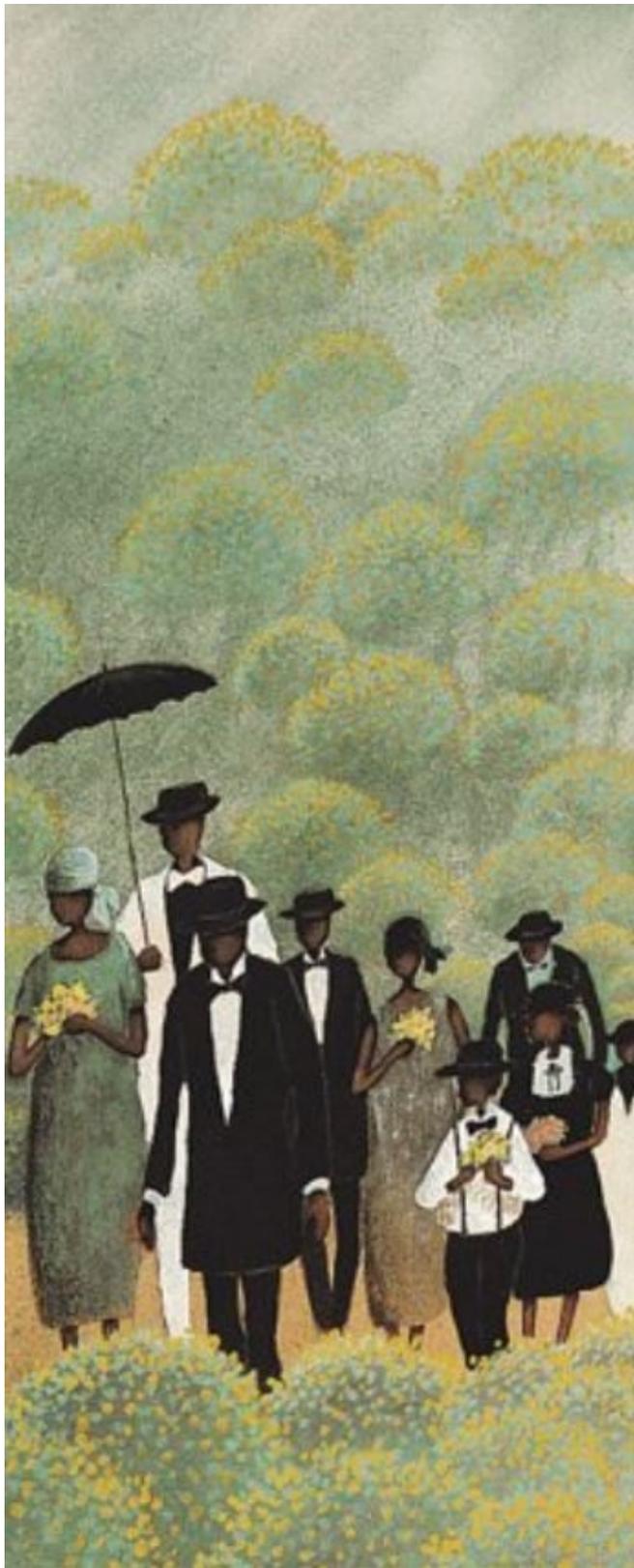


# Natural Selection Blues

by [Chris Dungey](#) (December 2024)



Funeral (T. Coleman)

**Carlotta Saylor decided that she** should leave *Hose A* at home for Teddy's wake. The black, six foot Colombian Motley was lethargic and possibly asleep around her shoulders at the first viewing. Carlotta took him home before the evening session. Most of her friends had been introduced to the fat boa constrictor. No big deal to them. But she couldn't predict whether any of Teddy's white relatives might freak out. She liked her inlaws, the one's she'd met, but had never been to a family reunion.

