

an ordinary girl

Carolyn at four...

Carolyn sat on her Schwinn Stingray's banana seat, her feet firmly on the ground. The silver handlebar streamers shimmered in the sun, a crinkled, stuttering sparkle that fueled her excitement. She barely listened as her father was talking to her.

"Let me just get this other training wheel off, and we'll see how you do."

The bike pulled left as her father wrestled with a bracket. Her brother Jack called them "cheaters." He had already taken off down the driveway on his muddy green BMX, prompting Carolyn to declare to her father that she wanted her training wheels off.

"Think you're ready?" He smiled at her the way she liked, the way that made the entire world feel perfect and safe.

"I can do it. Jack knows how to ride his bike the right way."

"Okay then. Let's give it a try."

With the wheels gone, she felt scared and uncertain.

Her father knelt beside the bike, his hand resting on the seat, helping her to stay balanced.

"Here's what we're going to do," he said. "Look at me. I'll hold on to the back, just like this. All you have to do is pedal and keep your eyes straight ahead. Okay? Straight ahead. Don't look down."

Carolyn clenched the handlebars and nodded manically.

Her father stood. "Let's go. Straight ahead."

She planted her feet on the pedals and began to push against them. The earth grew unsteady, and the bike wobbled beneath her.

“Dad?!”

“Keep going!”

The pedals were moving in circles now, and she could hear her father’s footfalls on the gravel behind her.

“You’re doing it!”

She was moving faster and pedaling furiously. Her hair blew back from her face, and the silver streamers danced. The sound of her father’s steps increased in frequency and then faded away.

“Dad?!” She panicked and turned her head to look at her father. He wasn’t there. He had let go.

at six. . .

She held the thick piece of paper carefully out in front of her as she climbed down the school bus steps, one by one, so she wouldn’t trip and fall and ruin the paper. It was a scratch paint of her family and her house. She had even scratched her mom holding Kyle’s hand. He was little and standing next to her with his small hand up, reaching for hers.

It took three art classes to make. First, she had to use the greasy crayons and color all over the paper. Other kids drew pictures or big circles inside even bigger circles. Carolyn started at one corner and made colored lines all the way diagonal across, in rainbow order. She liked the way the greasy crayons smelled and how they slid in her fingers when she pushed down hard. Next, with black tempera paint, she slathered over everything she had colored. This initially caused alarm, fear that she was ruining her design, but Mrs. Mullen explained that they would be scratching away the black paint next time, to show the colors underneath. Carolyn was

enormously pleased with this idea. She would scratch a picture of her house, her mom, her dad, brothers. And herself with curly hair and a smile that spanned the sides of her head.

Now, holding the finished work, she walked up the driveway to present it to her mother who would exclaim, as she always did, that it was just beautiful. She would put it in a picture frame and lean it on the mantle next to the construction paper handprint turkey that Carolyn had made at Thanksgiving. And then when her dad came home from work, Carolyn's mother would point it out to him.

"Look what Caro made for me us, dear. Isn't it wonderful? It's our family." Carolyn's father would admire his daughter's handiwork and ruffle up her hair before pouring himself a drink and disappearing into his study until dinner.

at seven ...

"I like how my room looks this way."

She hung upside down, her small head and shoulders draped over the edge of her bed. A few strands of hair caught in her eyelashes as she stretched out her arms, reaching for what was now her ceiling.

"It always looks so clean like this."

Her friend Ella climbed next to her and lay her head back.

Upside down world.

"It does look clean," Ella whispered.

The flattened glass globe of the overhead light was a squat toadstool in the center of what had become the floor. Books were suspended, and the bookshelf itself was suspended from the ceiling over a rug of braided mosaic in purple and green. Two pairs of sneakers were anchored near the door, which had a threshold that must now be stepped over to enter the upside-down

room. Colored pencils and pads of paper on the window seat stuck to the cushion on which they once sat. The curtains at the side of the window rose in stiff folds, and a discarded sock hovered near Carolyn's head. She turned to smile at Ella, but Ella had spotted something resting above the bureau, and she was crawling on the ceiling to examine it. Blue with white polka dots and yellow rickrack.

"Hey," Ella said, "It's your Mrs. Beasley doll."

Carolyn scowled.

"I hate that doll," she sneered. "It's stupid. She says the same things. Aunt Marian always buys us dumb stuff for Christmas. She gave the same thing to Lydia, and Lydia's just a baby."

Ella studied the toy in her hands. Curly blond hair gone ratty, large blue eyes with black square-frame glasses, a blue polka dot dress with yellow rickrack, and an untied yellow ribbon around the collar. Ella fixed the ribbon and took hold of the ring on the side of the doll, giving it a pull. A whirring sound and then:

"Gracious me! You're getting to be such a big girl!"

Ella blinked and pulled the string again.

