

CHAMELEON

Omnibus Unum 2012 – 2016



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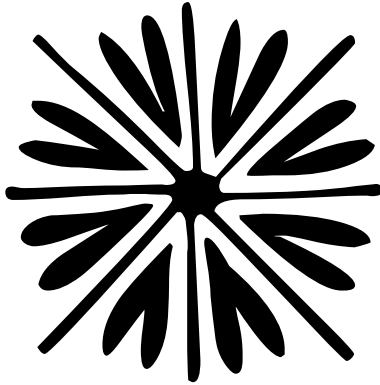
Selected Poems and Stories

CHARLES JOSEPH

2017

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Omnibus Unum 2012–2016



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INDIGENT PRESS MONTCLAIR NJ

CHAMELEON Omnibus Unum 2012-2016

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For Kathleen

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CHAMELEON 1

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Selected Poems and Stories

Chameleon

Everything always seems better
with a fresh coat of paint.

Of course, it depends on how
you choose to color it,
or how thick or thin
you decide to lay it on,
but with a little practice
hiding all of those
cracks and blemishes
from your family and friends
is pretty easy to do.

The hard part is living with whatever's
festering beneath the surface.

Rhythm

Keep your strength up,
this song has a maddening rhythm:

the seconds will tick, the hours will click,
and you'll move each day to a dull symphony
of car horns, box-trucks, menstruating women,
lackluster men, and ringtones.

It's a square dance without enthusiasm:
'round and 'round in circles you go
until everything looks the same.

So, *keep your strength up,*
because this song doesn't end
until you die.

It Was Dark, and So Was She

Bill had a wet bar and a pool table in his basement, so for their third date he invited Maggie over to have a few drinks and shoot some pool.

But after about eight drinks and eight games Maggie was beating him seven to one, so Bill got bored and he turned the radio on and tuned it to a slow-jams station to shake things up a bit.

“Hey Maggie, how 'bout a dance?” Bill said, and he strutted toward her like a peacock in heat.

“Get the hell away from me,” Maggie said, and she gripped her pool cue with both hands and whacked Bill on the shoulder like she was trying to split a round of cordwood with a dull ax.

It was a vicious two-handed blow that chopped Bill down to his knees, and when he looked up Maggie was standing over him with wild eyes cocked and ready for another swing.

“Wait, wait!” Bill said. “Jesus Christ, what did I do?”

“You don’t talk to me like that, Bill,” Maggie screamed.

“Talk to you like what?” Bill said. “All I said was, how 'bout a dance...”

“Ohhhh,” Maggie said. “I thought you said I looked fat in these pants.”

“No, no, not pants, *dance, dance,*” Bill said.

“Okay, got it, sorry 'bout that Bill,” Maggie said, and she swung her hips to the music with a seductive smile on her face. “Well, now that that’s settled, why don’t you get up and fix us another drink. Who knows? You may get lucky.”

“I don’t know,” Bill said. “Maybe tonight’s just not my night. You know?”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right, sweetheart,” Maggie said. “Eight ball in the corner pocket.”

It was dark, and so was she.

grave-robbing e.e. cummings

Lou Reed's
transformed

who used to
play a psychedelic-ostrich

guitar

and pluck onetwothreefourfivesix stringsjustlikethat

Sweet Jane

she was a handsome man

and what I want to know is

how is your newyork boy

Mister Warhol

Little Rascals

Max and Petey
were two crazy sons of bitches,
but we were best friends.

We ate together, played together,
and each summer when the nuns decided
to close down the jail and let me out on parole,
the three of us went everywhere together.
But I guess that's just what best friends do.

A few years later, Max died in his sleep,
and Petey lived a long, comfortable life,
but he expired in my mother's arms
while I was away at college.
So I didn't get the chance to say goodbye.

But to this day, they're still two of the best dogs
that I've ever known, but I didn't own them,
because you can't own the silence in a puppy dog's eyes.
All you can do is hope that they respond well
to whatever they sense in your presence.

