

# CHOCHECHERRY

*BY CONNOR DE BRULER*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Apart from Michael Howard's 'Can anyone else feel that?' (Issue Two-Fiction) you won't find better dialogue on FLEAS than in Connor de Bruler's 'Chokecherry'. The exchanges between Carlo and Tillandsia are truly mesmerizing and we think the author's descriptive prose is almost too beautiful. This is the kind of writing that looks easy but is hardest to craft. And while we're gaga about his style, it's the story itself that really impacts. Who wouldn't want to read about a sexually conflicted young hustler with murder on his mind? A hypnotic narrative haunted by dark and elemental strains from a writer you want to watch. Quote: 'A game of pool commenced in the back room like the cracking of a whip.' And, "Do you seriously want to go to prison?" / "I'd rather go to prison than deal with this anymore." / "And what the fuck do you think happens to people like us in prison? You think I don't know how bad you hurt? I was inside for just a year and a half, general population with men." ...Uh-huh.*

On paper, Carlo was molested just once, but he had suffered for years. The real difficulty came in articulating that the manipulation and confusion it caused was almost worse than having to perform those alien sexual acts. His parents' therapist (not his personal counselor) called it "grooming" as if his hair was constantly being shampooed and brushed in those days.

The future became the household religion and he started to see ghosts in the margins of life.

His parents divorced and his mother regressed into conservative ideology. His father, the only son of a tenured English professor, had not instilled enough masculinity in her son, so she embraced a man closer to her own father's likeness: a Staff Sergeant at Fort Bliss.

She remarried a couple weeks after they moved to El Paso. Carlo never learned how she had met this new man, but a blank room with a window view of the mountains was waiting for him the day they

arrived. Their ceremony was held in a small desert chapel and the reception took place in the driveway and garage of his pueblo-style house off base. The dry heat was oppressive. His ice-cream melted down his wrist. Plastic cups emulsified in the sunlight.

When Carlo returned to the coast of South Carolina, he was twenty-three years old. The low country marshland beneath the iron bridges and single-lane roads looked like pools of spilled crude oil in the dusk half-light. Clouds parted with twice the speed in the coastal breeze, hiding and then revealing the low arch of a chalk-colored moon as he drove further into the festering swampland toward a fractured coast. He was still in men's clothes as he drove (a faded nicotine-yellow T-shirt and dust-worn jeans) but his face still carried the remnants of makeup he hadn't tried in earnest to wipe away. Eye-liner still traced the irritated, sleep-deprived flesh above his lashes and some smudged Revlon sat on his lips like a wine stain. His aquamarine fingernail polish was chipping where he compulsively bit down on the tip, something he had done since his move to El Paso. He kept his suitcase in the seat beside him in the beat up Honda. The suitcase belonged to his mother. He had stolen it.

Arriving somewhere unfamiliar at night was like sneaking into a stranger's home. His old hometown ran on a Southeastern schedule and just as the communal energy began to settle, Carlo was out of sync. The lights of 24-hour drugstores and gas stations shined bright on his contracting pupils. The streets were empty. He rolled down the driver's side windshield to smell the salt and exhaust in the air. There was blood on the night sky. He knew the difference between death and life. There was something supremely dead about this area. The windows of the doublewides were dark as if hollow inside. The palmettos shuddered in the wind but the trees, the kind seen more often inland, were unmoving. A bad omen.

He took a cigarette from the soft pack in the cup holder at his waist and lit the end with the weak flame from his neon Bic. He punched the cabin lights and read over two addresses scribbled on the worn sheet ripped from a legal pad. His headlights dimmed until he shut off the cabin bulbs. The battery and car around it was getting old.

He headed down Red Bend road and took a right at Chokecherry Lane. Carlo ashed the cigarette out the window with his left hand and steered with his right. In the headlights, he caught glimpses of raccoons

and possums scuttling along the wood and chicken-wire fences. He hadn't heard the yapping of coyotes all night. It would take getting used to.

