

# Sinkhole

Savannah Nayor

It had been a brisk walk down Atlantic Avenue as, of course, all walks at this time were. Natasha stood shivering on the steps of Apartment 303, shifting her weight in an attempt to knock on the door. Snow flurries were coating her lashes, forcing closed eyes. She raised a gloved hand against the wind, as if to whisk away the winter with one swift motion.

Night had fallen, though it was arguably no different from the darkness that persisted amidst the heavy cloud cover of the daytime. The streetlamps illuminated a warm orange, which Natasha would usually take the time to appreciate had she not been uber focused on the items she was jumbling.

She transferred her bag and phone to her left hand, trying to figure out a way to hold the cake with one hand too. Natasha had just spent the last of her allotted week's budget on this (discounted) dessert, so she had to make sure it didn't get smushed in the process of her good deed. She liked to consider herself "responsible" with her expenses but, come on, she was really just cheap. In her defense, her degree in Performing Arts had so far only landed her the leading role of the same waitressing job she had throughout college, with various unpaid performing gigs on the side. It was on her way back from the restaurant, actually, that she had passed the bakery, and thought it might be a nice gesture to cheer up her downtrodden friend.

She finally took hold of the bronze knocker and gave it a quick three whacks before steadying the cake with both hands once more. Her legs had gone stiff from the cold; it had not been a quick walk to Boerum Hill. She had considered hailing a cab to avoid a wipe out on the slick, iced sidewalks, but her frugality would not allow her. As she stood uncomfortably on the steps, Natasha thought that maybe she should have texted her host that she was stopping by. But, honestly, the chances she would see her message were slim to none. And, besides, Charlotte loved surprises.

It was a solid minute before she heard the shuffle of feet in her direction, followed by a dramatic swinging open of the door.

"What are you doing here?" Charlotte was nothing if not blunt, though her question was raised in a tone of confusion more than annoyance. Her bright blonde hair was littered with impressive knots, and she appeared to still be in her Christmas pajamas, although a quick peak into her house showed no other remnants of the holiday. Natasha wondered if her unkempt state was one of the warning signs she should've been looking out for.

"I brought cake!" shivered Natasha in response. She gestured to the dessert with her head and was met with a nod of approval – she was allowed in.

Natasha took off her, possibly ruined, waitressing shoes and jacket in the alcove by the front door and allowed Charlotte to take the cake straight through the living room to the kitchen. Natasha slowly trailed behind, taking a moment to admire the living space. The area was basked in warm lighting from various antique lamps, with intricate frames hung neatly on every wall. There were all kinds of trinkets along the shelves, covering an impressive array of books. In the time she had known her, Natasha had never seen Charlotte with a book before.

The glass coffee table was spotless, as was everything, so much so that the light from the lamps refracted miniature rainbows to dance along the Tuscan carpet. The room looked like a show room, as if no one lived there at all. There were no dents in the seats, no dust on the mantle, and no stains on the carpet. It was impressive, really, as Natasha had seen people sitting and flung out on the furniture on many occasions.

“Are you coming?” called Charlotte from, maybe, twenty feet away.

“Yeah, yeah, just a minute.”

Natasha always took a moment to admire the watercolor painting above the fireplace. It was of the NYC skyline folding in on itself from the middle. The artwork was quite exquisite, especially considering Charlotte had painted it herself. Natasha had met her through mutual friend groups a few years ago, after they had both completed their undergrad. She had somehow come up with the notion that Charlotte had also gone to school for the arts, largely after discovering this painting. However, she recently learned that she actually had a degree in Business Administration, though what she was doing with it, Natasha had no clue.

She had asked Charlotte about the painting at one of her dinner parties a little while back, to which she replied that it was supposed to be her. *What do you mean?* Well, it showed the city crumbling in on itself, and Charlotte asserted that she, too, was a sinkhole. *In what way?* In the way that people are allured to her, and before they realized that they were being pulled down, the city was in ruins. *Huh?* But Charlotte had already left to go speak to one of her other guests. Natasha never knew what to make of that conversation, but she was always keenly aware that her friend may be allowing her to sink without her knowledge, whatever that meant.

