

Charlie

The hamburg was black—thanks to the pinewood—yet still pink and raw on the inside. But I was done waiting, itching to take a swim and wash away a ten hour drive. Using extra ketchup, I ate it quickly. I raised the grate and left the other burger over the fire. Grabbing a towel, I hurried barefoot down a little dirt path that led to the lake, or reservoir really, the big draw in this hot and remote part of Nebraska.

There wasn't any beach. Large boulders lined the shore, and off to the right stood a small patch of reeds. I eased into the water, and once clear of the rocks, stood on sand coated by a thin layer of ooze. I waded out up to my chest and slowly waved my arms along the surface. At six-thirty the sun still packed heat, and except for a few waterlogged teens frolicking nearby, it was very still. I floated on my back, smelling the cool, clean water and the scent of sagebrush. My mind idled for a time and then a nagging thought arose—I should write something in my journal. But write what? I left the lake and headed back up the narrow path.

She never saw me coming, my approach screened by willow scrub, but as I emerged into camp our eyes met and she made a little gasp. She flung the burger back onto the grill and

ran.

I yelled “hey” and chased her onto the campground road. The pack she wore slowed her escape, but in any case I easily caught her arm. She spun sideways and the plastic bag she held ripped, scattering cans and snacks to the ground. She’d been in the back of my truck.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I said. “I’m not mad, you’re just hungry.”

“Sorry, I just needed some food.”

“Ever think of asking?” I let go of her arm.

“I don’t beg.”

I laughed. “A thief with principals—that’s good. Anyhow, come on back. I’ll fix that burger up proper and make some rice for you. We’ve all got to eat, right?” Her lips twitched and then she stared at the mess on the ground.

“We better get this stuff off the road,” I said, and she nodded. I cradled my arms and without a word she carefully stacked the items against my chest.

I built up the fire to reheat her burger and melt cheese on it, then started some quick rice. I got a bun out to toast on the grill. Opening my cooler, I handed her a Pepsi.

“Thanks,” she said, plopping down on the picnic table bench. I stood a few feet away, and could tell she’d been camping out awhile. After rolling the can down the front of her

neck, she popped it open, took a long slug, then burped. “Oh sorry,” she said with a quick laugh. “Guess I was dried out. Had a bad day—nothing to eat ’til now. You surprised me—getting caught like that—first time actually. Just bad timing or being careless is all.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really.”

She shook her head with a dismissive grunt and removed her ball cap, then ran her fingers through a thick mane of chestnut colored hair. Her sundress, stained and threadbare, sported a faded flower pattern. First time I really noticed her features—she was young, a teenager perhaps, and her face was striking. High cheekbones, dappled in freckles, framed a strong nose, and with her thick brows and intense, green eyes, she reminded me of one of those Appalachian beauties I once taught in the hills of southern Ohio.

“You’re kind of dirty,” I said. Her eyes flashed into mine.

“That’s not very nice. Look buster, whatever your name is, it’s been hot and humid, then hot and dusty, and I don’t—”

“You stink too,” I added.

She scowled, braced herself against the table, then kicked me. My shin felt the wallop of her hiking boot and I jumped back.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I said, grinning. “I’m just teasing

you. My name is Jack by the way.”

“As in jackass?”

“All right, we’re even now.”

“Hardly.”

“What’s your name?” She didn’t answer, but sat glaring at me, her arms folded tightly. I smiled, shook my head and turned away. I gathered her food on a plastic plate and handed it to her. “Please accept this as a peace offering.”

She unfolded her arms and took the plate. I gave her another Pepsi and decided to leave her alone. “I’ll just be Hoovering around camp getting chores done. Let me know if you need anything.” She nodded and slowly picked up the hamburger. As I worked I would glance her way and find her eyes always upon me, watching. She spoke only after she finished eating.

“My name’s Charlie.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Charlie,” I said with a slight nod. “I hope you found the meal prepared to your liking.”

She tilted her head with a look of disgust. “That hamburger sucked.”

I choked back a laugh. “You sure wolfed it down quick.”

“Yeah well, I haven’t eaten much last couple of days. And sorry if my smell offends you—it’s mostly just smoke on my clothes is all, and—like I was about to say—I always try to eat

before I get to bathing. Sometimes I don't get neither, but this place has a nice lake."

"Charlie, what brings you out here, traveling alone without—I'm guessing now—a budget?"

