

THE GREAT CIGARETTE ESCAPE

Leaning against the post—the one with splinters like porcupine quills—Charlie stared at the fading sunset. He yearned for the day when he too could melt like fallen ice cream upon a warm sidewalk. If I were Houdini, thought Charlie, I would say a few magic words, tease the audience and puff, I'd be a happy, single man again—*free*—free of wife, free of kids, free of responsibilities I never wanted. But there were no magic words or a slick vanishing act that would free Charlie from being Charles Kennedy, husband, father and would-be escape artist.

He enjoyed the long slow drags off of his last cigarette like a condemned man standing before the firing squad. Blowing smoke gently from his lips, watching it float up in the air, smiling, Charlie imagined himself cruising freedom's highways in his restored 1968 Mustang Fastback 428 Cobra Jet—white exterior with a bold kick-ass black stripe across the hood—a happy single man's car. Charlie inhaled deeply, releasing the smoke quickly and quietly, before mashing the butt into the side of the post, and then thumping it upon the growing pile of discarded *dream* butts on the ground below.

Sneaking one last peek at the sinking sun, Charlie managed to hold on to yesterday a bit longer—when his prematurely graying hair was dark, thick and wavy, the kind of waves that girls like to run their fingers through, and he would happily let them. In Charlie's world, that small but noticeable spare tire around his waist would deflate and quickly be replaced by the abs of steel he'd maintained when he was in his twenties. Back then, he would stroll shirtless in appropriate but mostly inappropriate places just to impress the ladies whether they wanted to be impressed or not.

With freedom, he would regain his life. The life he had before the needy hands and screaming little mouths crying 'gimme, gimme, gimme' stole his soul, emptied his bank account and killed his dream of sharing his love with all of the Sea Gal cheerleaders, past and present.

He wasn't always like this, numb. There was a time when he wore his happiness like a well-worn pair of cowboy boots. Before the

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invasion of the hope snatchers, when Charlie put on his Stetson hat...proudly, shamelessly admiring his godlike image in the mirror, he owned his life. Back then, he was free to roam, to pick up girls with forgettable names, to drink himself stupid and nobody cared. No one nagged him. No one told him that he was too old to be acting like that or that teaching his ten-year-old son, Charlie Jr., how to pick up hot, loose, middle school girls at the Everett Mall was not the fatherly thing to do.

In that bygone life, Charlie was a stallion, free, alive and buck wild. Nothing like the sad, broken workhorse he felt like these days. Now instead of being perched on a stool in some dimly lit bar drinking until that unattractive girl winking at him from across the room appeared attractive, he found himself night after night standing on his porch, smoking, hoping and praying that with each puff he moved a step closer to meeting his Maker.

He hadn't planned on having a wife or kids. They just appeared out of nowhere or at least that's what it felt like. One day he was single, happy, shooting pool and eating hot spicy Buffalo wings at Earl's Place with his buddies when this leggy waitress asked him if he wanted another beer. His next memory was standing in front of the minister. By the time they arrived home from the chapel, the first kid was waiting for them at the door. The next four seemed to appear out of thin air. His days of *Girls Gone Wild* one-night stands, never-ending TV football games, beer bashes and mellow Saturdays blissfully passed out on the sofa without a care in the world had been replaced by occasional Saturday night missionary sex, helping his sons with their homework and long weekends repairing this or that around the house. After a dozen years of what Charlie called life without the possibility of parole, he'd come up with the most ingenious getaway plan. And tonight he would set his great cigarette escape into action.

Just the thought of no longer having to work two jobs, sometimes three jobs and still coming up short before the next paycheck brought tears to Charlie's eyes. There were so many bills stamped in bold red PAST DUE or FINAL NOTICE that these were the first words his kids learned to read. They were three months behind on their mortgage and Vanessa still hadn't found another job since being fired for telling an ungrateful customer where to shove his fish sticks.