He found the first address from the legal pad's hectic scrawl at the edge of a cul de sac of empty timeshare cabins garnished in a boathouse aesthetic. Lightning struck in the distance, illuminating the expanse of swampland beyond the small backyards surrounded in waist-high alligator fencing. The only house that had any activity was the squat ranch home at the cul de sac's center. There were two cars in the driveway: a beige Impala and a black pickup truck. Warm red light pulsed on the heavy curtains.

He parked in front of the mailbox to give the other cars enough space to pull out and sat in the darkness smoking. It started to rain. He tossed the spent cigarette butt out the car and lit another. He didn't bother to roll up the window in the rainfall. He liked the way rain felt on his face. He leaned back in his seat and stretched his legs. He had been driving for two days. He stopped for the night in Alabama, sleeping in the back of the car. A strip mall security guard knocked on the window around six a.m. and told him to get lost.

He continued to wait. Early night turned into late night and he lost patience. He took some personal things from the car like a tube of lipstick and a bottle of pills as well as his Bic and cigarettes and shoved them in his pockets. He opened the glove compartment and took out the black, wooden grip revolver and box of .38 special and stuffed them in the front zipper of the rolling suitcase. He had not stolen the pistol or the ammunition. His stepfather had given him the gun to take to the range when he was seventeen.

He locked the car and took his suitcase up the shallow steps to the concrete patio in the rain. He rang the doorbell and knocked twice.

Mistress Tillandsia cracked the door open by a meager inch. The several chains hooked onto the doorsill divided her face.

"It's Carlo," he said.

"You're a day early."

"I made good time comin' from Texas."

"I'm with a client, you'll need to wait."

“I can crash on a couch or something.”

“I don’t have a couch in my house. I run my business through most of my living space. Things aren’t ready for you yet. Go around back. There’s a hammock under the veranda. Give me at least two hours.”

“Alright.”

He went to the back and saw the hammock. What she called the veranda was an uneven slab of repurposed boardwalk below a corrugated tin roof. He set his suitcase behind the headrest of the hammock beside the dry spigot in the vine-eaten brick. He lay back, halfway sheltered from the rain, and breathed in the musk of the swamp air. Even in the rain, the still water gave off an odor.

He fell asleep.

When he woke up, Mistress Tillandsia was yelling at him to get inside through the screen door. Carlo pulled himself out of the cocoon-like folds of the hammock and grabbed the suitcase. He passed through the heavy rain and up the creaking boards to the kitchen entrance where she stood in the fluorescent light. Her client was still inside, hanging out in the kitchen in his underwear, sipping from a glass of Evan Williams beside the open bottle at the wooden table. He was a bearded guy, five to six years older than Carlo, a confederate flag tattooed on his bare shoulder. The flag had been separated into thirds by several long calluses as if someone had tried to cut it off with a razor. Carlo noticed a Ziploc bag full of ice shoved into his boxers.

“The fuck you looking at?”

Carlo turned away and followed Tillandsia out of the kitchen through a narrow wood-paneled hallway. The dominatrix got her name from the scientific “*Tillandsia usneoides*,” otherwise known as Spanish moss. She had an air mattress blown up in the corner of her bedroom beside the bathroom door. There were two pillows, an ill-fitting, bunched top sheet and a thin gray blanket. It looked more welcoming than he could have imagined. He gave her twenty-dollars which she took from him without hesitating.

“I have to go back to the kitchen.”

When she was gone, he dove on top of the mattress and buried his face in the pillows. He fell asleep again. He dreamed about suffocating in a plastic bag, about the feeling of duct tape around his neck; the horrible noise of suction it made as a length was peeled off the roll. The terrible feeling of foreign textures and the taste of bodily fluids marred his unconscious mind.

He woke up the next day around noon. It was still raining outside, or perhaps it had stopped at some point and started over. The mattress was beginning to deflate. He sat upright and the opposite ends lifted from the carpet. He looked around the room. Mistress Tillandsia wasn't in her bed. The blinds were closed. His suitcase was gone. His clothes were neatly and carefully folded atop her dresser. He stood up and moved into the hallway. She had set his suitcase in a small alcove beneath a shoe rack. He pulled it out and checked the front pocket.

