. The first ten minutes don’t count anyway.”

He smiles. Tears come to his eyes. Yes, he says silently. This is Rachel, yes. The narrow face; the skin so translucent that he can see into it like jade; the slender arms that gesture shyly, with accidental grace.

“I couldn’t wait to see you.”

“You’ve been home three days. I thought you’d phone.”

He smiles. In fact he will not phone her for months. But he says, “I hate the telephone. I want to talk to you. Can you come out for a drive?”

“I have to ask my mother.”

“She’ll say yes.”

She does say yes. She jokes and says that she trusts Charlie. And the Charlie she knows was trustworthy. But not me, Charlie thinks. You are putting your diamonds into the hands of a thief.

“Is it cold?” Rachel asks.

“Not in the car.” And so she doesn’t take a coat. It’s all right. The night breeze isn’t bad.

As soon as the door closes behind them, Charlie begins. He puts his arm around her waist. She does not pull away or take it with indifference. He has never done this before, because she’s only fourteen, just a child, but she leans against him as they walk, as if she had done this a hundred times before. As always, she takes him by surprise.

“I’ve missed you,” he says.

She smiles, and there are tears in her eyes. “I’ve missed you, too,” she says.

They talk of nothing. It’s just as well. Charlie does not remember much about the trip to Brazil, does not remember anything of what he’s done in the three days since getting back. No problem, for she seems to want to talk only of tonight. They drive to the Castle, and he tells her its history. He feels an irony about it as he explains. She, after all, is the reason he knows the history. A few years from now she will be part of a theater company that revives the Castle as a public amphitheater. But now it is falling into ruin, a monument to the old WPA, a great castle with turrets and benches made of native stone. It is on the property of the state mental hospital, and so hardly anyone
knows it’s there. They are alone as they leave the car and walk up the crumbling steps to the flagstone stage.

She is entranced. She stands in the middle of the stage, facing the benches. He watches as she raises her hand, speech waiting at the verge of her lips. He remembers something. Yes, that is the gesture she made when she bade her nurse farewell in Romeo and Juliet. No, not made. Will make, rather. The gesture must already be in her, waiting for this stage to draw it out.

She turns to him and smiles because the place is strange and odd and does not belong in Provo, but it does belong to her. She should have been born in the Renaissance, Charlie says softly. She hears him. He must have spoken aloud. “You belong in an age when music was clean and soft and there was no makeup. No one would rival you then.”

She only smiles at the conceit. “I missed you,” she says.

He touches her cheek. She does not shy away. Her cheek presses into his hand, and he knows that she understands why he brought her here and what he means to do.

Her breasts are perfect but small, her buttocks are boyish and slender, and the only hair on her body is that which tumbles onto her shoulders, that which he must brush out of her face to kiss her again. “I love you,” she whispers. “All my life I love you.”

And it is exactly as he would have had it in a dream, except that the flesh is tangible, the ecstasy is real, and the breeze turns colder as she shyly dresses again. They say nothing more as he takes her home. Her mother has fallen asleep on the living room couch, a jumble of the Daily Herald piled around her feet. Only then does he remember that for her there will be a tomorrow, and on that tomorrow Charlie will not call. For three months Charlie will not call, and she’ll hate him.

He tries to soften it. He tries by saying, “Some things can happen only once.” It is the sort of thing he might then have said. But she only puts her finger on his lips and says, “I’ll never forget.” Then she turns and walks toward her mother, to waken her. She turns and motions for Charlie to leave, then smiles again and waves. He waves back and goes out of the door and drives home. He lies awake in this bed that feels like childhood to him, and he wishes it could have gone on forever like this. It should have gone on like this, he thinks. She is no child. She was no child, he should have thought, for THIEF was already transporting him home.

“What’s wrong, Charlie?” Jock asked.

Charlie awoke. It had been hours since THIEF brought him back. It was the middle of the night, and Charlie realized that he had been crying in his sleep. “Nothing,” he said.