She smiled for the first time. "Well it's true I don't have much, but I'm used to it, I survive. I travel light—hopping trains or bumming rides, crashing in churches, tool sheds—wherever. I'm not a kid either, if that's what you're thinking—I've sung in bars, got in fights—I will defend myself. Not that I'm proud of all I done, but neither has life handed me a full deck with white tablecloth and flowers."

I was incredulous at what came out of her mouth, mixed metaphors and all. "So, are you headed anywhere in particular?"

"West coast."

"I see. And where are you from?"

"Not from here, that's for sure. Hey," she said, standing, "how's the water? I could really use that swim now."

"Oh it's nice. Once you get past the rocks it's all flat and sandy."

She dug into her pack and pulled out a bikini. "Care to join me?"

"Yeah, sure—just let me straighten things up a bit and I'll be down."

“I watched you swimming,” she said, a sly smile forming on her lips. Before I could think of a response, she turned and strode away in the direction of the bathhouse.

I tried to concentrate but my attention was shot. I cleaned and put away the cooking utensils, stowed the food bins and cleared a space for my mat in the truck bed—as usual, but there was a pull in the air, as if I moved through a magnetic field. She was all I could think of. I hopped down out of the bed and got hold of her pack.

It was minimal—really a rucksack with a waterproof bivy and sleeping bag strapped underneath. There wasn’t any room for a tent and it would be dark soon—where would she sleep? I stowed the pack in the cab and was tempted to peek inside when I heard her call my name. I hurried down the path.

“Come on in,” she yelled, “the water’s great.”

She was already well offshore. Beyond her tiny face the sun floated above the horizon, its white heat reduced to a yellow ball. Wavelets broke the water into flashes of gold as swallows darted overhead, chasing insects. But looming in the northwest—smearred against the sunset like spilled ink—a storm cloud billowed high into the sky.

“Charlie,” I yelled, my hands cupped around my mouth, “don’t go any further—a storm’s coming in.”

“I’m not scared,” she shouted back.

I watched her splash around for a while and then do a leisurely backstroke—away from shore. I studied the sky and shook my head. The wind picked up, growing colder, and then I heard a low, growling rumble. I waded into the water and started swimming toward her, but when I got within twenty feet or so, she laughed and swam away. “Charlie. We should head back.”

“Don’t be a baby—it’ll miss us.”

But the thunderhead ballooned closer, swallowing the sun and turning the lake black and choppy. The birds vanished, leaving us to face the storm alone. She paused, turning toward me some thirty yards away, then disappeared in a blinding flash of light. A terrific crack of thunder shook the water and she screamed. I saw her struggle to reach me as I swam with all my strength—and then she stopped.

“Jack!”

She was going under. As soon as I reached her I grabbed her neck under the jaws and held her head up, then kicked my legs with everything I had. I drew her face close to mine—her lips quivered and her hands gripped my wrists tight.

“Charlie, listen. You have to let go and swim.” She shook her head, terrified, but we were both going to drown. I broke her grip, pushed her back and yelled, “Swim Charlie, swim. I won’t leave you.” There was nothing more I could do but stay

beside her as she swam, then help her when she paused to catch her breath.

We finally found ourselves stumbling over the rocks and then onto the path. We toweled off in the bed of the pickup and then I wrapped her in my sleeping bag. She handed me the two pieces of her bikini and I hung them up. Gusts of wind rocked the truck and heavy rain mixed with hail pounded the aluminum camper top. The noise was deafening.

“Are you all right now?” I shouted.

She drew her mouth close to my ear and said, “Hold me.”

I gathered her bundled form against my blanket and rubbed her back. Shortly thereafter I could tell by her breathing she had fallen into a deep sleep, and as the cold rain beat down in the darkness, I felt the warmth of her body begin to flow inside me.

* * *

A Harley thumped through its gears on a nearby road, and then a blue jay squawked. I opened my eyes—the campground was bathed in sunlight—my muscles felt like petrified wood. I glanced at the window above the tailgate—the two pieces of her bikini hung there, still damp, fogging the glass. She was asleep, curled on her side, her breathing just audible. I heard a groan as she shifted her body inside the sleeping bag, and then a tangled mass of dark hair popped up. Resting on her elbows, she smiled, her sleepy eyes half-moon slits. She was

disturbingly beautiful.

“Are you going to sleep all morning?” I asked. “You should have made breakfast by now.”