She now met Charlotte in the kitchen, which was decorated with the same flair as the living room. Her host was pulling out a fork and a pair of chopsticks from her drawer as Natasha sat down at one of the tall red stools surrounding the kitchen bar. She noted the lack of crumbs and dishes in the sink.

Charlotte twisted her blonde knotty hair into a makeshift French twist, with the chopsticks holding it up. She pulled the cake out and threw off the plastic container. She stuck her fork right into the center of the dessert and began helping herself. She did not offer Natasha a slice, though not that she expected her to.

“So,” she said, spitting chocolate crumbs. “What did I do to deserve such a treat?”

Natasha wiped spit from her eye. “I saw the speech you gave at that mental health awareness seminar, and I wanted to give you a little gift of congratulations and something to maybe help cheer you up a bit.” She treaded lightly on the topic of Charlotte’s depression, since she wasn’t really sure how to navigate the newfound discovery yet.

And Natasha did, truly, want to mention her pride in Charlotte. Seasonal depression was no myth, especially up north. With the holidays ending and the continuity of life cycling again, it was important to the schools to provide resources. To kickstart their mental health campaign, Charlotte was chosen as their keynote speaker.

How was Charlotte chosen? Natasha was fairly certain she didn't even know herself. Sometimes (often) Natasha couldn't help but feel jealous of the way jobs and opportunities just seemed to latch onto Charlotte, without much effort from her end. Maybe that was a reason Natasha liked to keep her close.

Bored and somewhat supportive, she had tuned into Charlotte's speech. It was also conveniently broadcast on the 5 o'clock news, so there was no need to leave the comfort of her bed sheets. The Charlotte on her flat screen was poised and vulnerable, and she spoke with such heart and honesty about her struggles with depression, it felt wrong not to bring it up.

Plus, it tracked. Charlotte had always been sort of a mystery, and despite their years of being acquainted, Natasha felt like she barely knew her. She chalked this up to Charlotte's elusive personality, but after hearing her speech, she decided that the distance Charlotte kept between people was due to her depression. This would also explain that whole sinkhole thing that always persisted in the back of Natasha's mind.

Still stuffing her face, Charlotte squinted. "Oh, yeah. I'm not depressed though but thank you."

"Sorry?" Natasha didn't really know what to make of this insight.

"I'm not depressed." she said simply.

"What do you mean?" Natasha's voice was strained.

She supposed it was a good thing that her friend wasn't emotionally suffering, right?

"No, like that's great but...why did you...why did they have you speak?"

Charlotte put her fork into the center of the chocolate hole she had created, and looked Natasha in the eye, lips still smeared with frosting.

"Think of it like an acting job," she said. "You get it."

"No, actually. It's not an acting gig if you're the only one aware of it being acting." Natasha lamented.

"Well, maybe if you actually got hired for acting gigs you'd understand me more." Charlotte went stoned faced.

"Oh, fuck you." Natasha really only became defensive when it came to her career, partly because she knew Charlotte was right.

"I'm sorry, Tashy, but don't come for me for no reason."

"It's not for-"

"Does it even really matter if I'm actually depressed if my message helps people?" Charlotte cut her off, her voice ringing with a genuine tone of curiosity.

"I mean, yeah. It's a lie."

"So?"

Natasha went quiet. To her it was clear that this was some kind of trickery, but how to articulate that, she wasn't sure. She leaned back in her seat, pondering the implications of Charlotte's question while her friend returned to her dessert.

"But your story seemed so real. You went into depth about your, like, lows?" Natasha reopened the conversation after a few moments. Her voice raised at the end of her statement, phrasing a question with no real answer.

“Look at you tuning in.” Charlotte grinned. “Yeah, I talked about being sad or whatever for no reason, but I’m not, like, *depressed*.”

“Isn’t being sad without reason...” Nastasha trailed off, waving her hands in a forward motion to allow Charlotte to complete her thought.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Yes, I do think so.” Nastasha raised her voice. In the midst of her frustration, she had a memory.