Because most dogs
can smell a mean pile of shit
from a mile away.

Atonement

To say that I regret my sins
would be an understatement.

And I'm aware that whatever
I've done wrong in my life
won't get me on the five o'clock news

but I still have a hard time living with myself.

So most days I flog myself pretty good
because if it was good enough for Saint Francis
then it's good enough for me.

But sometimes when I lie awake in the dark
I wonder if this is exactly
what that devil on my shoulder
had planned for me all along

because my angel won't stop weeping.

FIREBALL

From the moment I shot out of my mother's womb
and my red-flaming flesh entered this world
there's been something peculiar about me,
something quite strange and unusual about me,
something that many a man and woman
has tried and failed to destroy.

And although I've known for many years
who and what I am, I didn't believe it—
in fact, I thought I was nuts.

So I've spent the majority of my life thinking
that there was something wrong with me,
that there was something different about me,
something was just plain odd about me,
something that many a man and woman
would forever try and fail to understand.

But now that I'm intelligent enough to comprehend
that the difference between metaphor and reality
is simply what one chooses to believe,
I can no longer ignore the overwhelming heat
that grows inside of me each time
I confront who and what I am not—
because if I don't believe in who and what I am
then whatever light that's left inside of me will die.

So now as I expose my true identity

to this ill world of judgment, ridicule, and pain—
I am no longer afraid to embrace my idiosyncrasies,
because I now believe more than ever
that I am *ME* and you are *YOU*.
I am not a social security number.
I am not a cog in some man-made machine.
I am not a toy for others to manipulate.
I am not a currency to line pockets with
a race, a color, or a creed—

I'm a *FIREBALL!* A ball of light that's warm and bright
so don't even try to contain me.

And if you can't look beyond my flaws
and respect whatever unique beauty I possess
then I hope you quickly disappear from my orbit
like ash in the wind.

Because the sun rises in the east, sets in the west,
and each day will be eclipsed by the next,
so I'd rather surround myself with those
who will at least have the decency
to accept who and what I am—
and perhaps even pause for a moment
in the wake of my afterglow.

Myosotis

for Saria Mena

Child, when I saw you I was afraid to touch you,
my hands unworthy of your innocence.

Oh fragile...infant...*Buddha*. Your atomic smile
was enough to silence the world.

Now, after all the flowers I remain. Years will pass.
The wreaths and sprays will all be discarded.

But in my thoughts—
always *one*

glorious

forget-me-not.

Turnpike Terror

In the asphalt sea, the sharks and me,
strange multi-colored fish are we.

With a flash of red and blue in review
a Great White sped toward me today.

(Its drab counter shaded exterior—
HOT TO CHASE.)

Believing that I was its target
a cold current of fear struck me
and I slowed in my lane.

With a swerve of its tail and fenders
my two-ton aggressor propelled.

(Its drab counter shaded exterior—
HOT TO CHASE someone else.)

Thankful that I was not prey for predator
a blue calm struck me
and my migration continued.

In the asphalt sea, the sharks and me,
strange multi-colored fish are we.

All of us weak to the shriek of sirens.

Light Sensitive

You hide so well behind dilapidated corneas.
Come out...come out...*sad eyes!*

The bottle caps are singing...

magic...

moments...

For old times and new times, don't be deaf to the song.
Even old dogs need to howl at the moon.

So murder with the crows and wail with the loons.
Let those orange rings shine and allow peace

to encapsulate those dark brown balls
saturated in glum syrup.

For in the gloom of your grey glaucoma
a rooster waits, to mourn your evening skies.

Long Gone the Drums

America I miss you. I am loathsome no more. A surrender dear continent *to you*, who once coaxed miracles for immigrants. *To you*, who once dripped saturated with honey. *For all*, who pine in splintered forests of inflated lumber. *For all*, twice and three times denied encouragement. Obsolete are *we* who flicker in the still frames of mass media. *We*, who languish in the mechanical graveyards of fleeting industry. *REMORSEFUL*, the citizen hoards whose eternal faith summons your return. Long gone the pomp, long gone the drums of the old republic.

