

CĂTĂLIN CRISTIAN SELIȘTEANU

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I Bid You Farewell – Charlotte's Story



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I thank you in advance for choosing to read this novel and I am sorry for the mistakes that one might come across throughout it, as I am not a native English speaker.

This novel is a work of fiction. With the exception of the composers Fernando Carulli, Mauro Giuliani, Matteo Carcassi, Mozart and Beethoven, all the other names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, natural or juridical, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER I

"Follow me!" she says, impatient and happy at the same time.

"Hey, wait, where are we hurrying so fast?" I answer, trying to keep up the pace, but remaining behind.

We are both in a park, late at night, deviated from the main alleys, upon her initiative to show me something *unseen*. It is so dark and the branches of the trees are so thick that it is hard to cover more than two meters without tripping over something. The lights of the streetlamps were lost a long time ago, so our only source of light, too timid compared to the predominant black of the trees, is coming from the moon.

"You will find out soon!" she says, and I can tell she is somewhere ahead of me, which makes me follow her.

Our steps through the low grass and bushes are the only source of noise in this dark ocean of trees, for a few minutes, until we reach our destination – a calm and dark lake, in which a vast portion of the starry sky mirrors and which entices us to come as close as possible towards its shore. Is it a lake like those in fairy tales, where enchanted turtles live, or at the bottom of which there are golden palaces, guarded by fish-guardians, hiding priceless treasures? It is quite difficult to tell, because the other side can be seen, which leads me to believe that the lake is not that large, but it still seems like it could have something of great significance to hide.

I can feel my forehead sweaty as a result of the troublesome route we took and I wipe it with my right hand while catching my breath, a moment in which she comes closer to me, also feeling a bit tired. At least for the time being, our effort seems to bore fruit.

"Well? What do you think?" she asks me.

Her eyes, usually blue, have become now almost entirely black, but this transformation does not affect her at all. On the contrary, it makes her one with this place: enigmatic, dreamy, reserved in showing her true identity. I still don't know what to answer to her, looking

occasionally at her, occasionally at the lake.

"I have to admit, it is something you don't see everyday," I manage to say, eventually.

"Right?"

And then ... silence. None of us says a word, choosing to take in the serene surroundings which offer their best in this moment. Through the corner of my eye, I look at her, analyzing her silhouette, but I am afraid of her looking back and me not knowing what to say to her, so I quickly drop out this action. I want to say something, but I cannot find my words. It is as if I am made out of stone right now, standing straight and not moving at all, gazing straight ahead. As though sensing this, she decides to support me and starts the conversation.

"It seems as if you want to say something. You're not afraid of this place, are you?"

Saying this, she covers her mouth with one of her hands, suppressing a chuckle. Great. I just got here and I already made a fool out of myself.

"Uh, no, I'm not," I gesture in the negative. "It's true, this is a new place for me, but if you are here as well, it calms me, in a way."

"Only in a way?" she giggles.

"Uh, I meant-"

"How is this *way* exactly?"

It's clear that she is still being ironic, and the fact that I cannot find the right words fuels this irony. Irony which otherwise is not expressed maliciously, at least from what I can tell in this darkness that surrounds us. *Come on, say something, anything!* I say to myself.

"I was just kidding!" she joyfully answers. "You are like an open book, easy to read and often predictable."

"So it is not quite the trait for one to have."

"I haven't decided yet!"

Leaving the irony behind, maybe in the dark portions which cannot be reached by the pale light of the moon, she embraces me with both arms and covers her head in my chest.

It feels so real, her words reach me and I can feel her gentle

squeeze, making me question if this is really happening to me and how does one react in such a moment. Clumsy, I embrace her too, and, feeling her thick and warm hair on my chest, we both remain in this position for a fair amount of time.

"I wanted to do this for a long time," she whispers, her voice ever so mellow.

"What kept you?" I ask her.

"Perhaps time? In recent times, I feel I have no more time."

Saying this, she starts laughing - a laugh which becomes infectious, so I immediately follow her.

"Sorry," she adds "it did not sound that well."

"It's alright, I know what you mean."