“I can make you something, but you need to show me where everything is.”

“How about we get dressed and make breakfast together?”

Her eyes opened wide, flashing sea green. “How about we make breakfast first, then get dressed together?”

Speechless, I stared at her.

She tilted her head back and giggled. “You’re not awake yet, are you?”

I smiled, mesmerized, watching her face and waiting for the next surprise.

“Another funny thing—I’ve got no clothes left.”

“What?”

“Nothing clean anyway. They’re all pretty grungy.”

“Well don’t worry about that. I’ve got some sweats you can borrow, then we can wash everything in town.”

She frowned. “Jack, how come you’re so kind to me?”

I turned away for a moment, unsure of what to say. “You’re a very charming young lady, and I like you.” It was such a tepid response—I really wanted to touch her. I swept the hair from her forehead, then softly rubbed her eyebrow with my thumb.

“And you have the most beautiful eyes.”

She averted her gaze and remained silent.

“Charlie? Hey.” I gently turned her face toward me. A tear ran down her cheek.

“People haven’t been very nice to me. But you fed me, saved my life, didn’t rape me last night—though I knew you wouldn’t, I knew you were different.”

Before I could respond she rose, and her breasts lifted from the bedding along with the scent of her body, and then she laid herself across my chest. Her hands grasped my shoulders and her soft hair fell on my neck, her warm breath on my skin. Placing my hands on her silky back, I pressed her body against mine, felt her heart beat, and knew this wasn’t a dream.

* * *

Charlie was so eager to please, to make the most perfect omelet, that she burnt one side a little and started to fret. I hugged her and told her that’s just the way I like it. She smiled, watching me eat, and I could feel her joy flowing inside me. She made and ate her own omelet, and then we started the dishes. It was already nine o’clock, and I would have been on the road by now, going seventy, chasing after my next destination.

Blackbirds sang from the reeds in liquid notes, and the cool air—dustless after the storm—was perfumed with the scent of damp earth. A man could not expect a more perfect morning,

and yet it was made a thousand times lovelier with her presence. She leaned over the soapy dishes in my sweats, barefoot, her hair falling in tangled strands, a smudge of soot on her forehead. I had to know more about her.

I touched her shoulder and she looked up, expectant. “Hey, can we sit and talk awhile?”

“Sure,” she replied, handing me the last plate to rinse, and then we left them to dry. I poured more coffee and had her sit across from me at our picnic table.

She spoke first. “I’m sorry Jack, about yesterday, in the lake. I didn’t know what came over me. That lightning scared the hell out of me, then a wave hit and I swallowed water. But you came and got me, you crazy man—that’s why I lost it in the truck—you didn’t hit me or even get mad after I disobeyed you.”

“Hit you?” I said, incredulous. “How could anyone possibly hit you?”

“Oh, I’ve gotten my share of beatings in the past. But that’s all behind me now.”

“Who beat you, if that’s not too personal?”

“It really doesn’t matter—it’s water over the bridge, under the dam—whatever. I concentrate on the present, mostly just trying to survive, save up enough money for school in California, maybe take up music.”

“Yeah, that’s right, you mentioned singing in a bar. Tell me about your singing career.”

“Oh, it ain’t much of a career yet. I sang a few songs with my guitar at an open mike—some bar back in Joliet. I’ll tell you—I was scared, and it wasn’t pretty, but I got through it. The owner dude took me into his office afterward, was real friendly, said I sang great. He gave me fifty bucks to help me out, but what he really wanted was my body. I left without the money.”

“How old are you, Charlie?”

“Oh, ah, twenty-three. But I’m very mature for my age.”

“Well I can see that. So are you from Joliet, is that your home?”

“Used to be, and different places in Illinois, but they say I was born in Georgia.”

“They say—you mean you’re not sure?” I must have sounded like a lawyer—she parted her lips slightly and looked away.

“Oh well, yeah—I was just a wee kid when we moved. Now tell me about yourself. What do you do for a living? Something exciting I bet.”

“No, not really. I’m forty-two years old, divorced, no children to care for except maybe my high school students back in Ohio. I teach English, some drama classes, coach wrestling,

volleyball occasionally. Some teachers like to paint houses over the summer, but I always travel. I try to get up into the mountains, do some hiking, some thinking. I actually try to write stories during my trips—did get a few published.”