Beautiful Vultures

A black cloud above me
a broken ring of feathers in the sky
human eyes, with a taste for rancid meat.

Beautiful vultures soar patient for my corpse.

Devils you say. Well, I disagree.
Their actions are *Godlike*—while alive
they wait for me and never interfere.

This vessel my own,
my death their encumbrance.

God's Always Watching

Here I sit head in hand
with a coin and a scratch-off ticket
wondering if all of my problems
will soon be solved and dissolve
in a cloud of victory.

Fuck—*two cherries and a banana.*

(Better luck next time, sucker.)

Pushing Up Daisies

All of my heroes are pushing up daisies
except for a few, and they will soon follow.

Names tend to fade, trends come and go,
but every child needs someone to admire,
a man or woman to emulate—

every child needs a HERO.

Some wear numbers, some use gloves,
some use brushes, chisels, metal, or film.
Others: poetry, prose, or song. Some lead nations,
others rebellion. One is my father, and he's a king
as far as my heroes go.

All of my heroes are pushing up daisies
except for a few, and they will soon follow.

To be a *HERO* you need two virtues:
talent and *weakness*. So your admirers
can cheer your entrance and mourn your exit.

Dead or alive, their lives improved by
your imprint, your number, your victories;
your paintings, sculptures, or films;
your poetry, prose, or song; your leadership
of a nation, or the liberty of your rebellion—

every child needs a HERO.

So why can't it be *you*?

Vitus Vinifera

With wine, the labels blur
to hypnotic music.

With wine, bitter seeds
sprout olive branches.

With wine, the heathens dance
half-naked androgynous.

With wine, purple-lipped kisses
resuscitate parched flowers.

With wine, the amnesia
of an overflowing glass oracle.

With wine, immaculate
veritas inaccurate.

With wine, and more wine
a deep, long, sleep.

A Heart Full of Pearls

When it comes to death, I have learned to react,
like an oyster with a parasite lodged inside its shell.

So although I may appear numb to it (*death* that is),
I'm as human as any
Tom, Dick, Harry, Jane, Jen, or Jill.

But inside of this seemingly impenetrable sooner-or-
later-to-be corpse, there is still a tad of soft, moist flesh
in there that is easily irritated.

So I coat the memories of those I have loved, lost, still
love, and will always love in the tears that fail to flow
from my forlorn eyes until a pearl forms in my heart.

Sadly, what began with one pure, iridescent stone
has now developed into quite a collection
of morbid gems.

But what does one do with a heart full of pearls
that are at times too fragile to broach,
but too priceless to discard?

Except to protect and carry the weight of them with me,
until death do us part.

Golden Years

for David Bowie

When I was six, my mother
turned the volume up on our '70s
space faced Zenith receiver
and I heard him bark:

“This ain’t rock & roll,
this is *GENOCIDE!*”

And from that point on
the world looked and sounded
very different to me, because
he really, truly, *killed* me.

Jackals of All Trades Masters of None

To some it's the dawn of a new age
a time to pilfer what's already been pilfered
an opportunity to fill up the old war chest
while we fight amongst ourselves
confused, bewildered, and afraid.

It's a tactic well used throughout history
and they know this better than you and I
because they were raised to believe
that Armageddon is their birthright
and although there is no X penciled in
on their Gregorian calendars—

they know their *ATOMIC-GOD* looms
but they are not afraid of it
because they created it
just in case the meek decide
that it's finally time
to inherit the earth.

The Corn Maze

The trees are on fire again
red, green, gold, and grown,
soon they will be grey as ash.

Another summer, another autumn
and soon the snow will fall.

In the fields the tractor wheels
kick up harvest moon dust,
while children select pumpkins
to decorate windows and porches.

Another summer, another autumn
and soon everything green will die.

