

## Surviving in the Back Pew

Saturday night, I walked down the main artery of Delta, Colorado, my black blouse revealing breasts cupped in a lacy black bra, my black miniskirt with sequins catching the streetlights, and my bare legs freezing in the autumn wind. I was a thirty-year-old woman, clutching a shopping bag. I slipped off my coat when I saw a truck moving in my direction.

A big Chevy pickup came to a quick stop outside the United Bank, its diesel fumes disgorging. I covered my nose and stood stiffly. My shopping bag, a flowered plastic thing, swung from my wrist. I thought of the faces I'd seen this evening – the barber closing his doors with a tired nod to me, a young couple holding hands as they headed for the Egyptian Theater, a businesswoman giving me a look of disdain. Each face was a reminder that I had surrendered every ounce of pride to feed my child.

We bargained and then I stepped into the rumbling truck, my black skirt hitching up as I trailed a hint of perfume: Tabu.

He paid.

I did what he wanted.

And I survived one more week.

My child, Alondra, who slept on our lumpy couch, yearned to attend school on the coming Monday morning where they fed her. Although I took her to stay with the cousins, she hated the nights I had to work. Perhaps she sensed my self-loathing the next morning when my uncle brought her to church, where I desperately tried to wash my soul with the blood of Christ.

The wealthy folks of Delta held their noses as if the altitude of Garnet Mesa gave them better air to breathe. They spurned us poor people—especially me—once they caught the scent of exhaust fumes on my skin. Their high-altitude businesses were built on subsidized water rights, natural gas wells, and inherited grazing rights. By contrast, my life was a ledger

that would not balance. Standing on the curb by the United Bank, I tracked my depreciation. A dead Toyota Corolla, late fees on the trailer rent, and no internet line meant my accounting degree was a frozen asset. Out here on Main Street, my body was a short-term cash-flow solution to keep Alondra's caloric intake above the deficit line.

People look at our trailer park and see druggies. They're wrong. My neighbors don't use needles; they use gallon jugs of cheap whiskey or wine to numb the ache of two to four low-paying jobs. They don't party; they collapse.

All week, every week, I begged for an accounting or bookkeeping job, and in between, I washed windows, mopped the Coffee Cup's floors, and weeded onions in the fields. If I didn't have enough money for bills, I came out on Saturdays. As I strolled past the old red stone Chamber of Commerce building, a creamy BMW rolled past, filled with teens. They flipped me the bird, and a few minutes later, on the way back, some jerk yelled, "There's that trailer park Mexican whore again!"

It stung. I'm not a Mexican. I'm Tejana, Texas born and raised like my parents and grandparents, but tonight, I sure was a whore.

Near midnight, an older married man dropped me near my ugly white trailer, and to avoid attention, he didn't peel out. A part of me experienced a delicious feeling of revenge against my abusive and unfaithful ex every single time a man paid me for his pleasure.

In the gap of my door, a monogrammed envelope peeked out. No address, just the initials, CA, written in careful script, suggesting he was an architect or an elementary teacher. It spoke of watching me on Sundays at the Catholic Church as I sat in the back pew, my head down. It said, "I pray that someday you will look into my eyes to let me see the color of yours. I'm sure you have a pure spirit, and I'd love to get to know you. If you are as strong and courageous as I think you are, I could love you. Is it possible you could also love me?"

My breath caught. *What kind of man would want to marry me?*

He included a USB labeled, "Make It With You," a song by Bread.

I had nothing to play it on. I didn't even own a radio. I'd found our black and white TV waiting on a curb for recycling. We got one channel clearly and two others if my kid held the antenna over her head and stood on her left foot, me laughing and cheering her on.

My nine-year-old appeared by the kitchen table, blinking. She took in my face the way she looked at a broken appliance — methodically, looking for what needed fixing. "Did you get hit again?"

"No. I'm just being emotional."

She was quiet, observant. "Why Mommy?"

"I don't know. I just am." I handed her a barely warm corndog from the gas station.

She grabbed it and took a huge bite, then Alondra led me to our ratty couch and, her arms around me, put her bare feet cold against my leg.

I laughed.

