

and it goes like this...

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a novel

G. Andi Rhos



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# PART ONE



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## Drowning Sorrows



Charlotte-Louise Andrews, if you're stupid enough to spread your legs and get yourself knocked-up by one a them peasey-headed, gold tooth havin, one foot in the grave, the other in the penitentiary, sorry little niggras runnin round here, understand this—don't bring it here. I've done the very best I could to bring you up to be a fine and respectable young lady. You live in a clean home, you don't miss a meal, and I don't buy your clothes off Graham Avenue. And can't nobody in all a Kings County say one disparagin word about your mother. In exchange for all I have given you and all I have sacrificed for you, all I humbly request is that you do not disgrace my good name by becomin an unwed teenage mother. You're goin to need these.

LOU LOU pointed to an A&S bag then made her grand exit. Fifteen days passed before Charlotte-Louise saw her mother again.

Charlotte-Louise knew that was the Jack Daniel's talking; not the Chivas Regal. For reasons Charlotte-Louise would not realize till she grew older, whenever Lou Lou drank Jack Daniel's, she called her by her full name and spoke with a southern drawl. She actually said niggras.

In her restlessness, her whole life, thus far, replayed itself in her mind. For as long as Charlotte-Louise could remember, she and Lou Lou lived in their immaculate sparsely furnished two-bedroom tenement apartment like an old money couple who stayed married for appearance sake. Lou Lou confined herself to her quarters. Charlotte-Louise was never allowed in her mother's bedroom; although never spoken, those words were understood. Mother and daughter shared no displays of affection and no discussions, not even a casual "how was school today". In fact, her mother's now three-year-old gold tooth havin niggra rant

proved the last communication Charlotte-Louise recalled having with 80-proof-Lou (as she secretly called her mother). She recollected the occasion because it happened on check day. Only twice a month, on check day, did Lou Lou rise early enough to see her daughter off to school. That morning Lou Lou noticed her twelve-year-old daughter's breasts and hips were developing.

Charlotte-Louise returned from school to find Lou Lou in her room sitting on the corner of her bed. A brown paper A&S shopping bag sat beside her. Lou Lou managed to open an account at the reputable department store some years earlier. She manipulated the first five digits of her social security number, dropped her middle initial, added a year to her age, and wrote "Entrepreneur" in the space requiring an occupation. The only honest thing she did was pay the bill. Charlotte-Louise didn't even notice the bag. She didn't know what to think. Were they moving? Had someone died? To see her mother twice in one day! Adding to Charlotte-Louise's bewilderment, her mother broke down and spoke to her.

Her eyes bounced from her bedroom ceiling to the digital alarm clock atop her desk. 4:29 A.M. Her eyes bounced back to the ceiling then fell again on the lighted numbers. 4:29 A.M. Come morning, she would begin her sophomore year of high school. Charlotte-Louise couldn't sleep.

She wanted so bad to tell her mother back then that her legs had already been spread—by force—over the past three years, more times than she could count. Only not by some peasey-headed-niggra, but by Louis Maurice Andrews, Jr. Lou Lou's twin brother.

Louis Maurice Andrews, Jr. presented himself as a tall, husky man with above average intelligence and an infectious laugh. Not particularly handsome, but quite charming and he cleaned up nicely. The unmarried, childless proprietor of an auto repair shop, with mechanic's hands noticeably darker than his overall complexion, did well for himself. He in fact owned the building that housed his business. Louis Jr. drove a 1978 cobalt blue Eldorado with ivory leather interior and ivory tires. Everybody knew that was Big Lou's car.

Uncle Lou, as Charlotte-Louise referred to him, stopped by a couple of times every week to check in on his favorite niece and baby sister. He was only four minutes older than Lou Lou. During these visits, Louis Jr. offered his sister money and never missed an opportunity in letting

Charlotte-Louise know how special she was to him. As a helpless child with an uninterested and drunk-most-the-time mother, his favorite niece proved easy pickings.

The molestation debuted as digital penetration with all her clothes on. A well-orchestrated abuse, it progressed to mutual oral sex with Charlotte-Louise undressed from the waist down, and her uncle only revealing his penis. Before long, and at Uncle Lou's coercion, the act became two naked intertwined bodies in missionary position. It was the perfect crime.

Charlotte-Louise would never forget her twelfth birthday. Her Uncle Lou took her to his bachelor pad, above his shop, under the guise of taking his favorite niece out for her birthday. At least that's what he told his sister. He cajoled Charlotte-Louise to undress in front of him and put on the red satin teddy trimmed in black lace that he bought especially for her. The trembling Charlotte-Louise didn't know the teddy belonged to a two-piece set. Her uncle never gave her the matching panties. In his mind this was seduction. Uncle Lou knelt before her and gave her clitoris three licks. He then rose and stood behind her, placed his hands on her hips, and lowered his twelve-year-old niece to the floor. Charlotte-Louise experienced her first orgasm; an ecstasy that further compounded her shame and confusion.