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That was Vanessa, thought Charlie. That woman had a mouth on her. She could praise the Lord and curse the Devil *simultaneously*. When they first met, Charlie found this to be a turn-on. Now he was usually the target of her swearing followed by pleas to the All-Mighty God to fix her trifling-ass husband. Charlie learned to tune Vanessa out. Occasionally when he felt spiteful, he would piss her off even further by quoting their eight-year-old daughter Holly's favorite response, 'I am *not* here to please you.' Charlie would follow this remark with a smirk and a quick roll of the eyes, just like Holly would do.

With school starting next Tuesday, Charlie didn't know what they were going to do. They barely had lunch money to give their kids. If it weren't for Charlie's father using his pension to help out, they wouldn't have been able to buy the kids school clothes.

He and Vanessa had agreed not to have any more children. But Vanessa loved kids and wanted to have more, at least three or four more. Charlie thought she was crazy and had seriously considered having her *taken out*. He knew a guy who would do it for \$250 plus tax. Charlie had thought about it several times, even met with the guy at a McDonalds to discuss the details. But after analyzing the pros and cons of having his wife wacked, Charlie realized that he would be left all alone to take care of their rowdy rug rats.

Another option he'd considered was a vasectomy, but his buddy, Freddie, talked him out of it. He didn't think it was the manly thing to do. "Besides," said Freddie, always the forward thinker. "What if you and Vanessa break up? You might want to have kids with your new wife." As usual, Freddie's advice made sense. But the last thing Charlie wanted was another wife and kids.

He had just entered the house when Vanessa told him with the same excitement as the first time she told him about the arrival of their eldest son.

"Honey," said Vanessa animated. "We're pregnant!" Elated, she clapped her hands like a seal on a pedestal.

Charlie's first thought was that this had to be the most fertile woman on the planet. You could drop her on a deserted island and she would find a way to create a population the size of Texas within a week. Scratching his head hard, Charlie couldn't figure it out. They only had sex once a month—the first Saturday of each month when the kids spent the night with their grandparents.

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Charlie knew that their lackluster sex life wasn't all Vanessa's fault like he told his buddies. He was mostly to blame. He just wasn't up to it after working twelve long hard hours at the construction site. The most he could manage in his sleep deprived state was to smoke his cigarette on the porch, swallow his dinner and pass out on top of the covers. His only proof that something sexual had transpired during the night was when he awoke the next morning nude, sore and feeling violated with a smiling Vanessa nestled in his arms.

Pregnant *again*, Charlie thought; time for my escape plan. Vanessa poked out her lips, awaiting his kiss. Avoiding her, Charlie made a swift u-turn and headed back toward the door. Yes, today would be the day that he would leave Vanessa, the kids and this prison of love behind.

Vanessa possessed an uncanny ability to read his mind. Detecting that something was wrong, she rushed passed him, slammed the door and locked it. "Where do you think you're going, mister?" asked Vanessa, planting her hands firmly on her round hips, her way of telling Charlie that he was not going to be able to BS his way out of this. She folded her arms for reinforcement. Her left, painted-on eyebrow rose. The original one was lost when she stood too close to the barbecue grill two summers ago.

"Baby, I just need a smoke," said Charlie, using his boyish charm. It didn't work, nor did it work last week when a female cop pulled him over for driving a car without doors. His explanation almost worked on the officer had it not been for the fact that he was wearing nothing but his underwear. Stupid, yes, but he had been dared by his four-year-old daughter, Katie. How could he have backed down from her challenge? She would have taunted him with nonstop chants of 'loser boozer' while dancing to a rhythm of her own making.

"Don't you 'baby' me, Charles Isaac Kennedy! I sure as hell hope you're not thinking about leaving me and the kids, especially not today," said Vanessa, pointing her finger in his face.

"Baby, baby," said Charlie, kissing her, and then grinning like a weasel. "You know I...I...uh l-o-v-e you...and the kids, *too*."

