

CALL ME CAROL

Sickly sunbeams muscled through the greasy window to dance with the dust of the twelve by twelve room. Nine-year-old Georgie peeked through the holes of her soiled pink and white blanket—her most prized possession. She pulled it over her head for a few beats, willing herself back to sleep to fly across the night sky with Peter Pan to Neverland.

Georgie never knew who or what awaited her on the flip side of slumber—a landlord banging on the door forcing her to grab her backpack and skedaddle out the window, or worse, one of her mother’s smelly dates, staring at her like she inherently knew they shouldn’t be.

If she couldn’t sneak away while her mother was otherwise occupied, she’d jam one of the ragged chairs into a corner, hide behind it and curl up like a basement bug. It blocked the sights—unfortunately, not the sounds.

When she managed to escape the sometimes terrifying and often confusing nights in the rented rooms, Georgie hid in dark urine-soaked alleys, huddled between dumpsters. She’d pass the time by giving names to the rats that scurried from shadow to shadow—much like her, living according to the hand they were dealt.

Georgie made friends up and down the streets of the South Bronx. Besides Mr. Ahman, the owner of the local bodega, there was the hawk-faced lady who stood on a box reading from the bible. Mrs. Toradelli ran the corner newspaper stand and Ken and Dan were two of the beat cops who patrolled her neighborhood.

While the cops understood Georgie’s circumstances, her mother did just enough to keep the authorities at bay. Although a bit malnourished and small for her age, she wasn’t physically abused and, because of her size, the police never asked her why she wasn’t in school.

One morning Officer Dan stopped Georgie in front of the bodega. He knelt down to her level, ran his hands up and down her arms, looked her in the eye and asked, “Does your mother hit you, kid? Tell me she hurts you and maybe we can do something.”

Georgie squirmed away from his touch just as Mr. Ahman came out to see what was going on.

“Well? Does she hit you?” Officer Dan asked again.

Georgie couldn't lie, wasn't wired that way. “No, never.”

“I know your mom. Maybe I'll try talking some sense into her, convince her that the streets are no place for a kid. If I can get her to give you up, I can work the system, get them to let you come home with me. I have two sons. They'd be your big brothers. Would you like that?”

Officer Dan asked.

Mr. Ahman put his hand on Georgie's shoulder, gave the cop a strange look and steered her into the store. He handed her an apple and said, “You're doing a fine job looking after yourself. Stick close to Sister Sarah and promise me you'll stay away from that cop.”

Her friend's words confused her. Living in a real house with a mother and a father and two big brothers—those were the kind of dreams that kept her fighting. When curled up behind that chair, she'd imagine those big brothers swooping in to take her away—if not Officer Dan's sons, than maybe Peter Pan and his gang of lost boys.

It was an awfully cold and rainy spring night when Georgie heard the door rattle—her mom and one of her dates. Georgie had just enough time to dive behind the chair to decide whether to hunker down or scramble out the window into the cold night. She hunkered.

The guy sounded like a rabid dog—growling, snapping and crashing around the room. The chaos gave way to the grunting and groaning sounds that Georgie hated most. She grabbed her pack to make for the window when the chair suddenly took flight.

The shock of seeing Officer Dan's face tethered her to the floor. He smiled. "Hey, there you are. Your mama's out of it. Why don't you come sit on my lap? I won't hurt you."

Georgie knew drunk. Georgie knew drugged. Georgie knew mean. She snatched up her backpack and bolted. He grabbed the strap, lifted her off her feet, threw her against the wall and lumbered toward her. Fortunately, she landed right next to the door. When he stumbled, she escaped and didn't stop running until she reached her favorite alley. Two strategically placed garbage cans and a dumpster shielded her. She could see out, but it would take someone with eagle eyes to spot her.

Georgie draped her small blanket around her shoulders and mourned the loss of another dream. Just as she tucked herself up against the bricks she heard a noise. She peeked out from between the cans and saw him. Backlit by the lone working streetlamp at the end of the alley, he cast a giant shadow. The specter lumbered toward her. She held her breath and pulled up tighter, trying to make herself invisible. The form stopped directly in front of her, turned his head from side to side, sniffed at the air and then looked directly into her hidey-hole.

Relief washed over her when she realized it wasn't Officer Dan. But the giant of a man standing before her was a stranger. She tried shoving one of the cans into his knees so she could run, but he bent down, held it firm and captured her eyes with his.

"What're *you* looking at?" She asked, knowing not to show fear.

"Babies shouldn't be out in the night alone."

"I'm not a baby. I'm nine. Go away or I'll scream."

