

# THIRTEEN YEARS

## Part 1: LITERAL LUST

*Thirteen years, thirteen years of marriage, it feels like twenty. Not as if time is dragging, it's just that after I married Christie I practically became a different person- I grew up. The nineteen-year old Charlie would not recognize the current Charlie that is sitting in front of this laptop computer typing away while his four and seven year old daughters watch Dora the Explorer. I'm at the very cusp of forty, ridiculously out of shape, receding hairline, and I am enamored with our nanny.*

*I write this as I am supposed to be working on my new novel. That is one of the reasons we hired Nola. Nola is our young, nubile nanny. She's slightly on the tall side for a woman, long brown hair that constantly drapes across her face when she leans over to pick up my youngest child. Nola is a full-time college student and arrives here usually a little after four after she picks up my kids from school to cook dinner, and do minor house chores. We really haven't talked; I usually reside in my office working on my newest novel. I usually look up from behind my computer screen and ask, "How are you Nola?" To which she usually responds, "Just fine Mr. Fink." That is the extent of our exchange.*

*During dinner I usually wander over to the kitchen table and fill up a plate of whatever is offered, then without saying a word make my way back to my sanctuary and pretend to be working. My wife Christie tends to work late and isn't around to feed and take care of our kids. After the failure of my last novel I told Christie that the book wasn't successful because I wasn't able to submerge myself in the characters that I created to make an interesting plotline (or some bullshit along those lines). So Christie searched for a nanny so I could work undistracted. We hired Nola after my wife posted a request for a nanny on craigslist. She hired Nola after seeing that she was polite, had a past in baby-sitting and was white. My wife says that she isn't the least bit racist, but claims that our daughters would better accept the nanny if she was easier to relate to- I didn't say a word.*

*I knew from the moment Christie introduced Nola to me that she was quite attractive. She was wearing blue jeans and a tee shirt with a long sleeve white shirt underneath it. She had this sort of vibrancy about her. She was energetic and was eager to meet the girls and me. I never thought much about her until last Friday when Nola made Macaroni and Cheese with fish sticks and served apple juice (my daughter's favorite). I needed to take a break from youtube'ing The Duran Duran videos to clear my head and hopefully begin making some headway on my novel. I sat at the table to the delight of my daughters. It was then that I realized that I had been somewhat of a neglectful father. I thought I was doing my daughters a favor by staying out of their hair, my dad was an asshole and I wish didn't take such an interest in me.*

*Anyway, I sit down at the table and suddenly felt obligated to play around with my daughters who thankfully think that their father is the inventor of comedy still. I was mid-way performing my macaroni matinee when I looked up just as Nola was laboriously scooping out the remaining spoonfuls of noodles that were stuck to the bottom of our Cuisinart pot. She was leaning forward*

*pushing her right arm in a digging motion to release that last bit of cemented cheese and elbow mac. Nola was wearing a loose collared Chicago Bears t-shirt that hung freely from her neckline. While entertaining my daughters I was simultaneously peering past her clavicles.*

*It was a spectacular view. Beneath her worn, faded NFL apparel she sported an emerald green lacy bra that supported two modest but very appreciated breasts. I watched with subdued delight as they undulated moving subtly opposite direction of her shoulders. I know, I know, it's sick. My daughters were seated on either side of me and there is their father ogling the nanny. Don't get me wrong, I know they weren't wise to what I was doing, if they were I would have stopped immediately.*

*Just as she was done scrapping and placing the last remaining bits of dime store cuisine into the plastic recycled whipped topping container I noticed Nola paused in her movements. I immediately glanced up and realized that I had been looking. She noticed me noticing her. I stared back with genuine fright and plea for forgiveness in my eyes. What was her reaction you ask? Giggle and a slight smirk as she turned and sauntered toward the fridge! She gave me a "you little mischievous scamp look". I now feel a little awkward and befuddled around her, but I like it.*

Charlie peers over the top of his lap top computer through the doorway from his office and saw his daughters in child like repose on the living room floor watching television. Next to his daughters Nola was lying on her stomach with her hands under her chin and her bare feet playfully rubbing together as if she were playing a game of solitary footsie. Charlie looked back at his lap top screen and continued typing.

*Just once I would love to rub those feet. I'm not even a foot guy, but I would love to be massaging those feet, sitting on the couch behind the girls, my wife inexplicably absent and Nola lying on the couch with her feet on my lap and me gently rubbing them. I'd rub the balls of her feet with great pressure and concentrate on the heel of her foot with the heel of my hand pressing in a corkscrew fashion to loosen up the rigid muscles. That is before I move to her toes, placing them between my index finger and thumb and pulling up on them while gently twisting back and forth letting them slide between my lotioned digits. I look at her face; she is passively viewing the television, her head slightly tilted upward and to the side, unintentionally exhibiting her delicate jaw line and modest nose.*

*I seamlessly migrate my thumbs to the soft arches of her foot witness her left knee pivot inward toward her other leg as a response to the new sensation- her afore mentioned knee slowly eases and returns to its original position then almost consciously continues to pivot outward opening up her legs slightly. By this time she notices me looking at her new (albeit minimally different limb placement). I glance upward and our eyes meet. Nola cracks a tiny smile. Nola is intimating what is running through my mind from my previous gaze. She giggles and playfully throws an appropriately named throw pillow at me.*

Charlie's wife of thirteen years crosses the path of her husbands vacant daydream stare and stands just on the other side of the office doorway, blocking his view of the firm

denim clad 20 year old posterior with her thirty-seven year old stained, grey sweat pant sporting ass.

“How was your jog Christie?” asked Nola.

“Perfect night, I fit in nearly two miles.”

“I’m jealous, I never set aside the time to work out.” Nola said.

*You don’t need to drop an ounce*, Charlie thought.

“You don’t need to drop an ounce,” Christie said.

“No, I feel fat, I’d like to cut at least ten pounds.”

“Nonsense” said Christie, “I’m the one who needs to drop a bit weight.”

*A bit? Perhaps she thinks there is a wider variance of the word “bit”, than is commonly lent. By her definition Hitler was a bit of an anti-Semite*, Charlie thought.

“Time for bed girls. Nola, you mind putting the girls to bed while I run through the shower?”

“No problem”.

Christie turned around and leaned against the doorway to her husband’s office.

Charlie deleted his previous writing exercise and maximized the window that contained his next failed endeavor. *Bronco Kinkaid*, his soon to be third published novel. *Bronco Kindaid* will be the story of a ruff and tumble, cowboy who is new to a small 1880 Wyoming town. The novel is a return to the Wild West genera after Charlie’s departure with his second published (and terribly received novel) *Bouncing Betty*. The story of a Brooklyn bouncer who falls in love with a waitress named (you guessed it) Betty.

The book was universally panned because it was apparent that Charlie had never been to Brooklyn, never talked to a person of Italian decent and never even visited a nightclub. The American Italian Anti-Defamation League called *Bouncing Betty*, “ignorant and offensive”. They also went on further to point out just how ignorant the book’s author was by stating, “It is not within the American Italian vernacular to use the label *Guinea* as a term of endearment when referring to other American Italians.” Charlie thought many aspects of the African American culture and the American Italian culture was interchangeable. Charlie’s publisher thought that he was writing a biting sardonic take on the American Italian stereotype. He didn’t know that Charlie was just that idiotic and insensitive.

Charlie couldn’t catch a break. With the backlash of *Bouncing Betty*, Charlie’s book publisher implored him; (wait implored is far too gentle) demanded Charlie to return to the genre that made him famous. As his editor put it, *write what you know*. Apparently Charlie knew the old west, even though his stories were full of historical inaccuracies. But in his editor’s eyes Charlie, a paunchy middle-aged man with disconcertingly hairless legs who was born and raised in a suburb of Rockford, Illinois knew the old west.

Charlie’s first book *Stetson Sunset: The Chronicles of William Henry McCoy* rose to number 28 on the *New York Times Best Sellers* list in the fall of ’02 and number 18 on

Amazon.com. Charlie was riding high from the unexpected success of his freshman effort. Now he finds himself sitting in front of the familiar glowing screen of his computer staring at the tired, played out story of *Bronco Kinkaid*. Charlie made the mistake of killing his title character at the end of the third act in a knife fight between W.H. McCoy and an Indian squaw that was fueled by whiskey and a gambling debt. Now short a cash cow Charlie came up with *Bronco Kinkaid*, close friend to William Henry McCoy (though never disclosed in the first novel) and successor to his saddle.

“Are you busy Charlie?” asked Christie.

Charlie snapped out of his fugue state, cleared his throat and responded, “Uh, yea Hon, I’m at a pretty critical stage in the book, I’m making some real headway with the antagonist.” *Amongst writing about the erection inducing au pair*, Charlie thought after saying his bullshit excuse to his loving wife of twenty- make that thirteen years.

“Shoot, do you think that you could spare a few minutes to look at Nola’s car? She was going to take the girls to the grocery store earlier but her car wouldn’t start I guess.”

“Sure!” Charlie exclaimed standing up out of his creaky leather office chair. The office chair that Charlie leaped out of was a part of the *Home Executive Office* from *ikea.com* for \$649.95. Charlie purchased the *Home Executive Office* set as a treat for himself after the success of his first novel to replace the decade’s old school desk that he converted to his writing desk. Charlie used the old oak single desk with hinged worktop to prop his *Olivetti Lettera 22* portable typewriter while he sat on his folding chair and created his first novel. Charlie practically thought after his initial success that the Smithsonian would want to acquire the old oak single desk with hinged worktop and accompanying folding chair. Charlie had better workstations in his home but choose this one because of its quaint and meager elements that would make for great stories to tell at cocktail mixers for years to come.

Now his *Ikea* mahogany veneer desktop is scratched and marred, the center drawer is missing its nickel-plated handle and the genuine leather executive chair with adjustable lumbar support is now dried and cracked. The dilapidated office set now only served as symbol and constant reminder of his deteriorated success.

*Reel it in Charlie, you don’t want to look eager you moron*, Charlie scolded himself. “I can take a look at Nola’s car. I need to take a break from writing anyway. Perhaps it will help clear my mind.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I thought you said that you were at a critical stage with the antagonist?”

“Well yea I am, but I fear that the character development may all be progressing too rapidly and won’t appear organic”

“Oh, ok. I’m going to take a shower, I’ll let Nola know that you are going to take a look at her car; she’s tucking in the girls right now.”