Her expression softened, but remained guarded. "Look, honey, I know it's been tough, but we'll get through this. We always do," said

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Vanessa. She lowered her head, rubbed her belly, and then sneaked in a smile. “And I promise you this is the last baby.”

“I’ve heard that before,” mumbled Charlie.

“I didn’t make these babies by myself, you know.” She placed her hands on her hips again.

“I know,” replied Charlie, wishing he could snatch back his words. Vanessa’s hawk-eyes made him nervous; he started to rock side-to-side like he had to pee. With his heart pounding, his hands sweaty, he thought about running. A quick sprint and he would be out the door. Vanessa was bowlegged, pigeon-toed and pregnant; she would never catch him. The boys were in the backyard burying something; he dare not inquire. Plus he could be in the car before they got to the front door. Holly, with her mother’s good looks, was in her room trying on her new pre-teen, wannabe sexy, but more like disturbingly slutty, school clothes. And finally there was Katie...where was that demon-child? The last time Charlie had seen her she was busy destroying the self-esteem of the family dog. “Baby, I just need to get some air.”

“Charlie...Charles,” said Vanessa firmly, but she couldn’t stay mad at him. She loved him. He was still a good catch. When they met, Charlie was handsome. Easily the most handsome man she’d dated and she’d dated some pretty good-looking men. But Charlie was *Charlie*, funny, cocky, but nice. And she had to admit that she loved the fact that she had been the one to snare the dashing Charles Kennedy. With his western shirt, tight blue jeans, beat-up cowboy boots and Stetson hat, he looked like he’d just walked right off the set of an old Shoot ‘em Up. Tall, dark and experienced at charming the ladies, he was the last of the great American cowboys and she alone (among his many female admirers) had roped him in, branded him with a wedding band and trained him to put down the toilet seat. It was work, but he was worth it.

Reaching for him, Vanessa held his face gently in her hands. “We’ll have this baby and I promise you no more. Okay.”

You should have said that five kids ago, thought Charlie. He made a wise choice not to repeat that statement aloud while maintaining his fake smile. Suddenly, Charlie felt a pair of tiny hands wrapped around his leg followed by a weight on his foot. It’s Katie, he thought. She stood on his left shoe, then jumped up and down several times before sitting on his foot.

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“Got you, Daddy,” said Katie, smiling up at her father.

Katie, a miniature dictator, shared her mother’s talent for praying and swearing, but mostly swearing. She was the only child in the history of the Tiny Tots Daycare Center to be banned for life from attending their school for unleashing a series of four-letter words causing two teachers to go home sick and one to be temporary institutionalized. Katie was a clever child, with the IQ of a mad scientist. Escaping from her would be more difficult than fooling his wife. Charlie carefully pried Katie’s sticky, little chubby hands away from his leg.

“Daddy’s got to go out for a minute.” He patted her on the head hoping she would go away, but she stood there in defiance.

“Can I go?” It wasn’t really a question, but more of a demand.

“No,” Charlie responded quickly.

“Why not?” asked Katie, firmly planting her hands on her tiny hips.

“Well...because, Daddy is going to the store.”

“So,” replied Katie arrogantly. She had all of her father’s characteristics, but mostly displayed the bad ones, *proudly*.

“So you can’t go,” said Charlie, stepping back while trying to decide if he should run for the exit.

Katie paused, examined him with the same hawk-eyes as her mother. “Look here, I need something from the store. I’m gonna go get my shoes.” She took a few steps, turned around quickly and added, “You stay right there, Daddy. You hear me.” She hurried to her bedroom.

Charlie seized this opportunity to race toward the door and right into Vanessa.

“Are you okay?” she asked, swiftly tucking her hair behind her ear.

Charlie carefully removed her hand from the doorknob. “I’m fine...just tired I guess. I’ve been working too many long days, babe. I’m tired.” He hunched his shoulders, and then added, “I need a smoke, okay.”