“Come with me.”

“No way.”

With only one hand, he gave the dumpster a mighty shove and sat down next to her—didn’t grab her by the neck—didn’t touch her.

“Alone in a dark alley in the middle of the night with the rats,” he said. “Most people are scared of rats.” He kicked at one as it scurried out right in front of his feet.

“Why’d you do that?” Georgie whispered. “He wasn’t bothering you.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“His name’s Stubby because he’s missing half his tail. I’m not scared of rats like most people are. I’m scared of most people like rats are. I’m scared of you. Go away.”

“On the streets, fear keeps you alive. Ha!” he said.

“Ha?”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“So what?”

“You’ll catch a cold, have to suck on a Luden’s. That’s the only candy the sisters let you suck on in Catholic school. Fake a cough. Ha!”

She relaxed a bit. Despite his size, he seemed child-like. “I’ve never had a cold—not that I can remember. I had a real bad rash once,” she told him.

“You shouldn’t be here visible to darkness. Finding you here makes me jump all over. Ha!”

“What do you care?”

“Nobody else does,” he said.

He was right about that. “I don’t have a dad and my mother is, well…”

“Your parent’s lives should share your future. Ha!” he said.

“I agree. I think?”

“You have a mother, but not a parent. My parents died. They’re in heaven. I want to go there.”

The conversation continued until Georgie realized that his ramblings weren’t really bizarre at all, but a kind of understanding of how the world worked. It didn’t take her long to see that even though he was a grown man, an extremely tall and muscular grown man, his brain worked different than most. Maybe not worse, just different.

“Come with me. I’ll keep you safe,” he insisted.

“No.”

“Go to the shelter,” he stated.

She felt a little more comfortable with him and started chattering. “My mother doesn’t like the shelter because she can’t bring her men there. She rents rooms. I hate the rooms.” She shuddered. “The shelter’s great, but no beds tonight. I visit Sister Sarah during the day. She lets me keep clean there—even gave me a hairbrush and toothbrush of my own. She taught me how to read when I was little, like four. I know how to add and subtract and divide and I memorized the multiplication tables. Sister Sarah says I’m bright, very bright, wondrously bright.”

He nodded. “You sure use a lot of words. I know Sister Sarah.”

“She gives me books, mostly kids’ bible stories—a couple of others. My favorites are Peter Pan, because I love the lost boys, Heidi, because I love the grandfather, and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Yup, right in that order. Hey, mister, look over there. That’s Spot. See the white mark on his butt? I haven’t seen him in a while, thought maybe he died.”

The giant sat silent beside her, listening intently. Georgie decided that he looked just like the warrior angels pictured in her bible books—the ones who kicked the crap out of the devil. *Or*

maybe Superman. His hair was jet black, his eyes blue—icy blue. *Like x-ray vision.* She reached a decision, stood, brushed off her tattered jeans and put out her hand.

“Name’s Georgie. Nice to meet you.”

“My parents named me Conrad. Don’t call me Connie, that’s a girl’s name. Ha!”

“That’s funny because my mom named me George and *that’s* a boy’s name. Ha!”

“It’s not nice to make fun,” Conrad said.

“I agree. But I’m not making fun, just *having* fun.”

Conrad wrinkled his forehead.

“It’s okay to laugh at yourself and with friends. That makes life a little easier,” she told him.

He smiled. “Come with me.”

She sat back down, pulled her blanket over her head and again said, “No!”

“You’re stubborn. Sleep. I’ll stand guard.”

She took a chance and closed her eyes. Just before she dropped off, he removed his own jacket and draped it over her. In the morning, he still sat atop the dumpster keeping watch.

Georgie found real and true friendship that night with a man who never quite grew up. She’d found her lost boy.

Every night after that, he joined her in the alley, standing guard from his perch on the dumpster while she slept.

“When do *you* sleep? *Where* do you sleep?” Georgie asked one night.

“During the day. It’s best that way. If someone sees me with you, I’ll go back to jail.”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer but asked anyway. “Why were you in jail?”

“A little girl dropped her dolly. I picked it up. Ran after them. Mommy screamed. Screamed some more. A police car came. Cops pushed me down—hard! Handcuffs. Bars. For a whole day. Won’t ever help again—except for you.” He shrugged, “I used to be smart, now I’m dumb.”

“That’s not true, Conrad. You’re smart, just in a different way—in a secret kind of way.”

“The cops thought I was going to hurt her. But then they let me go. Policemen are our friends.”

“Not all of them,” Georgie mumbled.