Who had written this missive, a note of desire and yearning? I mentally scanned the men who attended mass regularly. There was only one man within my age bracket, but his family was quite wealthy. Rumors were he owned a gorgeous ranch north of Cedaredge with gas leases. His mother was a large woman who utterly despised me. Last Sunday as we were walking out from Mass, Lysandra guided her wealthy friends through the heavy doors, saying loudly, "We all have crosses to bear, Coco. Some of us bear them much more privately."

Father Frederick nodded as he frowned at me. Then he looked at my beautiful child with long black hair. He winked.

I froze.

They all knew what I did to get by. Swallowing pain, I suppressed tears. No way would I let this rich woman know how much that hurt me, but I didn't say anything because people swirled to each side, afraid of Lysandra Austin.

A nice older man avoided everyone's eyes and got me turned toward the door.

In defiance, I attended mass every chance, sitting in the back, my eyes on the floor. This note must be from one of the widowers. Maybe the man who had helped me up? He was in his sixties or older like many other men who attended mass. I wasn't interested because I wanted a large family.

Two rough days passed.

The fluorescent lights of City Market hummed, making my Salvation Army blouse look more yellow than white. I checked my last receipt to see what the balance was on my EBT card before I put my few items on the belt, avoiding the checker's eyes.

Lysandra Austin pushed in front of me and began unloading her full shopping cart onto the belt, saying, "I'm paying cash." Piling things on, she glanced back with a slight smile. "Oh, Coco, I'm sorry, I didn't see you there."

I wanted to flip her off, but I stood silently, and tried to catch the checker's eyes, expecting her to say something.

Hands busy and eyes down, the clerk worked quietly, respectfully.

Mentally, I calculated what the daily sales and profit margins of the store would likely be. They had to pay processing fees on food stamp EBT cards and credit cards. Lysandra supported City Market's bottom line by paying cash. The manager smiled and waved at her. "Good to see you, Mrs. Austin." She was the lead partner in the largest law firm in the area and wielded enormous influence.

Lysandra scanned the customers for who might be of interest and casually stepped back as she acknowledged the manager. One stiletto drove into my right toes, and pain shot up as reflexively, my foot jerked back. I pinched my lips to keep from crying out. I stared up at her diamond-choked neck, the jewels catching the rays from the overhead lights and sending sharp rainbows.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she leaned down, saying loudly, "Good thing I didn't get you." A fake smile. "You poor child. Here, let me buy your groceries." She grabbed my bag from my hands

and looked into it. Shaking her head, she dropped a bill into it and handed it back. “Here, honey, now you can pay for it yourself.”

I thought about shoving her. No. Smashing my toes could have been an accident and the cops would arrest me, not her, saying I must have provoked the important lawyer who sat on the Town Council and donated thousands to local charities.

Her back to me, Lysandra asked the clerk, “How is your son doing at Mesa State University? Is he enjoying Grand Junction?”

She answered with grateful eyes, “Without the scholarship you set up, Lysandra, our boy would be working the hay fields at minimum wage. My husband and I sure do appreciate it.”

“You’re more than welcome, Betty. I try to help where I can.”

The store manager came over, smiling and offering his hand. Several businessmen saw them talking and approached. One was the local CFO of the United Bank. He had turned me down for a book-keeping job, saying, “You don’t have any local references.” The conversation looked pleasant, yet serious.

My face blistering hot, I limped over to another line, trying not to watch the woman. I handed the checker my nearly empty EBT card and the five dollar bill. The checker handed me the receipt and a dime. *I guess I should be grateful for the woman’s gift, only cost me a fractured toe.*

Clutching a single bag of food—a loaf of white bread, store-brand peanut butter, a large bag of generic cereal, and three boxes of off-brand macaroni and cheese, I hobbled out past Lysandra Austin who was surrounded by a small group of admirers.

I didn’t feel the cold Delta air until I was halfway across the parking lot, my toes aching and my stomach roiling.

I was a tramp, not a lady.

Like her.

Saturday evening, a silver Ford 350 truck with red stripes and shiny red dual wheels idled over to the curb, the windows tinted dark. I watched the way the street lights caught the black sequins on my skirt as if I wore chain mail.