“Oh, oh,” she said as she threw her arms out. “I knew it. I write too. I get the words for my songs while I’m traveling. Thing is, the more shit I step into, the better the songs. I must have a lot of good songs, Jack.” She pinched her eyes shut and rolled her head, laughing—enjoying her own humor even as it revealed a sad truth. She reached over and squeezed my arm, then slid her hand down to clasp mine—her eyes now serious, intense, seductive.

“I like being with you Jack, you make me feel special. Could you show me your mountains? I never been, but I’d love to see them. I wouldn’t cause you no trouble—I could cook for you?”

She held my hand tight and waited, but I knew there was no other answer—I was trapped within her eyes, and nothing mattered now except being with her. “I’d love to, Charlie.”

She jumped up and ran around the table, a wide grin on her face, then circled her hand for me to turn around. When I did she sat on my lap, put her arms around me and hugged me tight.

“Thanks, Jack. I’m glad I left Joliet—all choked up with walls and rules and stinking hypocrites. Out here I can breathe

fresh air, look out and see forever. And now I've met you."

Her happiness was so pure, so spontaneous—and squirming in my lap, her fingers spread-eagled against my chest—I wasn't going to wait any longer. I put my hands up underneath her hair and then rubbed her temples gently with my thumbs. Her mouth parted slightly and then she closed her eyes. I leaned in and as soon as our lips touched we leapt at each other—hard and rough—forgetting where we were, forgetting time, forgetting everything.

* * *

"I'm going to make you something," Charlie said. Her foot was jammed against the dash, and there was a key ring around her big toe from which she knotted strands of thick thread. She sat close to me on the Ford's bench seat, trying to remain steady as the truck rattled over cattle guards and one lane bridges, into grassy swales, and then up and down a section of convoluted hills—the land bleached pale by the summer's relentless heat.

Like so much litter strewn along the road, we started passing house trailers with ATVs, pickups and horse pens, Quonset huts, then an irrigation business with racks of stacked pipe—the usual signs that a village lay ahead. Soon we were on the main drag, surrounded by one and two story brick businesses with small, clapboarded houses spread down the side streets. We looked for a grocery store with a laundromat

attached, and found one at the other end of town. I was anxious to buy her anything she desired for our feast this afternoon. She didn't want to eat at a diner, which I offered, but for us to prepare our food together and take it to the lake for a picnic.

Handing her some quarters for the machines, I told her to stay put while I got some gas, and then we'd buy the food when I returned. I could have bought the gas anytime, but I wanted to go to the western wear store we passed earlier. Once there I found a raincoat with its own pouch, a warm jacket, and a white, flat brimmed cowboy hat. It took longer than planned, and when I returned she was sitting on the curb in the shade of an awning. She ran over and threw her arms around me, pressing her head tight against my chest.

"I got scared," she said, looking up into my eyes, "I thought you might have left without me."

I kissed her forehead and realized her tough girl demeanor was an act, reserved for strangers. I told her I was sorry for the delay—that I got her some things she'd need for the mountains. She released her embrace and tried on the new clothes. By some miracle they all fit. We hurried through the Piggy-Wiggly, buying our food, ice and two dozen wine coolers. We entered the deserted laundromat and she pulled the clothes from the dryer and stuffed them into her pack. She slipped into her bikini while I guarded the door, and then we left, anxious to return to

our lake.

* * *

Our bodies craved food, and after a quick swim, hunger became our immediate concern. Still wet, we raced each other back to camp. I bumped her from the path as she passed, but fell behind, laughing—she was so earnest to beat me. Reaching my truck, she turned and flicked her tongue out. She didn't flinch as I walked into her—both of us huffing, staring each other down—her eyes defiant. I leaned in, she opened her mouth and then I pinned her tongue back with mine. Everything we did was physical, sensual—all other concerns irrelevant, overridden by a million years of evolutionary survival—eat, sleep, protect, flirt. The air was charged, the voltage building.

Charlie cracked the cap off her third wine cooler, and our otherwise efficient teamwork in cooking was offset by our frequent need to stop and kiss. And I teased her, told her she would have to eat anything that got burnt. For that she reached in and pinched my side as hard as she could.

“I'm going to do that every time you say something stupid,” she said, “then you'll wise up.”