“I don’t want you to get sick. I got a fever once, went to sleep for a long time and woke up stupid. Ha!”

A week later, as soon as she slipped out the window, she realized her mistake. It was cold, so cold that Georgie agreed to go with Conrad to someplace “better.” She skipped for a block or two then threw her arms out to airplane along the curb. Conrad laughed and then joined her.

Their journey ended at a rail yard bordering the river where balls of fire turned the night bright orange. When they got closer, she realized that the flames were confined to big rusty barrels.

People milled around everywhere. Bodies huddled under cardboard and old blankets. Crazies she recognized from the streets hovered over shopping carts over-flowing with everything *but* groceries. Dark forms with glowing devil faces congregated around the blazing barrels.

She was holding tight to Conrad’s hand when two men started yelling at each other. It turned into a fight. They fell to the ground, rolled around and crashed into Georgie’s legs which sent her tumbling. Conrad first set her upright and then reached for both men. His massive hands held them up by the front of their jackets until their feet dangled in the air.

“Stay away from her! Stay away from me! Ha!” Conrad tossed them several feet into the air as if they weighed nothing. They landed in piles and then scrambled away.

“Conrad, it’s not better here. It’s scary. It looks like hell—I mean like the real hell.”

“I’m going to pick you up and carry you now. Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“They are and that’s good.”

“Hey Connie, whatta' ya' got there?” A dark voice called out from the murky glow. “Ain't ya' gonna' share, ya' big retard?”

“Those are not friends having fun, Georgie. Ha!”

He led her to an enclosed pier with high steel sides and a sand bottom. She wrinkled her nose at the oily fish smell.

“This is *my* barrel.” He balled up newspaper, tossed in a match and loaded it up with broken furniture.

Georgie sat in the cold soft sand, pulled her knees up to her chest and leaned back against the metal while keeping a close eye all around. The fire roared to life. Conrad crossed his arms. Just like in the alley, they talked nonstop while waiting for sleep.

While Georgie loved the cadence of Conrad’s short choppy sentences, not everybody did. Every little while someone shouted out, “Shut-up, retard!” They yelled at him and made fun, but nobody had the courage to face him.

She came to know his heart. Some of Conrad’s words made more sense to her than anything she had ever heard in her life—others, not so much.

“Ya' know, Georgie, a little goes a long way in a friendship. Ha!”

“Ha!” she exclaimed and smiled up at her lost boy. She didn’t know the word profound, and wouldn’t understand philosophy for years to come, but deep down in her soul, she understood his brilliance.

That was the first time she’d been out of the four square block radius she called home. Georgie knew her mother would never leave the South Bronx because she said she’d be damned if she’d give up her corner to some pimply-faced anorexic teenaged bitch. That was good. It meant she and Conrad could remain friends forever.

The following morning, Georgie returned to the rented room, opened the door ever-so-slightly and peeked in. To her surprise, Carol was alone and alert.

“Come over here, ya’ little shit.”

Georgie stood in front of her mother. Carol lit up a cigarette, blew the smoke into Georgie’s face and said, “What’s new with you? Wanna’ tell me where in the hell you go at night?”

Georgie shrugged.

“Some of the girls say they see you with that freaky giant man-child. Has he touched you?”

“Touched me?”

“Your privates, stupid. Has he put his hand under your shirt or down your pants?”

“No! Yuck! No! He’s my friend. Conrad wouldn’t do that!”

“It’s not like I care. It’s just that, if he does that and if you like it, maybe I’ll be able to turn you out sooner than I thought.”

Unfortunately, Georgie knew what Carol was talking about. She sat down in the big chair, reached into her backpack, pulled out her blanket and ran it along her cheek—resisting the urge to suck her thumb.

“Where’d this blanket come from, Carol?” Georgie was forbidden from calling her mother mom or mama or mommy.

“Your grandma made it.”

She brightened. “I have a grandma?”

“*Had* a grandma. She’s dead.”

Georgie’s face collapsed. Carol smirked.

“What about the daddy? Where’s the daddy?”

Carol snorted. Are you talking about *your* daddy? Yeah, if I knew who *that* daddy was, I’d be home free.”

“Free of me?”

“Yeah, you got that right, kid.”

When they needed quick money, Carol made her sit on her knee on a street corner and beg. People couldn’t resist helping a woman and child down on their luck. One evening, while perched on Carol’s lap, a well-dressed man stopped and eyed them speculatively.

“Is that really your kid?” he asked.

“My niece,” Carol answered.

“Beautiful little girl.”