A good-looking man with thick blonde hair and a neatly trimmed blondish-red beard pushed the passenger door open as the aluminum step came out. "Care for a lift? It's cold out." His voice wasn't the jagged rasp of a working man. It was smooth and sanded down by an education that didn't fit around here. *Come Away With Me* by Nora Jones offered love in the warm cab.

I looked up. He was a big man and I stopped, one foot on the aluminum step.

His blue eyes looked kind. "I won't hurt you, Coco. Trust me; I'm an honest and honorable man."

Cautiously, I crawled in. I checked the cab for handcuffs, ropes, and whips before I let the door swing shut. His aftershave was soft and light – an expensive brand. I recognized him from Sunday morning mass. He was always there with his parents – his mother had openly shunned me at church and also smashed my foot at the market. The sound of blood inside my ears was louder than the diesel engine. Did she send her son to run me out of town?

Without looking directly at me, he said, as if confessing, "I noticed you several weeks ago." He had a twisted smile. "Name's Charlie."

Unlike most men who burned rubber because they were afraid to be seen with me, the big truck slowly pulled from the bank's curb. Almost meekly, he spoke, "Coco, I'd like to get to know you. Can we drive out into the country and talk?" He gestured. "I won't ask you to do anything but talk and I'll pay for your time."

Most men didn't ask where to take me and no man had ever driven me anywhere without wanting something at the end of the ride. I grabbed the door handle. It was locked, or I might have bailed out. I took a breath and said pleasantly, "I heard you have a nice ranch north of Cedaredge."

He didn't answer right away—the truck's diesel engine filled the silence for three miles until after we crossed over the Gunnison River. "The ranch house is too big for one man," he said placidly, his jaw tightening as he looked out at the dark silhouette of The Grand Mesa. "I designed it, and built it, but Mother chose the furnishings. I just sleep there." A slight shake of his head. "I stay in one of the guest rooms because the master bedroom is way too large for one man. I'd rather be out where the animals are, and I only go in for a bite to eat and to sleep."

I wondered why he was interested in me – to fill the space in his king-sized bed? Or a desire to screw the girl that Mommy despised, to spite her? Was this a set-up and out in the desert, he'd beat me to a pulp under her orders?

My guts spun into a tight knot.

"I've watched you in church. You always sit in back with your eyes down. I'm sure you're better than what people say, and I break my neck trying to get a look at your eyes." He took a long, deep breath. "Now I have – they are dark brown and deep. They snap, showing the fire of your spirit." His smile lit the night.

"I'm anything but pure."

"Your heart is. I know a lot about you. All the men around town want you. Some say you give good advice about handling their wives."

"They want my body, not my love." I'd lost count of how many men wanted me, but not one of them would hire me. Jobs around here were inherited.

The fellow handed me a dark red envelope with his monogrammed initials, CA.

I dropped it on the floorboards, fearing it held a drug that would knock me out. The muscles of my right thigh started twitching.

Driving smoothly from town, he said solemnly, "My grandfather was a cattle rancher from Texas, moved up here for the water. He homesteaded a small place with an immense pristine spring and mineral rights." He extended a calloused hand. "Nice to meet you."

Cautiously, I took it.

His grip was surprisingly gentle.

He casually let my hand drop as if I were his friend. His phone barked, “Ruff, Ruff.” He pulled it from his pocket and crouched away from me. I couldn’t hear what he said, but the tips of his ears turned red. We drove north along graveled roads, slowly sharing – him friendly and making light jokes; me, reluctantly answering his questions. Charlie liked that I was from Lubbock, Texas, saying that’s where his grandfather had left with only a dollar in his pocket.

I looked up at him. “My family in Texas is poor, my family here is poor, and I’m desperately poor.”

“Coco, I’m quite well off, but my family is poor in spirit, and...” he paused, “I need...” wavering, “a woman in my life.” Tentatively, he touched the back of my hand. “Would you be my friend?”

I huffed. “You want a street walker to be your friend?”

“I want *you*, Coco, to be my friend.” His blue eyes were sincere.