She was rustling in the kitchen. Carlo walked over to the wooden table where his cigarettes and lighter had been set out for him.

“Do you drink coffee?”

“Yes,” he said, sitting down and placing a cigarette between his lips.

“How do you take it?”

“Luke warm and straight black.”

She set the cup in front of him.

“You'll have to wait for it to cool down.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Thanks for everything, for the bed and a place to stay. For setting my stuff out. I appreciate all of it...”

“There's a 'but' coming,” she said, interrupting him.

“Where's my gun and my bullets.”

“I was actually looking through your stuff to make sure you didn't bring any hard drugs into my house.”

“I get it. It’s your place. You don’t want something dangerous like that around. It was disrespectful to bring it inside. I should have kept it in my car.”

Tillandsia took a seat at the table and sipped at her cup of coffee.

“It *was* disrespectful and I don’t want anything like that in my house,” she said.

“I’ll go put it back in my car.”

“Nice try. You’ll get it back when you leave.”

He smiled and ashed his cigarette in the crystal tray between them.

“Why can’t I just put it away in my car? I was gonna go to the range tomorrow.”

She set her cup on the table.

“You’re so transparent, you’re almost invisible.”

“I know it doesn’t look good. But the truth is, when I had to leave El Paso, where else did I know anyone who could help me get situated. You know, get a job and get a place. I’d be living in my car if I went anywhere else.”

“Carlo, baby,” she said. “It doesn’t look good because it isn’t good. Why do you think I said yes?”

“So you’re just letting me stay here so you could talk me out of it?”

“I’m not going to talk you out of anything. I’m just not going to let you.”

“Why not?” he said, his face turning red.

“Because it’s not worth your life.”

“It’s not worth my life? It is my life. It’s always been my life.”

“Things can change. You’re still a kid.”

“The way things changed for him. Everyday he’s out there talking to people who don’t know. Every time he’s given...”

“You’re obsessed. You’re wounded and you’re full of rage and you’re naive.”

“But I’m right. You can concede to that one fact. Whatever I do, or what you’re trying to prevent, you can agree with me that I’m right.”

“I can’t say that. No, I can’t say that you’re right. I can agree that he’s wrong.”

He began to breathe heavily through his nose and wiped tears from his face.

“Give me my fuckin’ gun back, Norman!”

She reached across the table and gave him a powerful, open-handed slap.

He squinted from the pain.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You say something like that again and you can get the fuck out of my house. And I will call the police and tell them you have a plan to murder someone. Do you understand?”

He buried his face into his hands and began crying, nodding his head.

She set a box of tissues in front of him and told him not to get snot on her kitchen table.

He took one and cleaned his nostrils.

“Do you seriously want to go to prison?”

“I’d rather go to prison than deal with this anymore.”

“And what the fuck do you think happens to people like us in prison? You think I don’t know exactly how bad you hurt? I was inside for just a year and a half, general population with men.”

“I want him to die so bad.”

“You need to forget he exists,” she said. “You should look for your father, or your grandfather. Find a job. Create something.”

He tried to stop crying.

“I was thinking about...seeing if...I could spend some time with my dad’s dad.”

“Maybe you need to go back to Texas.”

“Don’t make me go back. I can’t go back there.”

“Then what am I going to do with you, Carlo?”

He had to leave the house when she had clients over. He could go to the Bojangles a mile up the road or stay in the backyard when it wasn’t raining and watch the alligators sunbathe on the mounds of pluff mud like statues. She had a regular list of men who came to the house. Not one looked the same. Some of

them came with gym bags stuffed with gear and outfits they liked to wear. One guy had a suitcase record player and a milk crate of vinyl albums he brought to each session. Another showed up with a different bottle of champagne and assortment of European chocolates. Not all were so innocent. He had seen her throw at least two men out the door with their clothes half off.