Charlie often used literary terms that even he wasn't overly familiar with to pacify his wife whenever she inquired about his work, that way Charlie could hide the fact that (in this instance) he was barely past the acknowledgment page.

*For Louis L'Amour  
& everyone who keeps the  
spirit of the Wild West alive in  
their hearts.*

Charlie never read a Louis L'Amour book and had resentment toward anyone who wore Wrangler jeans or bolo ties.

Charlie suddenly had a burst of adrenaline flow through his veins. He was silently catching his breath as he listened to his wife climb the steps.

*How do I smell?* Charlie thought to himself. He pulled the stretched elastic collar of his Breast Cancer awareness 5k run/walk (Charlie did the latter) t-shirt away from his cold, clammy chest. *Sniff. I can't really smell anything foul,* Charlie thought to himself. *But then again smelly people can never smell themselves. When was the last time I showered, let's see, I took a shower just after Simpsons but before Family Guy, in the half hour block of television when The Cleveland Show was airing. So that was Sunday evening and today is Thursday. SHIT! I must reek. I really need a job where I leave the house so that I feel obligated to shower.*

Charlie looked around his office for a change of shirt. Sadly none of the shirts on the floor appeared to be any cleaner than the shirt that he had on. Charlie was now realizing that he was going on day five with the shirt that he was currently sporting. Charlie rushed upstairs into the master bedroom and rummaged through his closet to find an appropriate shirt for this occasion. He grabbed a polo shirt and before swapping tops he applied a thick layer of Christie's *Secret* deodorant that she kept on her dresser. The deodorant that is strong enough for a man, but pH balanced for a woman. Unfortunately it is also scented for a woman, but anything was better than his five-day funk.

He stepped in front of the full length mirror located adjacent to the dresser in the master bedroom and began to hand quaff the greasy hair on his head that had been neglected for the past five days. He pauses, takes one long look in the mirror while exhaling a long breath and thinks, *what the hell am I doing?*

Charlie was now realizing what started as a fascinating lark was suddenly treading on inappropriate. He felt ridiculous even considering his intentions.

Over the static sound of his wife's shower he could hear Nola singing his daughters a lullaby. He stepped into the hallway, and listened intently while Nola lulled his daughters to sleep with her rendition of a Jordin Sparks ballad.

*No matter what you say about life  
I learn every time I bleed  
That truth is a stranger  
Soul is in danger; I gotta let my spirit be free  
To admit that I'm wrong  
And then change my mind  
Sorry but I have to move on  
And leave you behind.*

Charlie leaned against the wall in the hallway and rested his arms across his chest, closed his eyes and listened intently.

*I can't waste time so give it a moment  
I realize, nothing's broken  
No need to worry 'bout everything I've done  
Live every second like it was my last one  
Don't look back at a new direction  
I loved you once, needed protection  
You're still a part of everything I do  
You're on my heart just like a tattoo.*

After a couple of choruses and a bridge, Charlie could hear Nola softly repeating the same lyric over and over with dramatic pause and surmised that it must be the end of the song. He strategically stepped towards the areas of the floor least treaded upon as to not make the familiar *bare wood floor creaking noise*. Skulking down the staircase continuing his foot placement strategy, rounded the corner and sat at his throne of failure behind his desk.

He could hear Nola descending the staircase, once reaching the bottom casting her shadow across the office doorway before slowly craning her head around the doorframe like an angelic stooge, short two members.

“Mr. Fink” Nola said in a soft upward inflective tone. “Christie said that you could possibly look at my car?”

“Oh, sure certainly Nola, let me grab my jacket.”

“Did you change your shirt Mr. Fink?”

“Did I change my shirt? Yes, yes I believe I did”

*Huh?!?* Charlie thought to himself, *either I did or didn't.*

Charlie shuffled over to the living room closet with Nola in toe, and tossed on his faded jeans jacket that exactly matched his denim jeans creating a denim jean jumpsuit appearance. At that moment Charlie was trying to pin point the exact age that he stopped caring about his appearance. *31, 32 I'd imagine*, he thought.

Charlie angled around and opened the front door and like a denim-clad Sir Walter Raleigh, and politely held the front door open for Nola.

It was a just after eight o'clock on a cool dry October evening. Nola led the way down the sidewalk wearing the hooded sweatshirt that she had been wearing that evening. *She looks mature and grown up. Girls her age today, as opposed to Nola's choice of wardrobe dress more salacious than ever,* Charlie thought.

Charlie notices this when he finds himself admiring too long at the teenage girls that stand in front of him in line at the grocery store- trying not to stare too long at the sweatpants that have *hottie* or *angel* printed on the ass. *Sometime in a girl's life they tend to not dress as they did before. They hang up the plaid halter-tops, v-neck three quarter sleeve length nylon shirts and cargo hip-hugging Capri pants in exchange for dungarees and a t-shirt. I like it; it shows that she is comfortable, confident with her natural appearance.*

Nola led Charlie to her green '94 Ford Taurus that was parked just past his mailbox. Nola opened the driver's side door and leaned into the vehicle- her posterior upturned and spectacularly fascinating to Charlie as he enjoyed his unobstructed view under the street lamp. A popping noise came from the car as Nola's trunk lid lifted.

"I don't think that was the hood lever," said Nola over her shoulder.

"Wrong end I believe, unless this is a '69 Beetle."

Charlie chuckled at his own seemingly clever joke that went over Nola's head. Charlie strolled to the backside of the car and slammed the trunk shut just as Nola pulled the correct lever and the hood popped loose. After spending a solid forty seconds trying to locate the button just under the hood to fully release it, Charlie was finally victorious in accessing the engine. He didn't rest long on his laurels. He strategically placed the prop-rod and got down to business.

Charlie knew absolutely nothing about cars. He was surprised that Christie even recommended that he take a look under the hood. Apparently Christie assumes that if you were born with exterior genitalia then you possess (at the very least) rudimentary skills to repair a car. Well Charlie fit the requirement but looked at the intricate American made impetus completely perplexed. Not to look like less of a man, Charlie began wiggling the cables attached to the corroded battery terminals. After thoroughly wiggling the red and black lines he looked above the propped hood and told Nola to try it now. Nothing happened. Charlie opened the radiator cap looked inside the dark void then securely put it back in its place.

"Try it now."

Nola turned the key and nothing happened. Now out of complete desperation Charlie began tightening the plastic wing nuts that attached Nola's air filter and grabbed the fan belt and jiggled it up and down for a few seconds.

"Try it now."

Nola once again turned the key and (no surprise) nothing happened.

“Are you pumping the gas pedal?”

“Should I be?” asked Nola.

“Yea,” Charlie said in his *duh* tone.

Nola pumped the gas pedal and turned the key and only accomplished to create a gas scent emanating from the car that wasn't there previously.

“Damn!”

“Do you know what's wrong with it?” asked Nola.

“It's hard to say, it could be your timing belt. I'm not a hundred percent on that though. Ah, they make these cars so complicated now days that a guy can't work on his own engine anymore. I'll call a tow truck for you in the morning.” Charlie said.

Charlie fumbled with the prop-rod then shut the hood.

“Hop in the van, I'll give you a ride home Nola.”

“Are you sure? I feel bad I don't want to pull you from your work.”

“Don't worry about it; my novel will still be there when I get back.”

Nola climbed into the passenger seat of the Fink's 2005 Plymouth Voyager mini-van and cautiously as always Charlie backed out the driveway.

The drive was rather quiet so Charlie said, “You are welcome to find something to listen to on the radio.”

“That's fine Mr. Fink.”

“You know you can call me Charlie.”

“Sure Charlie.”

Charlie wondered why she was so formal with him, but not so much with his wife. *I guess she does talk to Christie much more than me. I wonder if it is a good thing that she refers to me as Mr. Fink, perhaps it is a sign of respect?* Charlie wondered.

“What time should I pick you up tomorrow?”

“Don't worry about it Charlie, my roommate doesn't have class in the afternoon. She can chaperone the girls and me, if that's alright with you. She is a really responsible driver- she drives even slower than you.” Nola, biting her tongue at the end of that statement and wondering why she just made a disparaging comment about the guy who was gracious enough to give her a ride.

“Sure that sounds fine I guess. Well if it doesn't work with your roommate just give me a call. Or send me a text!” Charlie saying “or send me a text” with far too much enthusiasm.

“Nola, I'm embarrassed to ask this, I should know it, but what is your last name?”

“Shepard.”

“Interesting, hmm.”

Nola said with a slight confused chuckle, “why would you say that Charlie?”

“Well, it's believed that people with names like Taylor, Smith, Baker, Shepard,” gesturing with his freehand as he said Shepard to his somewhat icy passenger, “exist because the ancestors of the individuals who had those names worked in those fields.”



Silence from his driving companion as she furrowed her brow in confusion peering at Charlie with a look of skepticism.

“Taylor, Smith, Baker, Shepard,” continued Charlie, “clothing maker, blacksmith, bread baker and in the case of your ancestors, sheep shepherd.”

Charlie had an *ain't it cool* look on his face after he explained his fascinating factoid that was not shared by the offspring of sheep shepherds seated next to him.

“So what does that mean for your last name, Fink?”

“Well,” Charlie stammered, “my ancestors were most likely..... contemptible individuals that squealed on other individuals,” his voice trailing off at the end. “If...if you apply that to my last name. It doesn't work for everyone's” Charlie began to wonder if he being an unpleasant contemptible person could be blamed on his genetics. Charlie realized that he must change the subject; he glanced over to the schoolbooks that lay on Nola's lap. “*The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson*, are you taking a poetry class?”

“I was last semester, I'm not anymore. This would be supplemental reading I guess.”

“Hmm,” Charlie muttered with a wistful grin. “I use to read Dickinson to Christie when we were first dating. I thought it would make me seem insightful, and sensitive. She thought Dickinson was too morbid.”

“That's what is so interesting about Dickinson” Nola said while turning slightly in her bucket seat toward Charlie. “Emily was a recluse who spent her time boarded up in her room thinking about her impending demise, only to become famous after she died. It's sad really.”

Charlie looked vacant staring out towards the lamp lit intersection as they waited for the light to turn green and began to recite a passage, “Because I could not stop for death he kindly stopped for me. The carriage held but just ourselves and immortality.”

There was a calm silence in the minivan. Nola, after a moment keeping her eyes trained on Charlie said “exactly.”

