

A Man Called Carl

He straightened the row of cereal boxes until the faces were aligned and the corners formed a neat, uninterrupted line. The fluorescent lights above him hummed faintly, flattening color and casting everything in the same glow. A woman reached past him without a word and pulled a box from the middle of the stack. Another slipped free and dropped to the floor at his feet. She glanced down at it, then at him, and waited.

He picked it up and returned it to the shelf. By the time he stood, she was already moving away.

“Excuse me, Charles?”

He turned. A man stood before him holding a jar of pasta sauce, squinting at the small plastic name tag clipped above his pocket.

“Uh, it’s Carl, actually,” he said with a polite smile.

“Yeah. Whatever,” the man replied. “You know where the rice is?”

Carl’s smile faded as he pointed toward the back of the store and watched the man leave. For a moment he considered the name resting on his chest, printed in blue ink and laminated against wear. There had been a time when his name was spoken reverently and with care, as though it might burn the tongue. Now it was shortened, misread, dismissed.

A few minutes later his manager appeared at the end of the aisle, a clipboard tucked beneath one arm. “Bathroom needs attention,” she said, handing him a mop without breaking stride. “Try to be quick about it.”

He took the handle from her and opened his mouth to respond, but she was already moving down the aisle, speaking to someone else before he could say a word. He stood there for a moment, then turned and walked toward the back of the store.

The smell hit him before he even reached the bathroom. He worked methodically, head lowered, as his own movements echoed through the small tiled room.

There had been a time when rooms fell silent before he entered them. Entire crowds had bowed their heads without being told. The air itself had seemed to tighten in anticipation of his voice. Now he scrubbed at the base of a porcelain sink and tried not to think about the thin film of water seeping into his shoes.

“Carl!” someone called from the hallway. “You almost done in there?”

He straightened slowly and leaned on the mop handle for a breath before answering. "Almost."

When he returned to the aisle, he picked up where he had left off. Beyond the shelves, he could hear the scanner at the registers beeping. A child pointed toward him and whispered something that made her mother glance briefly in his direction before turning away. There had been a time when people looked at him with something close to reverence. Now they looked at him and saw only a name tag. He adjusted the badge so it sat straighter and returned to the shelf.

He took another breath, deeper this time, and for a moment allowed himself to remember when his name carried weight. He had stood above them then, and they had known it. Whether they loved him or feared him had not seemed important.

A voice cut through his thoughts.

"Kyle?" someone called from nearby.

He closed his eyes briefly and let out a slow breath before turning.

"Yes?"

The rest of the shift passed in much the same way it had begun.

When it was over, he closed his locker and headed toward the entrance. Rain streaked down the glass doors in steady sheets, distorting the parking lot into blurred lights and shifting gray. He paused there, watching it gather and fall.

There had been a time when he had decided when rain would come. When dry fields waited for it. When entire towns lifted their faces toward the sky and spoke his name into the wind with hope.

A quiet throat cleared behind him.

He realized he was in someone's way and stepped aside, the man moving past him without a word.

He stepped outside and let the door close behind him. The rain was steady. It gathered along the collar of his shirt and ran down the back of his neck. He tilted his head toward the sky and let the rain fall across his face, closing his eyes as it moved over his brow and down his cheeks.

He thought back to when rain had answered to him. Clouds would part or gather at his whim. Storms would build slowly over distant fields long before anyone else sensed the change.

He opened his eyes and reached for his umbrella. As he started down the street, a strong gust of wind caught it, twisting the frame and snapping the fabric inside out. He struggled with it for a moment, but it resisted him stubbornly.

A small group stood beneath a bus shelter watching the effort. Someone laughed.

He paused for a second, remembering when people had pleaded for him to bring rain or begged him to make it stop. They called out into the wind, waiting for him to answer. Many times he refused.

A car passed too close to the curb, its tires cutting through a shallow puddle and sending a cold sheet of water across his pants. The shock of it pulled him back to the present. He lowered the broken umbrella, giving up on it.

Across the street, in the small park, a group of children ran and played. They chased one another through puddles, their shoes splashing water into the air, their laughter rising above the steady sound of the rain. He found himself staring at them as they moved without a care in the world.

There had been a time when laughter would have meant nothing to him. It would have been noise, something to be ignored or silenced. Rain had not been meant for joy then. But now he watched the way the water darkened their hair and soaked through their sleeves. He watched one of them slip and stand again, grinning wider than before.

They did not seem to notice the rain at all.

He couldn't remember when his feelings about things like this had changed.

One of the children glanced toward him and lifted a hand in a quick wave.

He realized he had been standing there staring and felt a sudden self-consciousness he could not quite explain. He looked down at the umbrella in his hand. The fabric hung twisted around its frame, the metal ribs bent and exposed. Water dripped steadily from its edges.

The day returned to him in pieces — the cereal box at his feet, the misread name, the mop pressed into his hand, the laughter beneath the shelter. Each moment small on its own. Together, heavier.

His fingers tightened around the handle, and for a moment something stirred in response. A faint crackle traced along his knuckles. The air near his hands seemed to tighten as thin sparks flickered. He felt how easily it could grow if he allowed it.

He closed his eyes, then loosened his grip. The last trace of it faded. The rain continued as it had before.

He drew in a steady breath, returned the child's wave, and began walking home.

When he reached his home, the change in atmosphere was immediate. He stepped inside and warmth met him first, then light, then the quick patter of small feet across hardwood.

"Daddy!"

She collided with his leg before he had fully closed the door, arms wrapping around him. Her hair smelled faintly of soap and something sweet. He dropped his bag and crouched, gathering her into his arms despite the dampness of his coat.

Behind her, his wife appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She leaned in to kiss his cheek, unbothered by the rain.

"Long day?" she asked.

He hesitated only long enough to feel the weight of the question.

As his daughter tightened her grip around his neck, the hallway light above them flickered once, softly, as though stirred by a passing current. He looked down at the child in his arms, at the way she looked at him.

There had been a time when thousands had believed in him, and he had stood above them unmoved.

Now one small voice called him home.

"It's better now," he said, and meant it.

Outside, the rain continued to fall, steady and indifferent, but within the small circle of light in the hallway, he felt no absence at all.