The first guy he had seen with the swollen groin came around again. He spent about four hours inside and left. Carlo took the beat up Honda and followed his black truck to a dive bar called Ollie's at the edge of the marsh. The parking lot was nothing but white dust and pine needles. He watched him pass through the void of dark neon after the doorman glanced at his license. He followed him inside, letting his eyes adjust to the lightlessness. Tillandsia's client sat alone at the edge of the bar top with a bottle of Miller Genuine Draft in front of him, the bent cap still latched to the top of the long neck which he hadn't yet touched. There was shame in his eyes. A game of pool commenced in the background like the cracking of a whip. Carlo sat across from him and ordered a shot of tequila. He made eye contact and swigged the drink. He didn't say anything and averted his eyes from Carlo.

"Hey, you remember me?"

He said nothing.

"Hey," he whispered as low as he could while still being heard. "It's me. I'm Mistress Tillandsia's friend. I saw you..."

"Why don't you get the fuck out of here, man. I ain't tryin' to talk to you."

"It isn't like that. I was just looking for somebody who might be able to get me a gun?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm looking for a..."

"Why are you whispering at me, man. I ain't trying to listen to you. You need to get the fuck out of here."

The pool game behind them stopped. The bartender walked over to them.

"What's going on?"

"Get this faggot out of here, Reg."

The bartender turned to Carlo.

“Pay for the drink and get the fuck out of here. This isn’t that kind of bar, snowflake.”

Carlo said nothing and placed the wrinkled bills on the bartop. He walked out the door into the thick humidity, the tread of his shoes grinding against the dusty lot and noticed a man with a pool cue following him to his car. The doorman had his back turned as he smoked a cigarette. Carlo dropped to one knee, acting like he was tying his shoelace. The young man following him wore a plain white T-shirt and pulled the bill of his baseball cap low to hide his face. He came up behind him with the cue raised. Carlo knocked him in the groin with his elbow before whipping around and hooking him with a bony fist. He fell to the ground, his back covered in pine needles. The doorman was still ignoring them, thinking the fag was getting beat. Carlo’s adrenaline surged. He picked up the pool cue and rammed the heavier end against his attacker’s face. The young man’s nose broke and blood rippled over his wispy mustache and dry lips. He raised the cue high and swung it against his kneecap, then threw it into the bushes like a javelin before racing to the Honda. He drove away without looking back.

Tillandsia had been paid, in part, by one of her regular clients with a bag of very potent Miami cannabis. She characterized it as less of a payment and more of a large tip, or gift. She decided to take the following night to offer Carlo a good time. She had no couch in the living room, so they watched TV and talked and smoked a bowl while lounging on her bed. The flat screen was on the dresser. She didn’t have cable, but it didn’t matter what was on.

They watched the ending of a Mexican soap opera and Carlo translated the dialogue and taught Tillandsia some of the terms. He had been learning Spanish in school since childhood and picked up even more from the streets of El Paso. Throughout his life, he was either speaking or reading, or even thinking in Spanish, but still did not consider himself fluent. Teachers mistakenly used to call him Carlos on his first day of class. His mother’s maiden name was DiAngelo.

Tillandsia flipped through channels while Carlo painted her nails. He was stoned and took two minutes on each nail. She didn't care. She had done her fingers earlier. He mentioned ordering a pizza and she got out her laptop to place the order. She asked what he wanted and he hesitated for another few minutes, lost in rerun of *The Simpsons*. She snapped her fingers to break the trance and asked him what he wanted. He wanted sausage and black olives. Tillandsia wanted onions. Carlo agreed to red onions.

He finished painting her nails. They continued to watch the same channel as the rerun episode broke for commercial. The local news broadcasted a short teaser for a gas station robbery near the Charleston Highway. A fast food ad sped by at a manic pace. After, an old man's face took over the screen. He was sitting at a large mahogany desk in a stark white office in the foreground. Behind him were a series of open windows with white shutters facing the cobblestone streets below, stray bands of palmetto tree leaves jutting inside. The old man talked about integrity and his time as a deacon. He mentioned his military service and community outreach. He illustrated his years on the tourism board and gave vague allusions to his conservative religious beliefs. The old man gave his name and said he was running for Mayor of Charleston.