So, *Hose A*, sated after an ample weekly meal of frozen mice, curled up on his sanitary mat in the small room designated as his. Carlotta could count on him to sleep for a long time while digestion progressed. He could move around, get some exercise tomorrow before the funeral, which he would also not attend. Carlotta preferred to supervise his free ranging so that he didn't find awkward places to hide; like under the claw-foot tub in the bathroom; or injure himself trying to snout his way into a cold-air return. *You too fat for going in there, boy. Not warm in there like you might think.* *Hose A.* weighed in at 47 lbs, still an adolescent.

Carlotta freshened her lipstick after a final meeting with the mortuary people. She left her eyes alone, having been totally disappointed by the durability of her eye-shadow and mascara to tears. *I can't deal with that cremation. Nice little vault for him. I'm gonna wait on a tax refund, get him a stone.* She turned side-to-side flexing her biceps and forearms in the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. She judged them beautiful, or at least *coming along*. She hadn't worked out in the week since Teddy's *mishap*. Carlotta turned out the lights. *Time to go get shitfaced.*

So far, the folks gathered at the conjoined tables in *Lone*

*Pine Bar* were friends that Carlotta and Teddy shared. They were both on the staff at Bendle High School; Carlotta in the kitchen and Teddy one of the reduced corp of maintenance/janitors. A few teachers and coaches arrived early to honor Ted Saylor's years as assistant 8<sup>th</sup> grade football coach. (The most recent season, unpaid.)

Ted's brother, Terry, arrived. He and Carlotta embraced. Her sister Juanita kissed half the people in the bar then squeezed into their booth. The dimly lit place, its walls a poster history of local sports teams, was loud with garbled stories. A working class dive, whose assembly-line clientele had been made redundant 30 years ago, it absolutely fit the tenor and temperament of Teddy Saylor. A babble of reminiscences rose toward her like ocean swells.

A barmaid brought a tray crowded with *Fireball* shooters purchased by Lorenzo Kline, a biology teacher refugee from shuttered Flint Northwestern High. "Knock 'em back y'all. Nobody ever faced a puddle a vomit with more calm disdain than my friend Teddy Saylor. Whenever we began a dissection unit, ol' Ted'd just pull up a chair outside my lab."

"Hear, hear," cried Emmet Brown-Wander, Carlotta's boss, head chef and so-called *dietician*. "That man was a stalwart for any digestive crisis our student body might face. Lottie? You remember that one time we set out potato salad cups for a side? Those containers musta been left out in the sun at some point."

"I surely do, Emmet," Carlotta said, her voice thickening.

Emptied, inverted shooters banged to the table's surface like the salute of a VFW Honor Guard. *Teddy never bragged on his time in the Army. Said he was just polishing floors in a foreign land.*

Carlotta stayed on her feet so that she could move between the

table arrangements and several booths that were soon occupied. She hugged more school employees, and Teddy's cousin Kevin from Bay City who entered.

"Terry, I been wanting to axe you something since last night." Carlotta's voice rose like a swimmer not ready to be immersed above the waist by that incoming surf of noise. "Before I get too far under the influence."

"Of course, Lottie. Axe me anything," her brother-in-law called from across the table, now a thicket of longnecks. Teasing Carlotta's Ebonics was not typical of him. But, she knew Terry well enough to see that he was trying to provoke any kind of smile or laugh from her.

"I heard you talking with your cousin last night, something about an award ol' Ted ought to get?"

Terry hung his head for a moment. He lifted a *Bud Light*. "I'm sorry you heard that."

"Y'all clammed up when I came by," Carlotta said. "I thought ya mighta been telling a dirty joke."

"Nah, Lottie. We wouldn't leave you outta that. It was just me'n Kevin having a laugh on poor Ted. I'm pretty sure he would've appreciated it."

"So, what was it? Is there any prize money goes with it? How do we get him nominated?"

Terry chuckled and shook his head. He daubed at his eyes with a sleeve. "I'm not sure we'd wanta do that. You remember Charles Darwin, right? Well there's this guy that researches folks who died doing stupid shit. Get it? So stupid members of the gene pool are weeded out. That's how Darwin figured evolution worked. He called it *natural selection*. You can substitute *survival of the fittest*."