Once withdrawing, Louis Jr. walked naked to the bathroom, returning with a damp hand towel. He tossed the towel to Charlotte-Louise and put his clothes back on. Charlotte-Louise, still trembling, wiped herself with the towel and redressed as well. Unsure of what to do with them, she laid the teddy and damp towel across the arm of the pullout couch.

Louis Jr. then drove her to the local White Castle. He gave Charlotte-Louise a twenty dollar bill to pay for the burgers and drinks and told her to keep the change. While returning his niece home, he reminded her, "Remember, this is our little secret."

As Charlotte-Louise stepped out of her uncle's Cadillac, he leaned over and kissed her cheek. The seduction concluded with a tenacious finale. Louis Jr. had the temerity to wish his niece happy birthday. *No, 80-proof-Lou, it was no peasey-headed, gold tooth havin niggra*, she thought. This revelation would have to wait another four years.

At the time, however, Charlotte-Louise stood there transfixed on the brown paper A&S shopping bag and wondered, *what has 80-proof-Lou done now?* She tiptoed toward the bag as though afraid she might wake it. Its contents revealed seven panty girdles, seven matching bra and panty sets, a glass jar of Tussy, a box of Playtex pantliners, a bottle of Jergens lotion, and a round container of lavender scented talcum powder complete with its own powder puff. Smiling from ear-to-ear over the unexpected care package from her mother, she thought it was the nicest thing Lou Lou ever did for her. Even so, Charlotte-Louise's own voice startled her when she heard herself whisper, "Thank you, Mama."

That was her last remembrance before glancing at her alarm clock once again. 5:31 A.M. She smiled then pulled the lightweight cotton blanket up to her shoulders. She slept the full fifty-nine minutes before her alarm clock sounded.



As an only child with no friends, Charlotte-Louise always felt out of the loop. In her mind, other girls her age seemed so much savvier than she. The girls she attended school with did nothing to demystify her notion. They either laughed at her right to her face or ignored her altogether. Boys paid her no attention. She didn't mind that. Charlotte-Louise deemed herself clueless when it came to boys. Whenever one would so much as look as though he might say something to her, anything at all, she'd dig in her ear with her pinky for a good thirty seconds and clear her throat. After examining her earwax, she'd look the astonished young man square in the eye and announce unceremoniously, "Allergies." She didn't know what else to do.

Without friends or a boyfriend to idle away the time, Charlotte-Louise spent yet another summer cooped up in her bedroom writing poems and short stories that reflected her desire to belong. Writing was cathartic for her. That and eating. She performed both acts simultaneously. They never failed to soothe her discomfort in being an outsider.

Charlotte-Louise looked out of place. Her unkempt hair, lack of fashion sense, and ever-present grin alluded she'd come from a far-flung country and had yet to become Americanized. She always raised her hand in every class; that didn't help matters. The classroom, however, was her

sanctuary. She was acknowledged there and yearned to return to school the entire summer. Academics always came easily for her, and with academic excellence came praise. That praise provided her only evidence of her existence.

Last term her English teacher, also the school newspaper's faculty advisor, suggested that she join. That morning, the first day of her sophomore year, Charlotte-Louise headed to the main office, put a note inside her teacher's mailbox, and took her up on the offer. She also decided to try out for one of the school's teams. Charlotte-Louise knew she was overweight, therefore, cheerleading was out. Besides, she didn't feel pretty enough. A flier posted on the Student Bulletin Board caught her eye. Girl's volleyball tryouts were to be held in the gym at three thirty that afternoon. Charlotte-Louise figured she had nothing to lose.

Her last class ended at three fifteen. A gung-ho Charlotte-Louise made her way to the girls' locker room and changed into the school's mandatory gym uniform. She gained weight during the summer and hadn't purchased a new, larger sized uniform. She managed to squeeze into last year's. When she bent to tie her sneakers, she split her shorts. The girls witnessing the incident did what they always did—laughed at her. Charlotte-Louise hurriedly changed back into her clothes and made her way to the subway station. Once home, she would do what she always did: lock herself in her room and eat and write.



