

Negative Split

GREG FOWLER

Copyright © 2016 Greg Fowler

All rights reserved.

ISBN-13:978-1540631480

ISBN-10:1540631486

DEDICATION

To Angie, Linda, Cynthia and Betty, four of the
main reasons I'm a writer.
Hope you like it.

DISCLAIMER

The book that follows is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters to actual people or old friends is coincidence. However, experiences in life influence one's outlook, so if you think you see yourself in the lives of these characters, just consider yourself loved by the author.

CHAPTER ONE

“I don’t need your help,” Nathan Stiles said to his wife. He sat in the dark brown leather wing chair, head turned to look out over the backyard from the second story window of the home office. His eyes fixed on the river in the distance. White caps rolled across the water, as strong winds picked up. The family boat rocked in the waves, moored at the end of the long dock that stretched across the marsh grasses to the deeper water.

Dark clouds blocked out the late afternoon summer sun, and the natural light of the room grew dim. Carmen Stiles sat at the office desk, hands on the MacBook keyboard, her back to Nathan. She stopped typing, but did not turn around to face her husband. Instead, she, too, looked out a window in front of the desk toward the dock.

“You could have fooled me. How else are you going to meet the deadline?” Carmen said. “You’ve done nothing on this for months. I’ve busted my butt every day on this on top of the design studio work.” Carmen paused. “And I’m just a little tired of carrying you.”

“I’ll figure something out. I always have,” Nathan replied, still staring out into the back yard.

“When’s the last time you actually wrote something?” Carmen asked.

Nathan said nothing. *I wrote the speech for Coach this weekend,* he thought to himself.

The wind blew harder and large rain drops began to pelt the windows. Nathan continued to sit in silence. “That’s what I thought,” Carmen said.

A flash of light brightened the room and a few seconds later thunder rattled the rain-streaked windows. Carmen stood up, unplugged the computer and turned toward Nathan. “I don’t think I have to tell you this publisher is taking a big gamble on you. This is probably your last chance. America’s Mr. Romance is almost Mr. Irrelevant, and you’re not exactly getting any younger. You’ve got two months to submit the first draft. So, don’t blow it. I’m done.”

Carmen left the room, her footsteps echoing on the hardwood stairs.

“Hey!” Nathan called after her, finally turning toward the office doorway. “What’s for dinner?”

“Figure it out yourself!” came the reply from halfway down the stairs.

A flash of lightning lit up the room again as thunder shook the house. Nathan turned and looked back toward the dock. The rain was coming down so hard he could no longer make out the outline of the boat.

Nathan listened to the sound of Carmen’s footsteps fade down the stairs. He closed his eyes, and for the next few minutes he sat quietly, breathing deeply, listening to the sound of the wind and rain. Thunder sounded again but not as close. He considered taking a nap but decided against it.

A few minutes later, he opened his eyes and sat up straighter in the chair. Putting his weight on the floor, he stood and winced as pain shot down his right leg, from his hip to his knee. *Damn leg*, he thought.

Nathan limped over to the desk and opened the top left drawer. On top lay an orange prescription bottle. He grabbed the bottle and opened it. He saw only a few pills remained. He flipped the bottle over, dropping one onto his right hand. He paused before tossing the pill into his mouth and swallowing it without any water.

Nathan turned his attention to the dock again. The sky was lighter and the rain was definitely easing up. He walked over to the door that led to the second-floor balcony. He opened the door and went outside. The storm had left the outside air cool and damp. *Not bad for late June in the South*, he thought. The lone chair on the balcony was too wet to sit on. Despite an awning over the balcony, the storm had blown the rain onto the porch. So, Nathan leaned against the balcony rail, supporting himself on his forearms and breathed deeply.

From this vantage point, he could see most of the overgrown back yard and just how much work needed to be done. They'd bought the house on the secluded land almost twenty years ago, after the surprise success of Nathan's first book, *The Letters*.

To the left was a wooden playhouse swing set with faded boards and rusty chains, long abandoned by their daughter, Jennifer. She was a sophomore at Clemson University now. Just to the right of the dock entrance was a trampoline, no longer usable, with its dry-rotted and torn mat. *Cole sure loved that thing*, he thought and closed his eyes.

Nathan could now see a young boy, perhaps six or seven years old, with short cropped light brown hair - his summer cut - bouncing on a shiny new trampoline. "Come on in, Dad. Bounce with me," the boy said.

A young father looked up from a paper pamphlet. He sat

nearby on the grass and was surrounded by stacks of wood and held a long bolt in his hand. "Sure, I need a break from this, anyway," he said and put down the pamphlet and bolt. "I wonder if the people who write these instructions actually put one of these playhouses together," he said, mainly to himself. The father climbed a short step ladder to the trampoline and crawled through the opening in the trampoline's safety net.

"Let's try flips!" the boy said.

The father smiled. "Oh, no, you go ahead. Not me."

Another loud clap of thunder brought Nathan back to present and he opened his eyes. He continued to survey the landscape. In the center of the yard was the concrete paver path to the wooden dock. The overgrown centipede grass almost covered the dirty pavers, though. And the dock was a mess now, too - the boards were faded and cracking and loose in spots. From a distance it looked OK, but up close, you wondered if it was safe to use.

At least the boat is in decent shape, Nathan told himself. The *Letter Writer* was a twenty-four foot center console wooden boat, a gift to himself when he signed his second book deal and left his sales job to be a full-time writer. Although the next fourteen books never did as well as *The Letters*, he made enough from book sales to live comfortably on the secluded waterway and allow Carmen to be a stay at home mom, while raising the kids.