Carlotta sipped her *Fireball* which she had *not* slammed. "That

was the ol' boy caused the monkey trials or something, back in the day? We read a book in high school about it. Seems pretty cold, doesn't it?"

"It requires a certain dark sense a humor. Like Teddy's. Go online and check it out." Terry rolled the cold bottle over his forehead. He sniffled then held the bottom edge of the bottle against each eye. "This guy puts out an annual report of idiot shit people've done to self-destruct in the past year."

"People send him newspaper clippings from all over the world," Lorenzo Kline put in.

Now Carlotta daubed at her eyes as well. "You don't think Teddy was an idiot, do you? He could fix 'bout anything."

"And did," Emmet Brown-Wander declared.

Terry put the bottle down. "No, Lottie. Anyone can have a careless moment. Those Darwin Award people did something stupid and unnecessary, usually showing off with friends telling them not to do whatever. Ted goes up in the attic to set off a hornet bomb, the thing goes off premature and right in his face. He falls on the hatch door. If you weren't into the weight lifting, he woulda died up there."

"Yeah, 'stead of on a ventilator six hours later. They said his lungs just crystallized." Carlotta cried a single sob which brought the big table to a moment of silence. "And that big ol' ugly nest turned out to be dormant. I still got hornets coming outta somewheres above the deck. He was a *good* man, Terry."

Terry reached across the table to grasp both of Carlotta's forearms. "Just unlucky, Lottie," he said softly. "The gene pool needs more men like him in it."

After a few hours, the mourners began to drink-up and leave.

Carlotta stood for farewell hugs. All of those condolences would be reprised tomorrow after she'd put the urn in the ground. Carlotta declined Juanita's offer of company to see her through the night. With *his* lingering embrace, Lorenzo Kline reminded her of a commitment she'd made last spring: "You remember about bringing the snake in, first week of school?"

Finally released, Carlotta reassured him: "I can do it, Lonnie, if you get permission from the office."

"Already done. I reminded Principal Clemmons last night at the visitation. I just wanta stir some interest in zoology and suchlike. We'll be doin' a refresher section on the Linnaeus System of taxonomy to start: Kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, etc."

"I don't remember much a that," Carlotta told him. "But *Hose A* is one big example of a reptile."

"Besides *Hose A*, I can't find much of anything else that's interesting. My parrot, some other pets. No pet store within 50 miles'll loan me a chimpanzee."

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Carlotta had to get through two weeks alone before the routine of the cafeteria and, maybe league bowling a month later, would help to distract her. Out in the backyard, a two week deficit of weeding in her tomato garden was a good place for occasional weeping. That's where she retreated while the *Orkin* crew eradicated the little house of wasps. (The nest was under a roof soffit, not far and perhaps even connected to the bulbous attic target of Teddy's fatal assault.) It was offered to her as a souvenir, the men having no clue of its significance. *Looks like a papier-machete heart. Lonnie Kline oughta come get this ugly thing.*

She owed the plot a few more hours of remedial

weeding so went back out after the exterminators were paid. Then she found enough will and energy to do some industrial strength cooking for herself—making up frozen meals for when the cafeteria robbed her of the desire to fix a meal. *Hose A* had the run of the house again and Carlotta returned to her lifting routine with Juanita at *Planet Fitness*. Not much muscle mass or power had been lost by Lottie's two weeks of neglect.

On the first full day of school, she loaded *Hose A* into the car after he'd enjoyed an unscheduled breakfast of extra rodents. Carlotta hoped to keep him complacent, even sluggish, for the outing. She suffered the absence of AC for the short drive.

"You got to be on your best behavior for Mr. Kline 'n' his students," she told the reptile. "Supposed to be a real scorcher today so they might be keepin' it chilly in there. Damn, boy. I have got to crack a window up in here. You must be the luckiest animal, ever. Michigan's gonna feel like the Everglades to you, this global warming gets any worse."