We carried the pork chops, potatoes and corncobs, wrapped in foil, over to our picnic blanket. It was laid out by my cooler near a small willow, overlooking the lake. The campground was nearly deserted and the park was ours. I watched her eat, filling

her belly, and a warmth came over me from within, and when she laughed my insides became molten and without form.

After we finished our feast, Charlie worked on my key ring, wearing her cowboy hat as shade, and I scribbled onto my notepad. I lost track of time for a spell, then noticed she had brought out a notepad of her own.

“Let me see your lyrics,” I said.

“I beg your pardon.”

I grabbed her wrist and pulled the notebook closer. “How about this one, can you sing this one for me?”

“I don’t know, I don’t have a guitar. You’ll make fun of me.”

“No I won’t. Please? You sang for those idiots at the bar?”

“All right, I’ll sing this refrain.” She sat up, cleared her throat with a swig of wine, then looked straight over the lake.

“He said he loved me, he said he’d be true,
But yesterday I saw him
Kissing somebody new.
Now my heart is broken and
I don’t know what to do—
He said he loved me, he said he’d be true.”

I was blown away, never expecting such a beautiful voice.

“Charlie, thank you. That was lovely—you are so talented. We need to get you a good agent.”

She remained silent, staring at the lake. The sun was turning her skin pink.

“Charlie?”

“It’s so nice—the lake with this big sky and all the birds. So beautiful it hurts because I can’t get it into my heart. Sometimes I hurt so bad, and there’s no one to talk to.” Her eyes puddled with tears.

“Hey, you can always talk to me, about anything. Look, we’re both real hot, let’s cool off in the water—you’ll feel better.”

We stepped onto the rocks holding hands, balancing each other. White pelicans banked low over the glittering surface, and insects droned from the shore. Soon we were splashing about like children.

“Look what I caught, Jack.” She held up a palm sized painted turtle, its legs still kicking. “He carries his home on his back, just like you and your truck.” Holding it close to her face, she studied the creature a few seconds before slipping him back in the water. “I betcha he swims faster than you.” She cupped her hand, drew it back, and shot water at my face, laughing.

She screamed and turned away as I dove toward her. Staying underwater to increase the tension, I waited for her

splashing to stop. “Jack,” she shouted. I grabbed her ankle, then yanked her leg up and used it to push her off balance. I stood up and she thrashed about on her back, trying to break free.

“You cheated,” she yelled.

I towed her around until I figured she was tuckered out, then let go to reach for her waist. She twisted onto her stomach and kicked me as she swam off. I caught her ankle again and drew her in, then reached around from behind and pinned her arms back. “Stop struggling—you lost.”

“Let me go,” she screamed, then popped her head back, hitting my chin. Damn but it hurt.

I released her and she drifted away like a wounded fish. I tasted blood inside my mouth. “Charlie?” I waded over and hugged her—beads of water drained from her hair and rolled down her shoulder blades. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“Sorry, I didn’t expect it, it just came over me. It’s not your fault.”

“Trust me, Charlie, I could never hurt you. You’re such a sweet, funny, beautiful girl, and I—I think I’m falling for you.” Her eyelashes flickered as her face tilted up toward mine.

“But I’m afraid.”

“What are you afraid of? Are you afraid of me?”

She nodded. “What if this doesn’t work out, like maybe I won’t be good enough, or I’ll do something wrong and you’ll

tire of me, or who knows for whatever reason and I— ”

I put my finger across her mouth and turned her around, placing my arms about her waist. “I promise not to hurt you. Are you afraid now?”

“No.”

“Then just relax.”

I kissed her temple, her earlobes, and then her soft lips. Her belly tensed as my fingers swept past her navel and into her flimsy bikini bottom. She moaned, arching her head back hard against my shoulder. I whispered in her ear, “I want you.” Her body sank against me and I held her tight. “Come with me into the truck.”

I took her hand and helped her over the rocks and onto the hot, crinkly grass. Within the truck bed the trapped heat enveloped our damp, cool bodies. We knelt, facing each other. She sat erect, hugging her waist, her eyes following my every move as I retrieved a tube from my first aid kit. I got behind her and unclasped her bikini top. The straps popped away, leaving a pale mark against her sunburn. She flinched as I touched the cool cream to her skin. She was tense, but as I spread the soothing liquid over her back, I felt her muscles relax. My head resting on her shoulder, I slid my slippery hands down her forearms to her wrists, then back again. I held her upper arms, burying my nose under her damp hair and into the nape of her

neck. I began mouthing the fuzz there and she squirmed against my grip. The smell and taste of her was intoxicating—like a sticky web, meant to entice, then entrap, for purposes ancient and beyond all control. I was ravenous for her.