I gave my long black hair a quick toss.

“I mean it, Coco; I want a good Catholic girl with a backbone,” he said, “Someone who doesn’t run when things get tough.” His right index finger lightly touched the back of my hand again. “You’ve shown courage by continuing to come to Mass, despite my mother.”

I saw longing in his warm eyes. “I’m not a good Catholic girl anymore.” My head dropped.

He didn’t try anything so I slid next to him, pretending he was my boyfriend.

“May I put my arm around your shoulders?”

“Sure.”

A delicate happiness rode his lips as he watched the graveled road, sagebrush, and big cottonwood trees clipping past the tinted windows in the cold night.

Doing my job, I slipped my left hand onto his leg, and let it drift down to his inner thigh like a sweet girlfriend who loved her man.

He took it with his right hand and, instead of stopping to do business with me, he drove on. Politely, he asked, "Mind if I drive you past my place? Me and my neighbor hand built it. We cut the timbers, shaved and cured the logs, and we cleared our fields for the rock fireplace."

It felt weird. "Whatever you want."

Several miles went by, and then Charlie leaned to sniff my hair. The badly corrugated road bounced the heavy truck and my head bumped into his nose. We laughed.

Later, he kissed the top of my head, timing it so my head didn't bruise his lips this time. We laughed again. It melted my emotions enough that my knee stopped jumping. "I'm sure I could love you, Coco. Think you could love me?"

Other men wanted me to be their girlfriend for the night, but this man meant Holy Matrimony in the Catholic Church. You don't divorce. You had to die to rid yourself of your spouse. My chin trembled. "If you are as straight forward as you claim, yes." He was handsome, well-off, and still single.

Pointing out his beautiful large ranch house with yellow lights glowing, he said, "No one is home. I leave the lights on so maybe a robber won't be tempted. It's alarmed, but out here, no one would hear it." He added flatly, "My mother sends her housekeeper up on Mondays to change the sheets and she cooks and freezes enough meals for me for the week. Sundays after Mass, I eat with my parents." He stared out the windshield at the dark forms of cattle and horses standing quietly in the pastures.

I counted thirty-six windows. It was built out of hand-shaved pine timbers and local stones. He'd saved a lot of money doing everything himself. If he had financed it, he'd be drowning in the interest and debt. This was a lodge, not a family home. I looked at his big strong hands. Moisture gathered in the corners of my eyes.

I sniffed and stuffed the feelings.

His hand cupped my upper shoulder and pulled me a little closer in reassurance as if I belonged to him, as if this incredible house was mine.

My mind resisted.

My heart could not.

Charlie turned the new truck back toward Delta. "I'll prove myself to you, Coco." He looked at me under his thick arm. "You won't believe me, but I am proud of you. Honestly. It takes guts to do what you're doing." He laughed. "I'm 38 and still unmarried."

Silently, I absorbed his desperation. I wanted to jump from the truck but we were doing over fifty miles an hour down a winding and narrow corrugated gravel road bounded by ragged sagebrush and barbed wire on each side. I laughed involuntarily, my hands gestured meaninglessly.

As if to make up for the strange announcement, Charlie said, "'I don't want anything from you tonight, just your time. If you ever want more, it will be because you chose it."

Involuntarily, my mouth fell open. *What could I say to a man wouldn't kiss me until I loved him, and who wanted a sex worker to marry him in defiance of his mother?* My black fingernails unconsciously dug into his muscular inner thigh near his groin.

He didn't flinch; instead he looked down at me, his eyes subdued as if he had expected some sort of punishment.

Perplexed, I let up and stared at the dash lights. My teeth chattered as I wiped the corners of my eyes.

Ten minutes passed, me wondering how to get out of this truck, his jaw muscle flexing and releasing the way my father's did when he trying to figure out how to fund his next great invention. I said, "Turn here. My daughter is home alone and I always try to get back by midnight."

At my embarrassing white and slanting trailer, he opened a thick billfold for me to see inside. "How much do you charge an hour?"

"It depends on what you want me to do."

He handed me ten crisp one hundreds. "Thanks for spending time with me."