Carlotta brought *Hose A* in through the Delivery door of the kitchen. Odd, but the temperature in the school seemed ideal for a reptile, if no one else. She unrolled his mat on the floor of a utility closet for cleaning supplies. The orange, plastic, kitchen mop-bucket stood with a mop handle resting against a shelf. This was one of Teddy's hideouts. A collapsed folding chair leaned against a near wall. Lottie imagined she could smell a ghost of his *Old Spice* breaking through the dissipated ammonia and *Mr. Clean*. She lay *Hose A* down gently. "You behave your bad self, now," she said. She extended a hand toward the single register panel in the ceiling. "No flow so far, hon. Hope it's humid enough in here for ya."

Carlotta greeted three other members of the staff who entered through the back door. "I'm closin' this door and I'll post a warning. If you don't wanta surprise *Hose A* then you gotta

stay out.”

“I heard today’s his big day with the kids.+” Fran Hollis stood halfway in the delivery door, hitting her vape pen a few more times.

“Yep. I don’t know if he’s looking forward to it much.”

Flo Biggs moved in for a hug. “How y’all holdin’ up, girlfrien’. We *all* gotta get back in a routine, ya feel me? ‘Cept my summer wasn’t near shitty as yours.”

“I’ll be fine.” After she studied a hand-scrawled menu left by Emmitt Brown-Wander, Carlotta set the wheels of comforting repetition back into motion. “Looks like we need a gallon bowl a tossed salad with tongs ‘n’ a stack a bowls for lunch. Slaw in paper cups. Container should be in Fridge #2. Open a can a fruit cocktail., same place. Fresh apples ‘n’ oranges in #1. Bananas right here.” She indicated a flat produce box on the counter. “Don’t mind the tarantulas.”

“I hope you make a joke.” Rosa Sanchez draped an arm over Carlotta’s shoulder and read the menu. “I get fish patties from outta freezer.”

“Nope, baby girl. Lucky you’re in charge a putting tartar sauce into the thimble cups.”

Carlotta saw the stacks of sandwich buns that were delivered earlier. *Wow, Emmitt come in here early. Hiding out in the staff lounge, now. Better coffee. Dunkin’s brings it in. Never see that at Central High. Couple a decent couches in there.*

Free breakfast was always the same. Only the three shifts of lunch period required a varied menu. When the stations of the serving line were stocked with breakfast offerings, Emmitt Brown-Wander arrived again holding his premium coffee. He turned on the POS and Student ID readers.

“Could you do the till this morning, Emmett?” Carlotta asked.

"Kids are gonna wanta express sympathies and the line'll get backed up."

"Right," her boss said. "If any of 'em even know. When they find out *no Ted*, we'll have to bring in grief counselors from the District."

"Good. Am I covered for that? Anyway, I'm about wore out from hugs."

With the old routines falling into place, Carlotta took a moment to print, with red felt-tip, a sign to stick on the utility door. The space could not be locked. *Stay Out! Big Reptile!* The sign warned. She poked her head in to find *Hose A* resting at full length which meant he was warm enough. No cool air flowed from the single overhead register.

"Milkman wanta come in!" Rosa Vasquez called.

"I've got him, Carlotta said. She went to unlock, the hippy fella waiting, his first dolly stacked with crates of the two-swallow cartons.

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When the bell rang to begin the first full day of classes at Bendle High School. Carlotta warned the rest of kitchen staff that *Hose A*, would soon be coming through. Rosa and Flo, bagging landfill and washing trays, glanced up warily as the python was lugged to a hallway door. Francine Hollis remained fixed on the lettuce she was shredding.

Carlotta felt the snake thread out onto her arm, his head coming to rest on the back of her right hand. His head lifted abruptly as the final bell sounded, louder out in the hallway. "Rest easy now, you hear?"

She surprised two late arrivals still rummaging in their lockers. Both girls flattened back against the lockers to give Carlotta and company a wide passage.

"Mornin', Mizz Carlotta, one spoke, hefting her backpack.

"Mmm-hmm," Carlotta acknowledged over her shoulder. "Now, get your butts to class Chantelle, Tahiti."

"Sorry 'bout your loss a Teddy, Mizz Carlotta," the one named Tahiti called after her.