“I wish you would give that up,” she said, gently caressing his back.

“I wish you’d give up having babies,” he responded without thinking. It was too late to retrieve it. All he could do now was to apologize quickly and hope she would blame his cruel remark on

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him being tired. To help his case, he dropped his shoulders, lowered his head and rubbed his eyes. He even added in a yawn. "I'm sorry. It's just that we can't afford another mouth to feed." This time his voice was sweet and caring. He rubbed her stomach gently.

"I know," Vanessa interrupted.

Hearing Katie's voice in the background, Charlie needed to exit fast. With a quick, clumsy kiss to Vanessa's lips, he said hurriedly, "Honey, I'm coming back. I'm just going out for cigarettes. What's the big deal?"

She extended her arm, bowing slightly as she stepped aside. "Okay, but you hurry back," said Vanessa smiling. "We have a surprise for you."

"Surprise? What is it?" he asked, searching her eyes trying to detect what she was up to. "You're not having twins *again* are you?"

"No," she said, punching him playfully in his arm. "The kids and I have been working on this surprise for you all day. So go get your old cigarettes, but hurry back." Shooing him, she shoved him out the door. "Go on...get going."

He didn't know what she was up to, and he didn't care to stick around to find out. All he cared about was that his plan was in full swing. He could hear freedom calling his name...no that was Katie. She was rapidly approaching. Charlie promptly slammed the door shut and bolted for his Mustang. Not bothering to open the car door, he slid through the window, started the car and backed out of the driveway creating a fuss of dust. He slammed on the gas peddle. The tires spun, and the back of the car fishtailed.

Katie was clearly upset. She pouted and stomped her feet on the porch. He smiled and then waved at her. She in turn flipped him the bird. Charlie laughed, shook his head and said, "Man, that sure is my kid."

To his surprise, his laughter was immediately replaced with sadness maybe some guilt as he watched his old life disappear in the rearview mirror. Shaking like a wet dog, Charlie thought, I've got to keep my eyes forward. Freedom is ahead of me. He was a man on a mission and he wasn't about to let his wife and kids and strange unexpected emotions get in his way. Besides, any sadness that remained, he could easily drink away. "I'm still a young guy...well, I'm still good-looking anyway," said Charlie, checking out his image in the side mirror. He stroked his chin, combed through

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his hair and smiled. "Still got all my teeth...well, except for the two in the back I lost in that fight at the Seahawks game. Nobody tells me I can't sneak my moonshine whiskey into the stadium." Another dare from Katie, this one cost him two teeth, a night in the King County jail, plus a \$150 fine.

It was the perfect night for an escape: a cool autumn breeze, a full moon and plenty of working girls working the streets. This was a very important commodity now that Charlie was single. These ladies of the night would once again save him from himself. Relaxing, Charlie leaned in his seat carefully steering through traffic. Since he was driving without a license, the last thing he needed was to get stopped by the law. Yeah, that Katie again...she said that he couldn't teach the dog to drive. Old Sheppard did pretty good until he lost control of the steering wheel and mowed down the postman. As punishment, the post office refused to deliver their mail in April, May, and June.

A tall, braless woman wearing short shorts and high heels waved at Charlie as if trying to flag him down. He grinned, only to have his erotic thoughts of a backseat romp with this pretty woman suddenly erased by those weird feelings again. In his mind, he saw visions of past Thanksgiving days with Vanessa and the kids all gathered around the table, laughing and playing. "No! No, I'm not going back. I hate my life!" Charlie lifted his head, suddenly aware that he had stopped his car in the middle of the street and was banging on his steering wheel causing the horn to blow and attracting a lot of attention from the other drivers who drove nervously around him. Even the prostitute who had previously been waving at him stepped away.