I muscled her onto her back and flung her top out of the way. I drew the bottom piece along her legs until it cleared her toes. Stripping off my shorts, I laid over her for a kiss, but she was breathing so fast I thought she might hyperventilate.

“Charlie, I won’t hurt you.”

“Please go easy,” she said.

I felt ashamed of my lust, but my heart ached for her even more. I backed off and slowed down, kissing and caressing every part of her body, and when she came the third time, I slid deep inside her.

We lay exhausted in the heat—the truck reeked of sex. Charlie leaned against my chest. “You felt nice. I didn’t know it could be like that. Aren’t you glad I spied your sorry looking hamburg? Leaving it out there all alone—how careless.”

“Yeah, but you got caught, remember?”

Her smile turned into a yawn. “Oh, I’m so sleepy—could I close my eyes a bit?”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

I pawed around looking for a sheet, found one, then covered her. I leaned over her head. “Can I wake you in an hour to

watch the sunset?” But she only moaned—already half asleep. I quietly shut the tailgate, then wandered in a daze through the campground. Arriving on a bluff overlooking the lake, I watched the sky blush orange, then pink, and then the sun dipped below the horizon’s dark, distant hills.

* * *

The white Crown Victoria rolled up from behind on the campground road, then slowly passed me. The blue letters on the hood read STATE PATROL, a Nebraska police officer at the wheel. I had just finished a shower in the bathhouse, and Charlie was in camp doing breakfast dishes. He drove by me a short distance, then stopped.

“How you doing this fine morning, officer?”

“Pretty good. Yourself?”

“Doing great. Can I help you with anything?”

“Yeah. We’re looking for somebody—a young woman, twenty years old or thereabouts—involved in an assault and robbery. A guy said he picked her up hitchhiking—oh, about four days ago. Well, he got sliced up pretty good—said she swiped his wallet out of his glove compartment, took off. Some kid found it yesterday, minus the cash, over in a campground at Sherman Reservoir. She’s about five nine, medium build, dark hair past her shoulders, baseball cap, green eyes. Told him her name is Charlene. You seen anybody like that?”

“Uh, no officer—just me and my daughter camping, not many other people around.” I felt cold, started to shiver.

“Here’s a card with our number. Appreciate giving us a call if you see her. We got the park rangers on the lookout as well.”

“Yeah, sure officer, I will.”

His slow, methodical route would take him right by her. I left the road and bee-lined it back toward camp, trying not to look hurried. By the time his car got around a slight knoll and some cottonwoods, he would see her.

“Charlie.” My mind felt scrambled. “Get in the back of the truck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just get in and stay down until I say otherwise.” I helped her up and closed the tailgate. I nodded to the officer as he drove past.

I yanked her rucksack from the picnic table, unzipped the back pocket and dumped the contents out. I found her ID:

State of Illinois, Legally Issued Identification for:
Charlene Tamara Mahoney, female
DOB: 8/17/77 Issued 3/1/95
C/O St. Augustine’s Home For Indigent Children
Joliet, Illinois
Current guardian(s): None

She was nineteen years old, an orphan aged out of the

system.

“You can come out now. We need to talk.”

She sat on the tailgate in a pair of green shorts. Her long legs and bare feet hung suspended off the ground, her toenails now painted red.

“Why did you make me hide?”

“How old are you?”

“Jack, I told you.”

“Don’t lie to me, tell the truth.”

She averted her eyes, bit her lip, then looked back. “I’ll be twenty in another week.”

“What’s your full name?”

“Charlene Tamara Mahoney—sir.”

“Thank you. You know who just drove by? The State Police. Looking for a girl who knifed a guy, stole his wallet. You know anything about that?”

“No I don’t,” she said, punching out the words.

“Don’t lie Charlie, this is important.”

“He tried to rape me. I had to defend myself.”

“Then why did you take his wallet?”

“I needed the money—and he deserved to lose it,” she added, defiant.

“But don’t you understand? That implicates you. In the eyes of the law, by stealing that wallet, your side of the story

falls apart. You should have never taken it. They got your name, your description.”

“I’m sorry, pardon me, but I do what I can to survive.”