"Mmm-hmm. We all got to carry on, though." *Hope that news hasn't reached Biology.* Hose A's head began to sway back and forth, sensing more unfamiliar environment.

*Aw, shit. Don't start having a anxiety attack.* At 8am, the building remained ideally warm. When she passed back through the lobby, headed for the Math and Science wing, she was greeted by a strong rush of tropical breeze. A large floor fan had been set up, aimed from the locked-down entrance doors toward the office. *That won't help.* She saw Clyde Bates and some new-hire kid wheeling two more fans out of Facilities Storage off the gym.

"Central air ain't blowin', Lottie," Clyde said.

"I believe you." *Works for us,* Carlotta thought.

"Whole buildin'. Clemmons say if it get to be 85 on the roof, we dismissin' early."

"They better not let 'em go 'till after lunch." Carlotta paused outside Biology. "We've got things about to go in the ovens."

As she knocked, then entered, it appeared that Lorenzo Kline had gathered a small Noah's lifeboat of other domesticated specimens. Assembled on and in front of the broad, front island of sinks and Bunsen burners was an impressive array of volunteered pets: Turtle in a terrarium; guinea pig sleeping in a travel-sized habitat; hamster showing off on his wheel; rabbit sleeping in its pen on the floor; cat in another pen chittering its teeth at the parrot perched safely on Kline's

shoulder.

*Hope that thing doesn't start squawkin'*. This apprehension was shattered by a frightening bark and low growl from what appeared to be some kind of wolf at the back of the room. *Aww, shit. Hose A.* again craned his head up off her forearm, nodding, searching for the origin of the disturbance. He flicked his tongue, sampling the menagerie air for edibles.

"Zevon! Hush!" Someone's mom reined in hard on Zevon's leash. "I'll whip your butt!" The animal yarked, whimpered, then crouched, chastened, onto his front paws, hackles still bristling.

"Good morning!" Lorenzo Kline said. He was seated on the lifeless register which ran the length of the room beneath a long window view of an adjacent wing. "You can leave that door open. See if we can get some kinda breeze between the hall 'n' outside. Everyone knows Mizz Saylor from cafeteria, yes?"

Sleepy greetings and grumbled acknowledgements followed. As the students became aware of *Hose A*, most postures improved. One girl produced a stifled, one-syllable scream.

"Fuck me!" One young man announced.

"Language, Tyrell!" Mr. Kline barked nearly as loud as the wolfhound. "Why don't y'all go ahead 'n' introduce *Hose A*, Mizz Saylor," he continued. "To these young ... uh ... scholars. Be taking notes, class." A rustle of opening backpacks followed, then whispered pleas to borrow pencils.

"Will do, Lon ... Mr. Kline." *This room's about perfect if these animals will just act right. Sweat drops down the back a my neck. Lonnie's got pit stains in a short-sleeve shirt. Hose A* bumped his head continuously against her wrist. There was a tension in his back half which lopped over her shoulder, no longer languishing down her left arm. He raised this extremity to stiffen across the top of her chest.

"He wantin' a hug, Mizz Saylor," said a girl in the front row of desks.

*That's one I really don't need. Better make this quick.* "Yes, well. G'morning, students. *Hose A*, here, is a Columbian motley, boa constrictor. He's six feet long and still an adolescent, sorta like yourselves."

"He a Black Mamba like my boy, Coby!" Another male voice offered from the back of the room.

"No, now that's a whole different type. Mr. Kline'll narrow it down with you as to what his family is and so-forth when you study that ... Then *Zevon* howled like there was a full moon in the room. "God, damn-it!" Carlotta felt the snake's needle-like teeth bury into her wrist.

"Jesus Christ!" Several students shouted in unison as the first Rorschach splotches of blood appeared on the floor tiles.

"Fuck *me!*" The student named Tyrell reiterated.

"That's not helpful!" Mr. Kline yelled as he scrambled to the front of the room. "An' I'm gonna write you up later!"

Now, with sustained screams, several girls bolted toward the open door.