Zooming past the kids' elementary school, Charlie tried not to look that way. He tried even harder to forget their last parent-teacher meeting with Mrs. Henderson, the twins' (Holly and Henry) teacher. Mrs. Henderson told them that their kids were smart, possibly the smartest kids in school. But...and there was always a 'but' in Charlie's life, Mrs. Henderson said that his eight-year-old twins were sociopaths and would most likely go on to be notorious serial killers. To back up her allegations, Mrs. Henderson told Charlie and Vanessa about the time when Holly with Henry's help fed the school's five hamsters (still alive and kicking) to the school's mascot, a pig named Joe, on 'Be Kind To Small Animals' day. They

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videotaped the event, calling it A Pig Fest and posted it on YouTube. Crazy kids, thought Charlie, they take after their mother.

His heart raced when he drove near Harborview, the hospital where all of his kids were born. Seeing Charlie Jr. coming into the world was a proud and exciting moment...something that Charlie would never forget. The same thing couldn't be said about the births of Charlie's next four kids. With each new birth, he drank a little bit more. He was so drunk and upset over another mouth to feed that when Allen, his fourth child was coming out of Vanessa, Charlie pushed him back in. It took three security guards, two orderlies and a taser gun to force him off the hospital grounds. Charlie stepped on the gas pedal and shot past the hospital. He felt relaxed again.

His moment of peace was short-lived. That strange tingling sensation continued to nag at him. As he sat idle, caught at a traffic light next to Safeway, he could hear Katie's tiny voice. Not surprising, since it was at this Safeway where Katie said her first word. She was two and very talkative, but only in a language that she understood. A friendly clerk smiled at Katie and said, 'You're a cute little girl. What's your name?' Katie standing tall in the shopping cart replied as loud as her little mouth would allow. 'Shithead!' The store went silent, even the background music stopped. Katie continued to scream, 'Shithead!' all the way out the store to the car. The kids laughed first, and then Charlie. Vanessa didn't want to but she succumbed to the giggles, and they all had a good laugh while busybody shoppers shook their heads in disgust.

Suddenly all sorts of crazy family moments played in his mind. Typically, Charlie was not someone who easily expressed his emotions or at least that's what Vanessa told him. But right now, his feelings were going ballistic; one moment he was smiling and happy and the next he was sad and crying. What's happening here?

What I'm doing is right. I hate my wife...okay, I don't hate Vanessa. But I hate the kids. Nah...I don't hate the kids...well some of them I hate. Katie. I hate Katie. I'm still pissed off at her for filling my work boots with dog shit...laughing at me while she watched me gather my shoes and step into them and then calling me a punk-ass fool for the rest of the day. Damn...I can't hate her either. She looks too much like me. "My life sucks!" Charlie shouted. "I hate my life and it's all because of them. That's why I need to escape. That's

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why leaving my pregnant wife and her evil children is the right thing to do.” He grabbed the whiskey bottle he’d hidden under the seat and took a quick sip. “Die, you bloodsucking family! Die!” He took another sip while steering with his knees.

As the whiskey killed the memories of his family and with his long awaited plan now in motion, his heart danced with anticipation. The transition had begun. He could feel the fresh air clear his smoky lungs, smell the cheap store-bought whiskey on his lips and taste the even cheaper women who’d soon be crawling in and out of his bed.

Charlie reached into the backseat, seized a plastic bag and pulled out a hat...a Stetson hat. He had purchased it just for this day. It took him several trips to the blood bank, but he finally managed to sell enough blood and plasma to purchase this most prized possession, a classic white Stetson hat, a Roper, cowboy style hat. It was a fine hat...a man’s hat. And it was his hat. He didn’t have to share it with his wife or his kids. Charlie combed his hand through his hair; graying at the temples, he still had a thick mane. Placing the Stetson hat snugly upon his head, he felt a wave as if he had just driven through *The Twilight Zone*, but this time he wasn’t the toy cowboy stuck in the child’s play bucket. This time he was a man sitting tall in his saddle...or rather riding in his 68’ Mustang. He slid in his favorite CD, found half a pack of cigarettes (his emergency pack in the glove compartment), leaned back in his seat and drove towards cold beers, women with low expectations and even younger women with big bosoms and unresolved daddy-daughter issues. Yes, Charlie’s luck was about to change. Just the thought of paychecks spent selfishly on himself and hot whores brought tears to his eyes.