"Do you want to hear a secret? I know one."

Carolyn spun off the bed, grabbed the doll from Ella, and flung it across the room. It hit the closet door with a thud and sank to a yellow and polka dot pile on the floor. She picked it up again and brought it down with a plastic crash onto the edge of the window seat. Mrs. Beasley's head sagged; her black glasses cracked down the middle. Carolyn swung the doll again, this time knocking the head off completely.

"I hate it!"

"Stop!" Ella cried. "You're ruining her!"

Carolyn dropped the doll at her feet. She crouched down and pulled the string. The voice came slow, drunken.

“Do...you...want...to...hear...a...secret? I...know...one...”

“I did ruin it.” She felt small and foolish.

at eight . . .

She still loved playing with the Christmas tree. It was a great forested mountain. The garland was a road that wound its way to the peak, and all the ornaments were houses or businesses, and the angel at the very top was the church. Her favorite was the red and white house, with snow hanging off the eaves and a candy cane front railing. She always claimed this as her own whenever someone else was playing Christmas tree with her, like Kyle or Ella, whose mother would never let her touch their Christmas tree at home. Jack used to play, but he said he was too big for that now, though Carolyn still used his Lego guys and Matchbox cars because they were the perfect size.

This was a whole world she could control, with a post office, a grocery store, a movie theater, two schools, and even a train station. The gifts beneath the tree were a great city, tall buildings, short buildings, and everything in between. It was the world that occupied the living room for four weeks out of the year, and for those four weeks, it was Carolyn’s preferred thing to do. Almost as much fun as presents, which they would open tomorrow morning.

“It’s not working,” Kyle complained. He was on the other side of the tree and had gotten a filament of garland tangled on the wheels of his Matchbox truck.

“You’re not supposed to push down on the car.” Carolyn took it away from him and freed the vehicle from its snare. “Just go over the surface, see?”

Their mother appeared in the doorway, Lydia on her hip clutching a teething biscuit.

“You two go wash up. It’s almost time for dinner. And Kyle, put on a clean shirt.”

and then, at eleven ...

They were in a dressing room at Laveen’s Department Store in Iron Mountain. Carolyn had her arms crossed defensively over her chest. She was feeling deeply self-conscious, as if she were an ugly, smelly animal at the zoo, in front of a mocking crowd. Three days ago she’d approached her mother in the living room, where she sat alone reading a *Good Housekeeping* magazine and chuckling to herself. Carolyn’s carefully rehearsed speech, in which she justified the necessity of having a bra since she was almost twelve, and practically all the other girls in her class wore them, fell by the wayside in her sudden paralysis. She abruptly blurted that Ella was wearing a bra now. Her mother looked up from the magazine and stared appraisingly at Carolyn’s breasts.

“I suppose it’s time we did that,” she said.

But here, in the dressing room with both her mother and the woman that worked in the Girls’ Department at Laveen’s Department Store, she regretted having mentioned anything to her mother at all. They were discussing her body as though she weren’t present, addressing only the occasional question to her.

“She’s how old?”

“Eleven.”

“Not so tall for eleven, and already needing a bra. I’ll bet she’ll be at least a C cup before she’s through with them.”

The women laughed knowingly, while Carolyn stood in her tank top, not understanding the joke.

The women wound measuring tape around her rib cage, and then her breasts. Carolyn felt mortified at the touch of this stranger. When the sales clerk returned with a handful of pink and white confections for her to try on, Carolyn held her breath, willing herself to die.

“Caro,” her mother said, “take your top off and put these on.”

“Right now?!” She gave her mother a pointed look, eyes big with shame.

“We’ll look the other way while you change.”

Carolyn waited until their backs were turned. Then, clumsy and quick, she removed her tank top and slid her arms into the first bra on the pile. She fumbled with the hooks behind her, arms reaching urgently trying but missing. Her mother turned around.

“Here. I’ll get that honey.”

“You’ll become a pro at it in no time,” the other woman said. She approached Carolyn and began adjusting the straps. Carolyn was frozen in place, half-naked with witnesses. She tried to remember an occasion when she had been more embarrassed but came up with nothing. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and quickly looked away.

soon after, at twelve ...

She sat in Geography class, which was ordinarily her favorite, but not today. Not right now. There was a cramping pain low in her belly, almost as if she had to poop, yet she’d already done that this morning. She looked over at Ella, who sat two rows to her right and presently had her face buried in the paper on the desk. Their assignment was to create a map of an imaginary country, an exercise the class had been working on for the better part of a week. Carolyn loved this project and had brought her colored pencils to school to make her lakes and forests stand out blue and green. The pencils remained in their zippered case as she was too focused on her stomachache to concentrate. This felt so awful, and she thought she might throw up. She raised

her hand to be excused for the restroom. Mrs. Kaden nodded her head and Carolyn, with furtive urgency, rose from her seat and made for the door. Once in the hallway, she felt something give way, and then a hot dampness in her underwear.