Charlie knew that what he recited is the go-to line for those who loved Dickinson but was still slightly impressed that he could remember that stanza having not uttered it in over twenty years. Charlie looked over and returned her gaze with a polite warm smile. The intersection light turned green and Charlie proceeded on.

“So, do you write anything like that?” asked Nola.

“Me? No, I mean years ago and I wouldn't put it on the same plain as Emily's work.

“Can I hear it?”

“Well, I don't know if I can remember any of my poetry by heart. I mean I haven't written anything for years. Not since I was young and head over heels in love with my wife. I mean not to say I'm not that I'm no longer crazy about my Christie, I am of course. But she was always indifferent about my poetry, even when it was about her. She would simply say “it sounds really nice” and then go on to change the subject.”

“That's too bad,” sympathized Nola as she swept the golden brownish hair that wasn't constrained by her ponytail behind her left ear.

“Well, I was always more of a romantic than she was. I do recall the last stanza of the last poem that I had ever written. I wrote it not too long after Christie and I married. I stopped with the personal poems and started writing poetry of musings that I noticed.”

Charlie saw this as the opportunity to share a piece of work that he had never bored anyone with. For the first time in his life he has a captive audience when it came to his work.”

“Let’s hear it”

“I need to preface it first with a short exposition, since I don’t remember the first four stanzas by heart anymore. What’s the best way to describe it?” Charlie asked himself.

“Nola, do you believe in serendipity?”

“I’m not sure?”

“Serendipity, a chance unexpected, but fortunate encounter; like say you and your friends are standing in line for the movies. You are mid conversation and you take a step backwards and accidentally step on a man’s foot that is waiting in line behind you. You turn around, apologize and suddenly a conversation is struck and your friends and he and his friends decide to sit as a group in the theater. Afterwards you exchange numbers, and over the coming months you and he go out on numerous dates, spend countless evenings together, fall madly in love and eventually get married and grow old together, all because you stepped on his sneaker while in line waiting to buy a movie ticket. Serendipity!”

“Sure I guess I’d like to believe in that,”

“Well, my poem asks, What if you step on the wrong guys foot and it isn’t until after many years of marriage that you realize that you had made a horrible mistake? Or what if you decide not to go to the movies at all? Instead you stay at home and read a romance novel all while ironically missing your one chance to find that one true love? So,” continued Charlie clearing his throat to imply that he was finally going to recite the last stanza of the last poem he had ever written.

*“Yet ultimately I rue the day  
The day we have yet to speak  
The day I truly do regret  
Is the day we could have had to meet  
The day we never met.”*

Charlie suddenly felt incredibly self conscious and realized that he may have opened up a little too much to a girl half his age, whom he had only been first introduced to only a couple of weeks ago. Charlie nervously tapped the steering wheel in a white boy bongo solo as a way of signing, *that’s all I got to say about that.*

It had been at least three seconds which felt like an eternity and not a word. Nola looking at Charlie’s profile shifted her body square to the seat and looked vaguely at the

dashboard in front of her. Nola turned her head back toward Charlie with her lips open about to form a word. She had a perplexed look upon her face.

“So which dorm do you live in?” Charlie said, interrupting her before she could finish her thought.

“Oh... we passed it about three blocks ago, I’m sorry; I didn’t want to interrupt you.” Charlie apologized for being so long winded and turned the van around in an entrance to a parking lot, backtracked down the same street and stopped when Nola softly announced, “This is the place.”

“Well, you have a good night Nola.”

“Charlie,” Nola said while reaching toward the door handle. “I don’t regret having this day to meet.”

Nola smiled a closed lipped, but genuine smile as she exited the vehicle. Charlie leaned his elbow onto the center console and tilted his head dramatically to the right so he could watch her climb the concrete staircase to the front entrance of the brick building, hugging her books along the way. Once inside he sat upward in his seat and grasped the steering wheel in a perfect ten and two hand position, strongly gripping the gray vinyl and ringing it like an Indian burn.

“Did she just reference my poem?” Charlie muttered to himself.

With his head directed downward Charlie began to smile so strongly that his cheeks began to hurt. *Oh the implications are boundless*, he thought to himself. After regaining his composure Charlie merged back onto the street and ecstatically drove home.

## **PART 2: THE MILD MILD WEST**

The next morning Charlie could hardly contain himself. He awoke at 9:25 in the morning, practically sunrise to Charlie. He sat up in his bed with a seemingly unending smile still plastered across his face.

After strolling into the bathroom and inspecting pudgy façade he took in a deep intake of air and rapped across his chest with a single closed fist. With his recently acquired bravado Charlie omitted breakfast from his liberal schedule and swaggered into the office where he called for a tow truck to pick up Nola’s vehicle then immediately sat down in front of his computer. And for the first time in three weeks, Charlie was making progress on his book *Bronco Kinkaid*. Charlie was inspired by his newfound fancy and began to write a romantic western novel that reflected that.

Charlie began to construct a storyline that began with Bronco Kinkaid saving an unknown damsel in distress by rescuing her from her runaway stagecoach before it raced off a rocky cliff into a deep gorge. Upon consuming his victory granola bar for having established the main characters with a seemingly original chance meeting between the two, Charlie leaned back in his creaky office chair briefly resting on his laurels until realizing that the exact scenario played out in the third installment of the *Back to the*

*Future series. Undeterred Charlie came up with his own premise for the main characters. The words flowed like cheap wine.*

*Beneath a black Colorado sky speckled with a seemingly innumerable amount of stars, Bronco Kincaid trotted his horse past an old oak sign nailed to a crooked fence post that stated Leadville. Bronco leads his trusted companion over to a water trough that was adjacent to a hitching post. Stepped from his steed, he observed the dusty saloon entrance. With his calloused hands that were like leather he tied his foal to the post out front. Bronco moved at a slow plod toward the double doors of the saloon. He wondered if perhaps it was age that was slowing him down, if deteriorating muscles were taking their toll.*

*Bronco didn't know his age, he only estimated his age by comparing himself to people who looked like they spent roughly the same amount of time on the plains. You see Bronco's mother died of a blood hemorrhage while giving birth to him. His father died from a bullet lodged in his skull by his own Colt Peacemaker.*

*Bronco, a sleepy eyed child at the time, walked into his father's room after he heard a frightening noise. When Bronco approached his old man he saw a hole between his eyes, a vacant cross eyed stare and pool of blood around his own bare feet. Next to his father laid a note saying that he was sorry and explaining why he did what he done. But one thing always stuck in Bronco's craw, he found out years later that his Pa never knew a lick of reading or writin'. But that inconsistency was buried along with his old man.*

*Present day Bronco walks into a tavern that was little more welcoming from the inside than the dark, grim exterior. Bronco treaded across the pinewood floorboards and eventually leaned his elbow atop the stained bar surface.*

*"Three fingers of whiskey," Bronco muttered to the barkeep.*

*A stout man with a clean shave poured the brown spirit into a chipped glass and carelessly shoved it toward Bronco. Bronco drank his poison in one shot without so much as a flinch and slowly set the glass down while looking through his peripherals. He could see that his fellow patrons were taking an interest in him, Bronco was trying to gauge the temperature of the room to know if strangers like he were welcome in this town.*

*After a couple more stiff drinks and multiple leers from the regulars, Bronco asked the bartender if there were a vacancy upstairs. The bartender looked Bronco dead in the eyes not saying a word and ended the chilly exchange by pointing to the top of the steps.*

*Bronco settled his tab and ascended the staircase. At the top stood a red-haired madam who had the appearance of a horse that was ridden hard and put away wet. Her best years were far behind her. Her age looked to be about thirty or so, yet it appeared that she had lived at least a couple lifetimes within those years.*

*"You looking for a room honey?" asked the fair skinned madam.*

*"If you have one available it would be much obliged."*

*"Just so happens we do, follow me."*

*Bronco appreciated the warmer reception that he was receiving upstairs. The scarlet guide led him to the end of the hallway to the last two doors, walking with a swivel to her hips along the way. She casually tilted her head to the side while looking out of the corner of her left eye back towards Bronco. She had a slight grin of satisfaction in knowing that Bronco was admiring her coquettish stroll. The madam stopped before the last room and presented the entryway by*

holding her right arm outward. Bronco entered the room and looked around observing the velvet curtains drawn back and held by golden dyed rope. He peered out of the window and viewed the saloon front beneath him and his horse tied to the post below. Bronco pivoted and walked back to the door while doing so he observed the bed sheets with oily residue in the shape of faint shadows left by the previous customers.

“How do you like it?” inquired the madam.

“It’s just fine; if you put my horse up in your stable tonight we have a deal.”

As Bronco and the madam were discussing price, Bronco glanced over her shoulder to the room across the hall. The door was slightly ajar and Bronco could see a young gal sitting on the corner of a bed with a bowl of soup on her knees staring back at him with a look of terror in her eyes.

“Who’s that?” Bronco asked, subtly tilting his head down and back up to avoid having to point.

“Who’s that?” repeated the madam. “She’s extra if you want to spend any time with her.

Bronco looked once more and observed that the girl was at least half his age and was far too innocent to be in that trade. The girl, after realizing Bronco was starring at her for an inordinate amount of time quickly averted her gaze and looked at the bowl of soup in front of her. She then lifted her hand to her mouth and made an unconvincing hoarse cough. Perhaps a way of dissuading the purchase, Bronco wondered.

“Well? Are you interested?” the churlish madam asked.

“How much?”

“For her? Ten.”

“Ten?”

“Ten dollars,” answered the madam.

“Why so much?”

“Because she’s a virgin.”

“What’s a virgin doing here?”

“Her father died in a milling accident and her mother passed two weeks ago from tuberculosis.

“I’ll give you five.” Bronco bargained.

“Don’t even bother”, retorted the madam “I’ve got plenty of men who would pay twenty downstairs. I usually only let my regulars deflower a virgin but I’m giving you a chance. You look clean and have honest eyes. So what will it be? Do you want a warm bed tonight or not?”

“Ten it is”, replied Bronco.

“Fine, I’m going to need the payment for the room and for the girl up front.”

“The girl, what’s her name?”

“Huh, I don’t know Sarah I believe. She’ll be ready in five minutes.”

Bronco nodded and closed the door to his room and took a seat on a chair that faced the door. He proceeded to pull off his right boot to access his savings.

Laying out the money on the floor he realized that he had enough to cover his room and his company but he had money for little else.

From the other room he could hear the madam raising her voice to young Sarah.

“You have to eat something!”