“You’re crying, Charlie. I’ve never seen you cry before. “

“Go plug into a million volts, Jock. I had a dream.”

“What dream?”

“I destroyed her.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“It was a goddamned selfish thing to do.”

“You’d do it again. But it didn’t hurt her.”

“She was only fourteen.”

“No, she wasn’t.”

“I’m tired. I was asleep. Leave me alone.”

“Charlie, remorse isn’t your style.”

Charlie pulled the blanket over his head, feeling petulant and wondering whether this childish act was another proof that he was retreating into senility after all.

“Charlie, let me tell you a bedtime story.”

“I’ll erase you.”

“Once upon a time, ten years ago, an old woman named Rachel Carpenter petitioned for a day in her past. And it was a day with someone, and it was a day with you. So the routine circuits called me, as they always do when your name comes up, and I found her a day. She only wanted to visit, you see, only wanted to relive a good day. I was surprised, Charlie. I didn’t know you ever had good days.”
This program had been with lock too long. It knew too well how to get under his skin.

“And in fact there were no days as good as she thought,” Jock continued. “Only anticipation and disappointment. That’s all you ever gave anybody, Charlie. Anticipation and disappointment.”

“I can count on you.”

“This woman was in a home for the mentally incapable. And so I gave her a day. Only instead of a day of disappointment, or promises she knew would never be fulfilled, I gave her a day of answers. I gave her a night of answers, Charlie.”

“You couldn’t know that I’d have you do this. You couldn’t have known it ten years ago.”

“That’s all right, Charlie. Play along with me. You’re dreaming anyway, aren’t you?”

“And don’t wake me up.”

“So an old woman went back into a young girl’s body on twenty-eight October 1973, and the young girl never knew what had happened; so it didn’t change her life, don’t you see?”

“It’s a lie.”

“No, it isn’t. I can’t lie, Charlie. You programmed me not to lie. Do you think I would have let you go back and harm her?”

“She was the same. She was as I remembered her.”

“Her body was.”

“She hadn’t changed. She wasn’t an old woman, lock. She was a girl. She was a girl, jock.”

And Charlie thought of an old woman dying in an institution, surrounded by yellow walls and pale gray sheets and curtains. He imagined young Rachel inside that withered form, imprisoned in a body that would not move, trapped in a mind that could never again take her along her bright, mysterious trails.

“I flashed her picture on the television,” Jock said.

And yet, Charlie thought, how is it less bearable than that beautiful boy who wanted so badly to do the right thing that he did it all wrong, lost his chance, and now is caught in the sum of all his wrong turns? I got on the road they all wanted to take, and I reached the top, but it wasn’t where I should have gone. I’m still that boy. I did not have to lie when I went home to her.

“I know you pretty well, Charlie,” Jock said. “I knew that you’d be enough of a bastard to go back. And enough of a human being to do it right when you got there. She came back happy, Charlie. She came back satisfied.”

His night with a beloved child was a lie then; it wasn’t young Rachel any more than it was young Charlie. He looked for anger inside himself but couldn’t find it. For a dead woman had given him a gift, and taken the one he offered, and it still tasted sweet.

“Time for sleep, Charlie. Go to sleep again. I just wanted you to know that there’s no reason to feel any remorse for it. No reason to feel anything bad at all.

Charlie pulled the covers tight around his neck, unaware that he had begun that habit years ago, when the strange shadowy shapes hid in his closet and only the blanket could keep him safe. Pulled the covers high and tight, and closed his eyes, and felt her hand stroke him, felt her breast and hip and thigh, and heard her voice as breath against his cheek.

“O chestnut tree,” Jock said, as he had been taught to say, “…great rooted blossomer,

“Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?

“O body swayed to music, O brightening glance.

“How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

The audience applauded in his mind while he slipped into sleep, and he thought it remarkable that they sounded genuine, He pictured them smiling and nodding at the show. Smiling at the girl with her hand raised so; nodding at the man who paused forever, then came on stage.
Table of Contents

Start