Panic. Had she just wet herself? Like a baby?

Into the restroom and into a stall. There, on the cotton crotch panel of her panties, was a cherry-size dollop of reddish-brown blood.

At first, a deep horror, but then she remembered. Her first period. This was it. Her mother had spoken to her about such a thing, telling her that all women get them, it's Eve's punishment, and it's just a bit of blood for a few days every month. She'd bought Carolyn special supplies, thick pads with a sticky side, that fit right inside your underwear, but her mother had said nothing about a stomachache.

She wanted to go home immediately. What if everyone knew? What if they could all tell that she had her period? And what was she supposed to do, here in the stall, with no pads and a stain on her underwear? She only knew of two other girls that already had their periods, and the idea of finding one of them and asking for a pad was completely out of the question. She cried softly. After several minutes of despair, she rolled a giant wad of toilet paper and tucked it in place.

at fourteen...

She pulled her pillow over her ears to drown out her sister's snot-bubble crying. This was the second night of it. Their parents had replaced Lydia's little munchkin mini-bed with a real bed, a twin, wrought iron painted white, very much like Carolyn's bed. Last night, the first night, their mother had stayed with Lydia for a while, reading to her until she fell asleep, while Carolyn read in her own bed. *Nancy Drew* and *The Secret of the Old Clock*. Or at least that's what it

would look like to her mother should she cast her gaze across the room to her older daughter. Carolyn had tucked Judy Blume's *Forever*, a small paperback, one which her mother categorically would not approve of, inside the larger hardcover. Her eyes were riveted to the page. Her friend Natalie had given her this book at school, slipped it to her like contraband. "It's dirty," she'd said.

Carolyn was going to read it first then pass it on to Ella, who thus far had expressed very little interest in the novel.

Carolyn had asked her, do boys really name their thingies?

"How should I know? You have more brothers than I do. Ask one of them."

There was motion in her peripheral vision. Her mother was rising from Lydia's bed slowly, so as not to wake her. Carolyn folded the books together and stuffed them beneath the covers. Her mother whispered, "Good night sweetie. Did you say your prayers?" and exited the room without waiting for a response.

Carolyn lay in the dark, listening to the rain against the window and wondering about boys' things. She'd seen her brother Jack's once. By accident. She had been sent upstairs to fetch him for dinner, and he was standing naked in front of the mirror in his room, flexing his right arm approvingly. She started to giggle, and Jack whirled around, startled and angry.

"Fuck Carolyn! Don't you know how to knock?!" He grabbed for the towel at his feet, and that's when she saw it, the mass of shriveled flesh between his legs and his hair down there. He had so much hair around his thing. She felt disgusted and ran back down the steps.

Whimpering issued from Lydia's bed.

"Caro?" came a plaintive voice. "Are you awake?"

"No. Go back to sleep."

That was last night.

This night their mother had only stayed for fifteen minutes, reading four *Frog and Toad* stories to Lydia before kissing both girls good night and shutting the door, not even asking about prayers. Lydia began crying at once, and Carolyn shoved her pillow over her ears, wishing for the thousandth time that she did not have to share a room with her four-year-old sister.

“Caro?... Carolyn?...”

“Lydia, go to sleep.”

“I can’t. I want my old bed. I don’t like this bed.”

“Why?”

“There’s monsters.”

Carolyn threw off her covers, crossed the room to her sister’s bed, with the intention of shaking her a bit, but then she saw her, Lydia’s silver face in the moonlight, her cheeks shiny with tears, her upper lip slick from a runny nose.

“What monsters are you talking about?”

“There’s the ones under the bed.”

Carolyn thought for a moment, remembering clearly how it felt to be terrified of what lurked in the dark places.

“Don’t worry about them,” she said. “Those are your monsters. As long as you keep them under the bed, everything will be fine. Sometimes you have to put potato chips out for them. They love potato chips. And Hershey Kisses.” If Lydia followed these instructions, she would surely bring ants into the room, and maybe, just maybe, that would be the final straw, and she’d finally get her a room of her own.

“Do you have monsters?”

“Sure. I keep them under the bed. And every night when I go to sleep, I making sure they stay under the bed. It’s like a cage.”

“Oh... ”

at eighteen...

The Smiths’ “How Soon Is Now” came loud from the stereo in the corner of the front room. Carolyn swayed back and forth to the music, taking care not to slosh the punch out of the red Solo cup she was holding. She saw Ella sitting on a couch, awkwardly talking with the mousy girl from their Introductory Biology class. Her expression was animated, lively, and she seemed to be having a good time. This was in stark contrast to three hours before when Ella had put up a fuss about going to the party. Three times she asked Carolyn if there would be alcohol involved.

