

In a tense moment, Charles Halloway struggles with unbearable pain in his left hand, which feels as though it has been seared in a furnace. As he battles the agony, he reflects on his age, defiantly thinking that fifty-four is not old. He attempts to crawl away, seeking refuge among the bookshelves, where he feels their presence could provide him with the necessary strength to fend off his pain.

Amidst this turmoil, a woman's ethereal voice echoes through the hall, inquiring about the "old man," and her footsteps draw closer. As she approaches, Charles's pain becomes almost palpable, emitting a life force that draws her near. He grapples with his agony, wishing he could cast it away. The woman, depicted as a witch, hovers over him, quietly urging him to cease his struggles and to let his heart go slow. A battle of wills ensues as she suggests he should stop all heartbeat, leading him deeper into a trance-like state.

As Halloway's heart slows, he succumbs to a feeling of peace, where the pressing pain begins to fade. However, his underlying curiosity transforms into laughter when he notices the absurdity of his situation—the witch, despite her menace, becomes a source of unexpected amusement. He realizes that life itself can feel trivial when faced with death, pondering the ludicrous nature of existence.

In an act of rebellion against his despair, Charles allows himself to laugh, which seizes the witch's attention. Her frantic attempts to control his heartbeat only magnify the humor of the moment. Halloway's laughter becomes unstoppable, a force that overwhelms both him and the witch, causing her to retreat, flustered and dismayed.

In the wake of this confrontation, Charles allows himself to bask in the release of laughter and joy, observing how it nourishes his spirit. The weight of his pain dissipates as he understands the humor hidden within the most dire of situations. With a newfound lightness, he reflects on his prior joys and experiences, feeling victorious over his agony. He stands up, rejuvenated and smiling at the absurdity of his plight, and strides out into the night with a sense of triumph and hope .