Georgie watched her mother size him up, knew she was checking out his fancy watch and gold cufflinks.

“You like her?” Carol asked.

Georgie looked around nervously—may not have understood exactly what was about to go down, but a voice inside her head screamed at her to run. She was about to do just that when the

man stooped down in front of her. “You sure have beautiful eyes, so big and brown and warm.” He wiped a smudge from her cheek. She jerked away. “Are you hungry, honey?”

Georgie was always hungry, wrestled daily with the fiery pains that squeezed and twisted her insides. She nodded. He pulled out his wallet, plucked out a twenty and gave it to her. She stared into the man’s denim blue eyes and saw something she couldn’t identify, something important, something her mother may have missed.

Carol snatched the twenty from her hand, stood, grabbed the man’s arm and walked a few feet away.

“You interested?” Carol asked.

“In what?”

“Come on, man. Ya’ want her or not?”

“You want to sell her to me?”

“You know damn well what I’m talkin’ about, perv.” She softened her voice and said, “Hey, man, look at her, she’s still got some of her baby teeth.”

He considered her words, looked back at Georgie.

“How much?” he asked.

Carol was about jumping out of her skin. Georgie only saw her twitch all over like that when she needed her medicine real bad.

“Fifty grand. Cash.”

“It’ll take time to get that kind of money.”

“How long?” Carol asked.

“Tomorrow. Mid-morning. Right here,” he answered.

They stayed at the shelter that night. Carol lay next to Georgie chattering non-stop and humming. Georgie never heard her hum before—didn't like it. She tried to ignore her, hid beneath her blanket and thought about Conrad.

Carol suddenly grabbed Georgie by the wrist and dragged her through the sea of cots and mats to the back door. "Move, move, move! See those guys? They're cops! That son of a bitch must have followed us and then called them. Or maybe *he's* a cop. Dammit!"

She dragged Georgie to the nearest subway station, pulled her onto her lap and begged until they had enough coins to buy tokens.

"Where are we going? Carol! I want to stay here. Pleeeeease..."

When they reached Grand Central Station, Carol told Georgie to sit down and shut-up. She approached a well-dressed man, disappeared around a corner and later returned with enough cash for train tickets.

Georgie pulled away from her mother's grasp. "No! You can't make me go!"

"Get your ass moving or I swear to God I'll sell you to the first pervert I see."

The little girl and her mother climbed five gray wooden steps and stood on a porch before a bright green door.

"Where are we?" Georgie asked.

"Milwaukee. Bay View. This is your grandma's house. This is where I grew up."

"Who lives here now?"

"Your grandma does, stupid!"

Georgie couldn't breathe. She was angry and for the first time in her short life, physically attacked her mother—kicking at her shins and pinching her arms. "You told me she was dead!"

You lied! You're a liar! You..." The door swung open and Georgie stopped to stare up into kind caramel-colored eyes that melted over her, warming her like Conrad's coat.

"Take her! I gotta' lay low for a while. How much do you have?" Carol rasped.

Georgie strained her eyes as her grandmother disappeared back into the shadows of the big house. She returned with an envelope and pressed it into Carol's hand. Without a word, Carol turned on her heel, bounced down the steps and headed up the street.

When her grandmother looked back down at Georgie clutching the torn dirty blanket, she smiled and held out her hand. Georgie didn't take it.

"Did you just buy me?" Georgie asked.

"Oh, baby, what horrors has she put you through?" She gathered the little girl up into her arms. Georgie stiffened and she put her down.

"Listen, baby. Your mom ran away with you only a couple weeks after you were born. I never stopped looking—even hired some men to find you but we never dreamed you were living in New York. I worried so, prayed every night that she'd bring you back. But I never dared to believe..."

"Where's my grandfather?" Georgie asked, thinking about Heidi.

"Your mom was twelve—daddy's little princess. We'd decided to have another child. Oh, Carol was angry about that. I wasn't too far along when I lost the baby. Your grandpa put me into the car and we headed for the hospital. There was a bad accident. He died and Carol never forgave me. I tried to help her, took her to a doctor..."

"A psychiatrist?"

"Now, how would you know about that?"

“I know a lot, Grandma. I know you shouldn’t love me because she’ll be back. I’m going to make her a lot of money one day. That’s why she won’t let me go.”

Once again her grandma wrapped her up in her arms. That time Georgie hugged her back. The huge house sat in the middle of a street lined with giant trees and grass in every yard. Lake Michigan was only a block away and Georgie loved exploring the shoreline and caves.