As we walk this maze of dead stalks
the New Year beckons—
to spring the strongest seeds.

Beware the Fluttering Wings of Death Angels

She's every boy's wet dream.
She's a candy cane on Christmas.
She's got a mind as sharp as a meat cleaver
and a tongue that cuts into you
like a hundred licks from a bullwhip.

But she's tight, she's cool, she's hot,
She's the scratch to that malevolent itch.
So you'll do what she wants whenever she wants
as you lie limp in the palm of her hand.

And you'll want her, but you won't know why.
You'll want her as she bleeds you dry.
And you'll want her much more than she'll want you,
but she can never be had.

Evolution

Often, simple tasks evolve into habit,
like taking a daily shower
or saying a prayer before sleeping.

Habits like these seem harmless.
But bees are harmless
until you're stung by one.

Then a welt will rise.

And with enough welts
perhaps (before a death by asphyxiation)
you will realize:

that ice cream can kill you,
hope can kill you, stress can kill you,
that even love can kill you.

Evolution is
learning how to avoid
oncoming traffic.

The Return of Kid Lightning

With three hours of free time left
before I rabbit punch the clock,
here I am (once again) trying my best
to knock out a new poem.

It's 7:16 AM. A July sun is burnin' off the morning dew.
I'm hoping for a breakthrough while Kay's dog sleeps
in a light puddle beside my chair. I'm in my underwear,
and there's a blue mug of coffee steaming beside
a lit cigarette in the ashtray on my desk.
Everything seems to be in its place—
but it's too hot to keep the window closed,
so I opened it, and a car alarm is distracting me
while two crows and a hive of locusts
fight for auditory supremacy. Oh yeah,
a bus just went by carrying Who-Knows-Who
to Who-Knows-Where. I'm sitting in a blue chair
that I bought at IKEA when I was down on my luck,
and the two creeps in the apartment above me
just started to fuck—but here I am (once again)
trying my best to knock out a new poem.

You know, a few days ago, I received a few compliments
from a guy in Texas that made me feel pretty good.
He said, "I'd never heard of Charles Joseph before,
but he is now a poet that I intend on following," and,

“I’m interested in seeing what he has planned for the future.” Which, when decoded, pretty much means, “Hey man, I dig your stuff, so get off your lazy ass and pump out a few new poems before I forget that you exist.”

Well, to be honest, if that ain’t pressure, Tex, I don’t know what is. However, I appreciate your interest in our work. *I really do!* But after years of sluggin’ it out with the blank page, if there’s one thing that I’ve learned, it’s that creativity comes and goes in waves. So, I don’t have the heart to tell you this to your face, Tex, because you’re our one and only fan, but Charles Joseph is my alter ego and for the past three months or so, he’s been down for the count. He believes that the think-well is dry—that whatever silver he had on his tongue has lost its luster. He hates everything that we’ve written, and he will without a doubt hate everything that we write in the future.

So, with that said, he has no idea what it is about our work that you like, because he can’t even stand to read it, and when he does read it, he feels sick inside like a little boy who just dropped his lollipop onto an anthill.

But a few kind words can go a long way,

and in this case they did because you
stirred something inside of us, Tex—
and you're not aware of this, but it was you
who coaxed us back up on our feet. So,
since we're here shadowboxing a wall
as tall as a skyscraper,
this one's for you, Tex, (wherever you are):

*Roses are red, violets are blue
I have no idea what comes next*

boohoo.

*Writing is hard, writing sucks,
I wish I had a four-leaf clover*

(The End).

Well, that ain't much, and this ain't much,
but here I am (once again)
trying my best to knock out a new poem.

So thanks for your help, Tex,
but I gotta go now
'cause it's almost time for me
to rabbit punch the clock.

But just so you know, even though
I'm on my way to the showers, this little exercise

has miraculously whipped me back into shape,
and for some odd reason I feel like a contender again.
So in the morning, when my alarm clock rings—
DING, DING, DING—trust me, Tex:

I won't need a four-leaf clover.