I pushed it back. "No, please, that's far too much." It felt like he was not buying my time, he was trying to buy *me*. A second later, I thought of fresh milk for my daughter's cereal.

"Thank you sincerely for these precious hours of getting to know you. I know you're scared, but I'll earn your trust with every word and every act, or the Lord will hold me accountable." He spoke with a firm tone, "I solemnly vowed to give you everything that you need the Sunday my mother humiliated you after Mass." He inhaled and exhaled. "I know what it feels like."

We stared at one another.

Breaking the moment, he tipped my chin up as if to kiss me, but he only looked into my surprised eyes. "Coco, you could be the woman I've been looking for." His pupils were dilated. "And now, I know the color of your eyes." His blue eyes were warm, holding back moisture.

I could *not* stop the twin tears racing down my cheeks to drip into my black, open blouse. My daughter wanted a father, and I wanted what he held inside himself more than his money. My neck burned with terrified desire.

The back of his fingers gently wiped my hot tears away. Charlie took a deliberately deep breath. "We won't be lovers, Coco, not before we're married. I promised Mother long ago, and I've also promised Father Frederick that I will remain chaste until I am married." He looked at me, his blue eyes wide and vacant. "If I don't, everything will fall apart."

My mouth fell open. I almost yelled, *What? You're still a virgin?* I pulled myself together and asked, "How in the world would she, or anyone else, ever know?"

"Mother always finds out what I'm doing and who I'm with."

The ringtone, "Ruff, Ruff," broke the moment.

He gritted his teeth and ignored it. "People know that if they report my activities to her, she will remember when they want a favor."

Cold goose bumps rose. I took a sharp breath.

His strong arms came around me, tucking my cheek into his muscled chest. He patted my back until the shivering stopped. I had comforted others this way a thousand times but never been on the receiving end. I almost surrendered everything. My soul ached for such kindness, but the math does not add up when danger lurks behind a sweet smile. If his mother knows everything that he does and who he does it with, I was now her primary target. I had to decide if I was strong enough to walk down the aisle with this man.

I blinked.

He had disarmed me so gently, so completely, that I had forgotten I didn't even know him, yet I was thinking about marrying him. The dizziness made me stumble very slightly.

He caught my arm and walked me to the door and then he bowed as he kissed the back of my hand. Charlie tried to get me to look into his eyes, but a ragged chill ran up my back and I glanced away, fearing the fees and interest I'd pay for the loan of Lysandra's son, not counting the management and maintenance fees. I could not afford him.

It could cost me my soul.

Charlie pulled my chin back to him, reading my mind. "Ignore my mother, otherwise, I have no freedom. She will read me the riot act after Mass tomorrow. I'll listen and nod like I'm agreeing with her."

I wanted to trust this man. I wanted...

I wanted...

Him.

Charlie was the first man in my life who had looked inside me and didn't try to change something, he saw me, and still, he loved me.

He had rescued the letter from the pickup's floorboards and pushed the dark red monogrammed envelope into my hands. A friendly wave goodbye, "See you at Sunday morning Mass." He dropped his head slightly. "May I sit beside you?"

I didn't think. "Yes, please, I won't feel so isolated." At church, the good Catholic women parted before me as if I had herpes simplex bubbling on my lips.

Inside my embarrassing trailer, I clutched the envelope close, inhaling its faint crisp scent that held notes of green leaves, apples, and water lotus. It was Nautica Voyage, an expensive cologne that spoke of distant places, a honeymoon cruise to tropical islands. I fought against the tears of hope that rose from deep inside my empty chest. Could I again love after what my ex had ripped from me?

It struck me that Charlie cared enough about me to risk his domineering mother's wrath. Momentarily, the knot in my stomach uncoiled. Did he actually have a spine that wouldn't crumble when his mother came at him? She had run off every woman he had ever dated.

I picked up my sleeping child and cuddled with her on my lumpy mattress, wondering if this evening was a dream or a nightmare. I reached for the scented envelope, his man scent, and pressed it to my nose once more. This paper was real. Was he? Charlie seemed sincere, but... What was I getting involved with? I sensed danger. Was he worth it? I had a child to worry about. I carefully opened the dark red envelope, expecting a trap to snap closed on my life.