As he drove toward the 7-Eleven where he usually bought his cigarettes and where Vanessa and the kids thought he was going tonight, he smiled. He hadn’t smiled since that day standing in the little wedding chapel. By then Vanessa was already six months pregnant, and everyone expected him to do the right thing. Charlie’s father noting his son’s unhappiness pulled him over to the side. “Too late to pull out now son,” said Charlie’s father. “But there’s nothing stopping you from having your fun on the side.” Charlie thought about it. He’d even had several opportunities to cheat on Vanessa, but he couldn’t. He could leave her, even consider having

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her killed execution style, but he would never cheat on her. Not that he placed such a high value on his marriage; he just knew that Vanessa would hurt him, *badly*. Over the years, she had repeatedly warned him of the consequences of infidelity and promised him with one hand holding her grandmother's Bible and the other over her heart that if he strayed his body parts would be promptly separated and spread around the Puget Sound.

Turning up the music, Charlie sped past the 7-Eleven. The more he drove the lighter he felt. Guided by the North Star, he'd finally made it to the highway. He didn't have much money, only \$153.88. The rest of the money he left in the bank, all \$529.46. He started to take all the money, but then thought that he should only take what he had in the bank when he met Vanessa. That way no one could say that he left his wife and kids without a penny. Besides, he would live off his credit cards. No, they were all maxed out he suddenly realized. That was okay. He would find work. He'd worked in construction, had been on a fisherman's boat, cleaned windows on the Space Needle and had even made coffee drinks at the Bottomless Latte Stand.

Charlie cheerfully drove down the highway, dreaming and smiling. He would buy things. Yes, lots of things that he had been wanting like the biggest flat screen TV he could find. He would buy that real genuine monkey paw back scratcher that Vanessa wouldn't let him buy from that homeless guy. And Charlie would get himself another Stetson hat...a black one. Maybe he would start a collection of Stetson hats and display them like the ballplayers displayed their sneakers. Being single and free meant that there would be plenty of money. He even dared to think that at age thirty-six, he could actually open up his first savings account and maybe he could even put money in it. Hell, with the money he would be making, he could buy stocks and bonds. He could even invest in a 401K plan, something he'd never had any need for since he was hoping not to be around to use it. It was all looking good. He could see his new life racing towards him; he was going to be single, rich and horny as hell.

The night air moved through Charlie with a rush of enthusiasm...an old familiar feeling emerged. Something he couldn't name. But the closest description he could come up with was that he was happy. His heart tingled, his fingers fidgeted, and his brain

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cells rose from the dead. He felt an excitement in his loins that he hadn't experienced since high school; he actually wanted to have dirty, filthy, disgusting, meaningless sex with teenage girls again and again. He was in such a sharing mood that he would pleasure their moms too.

Popping open the glove compartment, Charlie searched frantically for more music. He rolled down the window and threw out Vanessa's CDs. He never shared her taste in music. Next to go were the kids' CDs. No more kiddy sing-along songs for him. As he fished out another of his CDs, the music blasted. Off-key and not giving a damn, Charlie sang overconfidently as he glided down the highway.

He would drive all night, maybe drive the rest of his life. What did he need to stop for? Stopping was for a broken-down horse saddled with a wife and kids to provide for, not a wild and sexy stallion with a satchel of fun money and high-spirited fillies...uh females to mount. His plan developed as he drove. He would sleep in his car and eat in restaurants. He would travel all around the country working odd jobs, eating, sleeping and having sex with the local whores. And in the unlikely event that the town whores were all busy, he would bed the women behind bars, fat chicks, ugly chicks, women with one leg, no teeth and librarians. "No wife, no kids and no worries. Yes!" shouted Charlie. "Now this is what life's all about."