And the blank page better watch its ass.

'Cause *KID LIGHTNING* is *BACK*
and tomorrow he'll be comin' out swingin'.

Soon, It Will Be Time for Me to Miss You More Than Ever

Soon all of the turkeys
will be stuffed with Christmas cheer
and I'll be watching Mighty Joe Young
wondering how a papier-mâché ape
from 1948 can still melt my heart
after all of these years.

Then I'll remember the rabbit ears
on top of your television set
and I'll say the word *grandpa*
but you won't be there to hear it
and I'll miss you more than ever
but I'll keep it between you and me.

Because my facade
has grown thick enough
to allow children to be children
just like yours was each year
we spent together
during the holidays.

Remembering 1912, For the Boys in the Band

To this day
they're still not sure
what it was that sank the ship,
but this much is true:
the band played on
as the North Atlantic
slowly swallowed
all of their hopes and dreams.

Some say they were heroes,
and I imagine others believe
that they were fools,
but this much is also true:
as bows graced the strings
of three violins, a bass, and three cellos,
the hammers inside a piano danced on wires
as each instrument made love to its master's soul.

But as their Titanic love affair
eclipsed all doubt that that moment
would be their final requiem,
the taste of fear would never sour
the sweetness of their tone,
because they were frozen in time,
affixed to the sound that only *their* hands
could conjure at will.

Queer-bait

Smarter than the average bear,
Yogi never chased after his cubs;
he knew that his fur was enough
to lure them in.

Assless chaps
were for impatient dicks;
his Janes were shy and submissive,
just like his wife.

Tomahawk

It's funny how
that little voice inside of me
can twist me into a knotted mess
and make me say or do
crazy things.

But for the most part,
I've always been too smart
for my little voice,
because if he had his way
we'd currently be fish food.

I mean (get this): one time
he told me to jump off a bridge—
and considering the circumstances
I honestly entertained the idea,
but I'm still here, right?

So, even though
I've caved to his desires
more than a few times,
in the end, I'm much stronger
than he is as well.

Of course, that doesn't diminish the fact
that when he's really on the warpath
I tend to sit somewhere quiet
with a glazed look on my face

while he forces me to analyze each
and every fragment of my life
that's better off forgotten
until I become so overwhelmed with grief
that I wish someone would come along
and whack me on the side of my head
with the blunt end of a tomahawk
so that motherfucker will just bleed out
and I can start this game over
with a new little voice
that's a little more forgiving—
but I'm not that lucky,
so I guess we're stuck with each other
until one of us decides to give up.

But it ain't gonna be me,
because I'm aware that each time
I've said that I wish I were dead,
what I really meant to say was
I WANNA LIVE.

And I've known that for a long time now,
so I guess that's exactly why
he's in there bitching and moaning,
and I'm out here running the show.

Penn Station Postscript

Late one night while waiting for the cattle car,
I studied the faces of a hundred miserable humans.

With all seats occupied by blue and white collars,
I discovered a man more miserable than all of us.

Cockeyed drunk and slumped over a trash receptacle,
he nodded in and out of his oblivion—

uncomfortable in the solitude of his humble home,
seemingly invisible to bystanders.

Ambiguity Defined

Hawking lost God in a black hole
Goswami found him with Quantum Physics.

Sally lost God when the baby died
Jimmy found him after the needle.

I've lost God many times
but never found his equal.

Ashes and Tombstones

Despite whatever
the witch doctors tell you
a death is never a celebration.
But regardless of what
one does on this earth
a fragment is generally left behind
that someone will carry with them
like a stone or a grain of sand in their boot
that rubs their skin raw enough
to leave an indelible mark
over an indelible mark
that was formed the moment
eyes met eyes or words touched ears
and love was something that wasn't discussed
but felt as the hands of clocks raced forward
and the years melted away
only to expose that a galaxy of hellos
can be pulverized to stardust
by one catastrophic goodbye.
So no, despite whatever
the witch doctors tell you
a death is never a celebration.
But honoring a memory
is as close to noble
as most of us
can ever hope to be.