*Bronco could hear no response. He sat back in his chair and gazed at the cracked wood door and he waited. Just beyond the sounds of his own breathing for the first time since being in his room the he could hear the noises of the saloon below him. The occasional bellowing laughter vibrated the floorboards beneath his feet. A sound emanating from the room that he shared a wall with caught his attention. Bronco closed his eyes and listened intently. Short breathy moans increasing in pace were penetrating the thin wall. Another customer with a painted lady Bronco assumed.*

*Bronco sat up in the chair brought his hands to his face and massaged his sun burnt brow and pulled his finger tips down passed his yawning mouth stopping at his chin, his abrasive chapped hands lightly scratching his leathery skin.*

*A knock at the door jolted his hands from his face. He looked at the door as he heard another gentle knock from frail knuckles. Bronco simultaneously slapped both knees with his palms as he stood and with a hard heel he walked toward the door.*

*Upon opening it he was greeted by the madam.*

*"I trust you have the money to settle the debts?"*

*Bronco walked to his bed and grabbed essentially his last remaining dollars and handed it to her. The madam stepped to one side and young Sarah was standing behind her, eyes to the floor adorn in a white cotton gown with a matching white wreath around her head.*

*"I'm going to be standing just down the hallway, the first sign of trouble Sam and I will be in this room," the madam said in a sober tone to young Sarah. Then she stood upright and gave a long judging stare to Bronco. Which Bronco matched back toward the madam.*

*The madam stepped backward and placed her hand on young Sarah's back gently pushing her into the room. Sarah's eyes never left the floor. Once inside the madam reached for the door handle and closed it behind her.*

*"Have a seat," Bronco suggested.*

*Sarah's feet were planted solid in one spot, Bronco reached and gently touched her left shoulder to lead her further into the room. She shuttered like a beaten dog and lowered her shoulder at the first sense of touch.*

*"It's alright", Bronco said reassuringly.*

*He placed his hand back on her shoulder and walked her to the bed where she sat on the corner. Bronco took two steps back and grabbed the chair that he was previously seated in and moved it in front of Sarah and took a seat. Bronco looked at Sarah, cowering on the corner of his bed, her eyes glued to the floor. Bronco looked at her purity dress and observed the light stains of blood just above the inside hem.*

*Bronco proceeded to look at the same single spot on the floor that Sarah was admiring. Without lifting his head Bronco said, "Sarah, you have nothing to be afraid of, I'm going to get you out of here."*

*Sarah looked up at Bronco with a look of disbelief in her eyes. Tears began to well up and cascade down the sides of her cheek.*

*"I'm going to get you out of here,"*

*After tying the stained bed sheets together Bronco anchored one end to a chair that was placed against the window sill. After quietly landing on the boardwalk he convinced Sarah to trust him once more and coaxed her to the wooden precipice where she leaped into Bronco's awaiting arms.*

*They climbed onto Bronco's steed and quickly rode off into the star speckled Wyoming night. Powder fine dust from rapid hooves rose and settled in their wake. They rode as fast as his horse could carry them. Sarah, positioned in front of Bronco on the saddle, wrapped her tiny arms around the convulsing mare's neck - her white purity gown flapping in the chilly night air. They rode into the dark plain. Their destination was anywhere from which they were running. As the moon rose higher the inessential rocks, bushes and trees seemingly parted before them becoming streaks of amber and onyx surrounding their escape.*

*The long journey was yet before them, their lives would change forever. Course breaths from the horse matched their own as they traveled into the dark, distant unknown. The troubles of their separate pasts would soon- KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.*

A knock at the door yanked Charlie's mind out of 1880's Wyoming and back to the present day. Charlie opened the door to see a formidable man standing on his front stoop and a tow truck in the background.

"You call for the tow?"

"Yes, I did. It's the green car on the street. I need it towed to a repair shop, it won't start."

"The car won't turn over?" the driver inquired.

"Yea, it won't start."

The large man rolled his eyes and walked to his truck with Charlie in tow.

"Pop the hood."

While Charlie was trying to locate the elusive hood lever once again, the substantially sized man climbed into the cab of his truck that was just larger than him. After positioning his truck in front of Nola's Taurus he connected jumper cables from his truck battery to the dead car battery.

"Turn the key," the driver said in his gruff voice.

The car started immediately.

Charlie thanked the man by shaking his rough, dry right hand that nearly swallowed up his dainty digits. Charlie paid the man a recommend forty dollars for a jump-start and prompt service before the tow-man left.

Looking at his watch Charlie noticed that it was nearly a quarter to four. *Fifteen minutes*, Charlie thought to himself. He jogged back into his house and up the steps to his room and opened his closet door and pushed aside Christie's shirts on the hanger rod so as to access his limited amount of button down shirts.

### **Part 3: FASHIONABLE FOIBLES**

Charlie was meticulously going through his eight shirts and settled on his pink shirt with vertical powder blue pin stripes that he had received from Christie for his birthday at least three years ago. Charlie had read that guys that wear pink shirts exude confidence. Charlie put on the shirt and buttoned it up then stepped in front of the mirror.

"You're trying too hard Charlie," he said to his reflection.

Charlie untucked his shirt and opened the second to the top button, then reassessed that this would be passable. Charlie migrated to the bathroom where he used some of Christie's hair styling gel. Charlie began to mold his hair in such a way that it replicated a twenty-year old *MTV* reality star with bed head if only Charlie wasn't lacking significant amounts of hair.

Charlie paused from molding a younger hairstyle and with his hands still hovering inches from his scalp; he protruded his lower lip and nodded his head in an approving fashion. Taking one last look in the mirror, Charlie at the last minute decided to unbutton his pink button down shirt so he would look like a combination of cool and casual, and not look like he was trying to impress the nanny.

Charlie scurried down the steps and sat back down in his creaky, cracked leather office chair and tried to concentrate on the storyline that he had just previously constructed, but was instead glancing over the top of the of his computer to the bay window that displayed the street in front of his home waiting to see if Nola was passing by. In a moment of self consciousness Charlie cupped his right hand and breathed into it while sternly inhaling to check his breath.

"Smells like Tuna," Charlie whispered to himself.

Charlie quickly rose from his chair and b-lined it to the bathroom and searched in the cabinet under the sink and grabbed the large, dusty economy-sized bottle of mouthwash. He swigged a large amount and swished it around in his mouth feeling the intense burn on his tongue and cheek walls. Charlie tilted his head back and gargled the acrid substance until his sensitive tonsils could take no more. He spewed the green substance into the sink and began coughing so severely that his esophagus began to contract which then made him cough even more while gasping for breath.

Standing in front of the sink with his hands grabbing firmly on either side of the bathroom counter, Charlie watched the long drools of saliva drip from his mouth. He looked up at his reflection taking in deep breaths of air noticing that the recent chocking fit has made his eyes look so bloodshot that he appeared like he was just back from a road trip with Snoop Dog and Woody Harrelson.

From the bathroom Charlie could hear the front door knob twisting and the door begin to open. Charlie sprinted lightly on the tips of his feet like a gazelle back to his desk and crashed back into his squeaky seat.

Nola accompanied by Charlie's daughters entered the house. Charlie began typing. Not knowing what to type Charlie was simply typed, "typing typing typing typing typing typing typing typing typing." The daughters walked straight into the kitchen and to the fridge. Nola walked across the living room and to the entrance of Charlie's office. Charlie continued to work ignoring Nola's approach.

"Hey Charlie," Nola said from the door frame.

"Oh! Hey Nola, when did you get here?"



“Just walked in, I noticed my car is still outside. Did they not have time to pick it up?”

“Oh, it’s fixed. The tow truck driver and I were able to get it running.”

“That’s great! What was wrong with it?”

“Ah.... timing belt,” Charlie said while glancing out his office window.

“How much was it? I’ll pay you back.”

“Consider it gratis. Pay it forward.”

“Thank you Charlie” she said with broad grin.

Nola looked closely at Charlie while he peered at her over the top of the computer. Charlie, unafraid of the soul bonding moment stared right back at Nola. Nola began to squint her eyes which made her look even more attractive. Charlie mirrored her squint with his own squint.

“Charlie, are you alright?”

“Perfect. Why do you ask?”

“It looks like you’ve been crying?”

“What?!?”

“Your eyes are all watery and bloodshot. Is everything alright?”

“Oh that,” Charlie said with a nervous laugh while quickly breaking eye contact focusing his sight to the empty soup can on his desk that held his pens. “I just had a slight chocking misshape with a granola bar, I’m fine,” Charlie exclaimed while lifting and inspecting individual ball point pens.

“Oh, okay,” Nola responded. She turned around and accompanied the girls in the kitchen.

Charlie rolled his eyes and leaned back into his chair covering his face with his hands while exhaling in embarrassment and in shame.

“Charlie?”

“Yea!” Charlie responded in a loud surprised voice, dropping his hands quickly on top of his desk and folding them trying to make it appear casual, but failing miserably.

“The girls want pancakes for dinner, can I make you some?”

“I can always eat,” replied the nervous red-faced Charlie.

“Are you sure everything is alright Charlie?”

“Peachy keen!” he responded in a sharp exhale.

Nola stood in the doorway a couple of seconds longer, then turned around and went back into the kitchen.

A short while later Charlie could smell the familiar scent of breakfast emanating from the kitchen, as the smell of fresh pancakes and sausage filled the Fink residence. Charlie made his way to the kitchen before he was called to eat.

“Daddy you’re going to eat with us again!” asked his youngest daughter.

“Of course I am sweetie.” Charlie answered and looked up at Nola as he shrugged his shoulders, faced his palms upward and with a breathy chuckle dismissing the accusation that he was an absent parent.

“Daddy you look funny.” said his oldest daughter.

“Why would you say that Natalie?”

“You are wearing a funny shirt and your hair looks funny too.”

Charlie’s face turning back to the same shade of red that it was when Nola was talking to him just earlier - Charlie began to casually drag his palm across his intentionally messy quaff with a tight lipped smile.

“Now Natalie, that is not a nice thing to say to your father,” said Nola, coming to Charlie’s defense. Charlie suddenly felt equated to his young daughters. Like he was a neighbor boy who was invited over for supper and after an unintended barb the mother is rushing to the young guest’s defense.

Attempting to nonchalantly iron down his pomaded tuft of hair and swearing to himself for trying anything new, Charlie was the little boy with a thinning hairline that wanted to run home.

After two beats he regained composure. Charlie attempted to rectify the situation. “So girls, how was school?”