So excited, Charlie sank lower in his seat. He was "de-evolving" into the hip, cool guy he used to be back in the day when everyone referred to him as 'Handsome Chuck, all the ladies wanna...' Those were the days when he could smooth talk even the most respectable woman out of her panties in sixty seconds or less. He had seen all types of ladies' underwear: leopard print, yellow smiley face, peace sign, flowers, leather, thong, edible, bubble gum flavored, clean, torn, stained, flannel and flammable. Smiling, Charlie lit another cigarette. "Handsome Chuck is back," he said, taking another puff.

The fact that it was 8 o'clock at night and he could barely see as it was didn't stop Charlie from sliding on his sunglasses. The ones that Katie pinched from K-Mart. He had scolded her. Of course, he told her that stealing was wrong and that it didn't matter that she was only four. God had placed her name on His hit list of sinners to spite. And that she should expect a plague of angry headless

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dolls to swarm her any day now. He had intended on returning the sunglasses, but they looked really cool on him.

He was happy with a capital H. He would never let another woman rope his heart and hog-tie him to a house full of psychotic kids lead by a sadistic, foul-mouthed, pint-sized diva. No, he would never again find himself strapped with a mortgage and debt the size of Mt. Rainier. A debt he couldn't crawl from underneath even if he lived twenty lifetimes and won the Lotto each time. This time he was driving to freedom, not driving around town trying to decide what he could crash his car into without killing any innocent bystanders, while making sure that he was killed instantly. Because the last thing he needed was to survive an accident and be faced with another bill he couldn't pay.

Life was suddenly good for Charlie. He examined the cigarette between his fingers, a bad habit he had picked up after the twins were born. "I want to live," said Charlie. He thumped the cigarette out the window. "I want to live!" again he shouted, laughing, tears rolling down his face. "I have my life back!" He honked the horn. "I want to live! You hear me world. I want to live! I'm Handsome Chuck and I want to live!"

At first, he thought the sound was coming from the horn, but when he stopped honking, the ringing continued. It was coming from his jacket, which was on the passenger seat. He retrieved the phone. Out of habit, he glanced at the caller ID. Charlie paused, then sighed or cried out he wasn't sure which one. Should I answer it? No, thought Charlie. He put the phone down. But it continued to ring. He picked it up again. He put it down again. He picked it up with the intention of throwing it out the window, but accidentally hit the answer button.

A tiny voice on the other end said, "Daddy, hello Daddy." It was Katie.

Hesitating, Charlie replied, "Hello."

"Happy birthday, Daddy!" Shouted several excited voices on the phone. "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Daddy. Happy birthday to you." The singing was followed by loud cheerful applauses.

"I want to talk to my Daddy," demanded Katie. "Give me the damn phone." Charlie could hear Katie yelling at the other kids.

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“Daddy. Happy birthday, Daddy. Come back home now. So...I...I can eat your birthday cake.”

“Honey, what’s taking you so long? I wanted it to be a surprise, but it’s getting late and the kids were getting restless. We have a party waiting for you,” said Vanessa. “Katie don’t touch Daddy’s cake!” Vanessa yelled, before returning to the phone. “Honey, you’ve been gone for a long time. Did you drive to Portland to get cigarettes?” She laughed. “I hope you’re on your way back?”

With his world rapidly deflating, Charlie didn’t answer. He thought, why did I pick up the phone?

“Charlie?” said Vanessa. Her tone softened. “Sweetie, I know you need your alone time, so we’ll wait for you. You take all the time you need. Me and the kids, we’ll be here when you return home. Okay baby?”

“Okay,” he mumbled automatically.

“Charlie...Charles, I love you,” said Vanessa happily.

“We love you Daddy!” shouted the kids.

“Give me the damn phone!” demanded Katie. “Daddy?”