“Looking good is the best revenge.” Charlotte-Louise overheard a middle-aged, bleached blonde White lady say that while commuting from her Manhattan high school back to her Brooklyn project apartment. The middle-aged, equally bleached (and teased) White lady in the train seat beside her nodded in agreement. All of fifteen, Charlotte-Louise decided those were words to live by. She wondered why hadn't she thought of that sooner. From that day forward, those words became her motto. No matter how hopeless she felt on the inside, she would never let it show on the outside. She would always look good. Charlotte-Louise (no one ever called her just Charlotte) made mental notes of the two women's clothes, shoes, handbags, jewelry, make-up, manicures, how perfectly thin they were and, oh! that hair. The women unsuspectingly served as Charlotte-Louise's template.

No way in hell could she reinvent herself and live up to her newfound motto on her mother's semi-monthly public assistance grant. Especially with her mother's fondness for drinking. Giving credit where it's due, Louisa Mae Andrews always saw to it that the rent, (utilities included), phone bill, A&S charge account, and life insurance were paid first. All items that could not be purchased with food stamps, like soap and toilet paper, were bought first. Lou Lou, as her family called her, only used the leftover money to lift her spirits. Charlotte-Louise often wondered just how much leftover money was there considering not a day went by when her mother didn't lift those spirits of hers. Questioning Lou Lou was out of the question.

As she prepared to exit the train and head home, her early morning reminiscence returned to mind. Charlotte-Louise realized that despite being on welfare and living in the projects, Lou Lou saw to it that they always had nice things. Charlotte-Louise thought, *perhaps 80-proof-Lou believes lookin good is the best revenge, too. Isn't that somethin!* And for that, she loved her mother.



Lou Lou wore headwraps, no make-up, and walked with perfect posture. Small-framed and of average height, she was a complicated, erudite woman who thought well of herself. Perhaps a little too well. She didn't think much of people and had no close friends. Truth be told, Lou Lou thought she was better than everybody. She believed herself more intelligent, more cultured, more ... more refined. An avid reader since childhood, she read about history, ancient civilizations and dynasties, philosophy, wine and cuisine. Whenever Lou Lou read mysteries, she almost always figured out the who-dunnit well before the book's end. She read the bible from Genesis to Revelation, the King James version, and understood it. Upon completing the bible, she facetiously asked the air, "What's so damn good about it?" then slammed the book shut. She read the *Kebrá Naqast* and English translations of both the Torah and Koran. Lou Lou read *Moby Dick*. Twice. She read about Buddhism, mysticism, and the Kabala; and read Albert Camus' *L'étranger*, in its original French, and understood it. She could quote Nietzsche, Ayn Rand, and Langston Hughes. And knew a Matisse when she saw one.

Lou Lou watched only three television programs: *The Today Show*, *The McLaughlin Group*, and *Like It Is* with Gil Noble, because they did not insult her intelligence. She'd attended almost two years of college. By now she would have earned her PhD had it not been for Charles Talltree, Charlotte-Louise's father.

Lou Lou and Charles knew each other since junior high school. In 1962, when Lou Lou was eleven, Charles, his mother, and two younger brothers moved on to her block in Crown Heights. Charles and Lou Lou later attended Bushwick High School together. Although a year his junior, Lou Lou was a grade ahead of Charles. They began fooling around six months into her freshman year at Hunter College (where she majored in journalism) and Charles' senior year at Bushwick. Four months later, the rhythm method failed. Charles, a little over a month out of high school and unable to find work, decided to join the Marines. He promised to marry Lou Lou as soon as he completed basic training. He, Lou Lou, and the baby would be a family he said.

Basic training came and went. No word from Charles.

Lou Lou completed a year of college, maintaining a 3.8 GPA. In the fall, Lou Lou returned for another term despite not being able to keep anything down. No word from Charles.

Within the next month she began to show. She purchased a fake diamond ring at Woolworth's and painted over the gold with clear nail polish so it wouldn't turn her finger green. Lou Lou told anyone who asked that she was engaged to a Marine. She explained that he would return soon so they could marry before their baby arrived and buy a house in Queens. She said Queens like it was an exotic country.

Her pregnancy caused her ankles to swell and made it uncomfortable to walk. Her pregnancy caused hemorrhoids and made it uncomfortable to sit. Yet, Lou Lou maintained perfect attendance up till three days before Charlotte-Louise was born. She delivered her daughter at Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center in Crown Heights. Charlotte-Louise swallowed meconium prior to being born and nearly suffocated at birth. Lou Lou's newborn daughter was given a spinal tap, intubated, and placed in the Neo-Natal Intensive Care Unit. Baby Girl Andrews spent five days there before her lungs cleared enough for her to go home. Brooklyn Jewish had discharged Lou Lou three days after giving birth.