“You smell funny too,” Observed Natalie.

Charlie slapped his right hand on the table, his daughters jolted in their seats. Catching himself, he slowly placed his left hand on top of his right and said in a nervous laugh, “What’s with the inquisition here? Let’s just enjoy the meal that Nola has prepared.”

Nola was fully aware of the awkward situation that presented itself at the kitchen table. She avoided eye contact with Charlie as she doled out the first batch of flapjacks. Charlie had a sudden feeling of contempt toward his daughters for completely diminishing his look, and making him appear nervous, twitchy and above all uncool in front of Nola. Charlie soon began to regain some of his confidence while pouring syrup over his stack and taking a bite.

“Nola, these pancakes are delicious! What is your secret?” said Charlie with a mouth full of soggy doe.

“They’re just Bisquick pancakes that you shake and pour.” Nola responded while placing the paper plate of freshly microwaved sausage patties in the center of the table.

“Well, they are just excellent.” Charlie continued.

Charlie’s daughters were looking at each other, wondering why their father was being so complimentary. Charlie is the kind of guy that informs his wife about, *egg yolk slump factor*. That is the degree in which you can tilt the frying pan versus how far the yolk runs into the white of the egg while making sunny-side-up eggs.

Charlie enjoys his eggs to have a slump of a quarter the radius of the egg white while the pan is being held at roughly a forty-five degree angle with the temperature set at

medium on the Fink's electric stove. Once the egg reaches that optimum cooking slump that is the time to remove the egg from the pan and place it on the room temperature ceramic plate that will allow the egg to cool and coagulate.

It's not like Charlie is an obsessive compulsive, it's more the fact that he is a jackass who likes to be particular because his wife is the one who prepares the meals while his culinary talents are limited to making simple cold meat sandwiches and the occasional frozen pizza, which he will still manage to screw up because he will often forget that you need to pre-heat the oven.

There are many mornings which Christie has prepared the eggs to his specifications; to the fawning praise of her husband, and other mornings she is tempted to take the three-hundred degree heated cast-iron pan and smash it across her husband's temple when he criticizes that it wasn't her best effort.

In this instance with the pancakes being as flat as cardboard and the rubbery microwaved sausage paddies having the texture of a worn car tire, even Charlie's daughters could tell that their father was far overly generous with his praise.

#### **Part 4: LIP SERVICE**

Charlie began to spend more time fantasizing about Nola. Wondering just how her hair smelt. If the texture was silky, it certainly appeared to be that way. Her hair has a way of gliding past her shoulders in a manner that was pleasing to the eyes.

*How do her lips taste? He thought. Like strawberries I suppose. She is constantly applying strawberry lip balm. What would our first kiss be like? What would the situation be? Will I quote her more poetry on the car ride home, the perfect moment while she is sweeping the hair from her face and opening that side up to me- when she is giving long lingering looks deep into my eyes? I lean forward and stop just millimeters from her mouth, the upper edge of my lips barely grazing her lower lip. With a quivering exhale she breathes milky white breath into my mouth. With anticipation almost palpable I move my lips closer and kissed her aggressively, like scratching an itch that has been pestering for all too long.*

*Bronco looked across the flames of the camp fire. Young Sarah shivered as she focused on the glowing furnace of charred wood. Bronco tells her to move closer to the fire if she's cold. She scooted a little closer to the fire's warm, inviting breath.*

*Bronco stood and grabbed a thick branch that lay in the thicket. He dragged it over the absent soil. Dropping the heavy branch onto the open flames causes luminous ashes to dance above the crackling flames. The firefly like specs eventually faded and drifted back to the ground. Sarah continued to shake. Bronco sat next to her. He removed his leather duster and placed it onto her shoulders and wrapped it around her like a blanket. Sarah leaned against Bronco and placed her head on his shoulder. Bronco, compelled by*

*the feeling of genuine affection for the first time in his life, kissed the top of her head. Sarah immediately looked up. Cautiously looking at Bronco submissively through the tops of her eyes, she raised her pouty lips and pressed them against his. A chill once again ran through her body. The shiver of her soul quaked against Bronco. He brought his hand around to her side and brought her close against his warm body. Sarah lifted the side of the duster to invite Bronco beneath. They embarrassed beneath an orange harvest moon.*

## **Part 5: MINT?**

It is the next day and Charlie is spending it sitting in his creaking thrown of failure conjuring masturbatory fantasies about his nanny. Charlie continued to make progress with Bronco Kinkaid and the character of the young bordello prostitute began taking on a very similar likeness to Nola. Charlie began to be the cowboy who could do no wrong. He was in complete control of every situation. He always said the right line; each well thought out phrase became poignant, pithy and had understated western poetic flavor. He never said the wrong thing, and never had the wrong thing said to him since Charlie was in control of every single word that was uttered. As Bronco and his young companion traveled across the wild wilderness that is eighteenth century Wyoming they find that they are becoming fond of each other, endearing to one another. One could say that Bronco and the young Sarah were becoming soul mates.

Nola arrived at the Fink's household a little later than usual. Charlie would not have noticed usually but on this occasion he was waiting for Nola. Nola pulled up in her dilapidated Ford Taurus with the precious cargo of Charlie's daughters. It was business as usual once inside the house- the same passive greeting, the girls sitting transfixed in front of the television and Nola in the kitchen preparing some ready-made meal.

Charlie skipped dinner and continued to write while munching on fun sized Kit-Kat bars and orange *Fresca*. While the girls were back to watching television and avoiding their homework Nola saw an opportunity to chat with Charlie.

"How's your story coming Charlie?"

"Fine so far."

Nola entered the office and positioned her firm denim posterior on the corner of his desk. Charlie admired the shape out of the corner of his peripheral all while keeping eye contact with Nola. He had an impressive perverse talent when it came to things like that.

"Just fine, what's the hang-up?"

"Nothing really, I mean nothing specifically. I'm just not feeling it. It happens. More time is spent in front of this computer not writing than actually writing."

"Can I help?" asked Nola.

Charlie chuckled and awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck said, "Sorry, I think it's solely up to me."

"What are you eating?" asked Charlie.

“*Andes Mint*. Do you want one?”

“No.... well, sure if you have one.”

Nola stood up and slipped her pink polished nails into the front pocket of her faded jeans. Her pants being so tight, so custom fit in appearance there was seemingly only room enough for Nola’s outstretched-fingers in that pocket and nothing else. Charlie could specifically see the contour of her hand stop midway in her pocket, the slight raising of her knuckle and the ascent as she removed her hand from her pocket and turned it over to reveal an *Andes Mint* neatly placed in the center of her palm.

Charlie reached his hairy-knuckled paw over to Nola’s hand. Realizing that he was caught in the moment, with his fingers twitching he ceased to savor the moment and plunged his fingers into Nola’s palm- snatching up the tiny foil wrapped mint.

“Well, if I can be of any assistance let me know Charlie.”

Nola turned and walked out of the room with an undulation that rivaled a paint shaker on a low setting. Charlie sat there with the warm soft mint in his fingers and proceeded to unwrap it. He brought it close to his lips and could feel Nola’s body heat conveyed through this tiny piece of chocolate. It was the most delicious, delectable sweet that he had ever consumed - this incredible delight, this divine confection that was brought to its melting point through the convection oven of a coed’s thighs.

Charlie’s muse delivered once again and he found himself adding a personal third dimension to the young female protagonist that accompanied Bronco Kinkaid.

## **Part 6: COED CONFIDANT**

As days passed Nola spent more time in Charlie’s office usually during the daughter’s homework time. He greatly enjoyed the time that Nola spent in his office; he would get a rise, a jolt of energy whenever Nola would poke her head into his office and asked if she could bother him. She eventually got more comfortable with Charlie and interchanged between sittings on the corner of Charlie’s desk to laying in repose on the Fink’s old love seat that took up too much space in the corner of his office. Charlie enjoyed both seating arrangements. When Nola sat on the edge of his desk he loved the close proximity at times his left arm would be a mere inch or two away from her leg- his arm hairs would stand on end seemingly trying to reach out to come into contact with her. When she laid on the love seat Charlie could observe her greater, he could look at her entire figure while Nola spoke at great lengths about the banal subjects that are built up in a young girls mind that provide “drama” in their lives.

Charlie could care less about the majority or what she was saying but loved to watch her say it. Also he appreciated that none of her dilemmas ever had to do with boys. What started as ten to fifteen minute conversations soon grew into forty and sixty minute dialogues that covered everything from religion to greatest fears. Nola’s greatest fear is that she will be choking on food while she is eating by herself and will be forced to take her life into her own hands and perform the Heimlich maneuver using the corner of a

table or chair - hopefully removing the trapped bit of food before everything went black. Charlie's greatest fear is that he will one day be in a horrible car accident - being complacent crossing into an intersection and t-boned by an eighteen wheeler and how an average day would be your last with your life's apex built towards a handful of seconds of sheer panic and terror.

Charlie would sit transfixed and held onto every word uttered out of her pouty lips and Nola admired how Charlie could articulate what he was thinking and bring her into his thoughts. They shared aspirations, they shared secrets.

Charlie wondered if Nola was a virgin, he realistically assumed that she wasn't, but shuttered at the thought of a stranger stealing her innocence. His affection for Nola was morphing from physical to emotional. He thought that he was born into the wrong time, that he should be twenty years younger- the thought of being a peer to Nola began creeping into the back of his mind. They could be young and in love without the social constraints and pre-existing inconveniences like a wife and kids. They could travel the world together, share a kiss in the Louvre in front of the Rodin sculpture of the same name. Bicycle in Amsterdam, wander the streets of Prague, or stay in bed and breakfast at the foot of the Swiss Alps where the only accommodations were a flat pine bunk with warm goose down blankets. Make conversation, make memories, make art, make love.

Each evening four times a week they spoke- they spoke until Christie would come home from work and Nola would quickly make her way over to the dining room table to check on the girls and their homework. Both Nola and Charlie knew that they were spending far too much time together than a plutonic relationship should grant- shared too many secrets and thoughts than a father of two and a nanny rightly should. There were too many conversations that started with "I shouldn't be telling you this", or ending with "I can't believe I told you that". Like how Nola's first kiss was from her eighth grade English teacher when she was thirteen. How when she was a junior in high school she had to file a restraining order against one of her classmates after he constantly pestered her and eventually exposed himself to her in a costume room after a rehearsal of the play *Grease*.