Then in my ignorance, in my selfish indignity that she betrayed my image of her and how life should be, I said something I knew would be hurtful. “Can’t you just work like the rest of us?”

Her hands leapt over her chest and she rubbed her arms, as if trying to back into a shell. Her defiance melted into tears. “Please don’t be mad at me. I wasn’t raised like you. People used me, they took from me my whole life and now you think I’m bad but I’m not. Sure I’ve stole some, and I got issues with anger, with men, but I’m trying—please don’t hate me.”

I dabbed her eyes with a dishtowel. “I don’t hate you, Charlie. I’m sorry I said that, it was thoughtless. You’re supposed to pinch me when I say something stupid.”

She didn’t smile, and the gravity of what she endured in her short life finally hit me. I hugged her, but she remained limp. I whispered in her ear, “Can you tell me what happened?”

She shook her head within my shoulder, and then I felt her squeeze into me, felt her shake as she began to sob. I held her and stroked her hair, but something had changed, as if a cold light had been cast into a beautiful dream. I brushed it aside—we had to get moving.

“Charlie look, we have to leave now, leave Nebraska. We’ll head to Wyoming, maybe to the Snowy Range, maybe into the Bighorns.”

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I drove northwest on a state road. We spoke a little about the mountains, but otherwise remained silent. I was thinking of my home, my career—the woman I was dating back in Ohio—and the vast difference in age and experience between myself and this young lady sitting beside me. I couldn’t imagine how much damage had been done to her innocence, how much she suffered alone, or the courage it took to try and escape her past. I cringed. I desperately wanted to regain the sweet spell she had over me. She kept asking about the mountains. Sensing something had changed, she would often reach for my hand, gazing at me while I drove. But she wouldn’t ask the question that must have burned inside her, and I was relieved.

Our road wandered through a desiccated, eroded plain and then into the Sand Hills. I drove fast, the route mostly deserted, but she had me stop alongside a massive sunflower field—she had never seen one before. She relieved herself within the stalks, and then wanted to kiss. I told her we had to keep moving.

We paused for lunch at a desolate rest stop that offered a table and some shade. Outside it had become hot and windy,

inside I was getting sick to my stomach—I could only eat a peach. She ate one as well, and we helped each other rinse our sticky hands with water. We moved on.

The road veered north, into the western corner of South Dakota. I was aiming to camp in the Black Hills. We slowed for a sign posted at thirty miles per hour—a village lay ahead. We soon rolled by several derelict houses. One had a washing machine out front, as if somebody tried to save it, but then changed their mind. At the main intersection the stores looked abandoned, and the brick bank was boarded up. There were stop signs for streets that didn't exist—they were filled with waving grass. Only a few houses had any signs of occupation—the holdouts of this ghost town. I turned onto a dirt street, still open but narrowed from encroaching weeds. There was a low, cinder block building—the local school, now deserted. I parked under the shade of some ragged cottonwoods and shut the engine down—the wind skidded dead leaves across the street.

“Are we camping here?” she asked. “It’s kind of spooky.”

I could barely look at her. “Charlie, I need to tell you something. Let’s sit over in that playground.”

I took her hand and we strode into the waving grass. We passed a metal slide that bore traces of red paint on its ladder, and adjacent a propane tank stood a swing-set made of telephone poles, chains and black rubber. I led her to a

whirligig. We sat on a weathered seat covered by initials, dates and a heart, all carved into the wood—declarations of love from children long gone. Blasts of hot wind shot through her hair, and she kept using her hand to sweep it from her face. She finally ended her delusional charade that everything was fine, and before I could speak she asked me, “You still love me, don’t you?”

“Charlie—I don’t think this is going to work out—I mean, we are so different in our ages and backgrounds, and you seem to be on your own path and all.” I sounded like a jerk, and I knew she would feel crushed and betrayed, but the groan of pain that came from her throat was sickening.

“Please don’t say that. I’ll fess up to what I done, I’ll go to jail if you want. And I can work, and I’m not like other girls my age—you said so too, remember? Don’t leave me Jack—please—I love you.”

She was begging, and now crying—rubbing her hands together between her knees—as if trying to rid herself of this latest disaster. I had to end it. “I’ll get your pack and your hat from the truck. You can sleep safe here, on a porch of one of these houses—there won’t be any cops or rangers around.”