“Wait a minute, I thought you literally went to therapy.” Natasha was positive she had been cancelled on at least once under the guise of a therapy appointment.

“I *went* to therapy. Like twice. I think I’m one of those people who are just, like, too perceptive for therapy, y’know?” Her tone wasn’t cruel, but it was matter of fact, which was arguably worse. “They needed a face of depression and I needed a cover; it was a win-win.”

“What do you mean by a cover?” Natasha was almost too nervous to receive the answer, but she had to ask.

“In case I do something super problematic. People are way nicer to you when they fear they could be your last straw.” She laughed without humor and then went back to her cake, letting crumbs drift from her chin to her spotless countertops.

*A sinkhole*, Natasha thought.

“You’re, like, not a good person.” was the best she could muster in response to her friend’s admission of manipulation.

“No, probably not.” she shrugged. “What’s it to you?”

The two women sat in silence (sort of). The sound of Charlotte’s lips smacking with cake was pretty much deafening, but Natasha’s thoughts were still louder.

“What if I report you?” she asked tentatively. Natasha wasn’t sure why this bothered her so much; it’s not like she ever knew Charlotte to be particularly honest.

Charlotte laughed a real laugh, a booming giggle that rattled off the walls and high ceiling.

“What if? Who are you reporting me to?” she continued to hiccup chortles as she made a half-attempt to wipe her face with a pristine yellow dishtowel from the drawer behind her.

“I just don’t want to be associated with you when they eventually-”

“AH-HA!” Charlotte dropped her fork to the spotless ground, allowing a quiet clamor of metal on tile. “You don’t care about me lying as much as you care about how it affects *you*.”

“Well, it does affect me! I’m associated with you and if it comes out that you’re an untrustworthy liar then-”

“Then it could affect your career.” Charlotte finished. For someone so covered in cake, she was quite smug.

Natasha didn’t know how to respond. Of course, that was what she was thinking. She didn’t yet have the name or recognition to be able to afford a connection to someone problematic.

“Just ‘cause I’m more overt about it, doesn’t mean that you’re not just as selfish as me.” Charlotte said plainly.

Natasha bit her lip but couldn't think of a response. Being called out for being a hypocrite seemed a good enough reason to leave, so she slowly pushed herself off the stool, and grabbed her bag.

"Ok, well I guess I should get going." she said lamely.

"Tell me something, Natasha." Charlotte raised her eyebrows at her friend. "Why did you actually stop by?"

"To congratulate you? To let you know I'm here for you?" Natasha was incredulous. "I guess I didn't need to do that, though."

"No, I guess not." Charlotte said thoughtfully, lips still covered with crumbs.

Natasha shook her head as she started for the doorway. She wasn't sure what she was expecting to get out of this visit, but self-reflection wasn't even a consideration. *Why did she stop by?*

She took a quick look at Charlotte's painting again—gosh, it really was beautiful. The skyline was a brilliant blend of blues, greatly contrasted by the bright yellow of the cavity that the city was sinking into. Maybe it was too late; Natasha had succumbed to Charlotte's gravitational pull years ago and had fallen deep enough now that there was no escape. But whose fault was that, really?

Charlotte walked her to the door, fork now back in hand. With a halfhearted wave goodbye, Natasha was back in the unforgiving cold. She raised a gloved hand to the wind once more, but this time to hail a cab. She watched the brick building shrink as she calculated her fare.

Inside the warm glow of the familiar apartment, Charlotte returned to her dessert. She began shoveling the food down her throat, barely stopping to breathe. Her body began to shudder, and the hiccups began once more. Warm tears flowed down her messy face, and this time sobs were what echoed off the walls. She haphazardly threw her fork into the cake and crumpled to her kitchen floor, submerging herself under the NYC skyline.

Suddenly she rose from the floor, no longer weeping. She sniffled and wiped her eyes, before giving a smile to no one. Charlotte cracked her knuckles and began to clean.