Charlie confided in Nola that Christie was his first; that he wished that he had sex with other women before he met his wife. That he feels like he has missed out on something that is crucial in his development.

Charlie's book benefited from the long conversations that he had with Nola. Sarah, the young prostitute that accompanied Bronco on the long hoarse-back journeys across the landscape of Wyoming was arrestingly beautiful in appearance, but was flawed and fragile at the same time which made her even more appealing to Bronco.

Charlie wrote most of his work after speaking with Nola. He would write to the early hours of the morning after which he would trudge up the stairs to join his inferior in every way wife. A woman that was seemingly selfish- never asking Charlie his greatest fears or his hopes and aspirations. In Charlie's mind his relationship with Christie was

more like a business agreement -they both work toward their common goal for the betterment of their product which in this case was their daughters. The naked, deep emotions of want and desire were hopelessly vacant, assuming that they were ever there to begin with. A marriage of convenience, both parties was merely present, and had no other plans for the rest of their lives.

Spending his evenings writing, Charlie's mornings and early afternoons were usually spent thinking about Nola, reliving conversations they had together in his head, dissecting what she had spoken to him and wondering if there was some hidden meaning behind it. Along with days dreaming he also started writing poetry once again. Like a paunchy John Keats his enraptured mind began contriving maudlin, mushy sentiments.

*Magnetic pale blue eyes with pupils as open as the soul that inhabits them  
Concealed for brief eternities they reveal & reintroduce their brilliance with every blink  
Supple, vacant, ashen pearl skin that emits an indescribable alluring aroma  
Creating a human canvas for which I paint my emotions  
Ineffable incandescence, enigmatic desire, hope, humility, love, shame, envy and lust  
She is the personification of an abstraction  
The embodiment of an intangible.*

## **Part 7: THE PRIDE BEFORE THE FALL**

The day that Charlie finished his novel of Bronco Kinkaid, he was brimming with excitement. He was convinced that it was one of the greatest things that he had ever written. He loved how he managed to create a fantastically original relationship of an older man and a young girl. The pacing, the emotion, it was in his mind raw and real. The story was his blood; he simply opened a vein and poured it onto the paper. He emailed his publishing agent in Chicago and printed off the two-hundred and twenty six page manuscript (as he always does) for Christi to preview.

For this special Friday night evening Charlie did something that he rarely ever does- he cooked dinner. He pan seared chicken breasts and boiled noodles that he later combined with a packet of powdered cheese to create a surprisingly eatable chicken fettuccini entre. He set the dining room table with the rarely used fancy fine China porcelain dishes that he received after the passing of his Great Aunt Maureen. The dining room table was set and immaculate. Charlie was putting the finishing touches by folding the Marti Gras napkins in half and placing them under the silverware just as Christie and his daughters were entering the front door. The scent from the chicken breast and feta cheese stopped them in their tracks like a brick wall. They were shocked see Charlie the homemaker standing over the place settings wearing Christie's novelty cooking apron that states "The most important cooking utensil is the corkscrew".

“Welcome home!” Charlie said enthusiastically. Christie and the girls looked at Charlie with a look of skepticism. For a brief moment Christie wondered if she inadvertently steered the Fink’s minivan into a wormhole and ended up in a dimension that was entirely the same in appearance but opposite in every other way. Somehow that seemed more likely than her husband cooking a large meal for the entire family.

“Have a seat” Charlie exclaims while clumsily sliding the oven mitts back on his hands. “I’m just about to pull the French bread out of the oven, the string beans should almost be at a boil and the main course is ready to be served.”

“What’s the special occasion honey?”

“Charlie stops his in tracks and with a jaunty tip-toed skip back to his wife he placed his oven mitted hands on both sides of her face and said “it’s a surprise”.

Christie and the girls removed their jackets and took a seat at the table. Charlie brought out his bountiful feast one dish at a time and placed them in the center of the table.

It was far from the best meal ever made in that home but certainly the best Charlie had ever created. The noodles were dry and rubbery, but not nearly as rubbery as the green beans; the French bread had enough garlic powder sprinkled over top of it that the Finks had no fear of a vampire coming within a five block radius of their home. And the pan seared chicken was dangerously undercooked.

Charlie spent the dinner session honestly inquiring about his family’s day and constantly applauding his cooking. Christie, not being able to find anything about the meal to applaud, politely complimented his efforts. His daughters (thankfully do not have particular pallets and not overly familiar with how food texture or taste should be) peacefully cleaned their plates while lamenting to themselves that they would have much rather be eating frozen fish sticks with macaroni and cheese.

“And now for desert,” Charlie said while gleefully hopping up from his spot at the head of the table and skipping off to the kitchen.

Charlie brought out the large sterling silver serving platter that Christi hadn’t used since Thanksgiving three years ago. Charlie stood at the head of the table, and with his right hand he quickly lifted the ivy etched cover to reveal his manuscript with stacks of Oreos surrounding the bind of paper to act as a chocolate wafer garnish.

“Enjoy.”

Charlie’s daughters grabbed the some cookies hardly even aware that their father’s toiling labors were at the center.

“And this is for you my love.” Charlie handed Christie the manuscript with a clever smile.

“You finished your book! That’s wonderful Charlie; I was hoping that was your big news! I can’t wait to read it.”

“Why wait at all?” Go start a bubble bath or sit in the gliding rocker in our bedroom and start reading.”



“Are you sure? I mean I can help you with the dishes, you went through all the trouble of making the meal”

“The girls and I will take care of the dishes and then we’ll plop down on the couch and watch a movie. You start reading. I want your opinion on this. Bring a bottle of red upstairs with you, wrap yourself up in an afghan and enjoy the story.”

“Ok, I’m gone.” Christie said with a chuckle as she was being gently pushed toward the steps by her husband.

“You have no worries tonight; I’ll put the girls to bed. I don’t want anything to disrupt the story for you.”

Charlie did as he promised and scrubbed and scoured the pots and pans, removing the stubborn bits of dry petrified noodles and flakes of blackened chicken. He filled the dishwasher with his deceased great-aunts fine porcelain China as she presumably rolled in her grave. He hunkered down between his daughters on the couch, laid a flannel blanket across the three of them and watched *The Little Mermaid*.

Charlie often craned his head over his shoulder and peered up the staircase and wondered how Christie was enjoying his latest work. He heard not a sound from the upstairs - no creaking of floor boards or turning of door knobs. He assumed this was a good sign - that is meant that his wife was fully engrossed in his story.

When it was time to put his daughters to bed Charlie noticed that his bedroom door was closed with the lamp lighting emanating from the gap at the bottom. Once the girls were in bed Charlie entered his bedroom and found Christie in her pajamas sitting up in bed reading *Bronco Kinkaid*. Christie was wearing her pink plastic pearl reading glasses. Charlie always disliked it when Christie would wear her reading glasses because it seemed to age her at least fifteen years. Charlie would often be greeted by the appearance of one of his mother’s five-card pinochle partners in his bed on many occasions. It was the last thing that Charlie needed before he hopped into bed with Christie. It was almost guaranteed that Charlie wouldn’t be trying to make a move on his wife and would ensure a continued sexless streak that had become more and more common in their boudoir.

“So what do you think so far honey?”

Christie continued to look down at the pages in her hand with a furrowed brow.

“Honey?” Charlie repeated.

“Yea, I’m going to take this downstairs to the couch. You’re welcome to go to bed.”

Christie exited the bedroom with her eyes glued to the page never looking up once. Charlie thought it was an odd unexpected response but assured himself that it wasn’t a bad thing, *if anything it meant the book was a real page turner*, he thought.

Charlie awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of a light muffled sob. He sat up in his bed trying to discern which corner of the bedroom the sob was originating. And more importantly who is making that noise. *Smack* went the dresser drawer and followed by the sound of another drawer opening.

“Hon, what’s wrong what are you doing? What’s wrong?”

This was answered by more muffled sobs and a slam of another dresser drawer and the opening of another one. Charlie leaned over to his night stand and clicked on his reading lamp.

“Hon, what in God’s name is wrong?”

“YOU!” Christie began with a teeth clenched growl, “You philandering piece of shit!”

Christie stood before Charlie’s dresser with bloodshot eyes, cheeks drenched with salty tears and a pair of Charlie’s boxer briefs clenched in a fist that was pointing at him accusingly.

Charlie rubs his eyes with his palms in an attempt to convey that he is groggy and confused having being jolted from a heavy sleep to buy him some time to think.

“What are you talking about?” He asks.

“You write a thinly veiled story about you and Nola and then you think that I’d be too stupid to notice?!?!?”

“Not even! Nola had nothing to do with the story.”

“Your Sarah or whatever is described exactly like Nola in appearance, you give her the same mannerisms and then you go on to have sex with her in the following chapters!”

“Honey, writer often take elements from real life to create an amalgamate or a composite character if you will to make them seem more organic and realiz-“

“You shut up you condescending, pampas dickhead!” interrupted Christie.

“Are you seeing her?”

“No!”

“Did you have sex with her?”

“No, of course not.”

“Did you kiss her?”

There was a stutter and stammer from Charlie, “no.”

“Are you in love with her?” Christie asked in a crackled, breathy, hoarse tone.

Charlie paused for three seconds before he looked his wife square in the eyes and lied to her with a less convincing, *no*.

It was those three seconds, the three seconds that would change the trajectory of Charlie’s life, the three seconds of hesitation that let Christie know what Charlie was thinking, doing and feeling over the past few weeks. That blip of blank air told her that her husband was no longer in love with her. That insignificant amount of time had substantial significance to Charlie and Christie- the three seconds that destroyed thirteen years.

At 3:27 in the morning Charlie was no longer in his warm bed but was instead driving though freshly fallen powdery snow to find a hotel with a vacancy. Christie stood in front of the bathroom mirror and saw the reflection of an old woman with puffy red cheeks, irritated bags under her eyes and a wrinkled weather worn face.

## Part 8: REVELATION

*Ring.....ring.....ring.....ring.....ring.*

“Hey, you reached Nola leave a message or send a text. Take care.”

Charlie hung up his cell phone and sat in the dimly lit room Super 8 hotel room. He sits at the small table next to the rarely used hotel dresser with a twelve pack of the lowest priced- highest alcohol percentage beer that the state of Illinois allows. Lifting the beer can to his lips and back to the table staggering the rings of condensation creating clumsy Olympic emblem.