They lay on the bed in silence.

Carlo finally said something.

"Do any of your clients like choking?"

"A few," she said.

"Receiving?"

"Of course."

"He was really into choking. I blacked out a few times during."

"And your folks didn't press charges?"

He pointed to the television.

"Does it fuckin' look like they pressed charges?"

"What was your plan?"

“I wasn’t gonna make it public. I know a golf course on Mount Pleasant. He likes to play there on Wednesdays.”

“Have you given up on it?”

“Yeah.”

They finished watching *The Simpsons*. The doorbell rang.

In his dreams, the former deacon had contacted Tillandsia for sex and Carlo was able to corner him in a spare room. He stabbed him with a kitchen knife as many times as he could, but he would never die. His dreams denied him that catharsis. He’d be standing over the sink washing blood out of his hair and face, the handle of the blade sticking out of his shoulder.

Carlo had found a job he didn’t mind at a chain makeup boutique in the city. He had a steadier income and began saving up to move out of Tillandsia’s home. He knew he would need a roommate or two in order to make it work. He spent the last of his prostitution money to buy a button-up white shirt with a black vest and a pair of dress slacks, something to look dapper in while he chose the best foundation for teenage girls and fifty-year-old women. It was better than sucking off construction workers behind a movie theater at four o’clock in the morning.

He decided not to look for his father.

His mother found out where he had gone and called one of Tillandsia’s cell phones. His bitterness had abated and, rationalizing that she’d continue to give him trouble if he didn’t placate her, he spoke to her and let her know he was fine, living with a friend, working a real job. She let him go like she would never see him again.

Election day came. Carlo was not registered to vote. The former deacon lost. The campaign posters were gathered up from the roadsides and stripped from billboards. The commercials on television also ended. Not that he ever watched much television after Tillandsia’s night off.

He got home from work on a Tuesday night. A new client was just leaving the house as he got in. Tillandsia was decompressing in the kitchen with a thin joint. She had a shoe box on the table. He asked her what she had and she told him that she would keep her word. He sat down and looked at the box and thought about the former deacon and the golf course on Mount Pleasant. He opened the shoebox and saw the gun and the smaller box of .38 special, then closed it, tapped his fingers on the table.

She asked him what was wrong, but he said nothing. She passed him the joint and he took a drag and passed it back.

“Maybe you should keep it,” he said. “You know, for protection.”

She set the joint in the side of her mouth and took the shoebox outside. He got up and watched her through the screen door as she threw the handgun and box of .38 into the swamp. He went back to the table and sat down and placed his head in his hands. She stayed outside, listening to the cicadas a few minutes longer.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *‘Chokecherry’ came from a pervasive sense of guilt that I was writing too much about North Carolina and Tennessee and not enough about the midlands or the coast. I spent most of my life ping ponging between North and South Carolina. I had just finished another novel that took place in the mountains and I realized that I was sustaining myself on memories of the crisp air and foliage covered boulders. But I live near the coast around the swamps now, and I remember the proper coast from my teen years too. I like to take pictures of copperheads on my phone and I notice when banana leaves grow each year around the palms. I know the alligators, the snakes, the beaches, the darkness, the desolation. Writing this story was my way of artistically metabolizing this particular region of the Southeast. It’s also a pretty rough place. We have a lot of stabbings and shootings. A truck just drove clean through an apartment a few doors down the sidewalk from me. The weekend before that, a body turned up in a McDonald’s parking lot across from my street. I wanted to convey that brutal daily life through the characters own sense of urgency within the story.*

**BIO:** Connor de Bruler was born in Indiana. He has been published in *The Rambler*, *Pulp Metal Magazine*, *FRESH*, *The Horror Library Vol. 6*, *Yellow Mama* and *The New Flesh*. He is the author

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