A familiar sound can be heard from afar, a sound I hear so often that it does not surprise me anymore - it's the bell signaling the end of class. Everything around me disappears, including her, and I am left all alone in the darkness. Is it really the end of class or its beginning? I try to remember where I am and when I got here, but an acquainted voice, different from the one of the girl from the park, calls my name.

"Alex."

What is happening to me?

"Alex."

This voice also belongs to a girl, but it is more high-pitched and clearer.

"Wake up!"

Upon this urge, I open my eyes wide, but I immediately close them, being hit by the powerful light of the sun above me. Now I remember everything, even if it's not that much to remember, honestly. Actually, it's something common in which I take place almost daily: I skipped chemistry class, went to the school roof and fell asleep. And I had that dream again, in which I was in a park, during nighttime, with a girl I knew. And even if I knew her, I could not clearly distinguish her face, only her eyes. Weird...

"Earth to Alex, are you there?"

I open my eyes again and this time the sky is obscured by the worrying and innocent face of a girl who is bent over me. Her red,

short but thick hair borders her cheeks on both sides, I can almost distinguish my reflexion in her thin glasses, and the wind, which blows stronger here on the roof, paints its own canvas with her hair, either to the left or to the right, or slightly upwards, making her look funny without realizing.

"Roger that, I'm up," I answer and pick myself up off the floor, scratching the back of my neck.

As usual, she's wearing our school uniform, consisting of a navy blue blazer, a light blue shirt and, for the girls, either the same navy blue or a burgundy pleated skirt; however, she's always worn her skirt in the latter color, as it matches her hair.

"The chemistry class is over," she begins to explain, giving me a short smile, at last, but then immediately becomes downcast.

"Already?" I ask, playing dumb. "That's really good."

"Really good because you skipped class yet again and got an absence?"

"No, really good because I didn't receive a bad mark. Had Mr. Stiffeng named me to explain today's lesson or, even worse, given us a paper test, I really don't know what I would have done."

"Therefore, you really don't want to maybe try to push yourself a bit?"

"Not in the slightest, Alexa," I point out while dusting myself off. I know where she wants to go with this discussion, it's always the same story: I don't want to go to class and, as a consequence, this will affect my future.

We are in twelfth grade, and in merely two months, the final exams will take place, after which we will finish high school. I don't want to sound like I'm not prepared for the exams, but, well, it could be worse, I guess.

Alexa smiles at me, being used, probably, by now, with my problems. Perhaps by reflex, she is now used to being worried about me and then to smile innocently and, to be honest, I don't really know why, after so much time, after so many years, she is still wasting her time with me. She is one of the best students in the entire high school - I am one of the weakest. She has a promising future stretching before

her, ready to be explored - I am most certainly a loser. She takes good care of herself, physically speaking - I am a slacker. When I put on my clothes, it seems as if I'm leaving town and my face is completely messed up: my hair is all over the place (not only on a windy day) and frequently, under my eyes, dark circles appear - the result of randomly sleepless nights.

I know Alexa since I know myself. We both grew up in the same neighbourhood, the difference being that I used to live - and am still living - in a small, crummy studio apartment. We both attended the same kindergarten and the same elementary school, although we weren't classmates until we started high school. As it can be seen in the present time, we are both attending the same high school, which is situated relatively close to our neighbourhood.

I can't tell what the future has in store for us, but who knows, if we've been unseparated until now, maybe it will be the same in college. Speaking about college, like the vast majority of the students attending here, I should be thrilled, I should do some research about the universities from this city and even beyond, but I somehow find myself uninterested, like I don't have a purpose for doing that, not even for my own wellbeing. What's the point in thinking about the future, when I don't even know what I will be doing tomorrow or the day after tomorrow or next week?

"Are you heading home?" Alexa asks me, but after that, she admonishes me in a funny, yet serious way. "You shouldn't be wasting your time like this! You know you are way behind classes."

"Ugh, okay, we're heading home," I say, accepting defeat.

I pick up my schoolbag, which is a bit dusty and I join Alexa towards the stairs leading to the lower floors. Had she not come, I would have napped for a long time, until the ending of all the classes for today. I know when this event takes place because it is announced through the speakers a few minutes before, and it would have woken me up. I once planned to stay up all night on the roof and, come summer time, I will do just that. It is now the end of April, and the nights are still a bit chilly. We'll see.