I was shaking and my mouth tasted vile as I threw some twenties into her pack. When I returned her arm was draped around a rusty grab bar, her face buried within her shoulder.

“Charlie look, I’m real sorry, I just think—”

“Just go,” she said, barely looking up.

* * *

I stood several seconds as if frozen, then turned and left her there, slumped on the whirligig. Leaning into the wind, thick grass tugging at my feet, I trudged back to my truck. I entered the cab, shut the door and pulled the key from my pocket. I hesitated, listening to her faint sobs until a gust overran the schoolyard, hissing through the trees, sounding like rain. I started the engine and slowly drove away. Arriving at the main road, I turned right and headed north.

It felt like a mule had kicked me in the chest. I tried to think ahead—of the mysterious Black Hills, the majestic height of the Bighorns—but it all fell flat. I’ll get my safe, predictable life back, my mature respectability. Yes, it was the right thing to do. She was not my responsibility.

Far ahead, to the west of Custer, the sun vanished into an ominous, dark-blue mass. Another storm was approaching. Damn, of all nights. It was now five o’clock. What would she eat? Where would she sleep?

I decided to camp in Wind Cave National Park for the night. Dry lightning flickered, and about ten miles before the park I saw the face of the front arrive, blowing a brown cloud of dust before it. The bitter wind slammed into my truck,

knocking it sideways. I slowed to reach for a map in the glove compartment, and a strange object fell to the floor. It was the keychain Charlie made. The macramé netting had been folded over to form a pouch, and it contained a hard object. As I turned it over within my fingers, I discovered it was a turtle, carved from wood. I also grabbed a tiny, rolled piece of paper from the floor. In pencil she had written: *Dear Jack, hope the turtle brings you good luck. Thanks for caring about me. Love always, Charlie.*

I pulled into a campsite and sat in the cab. Wind driven rain swept in, rocking the Ford. After a two hour pummeling, the storm passed on and it became dead quiet. A hollow loneliness overwhelmed me as I stared out the windshield. I already missed her laughter, her exuberance, the feel of her silky skin. She had taken a chance on me and lost. How badly she hurt I could only imagine, but the damage was done—she would never forgive me.

I went to bed early, without eating, but couldn't sleep. It all felt wrong. I must have panicked back there—a coward, afraid. And then I realized how vulnerable she was—such a pretty girl, alone and broke—everyone a stranger, every man a threat. There was no more thinking this over. I got up at three, made some coffee, then hit the road, southbound. I prayed she stayed put in the ghost town and that I could find her. There were few

roads in the area, but if she caught an early ride, I'd lose her forever.

The sun was about to break over the horizon when I blew into town, blasting my horn. I didn't care if I disturbed the holdouts. Yelling her name down every street, I finally stopped at the schoolyard and got out of my truck. I stood, breathing hard, and listened. A dog barked, then nothing, only the sound of raindrops as a breeze shook the trees. I glanced around the deserted playground and the whirligig froze in my heart. She must have left already.

A sickening panic gripped me as I tried to think, but then I remembered where she was heading. I jumped in my truck, found the main intersection, and sped west.

At a rise where the road turned to dirt, I spied a lone figure in the distance. My heart leapt. Please let it be her. I stomped on the gas pedal and fishtailed, muddy gravel peppering my fenders like machine gun fire.

In another minute all my anxiety vanished into joy—I found her once again, my little prairie dove. She turned and threw her arm out, thumbing for a ride, but then quickly spun back and continued west—ignoring the opportunity to run toward me with open arms. I slowed down and coasted alongside her.

“Charlie, please forgive me. I made a big mistake—I miss

you like crazy. I'll buy you music lessons, I'll send you to college if you want. I need to take care of you, Charlie. I want to show you the mountains, then I want to take you home with me.”

She stopped walking and I hit the brakes. Looking pissed, she strode up to my door and pinched my forearm as hard as she could. Apparently that wasn't enough, because she grit her teeth and slammed a fist into my bicep. She stalked to the back of the truck, threw her pack in, then came around and got in on the passenger side. She buckled her seatbelt and turned to face me.

“You bastard—don't ever do that again.”

She looked away and I ached to hold her, to show her how sorry I was, but not now. There'd be time later to make up, to spoil her with attention, to give her a home. The truck bucked, nearly stalling in second gear as I fumbled the clutch—my mind racing, my heart anxious in the silence—and then I felt her fingers squeeze into my hand.