On the day she left the hospital, Lou Lou went directly to Hunter and sold all her textbooks for \$150. She'd originally used some of her college grant money and paid three times as much. She then went and applied for welfare. Lou Lou explained to the intake caseworker that she'd just given birth, but her baby was sick and still in the hospital and they had nowhere to go. That wasn't exactly a lie. When Lou Lou could no longer hide her pregnancy, she decided she'd better tell her mother before someone else did. Pearl, her mother, didn't miss a beat in informing her daughter, "There's only one woman in this house." She said she'd wondered why Lou Lou was wearing that cheap shit on her finger.

The caseworker called the hospital and confirmed Lou Lou's story. She then gave her an application for public housing, a subway token, and issued her two vouchers. One for expedited food stamps; the other to pay for her hotel room. A welfare hotel—in Queens. The irony was not lost on Lou Lou. She laughed to keep from crying. The baffled caseworker asked her was she okay. Lou Lou nodded without providing an explanation. To add insult to injury, the caseworker informed Lou Lou that it would take approximately forty-five days before she'd be eligible to receive any money. Furthermore, her daughter couldn't be added to the budget till Lou Lou produced her birth certificate.

Lou Lou used the money from the sale of her textbooks to purchase diapers, a stroller, a bassinet, a baby blanket, and seven outfits for her daughter at Young Folks department store down on Fulton Street. She used her expedited food stamps to buy four cases of Similac. Two days later, Lou Lou brought her baby daughter home to their welfare hotel room in Rockaway Park. They spent the first six months of Charlotte-Louise's life there before being placed in a housing development in Williamsburg.

On the day she brought Charlotte-Louise home from the hospital, Lou Lou sat up half the night watching her baby sleep in her bassinet. She cried as her emotions ran from gratitude for her baby's survival, to humiliation, to resentment, to confusion, and back to gratitude. Her emotions ultimately landed on bitterness. There they remained for many years to come. Lou Lou decided that night, while watching over her sleeping daughter, that the world owed her. Owed her because she had to give up her education. Owed her because she had to give up a career in

journalism. Owed her because she had to raise a child alone at nineteen. Owed her because her mother put her out. Owed her because the only man she ever loved—the only man she ever let get some—broke her heart. By God, someone had to pay! Determined to settle the score, Lou Lou refused to be a part of the world.

So she drowned her sorrows in booze the way her daughter drowned hers in food.



Once home, Charlotte-Louise at last figured out the one thing she could do without involving Lou Lou. She hadn't inherited her mother's small frame and she overate. She ate even when she wasn't hungry. Yet, she realized she could privately emulate the elegant slenderness of the two ladies on the train. Charlotte-Louise remembered last year, her freshman year of high school, hearing awful heaving sounds coming from the stall next to hers in the girls' bathroom. Upon exiting her stall, Charlotte-Louise discovered Briara standing before the mirror. Briara Thomas, who by all accounts was the best-dressed and most popular girl at school! Briara Thomas, who all the girls envied for how much she could eat and still stay pencil-thin!

Briara scrutinized her skinny reflection in the mirror. She talked aloud to herself, "Just a few more pounds and I'll be perfect."

"You mean you throw up on purpose?" Charlotte-Louise asked. Briara didn't respond. "I thought only White girls did that?"

Briara didn't respond. Instead, she tooted her small butt in the air and sucked in her nonexistent stomach. Standing tall and poised, she pranced out the girls' bathroom never once acknowledging Charlotte-Louise's presence.

Charlotte-Louise wondered why hadn't she seen Briara at school this semester. She was a junior last year. Why hadn't she returned for her senior year? Charlotte-Louise didn't dwell on the thought. Instead, she eased into the bathroom, locked the door, and placed a rolled towel at the space between the bottom of the door and floor to muffle the sounds. She knelt over the toilet, seat up, and inserted her left index finger as far down her throat as she could. First she choked. She at once raised both

arms in the air as she'd seen her grandmother do whenever something went down the wrong way.

On her second, more ambitious attempt, Charlotte-Louise choked and peed herself. She reached under the bathroom sink and poured a little Pine-Sol on the floor. Charlotte-Louise washed her hands after using half a roll of toilet paper to blot up the urine. She then removed her clothes and stepped into the tub. Now more determined than ever, Charlotte-Louise made her third and (finally) successful attempt. Everything she'd eaten that day went down the bathtub drain. And so began Charlotte-Louise's potentially fatal quest for perfect thinness.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**G. Andi Rhos is a writer and activist residing in NYC. She speaks out against racism, domestic violence, and illiteracy. Rhos has performed urban spoken word on college radio and at various venues in NYC and Georgia. The twice-divorced Brooklyn native lives with her four sons. And It Goes Like This... is Rhos' debut novel. To learn more about the author, visit <http://gandirhos.com>**



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