The high school is quite *depopulated*, which means that almost

everybody has left for home. There are a few illuminated classes, where either the clubs are carrying out their activities, or special classes are taking place, in which homeworks are being done or different subjects are being discussed. Because I didn't and don't want to have to do with any of these activities *which destroy one's youth*, I numbly continue walking behind Alexa.

Alexa begins speaking. "Have you given it some thought, by any miracle, to maybe join-"

"Yep. And no, I don't want to," I interrupt her.

'To maybe join a club' was probably the rest of the question, and I am forced, yet again, to let Alexa down. She always asks me, kindly, if any club from our high school appeals to me, but after what happened last year, my answer is - and will always be - a negative one.

Realising my response was pretty distant, I add: "Sorry for that. I try as best I can to avoid the clubs from this high school."

"It's okay, I understand," she says, "it's already late for clubs, anyway, with the exams knocking at our door."

She looks at me and smiles. Even in the tranquil hallway where we are walking, her smile is easy to distinguish and sends me a familiar feeling of quietness, reporting that all will be good from now on. *All will be good*. I personally don't trust these words and I usually receive them with a bit of skepticism upon hearing them, but if I neatly place them around Alexa, they immediately start making sense, in one way or another.

"What about you?" I ask her. "How are you doing in the Astronomy Club?"

"I still find it fascinating," she answers quickly, indicating that she did not think of this answer and, furthermore, that she is sincere. "When I signed up in ninth grade, I felt a bit nervous, but as time passed by, I realised it really defines me."

"So it is definitely your thing, I'm glad to hear it. How many of you are there?"

"Including me, there are seven members. We try to attract more people these days, but it is a bit difficult, as students, usually, think about either exams, or holidays. I don't blame them, to be honest."

"Are you afraid the club will disband?"

"Yes," she says with a sad expression, "four of us are in twelfth grade, and I fear the other three will slowly start to lose interest as time goes by."

"I see. Don't lose hope. I'm pretty sure your club friends also work hard in recruiting more people."

"Yes, we're all a team. I want to make sure the club will do fine after I graduate. It will be a pleasure to offer them all the information that I have been working hard to obtain all these years."

"Wow, so this really makes you contented," I remark.

"Yes," she genuinely replies. "Leaving behind something for others, knowing they will benefit from it, really makes me happy."

"Well, I guess this is really who you are."

She really seems satisfied with this, but then again, it's so like her. But me? What do I live for? What really satisfies me? I don't even have an answer right now, that's so pathetic...

She smiles at me with an affirmative head gesture and, suddenly, our conversation ends. We finally get outside, surrounded by the slightly warm air, which foretells the starting of today's noon. Before us lies the domain of the high school - a huge botanical garden full of carefully arranged flower beds, trees, alleys and benches, and further ahead, over the high school fence with its black bars, we can see the city skyline.

Buildings start to fill up the horizon, cars pass by relentlessly, as if in a game of hide and seek, and I like to think that the people passing by have forgotten about their working day and are preparing to spend their free time. We are not alone here, by the way. A few wondering students, just like us, are either heading for the front gates or waiting for someone else, thus ending another schoolday.

I'm not that popular in this school, I only have a few friends with whom I get along well and with whom I go out at least twice a week. In fact, I never liked being in the center of attention for two reasons. First - when multiple glances are thrown at me, I start shuddering and I completely stop focusing on what I was doing in that moment. And second - I kind of suck at socializing. I don't know how to be that one

person who knows what to say everytime and everywhere, who makes good jokes to which everybody laughs and who looks physically good from any stance, even when they come out of a freakin' sewer! I overreacted a bit, but you get the idea. Honestly, I try to avoid this people, I have the feeling that I won't do well around them.

We go out the gate and we immediately take part in the noise of the city, leaving the high school behind us for today. Tomorrow is Friday and after that it's the weekend, which needs to be taken advantage of properly: I will either go out with my friends or stay indoors, in front of the computer, playing videogames and eating unhealthy food. I do wonder sometimes how I managed to reach twelfth grade without failing any classes ...

Alexa interrupts my thoughts. "What are you doing this Saturday evening?"