That was until the last contract negotiations. Nathan wanted a multi-book deal with higher percentage of royalties, but his long-time publisher was only willing to sign a one-book deal. Offended, Nathan let his ego get in the way and walked away from the deal.

After several years, a bad web company investment, and an economy struggling to recover from a recession, finances became a major concern for the first time in over two decades. Nathan finally worked out a one-book deal with his old publisher, thanks to Carmen and his agent doing a book proposal behind his back. Nathan had reluctantly agreed. Now, with two months until the deadline, here he was - a ticked off wife and in no mood himself to work on the book.

Nathan turned to go back into the office. He noticed the faded stain and splintering boards of the balcony. *Put that on the list, too*, he thought and opened the door. Sitting down at the desk, he plugged the power cord into the MacBook. He read over the current chapter. *Not bad*, he thought. Carmen had done a decent job.

And why wouldn't she? He thought. This was really her book. She was right about Nathan not writing anything. He had thrown out some early ideas for this one, but it was mostly Carmen's. She'd outlined it and done essentially all the writing. Every time Nathan came up to write, he just sat at the desk and stared out across the backyard. Eventually Carmen would come in. They would discuss the chapter, and she would take over writing. Nathan would read over the work and occasionally make some edit suggestions, but he didn't change much. He didn't see much to change today, either.

It had not always been this way. Nathan had written *The Letters* entirely by himself. After all, the letters were *to* Carmen. Writing wasn't a full-time job back then. Nathan had not been out of school very long and was a pharmaceutical sales rep. He wasn't a bad salesman, either. Sure, being young, good looking, and athletic helped to get past the front office gatekeepers, but once he became a regular visitor, the offices loved him. His politeness was sincere, and his smile was his best quality.

Even though he enjoyed the sales, Nathan had the writing bug, and at night and lunch, he started writing a book. A marketing major in college, he didn't have much formal training *a la* the English department. He'd had a couple of excellent high school English teachers, though, and felt he *had* to write.

So, he started writing and studying the craft of storytelling. Unfortunately, his first book attempt was not really clicking or flowing. It was about an athlete trying to convince a girl he was more than a dumb jock. *Stick with what you know* had been Nathan's motto. The second book had been kind of a mystery. But it was no mystery why a publisher wouldn't take it on - he was no Dean Koontz.

Then, on a spring morning in 1991, Nathan's muse appeared. On a regularly scheduled visit to one of his clients, the receptionist asked him to wait, which was unusual. He was well-known at this particular office and usually had free reign. "Sorry, Nathan. We have a new office manager," the receptionist explained. "She has asked to meet all reps before allowing them back."

So, Nathan sat in the waiting room. And waited. He was just about to ask the receptionist if he could reschedule, when the door opened, and a tall blond woman with green eyes in an impeccable business suit entered the room. His heart began to race.

"Mr. Stiles?" the women asked.

"Yes," Nathan could barely stammer, as he stood

"Hi, I'm Carmen Jones, the new office manager." She held out her hand to shake. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Nathan took her outstretched hand and was surprised at the firm, confident shake he received.

“Uh, that’s not a problem,” he said.

“Please come back to my office.”

“Sure, thanks,” was all Nathan could say.

Carmen turned around and led Nathan back to her office. “Please have a seat.” Nathan sat. “I know you’ve had the run of the place, but I’d like to change that. I’m trying to shield the doctors from unnecessary interruptions. I’d like you to check in with me each visit. Also, if you can schedule a day or two in advance, that would be great, too.”

Nathan barely heard. He just stared into her green eyes.

“Mr. Stiles?”

“Oh, yes. Check-in. Sure. No problem.” Nathan collected his thoughts. “Do any of the doctors have time to see me today?”

“No, we had a staff meeting earlier, which ran long and cut into patient time. So, today is going to be hectic. Maybe next time. Do you have anything new for us to review?” Carmen asked.

“No, not really,” Nathan replied. “Just refilling the sample stock.”

“Great. Then just leave that with me, and I’ll take care of it,” Carmen directed.

“Uh, OK.” Nathan opened his bag and removed several boxes of sample drugs and placed them on Carmen’s desk.

“Thank you for stopping by today, Mr. Stiles,” Carmen said and stood up, signaling the meeting was over.

“Please, call me Nathan,” he replied and stood as well.

“OK, Nathan. We’ll see you soon. I can call you if we need any samples before your next visit. Do you have a card?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” Nathan reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a card. He held it out to Carmen.

“Thank you, Nathan. Here’s mine as well,” she said and handed him a business card from the holder on her desk.

Carmen escorted Nathan back down the office hallway and out into the lobby. “Thanks for coming. Have a great day,” she said as she closed the door, leaving Nathan in the waiting room. He walked over to the receptionist window.

She slid the glass open. “Yes, Nathan?”

“What just happened?”

The receptionist grinned. “Bye, Nathan. See you soon.”

Darn right, Nathan thought to himself as he turned and left the office.

That night, Nathan went home and broke out a new legal pad and began to write the words that would change his life:
Dear Carmen...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Fowler is a native South Carolinian who lives just outside Lexington, SC with his wife, son and daughter. While he still struggles to run negative splits, he plans to make the second half of his career much better than the first half. For more information about Greg and his writing, please visit <http://GregFowlerAuthor.com>.