#26 For the Boy from Cody Wyoming

Jackson was a horrible drunk,
but at least he embraced the truth.

If one throws enough shit
at the wall, to the floor, on a page,
SOME OF IT is bound to stick.

Jackson lived, painted, and died,
but at least he found the SWEET SPOT.

For years, I've had a room
to write in, to work in, to die slow in—
inside of it a galaxy of crumpled paper stars.

Each morning I search for the SWEET SPOT
in the hallowed halls of mind, body, and soul.

Some days I spit out a diamond.
Most days I choke on coal dust.

But now that I've thrown enough shit
on the page, on this page, on other pages,
SOME OF IT is beginning to stick.

With many cigarettes, much coffee, and failure,
I have also learned to embrace the truth—
all art is somewhat accidental.

CHAMELEON 2

Omnibus Unum 2012–2016

Selected Poems and Stories



New Tricks for Old Dogs

THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS went out in Weehawken, Frank and Beth had been living together in their little one-bedroom apartment on Boulevard East for about two years. It was the end of March, April 1st was only a few days away, and when Beth's alarm clock woke her up at six a.m. the power was still on, so it just seemed and felt like another Tuesday.

Beth worked days and Frank worked nights, so Frank was asleep while Beth was in the shower wondering where their relationship was heading. Beth wasn't angry with Frank; she just missed the man that he was when they decided to move in together. And once she was dry, dressed, and ready to leave, she slipped a check for her half of the rent into the right pocket of Frank's pea coat so he wouldn't forget to pay

the rent on time again, and quietly closed the front door on her way out.

Beth was non-combative like that. And she was aware that whatever she said or did to help Frank remember anything of relative importance was—for the most part—a complete waste of her time and energy. But Beth always tried her best to tolerate Frank’s absent-minded behavior, because she loved him. I mean, it wasn’t like Frank had Alzheimer’s; he just worked too much and needed a vacation, so Beth was kind enough to chalk up the majority of his scatterbrained antics to complete and utter exhaustion.

But later that afternoon when Beth returned home from work, she flicked the light switch on the wall beside the front door and the lack of current to each and every switch and socket in their apartment forced her to let out a blood curdling scream that raised the ruff on the backs of every dog and cat within earshot.

“That’s it, I can’t take it anymore, I’m gonna kill you Frank,” she screamed, and stomped her right foot so hard she cracked the heel right off her shoe. But as Beth fell down to her knees and into the darkness of Frank’s negligence, she held back her tears as if one tear would sway her from leaving him. Enough was enough, and as far as Beth was concerned, this was one grand scale faux pas that Frank wasn’t going to smooth

over with another bouquet of flowers and an awkward grin. Nope, in her mind, it was over between them, and as soon as she could figure out where she was going, she was gone.

IT WAS FOUR-THIRTY and the sun was still out, but Frank and Beth's apartment was in the back of the building, so the light that beamed into the living room windows through their venetian blinds was as dull and dreary as their relationship had become. As usual, Frank was still at work, and he didn't get home most nights until a little after eleven. Beth was still at her wits' end. But instead of quickly packing up all of her belongings and booking a room at the Weehawken Sheraton for the night, she decided to sit down on the couch in their living room to calm down a bit and consider her options.

Beth didn't hate Frank; she just wasn't sure if she could be with him anymore. But the more she thought about leaving, the more she felt she should stay. Because after years of maneuvering in and out of one failed relationship after the other, she was afraid that if she left Frank she'd spend the rest of her life alone.

A poor reason to stick it out and give Frank a shot at redemption perhaps, but Beth was forty and divorced, and her ex-husband had cheated on her, so considering that all Frank really did was forget to pay

the electric bill, his bad behavior was at least forgivable.