"Hmm, I think I'm gonna-"

"Oh, I know! You will either get drunk as a skunk, or lock yourself at home!"

Ouch ...

"Ugh, if you already know the answer, why bother asking?" I sigh. Of course she managed to see through my extremely well-sketched *adulthood* plans.

"I thought maybe you changed something in your schedule, maybe you enlived it a bit."

"Slim chances. Or maybe you have a suggestion?"

"Well, I hope it does not bother you, but have you thought of meeting new people?"

I don't like this question. And I know where this is going.

"Nope, and I don't even hurry up to do this," I'm quick to answer.

It's Alexa's way to make me forget about the past, to make me keep going ahead and, on one hand, I am grateful for this, but on the other hand I feel like she keeps adding fuel on the fire. I already tried to meet new people and failed miserably.

"How about you?" I return her question. "Have you became the life of the party and I haven't heard about this?"

"Riiight, you caught me," she jokes innocently. "You should do this yourself if you want to surpass me!"

"Nah, I won't even try, I would fail miserably."

"No, you wouldn't," she disagrees. "And I haven't become the life of any party. I don't even know what to do at a party, to be honest."

Alexa could easily be a popular person, surrounded by crowds and crowds of students and even beyond, but for some reason this is not what she wants. Sure, she has friends, but few in number, which means she likes having friends on which she can rely. It's about quality, not quantity. And this is also what I have right now in terms of friends.

"What do you mean you don't know?" I start mimicking. "You start drinking, hop on tables and fall beneath them."

"Words from a renowned researcher."

"Oh, but you don't know the discoveries I have made. If you want, I can show you."

"No way, *mister*," she firmly says, although she is incredibly funny. "There's something about you that inspires me uncertainty, but I don't really know what."

'I myself am a complete uncertainty' is what I should tell her, but she probably knows this and is too kind to tell me directly.

"So anyway, do you have any plans for Saturday?" she asks joyfully.

"Hmm, well, you know I only work Monday to Friday, so not really," I reply. "Why do you ask?"

"Er, well ... No, forget it. I was just curious, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it was just a question."

"Maybe you want to play Nuclear Bomberman and lose again," I smirk.

Nuclear Bomberman is a brand new videogame on the computer, which Alexa bought on CD. We first played about a week ago at her place and it captured us for hours. Alexa's computer is way more performant than mine, which is at least three years old, so it's needless to say that videogames run pretty smooth on it. Unlike mine, hers has a CD-ROM drive and the newer Windows 95 operating system

installed, so it's pretty obvious that we play all the new games on it.

"Ha, like that ever happened!" she disagrees. "You know that you cheated!"

"Me, cheating!? No way!" I lie, playing innocent.

"We agreed we wouldn't use that power-up which lets you throw bombs through the edge of the screen. And what did you do? You immediately picked it up when it appeared!"

"Hmm, I have no recollection of that ..."

Our discussion resumes around videogames for the rest of our trip from school and after a while, we arrive in front of a small and clean looking apartment building, indicating that families with above average financial possibilities live here. Alexa turns to me smiling, wanting to say something, but I am faster.

"Tomorrow morning, 7 o'clock, right here," I point to my imaginary watch on my left hand.

She hesitates to say what she had in mind, bids me farewell and disappears through the metallic entrance doors of the building, leaving me all alone, thoughtful, as I have become recently. Having nothing else to do, I also start heading home, two blocks away. My apartment is situated in a building a bit more, let's say, *special* than the one in which Alexa lives, and by *special*, I mean it's inhabited by all kind of people. I live on the second floor. Above me live a very old guy and a girl a bit older than me, but not by much, perhaps in her early twenties, and I still haven't figured out if the guy is her father or her boyfriend. Underneath me lives an old lady who always tells me that her son will visit her, but for seventeen years, since I've been living here, I haven't seen her in the presence of her son. The guy living across my place always polishes his door, and from the ground floor I can always hear the radio when I enter the building. Another normal day in my life...

I enter my apartment and slowly close the door behind me - silence. The same silence that has been greeting me for the last four years since I started living on my own. My folks died in a car accident, which complicates things, but, long story short, I was left with this studio. Utilities don't come cheap, so I finally got a job at a local book