It said, "Please Coco, trust me." The poem was from Ovid:

Exert those rosy fingers, rein in awhile.

Seamen out in deep water, eyes fixed on the constellations.

Steer closer before your rising, don't yaw off course.

Even the weariest traveler's out to greet you

To offer you love as I do too.

Its beauty tore me open.

I was the Black Madonna, acting a role for men who wanted to use me or redeem me from my sins, but this man wanted me for...

I wasn't sure.

In the morning, I was tired, jumbled, and rushed, imagining Charlie Aaron Austin venturing to sit beside me at Mass. I fed my child cold, cheap cereal without milk, and slathered peanut butter on a slice of white bread for myself. Watching her eat, I anchored myself to her brilliance—Alondra made straight A's, had been twice promoted, and at nine, she was already in the fifth grade. Maybe she'd get a scholarship. She wanted to be an electrical engineer, a dream born recently when she had rewired and repaired an old vacuum cleaner with my patient help.

She put on her best clean dress, while I wore my least-wrinkled white blouse and a brown skirt, and then we walked the three miles downtown to Saint Michael's pushed by a dust-laden wind. By the time the heavy oak doors closed behind us, my blouse stuck to my back from the morning heat. The air inside smelled of frankincense and old wooden beams. The stone floor was cold and felt good against the thin soles of my hot feet.

We were late. I stood in the chilly vestibule, holding Alondra's damp hand as the opening hymn began. When the congregation rose, I slipped into the sanctuary and herded my daughter into an empty back pew.

Near the altar, a dignified blonde man, Charlie Senior, stood in an expensive black suit next to his wife, Lysandra, in a matching black suit dress. Her diamond choker was hidden behind the coat collar, but the dangling diamonds on her ears caught the sunlight streaming through the high stained glass, shooting jagged rainbows across the vaulted ceiling.

Then my Charlie walked in.

He didn't look toward his mother's usual pew. Instead, his blue eyes scanned the back of the church until they locked onto mine. He walked down the rear aisle, turned, and stepped into the pew right next to me.

Lysandra had turned to track her son. When her eyes shifted to me, her expression flattened. Her dark eyes narrowed into an unblinking search for vulnerability, lingering on my used clothing like I was an annoyance to be cleared away. Then her gaze shifted to her son with an absolute claim of ownership. She glanced back at me, and for a fraction of a second, her black eyes widened before she masked it behind a wall of disgust.

The wave of Lysandra's small white handkerchief caught Father Frederick's attention as he stood, getting ready to light and swing the heavily aromatic incense on a rope. He gave me a look like, "You shouldn't be here," but then he saw my pretty daughter.

He smiled.

I felt a tiny, involuntary muscle twitch at the left corner of my mouth. Lowering my chin, I let my hair fall forward to veil my face, exhaling slowly through my nose. The priest. That smile. Lysandra.

Charlie extended his hand to me as the hymn ended and I let my fingers slide into his. My palm started sweating against his clean skin, a minute tremor vibrating up my wrist that I tried to kill by pressing my hand into his thigh. His expensive aftershave drifted through the pungent incense spread by Father Frederick, and I leaned closer into this handsome man's space, letting my bare shoulder brush into his white shirt. With my other hand, I yanked Alondra tightly against my hip, pulling her into my side until her shoulder bumped my ribs.

I looked up at the carved face of Jesus on the hand-hewn cross. The light shifted, softening the lines for a moment before the shadows brought the agony back. My eyes darted to Charlie's handsome face.

He was seeking mine.

We leaned into one another, defiantly sinking as one into the tangled scent of Nautica Voyage, Tabu, and the smoky pall of sacred incense.

His fumes spread, Father Frederick stepped back upon the stage. I looked up and caught Lysandra's dark eyes. I recognized her expression because I'd worn it myself, standing

near the United Bank curb on Main Street calculating what I stood to lose. It wasn't disgust on her face. It wasn't contempt. It was the fear and determination of a woman who understood exactly what she had to do. I dropped my eyes to the cold stone floor, the same way I always had.

But this time, I smiled.