“Daddy’s here,” answered Charlie. He felt queasy.

“I have to tell you something.”

“What is it sweetheart?”

“Come eat some of yo’ cake with me, okay,” said Katie, breathless. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too,” said Charlie. He felt warm tears run down his face. “I’ll be home soon.”

“Yaaaaaa...Daddy’s coming home. I’m gonna stand at the door and say surprise to Daddy,” said Katie.

“I want to surprise Daddy too,” said Allen.

“Me too,” said Holly and Henry.

“You dumbasses,” said Charlie Jr. “Dad already knows about the surprise birthday party.”

“But,” said Vanessa, “he doesn’t know about our other news. So it’s still a surprise.” She returned to the phone. “See you soon honey. Love you.”

Charlie heard the phone click off.

“Surprises?” said Charlie. He continued to drive, but slower now. “It’s gonna take more than cake to get me to go back into that house of debauchery. I’m a free man. I can buy my own damn cake. And I...I can buy a woman...and kids to celebrate my birthday with

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me.” He drove in silence then suddenly yelled, “Damn! Damn! Damn!”

At the next exit, he turned around, stopped by a 7-Eleven. He purchased a carton of cigarettes, a new lighter and a Lotto ticket before heading home.

When he was less than a mile from the house, he returned his Stetson hat to the bag and hid it in the trunk. He stood next to his Mustang for a moment, said a silent prayer, cried, and then finished the whiskey before crawling back into the driver’s seat.

As he pulled into the driveway, Katie raced toward him with open arms and a big smile. Vanessa and the rest of the kids hugged him and sang happy birthday again as they walked back to the house.

They gathered in the kitchen with Katie seated at the head of the table and ate cake, drank Hawaiian punch and talked with their mouths full. Apparently, everyone in Charlie’s family had good news to share. Charlie Jr. announced that the victim was unable to identify him in a line-up. The school board agreed to drop all charges against Holly and Henry for the premeditated murder of five hamsters, if they promised to stop torturing the kindergartners with tales about invisible Seafair pirates who feasted on kindergartners. Although six-year-old Allen agreed to stop forcing girls to kiss him, he refused to give up watching them in the restroom. Even Katie proudly told her dad that she would no longer put ladybugs in her cake mix, bake them in her Easy-Bake Oven and feed them to him. Charlie was laughing and crying at the same time.

Vanessa smiled at Charlie as she sat in his lap. “I got a job!”

“You got a job?” Charlie repeated as if job was a foreign word.

“I got a call just after you left. I’m going to be working as the manager at *Mommy to Be*, that maternity store I interviewed at a couple of weeks ago. And Charlie, I’ll be making double what I was making at my old job.”

It was difficult for Charlie to tell if this was good news or not. Vanessa working again, yes...this was good—but at a maternity store. This woman needed no encouragement.

The next evening, Charlie was back on his porch, watching the sunset. Leaning against the post, he lit a cigarette and mumbled, “Well, I guess it’s back to killing myself slowly with these.” The sound of the door opening behind him and then tiny bare feet on the porch caught Charlie off-guard.

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“Here, Daddy,” said Katie. She handed him the Lotto ticket. He had dropped it somewhere in the house, but it didn’t matter. He wasn’t going to win. Even if he did win, he would either drop dead or Vanessa would divorce him and take all of his money, because there was always a ‘but’ in Charlie’s life.

“Thanks honey,” said Charlie. He rubbed her head, hoping to wish her away, but really hoping that she hadn’t caught head lice from the twins.

“What is that for, Daddy?” asked Katie, pointing at the Lotto ticket now in Charlie’s hand.

He wanted to say it was his ticket out of hell, but he replied with a pretty good Bogie impression, “The stuff that dreams are made of.”

Charlie put out his cigarette and then lifted his daughter in his arms. They quietly watched the sunset together.

“Daddy,” whispered Katie with her head on her father’s shoulder, “I dare you to...”

The End

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