It wasn't only that though, because aside from his shortcomings, Beth truly loved Frank, and from the moment they met, something inside of her told her that he was the one. But Frank was a forty-two year old workaholic, and Beth knew that unless he decided to pick her over his job, that it was only a matter of time before the funk that their relationship was in would sour them to the point where it would take a miracle to revive it.

But miracles happen everyday, some large, some small, and some are so minute we don't even bat an eye. And when Beth's cell phone rang in her purse that afternoon, the voice on the other end wasn't God, it was Frank, but as soon as she held her phone to her ear and he spoke, she blinked her eyes and as if by some miracle all of her anger and fear disappeared.

"You there, Beth?" he said. "Surprise! I'm on my way home, Hun."

"Oh my God, seriously, Frank? You have no idea how happy I am to hear that. How far away are you?" Beth said, and a few of the tears that she'd held back trickled down her cheeks.

"I'll be there soon, Hun," Frank said. "I'm just at the store picking a few things up for us for dinner. You didn't eat yet did you?"

“No, to be honest, I wasn’t that hungry before you called. But I will be.”

“Okay, well...any requests?”

“Nah, I don’t care. I’m just happy you’re coming home, Baby.”

“Yeah, me too, Sweetie. Okay, well, I guess I’ll see you soon then. Love you.”

“I love you too,” Beth said, and as soon as Frank hung up, she scrolled through her contacts to find the number to PSE&G to try to get the power turned back on before he got home, so it wouldn’t ruin their evening alone together. But once she found the number and made the call, the hold time to speak to a representative was thirty-five minutes, and Frank was only about twenty-five minutes away—so Beth hung up the phone and took a deep breath to calm her nerves, and by the time she exhaled she was up on her feet rooting around for candles.

NOW IN MOST INSTANCES, twenty-five minutes or so isn’t that much time to weave a web of deception. But for Beth, it was long enough to conjure a bit of a smokescreen and get into the shower to lure Frank into her trap. So when Frank opened the front door of their apartment and stepped inside, he didn’t find it odd that all of the blinds were shut and that there was a candle flickering in every room, he just assumed

exactly what Beth wanted him to assume; that she was trying to be romantic.

Of course, when Frank walked into the bathroom to say hello, his first instinct was to put the two bags of groceries that he had with him down, so he could get undressed and join her. But Beth squashed that idea as soon as she heard the bags hit the floor.

“Don’t even think about it buddy,” she said. “We have all night, right? Let’s just wait a bit, okay?”

“Sure babe, whatever you want,” Frank said, and hung his head a bit disappointed. “Well, I guess I’ll just start dinner then. I got us some lamb chops if you’re wondering.”

“Um, that sounds great, Frank, but—”

“But what? What’s wrong?” Frank said. “You love lamb chops. Don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course I do, but the power’s out, and we have an electric stove, so I guess we’ll just have to wait until it comes back on to cook.”

“What do you mean the power’s out? I just spoke to you like 20 minutes ago. What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know,” Beth said. “The lights flickered a few times and everything went black, so I lit a few candles. What’s the big deal?”

“It isn’t. It’s just weird, that’s all. I finally get a night off and now this.”

“Oh c’mon, Frank, would you just relax and forget

Frank said. “You only live once, right?”

“Exactly,” Beth said. “Oh my God Frank, this is gonna be so much fun, I’m so excited right now you have no idea. Okay, you go get the bread and the cheese and cut it all up, and I’ll set things up for us in the living room.”

“Alright, sounds like a plan,” Frank said, and Beth took off before he could say another word.

Of course Frank didn’t like lying to Beth, but he knew that as long as he played dumb and kept her occupied she wouldn’t bother to investigate, and with a bit of luck he could just clear things up in the morning and his little secret would be safe.

But after their little picnic on the living room floor, one bottle of wine morphed into two, and Beth and Frank talked and laughed by candlelight until they finally decided to go to bed, and by morning whatever it was that they were lying to each other about didn’t matter anymore, because when they woke up beside each other all of the lights in their apartment were on, and Frank and Beth were both as innocent as their intentions.