Carlotta spun around in pain. *If I go down, I'm screwed.* She backed up against Lonnie's experiment counter again. *Hose A* would not let go of her hand but that kept the front third of his length out of play. *Prob'ly can't let go with them nasty backwards angled teeth. Made for swallowing. Christ, this here is stupid.*

The snake's thick midsection flexed up from her chest, trying to clench onto something. *Goin' for my neck.* She grabbed the tail and pushed against *Hose A's* encircling strength. *Why you wanta do me this way? I can bench 160, buddy. Hope it's*

*enough. A scared Mom can lift some really heavy shit off of a child. Or a husband. Where's Juanita to spot me, yell at one more!?*

Carlotta managed, for critical moments, to hold the snake to a grimacing draw. *I ain't getting one a those awards cuz a you.* Now the dog was going nuts. *Smells my blood.* Zevon leaped toward the center of the mayhem, his owner hauling back on the leash like a field-day tug-of-war. With a staggering spin, *Hose A's* head, with part of Carlotta's hand still enclosed, whacked against the edge of the experiment counter. Stunned, the snake released her. The momentum of his front half cleared several Erlenmeyer flasks and a rack of test tubes onto the floor. The guinea pig habitat landed on the floor in a spill of cedar shavings. The cat yowled like it was being bred and the rabbit was now wide awake. *Hose A* hung limp over Carlotta's shoulder once again. "Lemme get you the hell outta here." She crunched over broken glass toward the hallway.

"Lottie! What do we do?" Lorenzo Kline was next to her, trying to wrap wet paper towel around her wrist while avoiding the dangling *Hose A*. "Y'all might need a stitch or two."

"First I've gotta chill this guy out with some AC."

"I'm driving you to ER!" The biology teacher declared, following her into the teache's parking-lot.

"If you don't mind *Hose A*. riding shot-gun."

"Oh." Mr. Kline said. "Why don't we find some ice first. There's supposed to be a first-aid kit in the office. I've gotta find those kids 'n' herd 'em back in the room. "

Carlotta flopped the snake into the back seat. She started the car and put the AC on Medium. *Go ahead 'n' steal it,* she thought.

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The puncture wounds were quite raggedy from way *Hose A* had coughed out her hand. The school ice and tight bandage wrap were good enough for the trip to Hurley Hospital. Again, Carlotta left the boa constrictor in the back seat. This was not a neighborhood to leave a running car unattended. Any banger interested in the vehicle would simply shoot *Hose A*. She parked in some morning shade and walked in to ER.

Late morning was slow; no waiting. Carlotta and the snake were back home in Burton by early afternoon. She'd been given three stitches, a tetanus shot, and a dozen Tylenol Extra Strength. "Gonna need a lot of ice," she told the lethargic snake who rested on a pillow in her lap, half of him draped over the couch's arm.

There were no cubes ready in the freezer bin so Carlotta held a bag of frozen stir-fry vegetables on *Hose A's* head. She used peas on her hand which had begun to throb. "I'll bet you're concussed. I am so sorry."

Carlotta took up the remote from the coffee table, hoping to find something decent on television. *Tennis? I hate this shit in the middle of the day. That one tournament that goes a week. Hey, it's Serena.*

The snake wasn't even flicking his tongue yet. "I hope you're gonna be alright. At least we aren't gonna be in the papers. Or some crazy book"

*Which one is this, now? Serena's more built than Venus. Hose A tried to move his head from under the vegetables. Too cold? Carlotta lifted the ice. Serena served an ace against some helpless lower seed. Look at the thighs on her. "You're prob'ly good as you're gonna get," she said. "But I wouldn't mind evolving like that."*

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**Chris Dungey** is a retired auto worker in MI. He rides a mountain bike and a Honda scooter for the planet; follows Detroit City FC with religious fervor. More than 75 of his stories have appeared in litmags and online zines, most recently in *Revolver*, *Book of Matches*; forthcoming in *Post Box (UK)*, and *Discretionary Love*. Dungey's most recent collection is called *We Won't Be Kissing*, from ADP/Kindle.

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