“I don’t want to have to hold your hair again,” she’d said.

And now here they were, in a house packed full of people talking and laughing and drinking bright red punch. Carolyn felt warm and kind of fuzzy. She wished every day could feel as good as right now.

“Hey. Aren’t you listening to me?” Shaun was lightly scratching her back and holding out a fresh cup of punch. They were in the same calculus class together. She had been nurturing a crush on him and was delighted when he invited her to this party. Carolyn looked at him, and he smiled. She thought he was especially handsome when he smiled.

“Sorry,” she said. “I guess I tuned out for a minute.”

“I asked if you wanted to go downstairs, where it’s quieter, so we can, you know, talk.”

Carolyn glanced to where Ella sat on the couch, still engrossed in conversation. Maybe it would be better if she were in a quiet room for a little while. Her head was starting to spin, and she felt wobbly on her feet.

“Okay,” she said to Shaun’s chin.

He put his arm around her shoulders and led her down the steps.

She lay on a bed in a dimly lit room. An anemic light escaped the crack of a closet door, and a bare blue bulb hung from a short chain on the ceiling. Her shirt was unbuttoned, her bra pushed up. Shaun was pulling at her pants. This seemed wrong, or maybe it wasn’t happening. It felt like a dream, and everything was blue. She wanted to go home, and she tried to say so.

“No,” her voice came feeble. “I don’t...I just wanna go...”

Shaun paused for a moment, then gave her jeans one last tug and tossed them to the floor. “You said you wanted it.”

I said that? she thought. I don’t remember saying that.

“No,” she repeated.

“Come on,” he replied. “It’s too late to chicken out now. That wouldn’t be nice. You like me, right?”

His pants came off with efficiency, and then he was on top of her, crushing her, stabbing at her between her legs. There was a searing pain. He finished quickly, spilling himself on a towel near the bed. He put his pants back on and left the room. Carolyn opened her eyes and shut them. Slow blinks. This wasn’t real. That didn’t happen. She tried to sit up, but a wave of nausea came over her, and she lay back down. She wanted to sleep yet knew she couldn’t stay here. Then the door opened again. She saw two silhouettes enter, their voices low, and one laughed

dirty. The sound of zippers and the topsy-turvy of someone climbing onto the bed. Again, she was crushed and stabbed, this one putting his mouth over hers. She couldn't breathe. She raised her arms to push against him, but he took hold of her wrists and pushed them onto the bed. His mouth smothered her—then abruptly, he was done.

“Go buddy,” she heard him say.

Again, the crushing, the stabbing, the smothering. This one was bigger than the other two. She thought she was ripping in half. He went on and on, pulling out once to bite hard on her right nipple, and shoving himself back into her as if in anger. She thought she heard the door open.

Later, when she next came to the surface, she was alone in the room. Her body felt raw, savaged. She had thrown up. It was down the side of her face, on her neck, in her hair. She sat up and slowly closed her legs, shifting so that she sat on the edge of the bed. Feeling around on the floor with her hand, she found a shirt and her pants. She wiped off the vomit with a pillowcase and then slipped her feet into the legs of her jeans, standing up in stages. The room spun. She took measured deep breaths as she pulled her pants up and zipped them. Where were her shoes? She looked around in the dim. There. By the closet. Baby steps, creeping toward that bar of light, then incrementally bending down and standing back up once she had her shoes in hand. Now she only had to get out of this room, out of this house, and get home to sleep. None of this would be so bad after she slept.

Ella nearly knocked her over on the stairs.

“Were you down there the entire time?! I’ve been looking for you it seems like hours! What the hell Caro! They kept telling me look here look there maybe she’s upstairs and then that

guy said you'd left but I even went to the car to see and I waited in the car because I thought maybe you were mad at me for not wanting to come to this stupid party in the first place then I kinda nodded off and when I woke up I just knew something happened so I came back in the house to look for you again. Were you looking for me?... are you okay?..."

Carolyn took hold of Ella's arm to steady herself.

"We need to go now. Please."

Once in the car, Ella drove down Highway 41, her hands shaking on the wheel. She had never properly learned to drive, but she had no choice right now. Carolyn lay in the passenger seat, her body curled small. The Mrs. Beasley doll's head bobbed from the rear-view mirror. Two years ago, they had turned it into an ornament of sorts, tidying the hair and repairing the broken glasses with electrical tape. The car mirror seemed the perfect place to display it. At the time, they had thought it so funny, but now Ella found it unsettling.

At last, she said, "We should call the police."

Carolyn grew agitated, twisting in the seat as though from another assault.

"No!" She was vehement, despite her voice rising out of her as a croak. "Then my parents would find out. Then everyone would know." Her eyes fell on the doll's head. Its smile mocked her as she rode along in the dark, and she began to sob with the full weight of it all.