Seconds after attempting to call Nola, Charlie’s cell phone vibrates on the icy table top.

“Nola?”

“Charlie? Why did you call me?” Nola said in a staggered sleepy voice.

“We.....we need talk Nola. I mean, Christie and I had a falling out, a bad falling out.”

“Oh, Charlie- I’m sorry to hear that”, Nola said amongst a gigantic yawn.

“Do you think we could talk Nola?”

“Sure Charlie, go ahead.”

“I was hoping that we could talk in person.”

Charlie could hear the sound of mattress springs. It was the sound of Nola rolling over in her bed to look at her alarm clock.

“Right now?” Nola said after a perturbed exhale.

“I’m in a pretty bad place right now Nola. I could really use a sympathetic ear.”

“You want me to come and talk to you at ten to four in the morning?”

“I would be eternally grateful.”

“It’s alright for me to come over?”

“Yea, it’s fine.”

“Alright Charlie, give me like twenty minutes.”

Charlie sat in his hotel room feeling chilled. He began to rub the bottoms of his feet back and forth on the industrial carpet to warm his toes, then leaving the warm spot of carpet that he had just created to walk over to the wall furnace and increased the temperature.

After sitting a while and sorting the different strange emotions in his head but not centering on how to remedy the situation he polished off his second beer, he was still feeling sullen but excited to see Nola. It was at that moment Charlie began to wonder how Nola knew where he was calling from. *Strange* he thought to himself. After two beats and a blank stare Charlie snatched his phone from the table and quickly clicked through the contacts list and called Nola.

“DON’T GO TO MY HOUSE!”

“What Charlie?”

“Where are you?!?!?”

“I just got here. I’m in your driveway.”

“I’m not there! Quick! Get out of there!”

“Where are you Charlie?”

“Are you out of my driveway?”

“I’m backing out. Charlie where are you?”

“Not there. I’m at the *Super 8* room 31.”

There was a long silence on opposite line as Nola was mouthing curse words.

“You still coming Nola?”

“Yea.....I’ll be there Charlie.”

A short time later Charlie was seated in his chair with his hands clasped over his face. With his eyes closed and his sense of hearing heightened he could hear the sound of what sounded like raucous kids that were laughing and speaking loudly. From the adjoining wall he could hear an infant crying, between wails he could make out the sound of a mother lulling her child. A soft knock on his hotel room door jolted his attention. He got out of his seat and after removing the chain lock and twisting the dead bolt he opened the door to reveal Nola standing in a pure white winter parka with her light brunette hair framing her soft smile. Looking upward through tired sleepy eyes she greeted Charlie with a slightly awkward, *hey*.

“Nola, I’m really glad to see you.”

“What happened Charlie? Nola said while stepping inside the hotel room and removing her coat. She tossed her coat carelessly on the corner of the bed and turned toward Charlie. Charlie observed that Nola was wearing dark jeans and a green rope knit turtleneck- her hair was not in a pony-tail and she had traces of dark eyeliner surrounding her light green irises.

“How are you Nola?”

“Tired, Charlie.”

“Yea, me too. It’s been a hell of a long week.”

After an awkward pause Charlie nervously crossed his arms and gently rocked in place on the heels of his bare feet while looking down at his Hobbit like hairy toes and nodding.

“Did you have me drive a across town in the middle of the night to make small talk Charlie?”

“Of course not! Do you want a beer?”

“Charlie, what happened?”

“Well, it’s a complicated matter. Christie kicked me out because she doesn’t like my novel.”

“You finished it!”

“Yea, today actually.”

“Wait, she kicked you out of the house because she didn’t like your book?”

“Well, there is more to it than that- I guess the girl in the story shares somewhat of a likeness to you.”

“Really? Like how?”

“I think that Christie was reading far too much into it myself. If you look hard enough at anything you’re going to find what you want.”

“How is she like me?”

Charlie sat down at the edge of the bed and kept his eyes trained to the floor. “Well, I don’t know, I guess a little in the personality, slight idiosyncrasies, eyes, lips, hair...scent,” Charlie’s voice trailing off at the end.

Nola sat down between Charlie and her coat, placing them just close enough for their legs to graze each other.

“And Christies pissed?”

“Pissed is an understatement.”

“Why would she think that there is anything going on between us?”

Charlie felt a jolt of pressure in his gut and an actual pain in his heart.

“I don’t...I don’t know,” he stammered.

“Can I ask you who the character is?”

“Yea, she a-,” Charlie was still trying to compose himself after the previous ego blow. “She’s a young prostitute.”

“You made me a prostitute?!?”

“Do you want a beer?”

“Let me get this straight, you based a character off of me and you made her a prostitute?”

“Allegedly! And it sounds awful when you say it like that. She was forced into prostitution and the main character rescues her from it. I’m going to grab a beer, you’re sure?”

Nola responded with a simple head shake. Charlie cracked open his fifth silver bullet and took a long first drink. He seated himself apart from Nola in a chair next to the hotel room table. He sat looking down and awaited Nola’s comforting voice. There was a long silence as Charlie went for another gulp.

Nola sat at the edge of the bed and was feeling cold, staring forward into the blank television screen she reached for her white winter Parka. Fearing that Charlie would soon be losing her he quickly piped-up.

“I’m sure.....I’m sure that you *\*cough\** I’m sure that you have heard this before, but you have the most engaging eyes.”

Charlie’s compliment was greeted by a smile.

“Charlie, I shouldn’t be here.”

“Nola, you are exactly where you should be.”

“If Christie found out that I was alone in a hotel room with you.”

“Forget about Christie, Nola.”

“I shouldn’t have come over.”

“Don’t say that, I’m really glad that you’re here with me.”

“Charlie you need to patch things up with Christie immediately.”

“You know....screw Christie! I’m through with her! I never felt anything with her. I feel that with you!”

“So apparently Christie stepped on the wrong foot at the movie theater.”

“What?”

“Did Christie step on the wrong foot at the movie theater?” Nola repeated- her voice heightened.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“In your story that you told me that first night that we talked, you mentioned serendipity and how it began with a step on a foot and ended with marriage. Did your wife step on the wrong foot?”

“No,” answered Charlie. “That story was just an example. Christie and I met through her roommate Denise. She was dating my best friend and Christie was single at the time so Denise proposed that all of us go on a double date to the *Cheese Cake Factory*. There was no serendipity, it was pretty unremarkable actually.”

“Did you ever love her?”

“Perhaps at one time, it’s hard to say.”

“Either you did or you didn’t.”

“It’s not that easy, it’s not that cut and dry. You’re too naive to know this. You have your head filled up with Hollywood’s portrayal of love. Love isn’t 90 minutes. It’s years of being next to the same person, it’s daily drudgery, it’s a matter of endurance. It’s confusing, it’s fleeting. At times I believe it’s nonexistent. There is no one person for anyone. Love is finding the person that you are annoyed by the least. It sure as hell isn’t stepping on a stranger’s foot and falling in love for the rest of your lives!”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Call you what?”

“Naive, I’m not some kid that you are taking under your wing and teaching the ways of the world.”

“Nola, I not meaning to come off as condescending, it’s just that I’ve learned a thing or two in my years, things that you will one day learn.”

“I sure as hell hope not....I’m sorry.”

Charlie shrugged it off, knowing that it was true.

“I didn’t want to do this to you. I didn’t want to break up your marriage.”

“You didn’t, this marriage was broken long ago. We were simply going through the motions.”

“You will try to get back with Christie, right?”

“I don’t know.”

“But your daughters Charlie.”

“I love my daughters, I do. But I also have a life to live.”

“Do you realize how selfish you sound? Those girls love you and look up to you.”

“They don’t look up to me anymore. They see a failure of a father! My youngest doesn’t even know that I was once successful. She just sees me as a guy who slums about the house.

The sound of the newborn wailing is now clear-as-day through the thin hotel room walls. Charlie suddenly feels like doing the same.

“I don’t think I should be a writer.” Charlie glared down, “I don’t believe I deserved the initial success that I received. I mean...it’s funny- I used to love to write. When I was a teenager I spent hours on end penned up in my room writing. Short stories, novelettes, my pen couldn’t keep up with the thoughts in my head. They just came pouring out, stories about characters that I came up with....the things that they did - they were my family to me, they were my friends. I gave them back stories- jobs, children sometimes, wives, husbands, neighbors. They had real emotions, real feelings, they were living and breathing on those pages! I lived those lives with them, I was there. I felt the happiness and pain in the situations that I created. Some of my greatest memories happened at places I’ve never been to with people that don’t exist.”

Charlie stood up from the bed and grabbed beer that had a sweat of condensation, opened it and took a long satisfying drink.

“The past couple of years have been difficult. I’m at a place in my life that I don’t like and I don’t know how I got here. I had this revelation that I can no longer be the lone drifter in my books- traveling from town to town. Not held down by a job, mortgage, car payments, furnace repairs.....a wife and kids.”

Charlie sat down and leaned back on his new found throne of failure, a *Super 8* motel low back wooden chair with floral print seat padding. He rested his hinged arm on the circular white pine table top and ran his hand across the top of his thin head of hair.

“This lifestyle isn’t healthy. I shouldn’t be a writer. It’s not the glamorous pipedream that I envisioned. It’s sleeping in. It’s wandering around an empty house in your pajamas for the majority of the day, watching endless hours of television and only break for the daily internet porn viewing. There have been some days that I have to quickly change out of my pajamas because I know that the girls will be home from school soon.” Charlie said with a laugh.

Charlie paused looking in the middle distance and said in a slight chuckle, “You know, I think.....I think I wanted to be a writer more than I wanted to write. And after living the lifestyle for years now....I don’t want to do either.”

“If you’re not happy Charlie then find something else. Find something that you like and do it. Life is too short to be miserable.”

“You’re right,” agreed Charlie.

Charlie informally abdicated his newfound throne of failure, leaving his aluminum cylindrical scepter on the table, he stood before Nola. With his courage floating atop of five quickly consumed beers he leaned in for a kiss. His partially opened lips were cold and moist from the chilled beer can lip. They mashed against Nola’s warm lips in a proximate three-lipped ménage a trios, although Nola’s lips were sealed like a nuclear submarine hatch. She pulled her head away from Charlie’s mouth that continued to advance further until he realized that he was about to gently tongue air.

Charlie opened his eyes to see Nola’s shocked and chagrin mug.

“I- I’m so sorry,” said Nola. “I realize that you’re weak right now because Christie kicked you out but I can’t go along with this Charlie.”

“I know, its fine.....this is the point that we are at!”

“There is no point that we’re at Charlie. I really shouldn’t be here. I need to leave.”

“Nola,” Charlie paused, staring deep into the very eyes that provoked his thoughts of infidelity and incited his thoughts of inspiration. “Life’s too short.”

Charlie sat next to Nola leaned in once more- mouths meet to kiss. Slow and steady they continued. Charlie placed his hand on Nola’s limp shoulder and began to massage it. He pulled his face away from Nola’s and looked over at her familiar cascading hair. With his index finger he guided the brunette locks behind her ear. Nola continued to look down.

Charlie slid his hands under Nola’s green knit sweater. He felt not only the shape, but the firm feel of an hour glass, the shape of a woman who was unfamiliar to what he was accustomed to. Soft skin blanketing sinewy flexes that abounded like an ocean tide, Charlie felt like he was about to tap into the fountain of youth.

Nola knelt upon the thick comforter. She peeled her sweater off getting the collar slightly caught under her chin. Charlie looked down to admire the same green bra that he had admired once before. He stood up from the bed and shut off the lights before he began to disrobe. Keeping his eyes solely trained on Nola and not himself.

Charlie displayed the body that was he and Christie’s dark secret, revealing his soft, white, pudgy abdomen, skinny arms that had the texture of a plucked chicken and a chest that was concealed by a cascade of downtrodden, bristly dark hair.

After feeling the now chilly room temperature on the sensitive areas of his body he joined Nola back atop of the bed and kissed her once again.

With shaky hands Charlie attempted to untie Nola’s o-ring belt, but to no avail. Nola patiently gazed into the top of Charlie’s thin haired head as he fumbled and soon yanked at the impossible belt. Charlie suddenly felt like he was attempting to disrobe the quarterback from his middle school flag football team. He never understood how to tie and untie those belts.



Without a word spoken Nola placed soft warm hands on top of Charlie's and gently pushed them away. Then with Houdini like finger work she untied the belt and proceeded to push her *Levi's* down to her bent knees.

In the reflection of the dark blank television screen there was the tentative embrace of separate souls. Their pale bodies seemingly flickered like two candle flames in the dim abstract, vacant black void.

Shallow breaths, the warm press of flesh, breathy light moans, light touching sensations that send firecracker synapses in the mind. Fleeting passions that will soon be released- left to float and evaporate amongst the ethers.

The exchange was intuitive, instinctive, inborn....and brief.

Charlie rolled off of Nola and onto the now very cold comforter. Juxtaposed they lay on top of the covers. Charlie in his refractory period now noticed his perceptively disgusting surroundings. The coffee stained duvet, the stale cigar scent in the room and his recent sexual partner. She was no longer the portrait of perfection that he had thought. Physical foibles that were concealed by clothing are apparent and real when you're vulnerable and naked. The *Venus de Milo* that he had imagined was flawed and human just like he. The hairline cracks in the statuesque veneer were now harrowing rifts. He didn't want to see that, he wished that he hadn't seen it all.

Nola sat up and put on her thong underwear bottoms. Charlie looked away. He just lied there and stared at the slits of light that penetrated the window blinds from the hotel sign.

Feeling ashamed himself, Charlie put on his underwear as well.

Silence filled the dark room as Charlie and Nola had a new found perspective that neither one of them appreciated. They laid there in their underwear lamenting that cooler heads didn't prevailed.

## **Part 9: STRANGE BED FELLOWS**

That night Charlie and Nola shared a bed, not so much as lovers but as friends. The past placed quickly behind them they slid beneath the covers and soon after Charlie broke the frigid ice. An abstinence of eye contact and yawns accompanied their conversation until they were both speaking with labored whispers with both eyes closed. The quiet pauses between words began to lengthen until no other words were spoken and they both drifted off to sleep. If you were to ask either of them what they discussed they wouldn't be able to tell you. Neither one of them would be able to remember.

The sun rose in the morning and Charlie awoke from a dreamless sleep. He was immediately greeted by Nola's face. He studied her rhythmic unobstructed breathing

through her pursed lips. He observed her lying next to him in the bed and wondered what could have been.

Charlie had to pee, but didn't want to wake Nola with a loud waterfall like splashing noise echoing through the bathroom's hollow core door, but he really had to go. Charlie got out of bed and noticed that the hotel room was unrecognizable.

His eyes flashed open this time to reality to find disturbed sheets and dog-eared duvet and no Nola. He looked on the dresser and table to see if she had left a note before she left. He checked his cell phone for messages- nothing.

Charlie began to wonder if Nola was ever there in his hotel room or if it was entirely a dream like when he first awoke. After surveying the room he remembered all too well that it was not a dream, and the disappointing events of the previous night were all too real. The feelings he had from the previous night came flooding to the front of his mind. He had not only awakened from sleep, but also to the thought that perhaps what could have been never was.

## **Part 10: MEET UP IN AISLE 12**

Under florescent lighting Charlie is crouched in-front of the canned tuna section at the grocery store. He holds in his hands a can of tuna packed in water and a can of tuna packed in oil. He wonders to himself which one sounds less unappetizing.

"Charlie?" a voice over his shoulder asks.

Charlie craned his head and saw Nola standing above him.

"Nola!" he exclaimed while standing. He reached his arms upward for a possible hug- Nola not expecting it jolted forward slightly and reciprocated his warm sign of affection.

Standing behind Nola was a man in his late twenties. He wore a sheer clothed t-shirt that appeared to be at least one size too small and featured a Rolling Stones concert tour that he was far too young to have been born let alone attended. He sported jeans that were strategically tattered and a baseball cap covering his dark mop of hair with a well-creased brim pulled down just above his eyebrows.

"Benjamin could you pick up a twelve pack of Coke?"

The Abercrombie model stepped away from the shopping cart that he was apathetically pushing behind her and with a broad shouldered swagger he left Nola and Charlie to themselves.

"What have you been up to Charlie?"

"Well, I've been wondering whether to get cold meat or tuna for my sandwiches."

"No," giggled Nola "What have you been up to all this time, it's been so long. I keep looking for your new book but I haven't been able to find it."

"You won't, my publishing editor passed on it. I mean to be fair he was never a fan of my work but this one in particular he definitely hated. He said that this book wasn't the least bit marketable. As he put it, "it dripped with catharsis". He recommended that I go

to a marriage councilor and try a different book from scratch; he even proposed resurrecting my original character Henry McCoy from the grave, so to speak. Or hell he might have been suggesting that I literally bring Henry McCoy back from the grave for a zombie cowboy novel. I don't know. Who cares the guys a schmuck."

"I'm sorry to hear that Charlie."

"I peddled it to a few other publishers but didn't receive any bites. So it sits on my shelf for now."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I did do something. I'm taking a hiatus from writing and re-joining the nine to five working world, so to speak. I'm the night security at the Aluminum Wire factory."

Charlie opened his nylon navy blue jacket, puffed out his chest and proudly revealed a sown on cloth badge and laminated identification card that was clipped to his shirt pocket. "It's a decent job with a steady paycheck which is nice. It also gives me a lot of time to think."

"I'm glad to hear it Charlie. Um, how are Christie and the kids?"

"Fine. Christie let me back in with my tail between my legs. The girls were none the wiser, for a while they were asking where you were and Christie just told them that you had gotten a different job watching other kids."

"Oh...I suppose. I'm really glad to see you back on your feet Charlie."

"Me too, I see my girls more now than I ever did before. I watch them in the evenings after school until my shift starts. So how have you been?"

"Good, I graduate this spring and I'm already offered a position at the *Rockford Star Newspaper* where I've been interning. I moved in with Benjamin six months ago and he's been great, really supportive."

"You don't say. That's great Nola." Charlie's heart sank when it was revealed that she had moved on and was now living with a man. It sank only slightly though. With so much time spent apart it seemed that Nola no longer had a stranglehold on Charlie's emotions.

"You'll never guess how we met," Nola continued, "I accidentally hit him with my car!"

"You hit him with your car?"

"Well, clipped him with my car. It was snowing and I turned down a side street and he was at a red light standing next to his car slapping the ice off of his windshield wipers. It was snowing pretty hard and I didn't see him and I clipped him with my front end as I was turning past him."

"Did you hurt him?"

"He said that he was fine, he told me a while later that his hip was bruised up but he played it tough that night. I felt horrible and told him that I'd take him to a hospital, he said that he was fine and told me to forget about it. I felt awful so I offered to take him

out to dinner, he accepted and we've been seeing each other ever since! Serendipity! Right Charlie?"

"Yea...exactly," Charlie said in a breathy mumble while neurotically rubbing the back of his neck.

"Hey babe," said a voice behind Nola. "They didn't have any no-calorie so I had to get diet."

"That's fine. Benjamin, this is Charlie I used to watch his daughters."

"Charlie is it? Good to meet you."

Their hands joined on either side of Nola and met directly beside her. Benjamin's athletic build and noticeably sizable forearms caused Charlie's shoulders to melt as he lackadaisically shook his hand and wondered why Nola wouldn't have mentioned him to Benjamin before.

"Well, I suppose we ought to get going, it was really nice to see you. Say hi to-," Nola caught herself, "It was really great to run into you Charlie, take care."

"You too Nola."

Nola smiled and nodded her head while she and Benjamin walked away. He wrapped his left forearm of Popeye proportions around her shoulders. Charlie stood staring at the two of them as they strolled away, hoping that she may give a glance back at him before she turned the corner and was out of his sight and out of his life once again. She didn't turn back- she instead was looking at Benjamin with her freckled nose cutely crinkled with a chuckled laugh at whatever he mumbled.

They walked away, passing an assortment of canned fruits and vegetables. He reminisced of the morning that they had together, though try as he might, he reminded himself that she was never there. Her dissipating essence and a lucid image of her serene face were his only companion that morning. He chose to remember the morning, not the night- he chose the dream over reality. With a wistful grin he wondered once again what could have been.

Just as Benjamin and Nola were about round the corner he noticed that Nola was wearing a pair of pink sweat pants that had the word *Angel* printed in white vinyl on the butt. Charlie looked down and chuckled to himself.

Charlie sucked in a deep breath of recycled air, lifted his leather belt and proudly puffed out his chest that displayed his belt. He looked up to the tiled ceiling before he focused on the laminate path that lay before him. With a wide swagger he set off to the sunset- the flickering florescent bulb of the cold meat deli counter.