Her grandma was an artist and the house was chock-full of paintings. Fanciful sculptures made out of iron, steel and aluminum colored orange, blue, yellow, red and green were perched in the front and side yards.

Every day that her mother didn’t return was a day to celebrate. They dared to relax a little. Georgie made friends with neighborhood kids who’d be her classmates at Immaculate Conception Catholic School in the fall which made her think about Luden’s cough drops. She missed Conrad.

Georgie’s grandma convinced her that she was special and brave and worthy of love—called her a survivor. Georgie’s biggest angst was leaving her best friend behind. She found Neverland but lost her lost boy.

One August afternoon, Georgie found a baby bird in the middle of the alley. Nothing looked broken, but it couldn’t fly—was abandoned and scared. She scooped it up and ran for home, certain that she and her grandma could keep it alive until it was ready to face the world alone.

Georgie banged through the back door, zipped up the five steps into the kitchen and stopped dead. Raised voices and angry words came from the dining room. *Carol!*

She considered running right back out the door and finding somewhere to hide. The cliffs and caves down at the lakefront would make perfect hidey holes. Instead, Georgie joined the fracas.

When Carol tried to drag her out the front door, her grandma called the police. Two officers arrived. One sat down next to Georgie while the other sorted things out.

“I want to stay here,” she said. “Please don’t make me go with her.”

“Is she your mom?”

Georgie dropped her chin. “Yes.”

“Does she hurt you? Does she hit you?”

She struggled mightily, tried but couldn’t lie. “No.”

There was nothing that could be done. They don’t take kids away from parents because they’re poor.

After her fleeting taste of normalcy, it was difficult to face a life back on the streets. Georgie begged her mother to send her back to live with her grandma.

“That’s not gonna’ happen. She wants you and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna’ give her what *she* wants. Besides, you’re going to make me a lot of money one day.”

“If you try to sell me again, I’ll tell. I swear I’ll tell!”

“Go find your freakazoid friend and let me sleep. I’m hoping for a busy night.”

Georgie ran all the way to the railyard encampment. Because it was daytime, the usuals were not around. She spotted Conrad’s feet sticking out from the end of the pier, smiled and made a mad dash toward him. “Conrad! Conrad! I’m back!”

She quickly realized that something was wrong. He moved, sat up, held up a hand and then fell back down. His head and face were covered with blood. She tried to stanch the flow but realized she needed help. “Conrad, don’t try to move. I’m going to get help.”

She spotted a couple of men walking the tracks, workers, railroad workers. She waved her arms, tore-ass across the stones, pleaded for someone to call an ambulance then ran back to her friend.

After the hospital staff stitched up his head, she held his hand, explained about her mother's plan to sell her, how they had to get out of town. Conrad nodded and talked about happy Christmases and Thanksgivings and Santa Claus.

“Who did this to you, Conrad?”

Instead of answering her question, he said, “Santa, when do we stop pretending? Never! Grow a beard, who's cooler than Santa? Ha!”

Giorgie missed his cryptic ramblings—missed him. The little girl struggled to hold back the tears burning at the backs of her eyes. “Did you have a Christmas tree? I had turkey at the shelter once.”

“Summer to winter, a gradual decline in the weather and a sick feeling in my stomach. I don't like the holidays anymore. Ha!”

“I know how you miss them. I miss my Grandma. When I was with her, I missed you. I'm glad I have you in my life, Conrad. You make things better.”

“It's not him, her or I, it's just us. Ha!”

“Ain't that the truth.”

“I have a degree in reading people but if you don't know, there's always the guess. Ha!”

“I like that one. I like that one a lot. What's a degree?”

“Big schools give them to people to prove they're smart. You don't need one.” He put his fingertip to her temple and said, “Genius with hair the color of the sun that shines like the moon.”

“If I’m ever able to get out of here, to get away from her and go back to my Grandma’s house in Bay View, would you come with me?”

“Listen to your conscience. Remember what you’re here for. Abandon the plan and cave in. Sometimes you have to settle for the better choice, not the perfect choice. Ha!”

Conrad healed and promised her he’d stay away from the river. A few weeks later Georgie woke to her mother pushing at her.

“Come on, get your ass moving!”

Georgie peaked out from under her blanket. “Leave me alone.”

“It’s your birthday, stupid. Don’t you even know that?”

“I do. I just...” *She remembered my birthday?*

“If you’re gonna’ get all whiney, you can forget it!”

“No, please...”

“Come on, then” Carol huffed.

Georgie couldn’t believe what was happening. Her mother seemed different, almost nice. *Had she missed me?* She dared to think maybe, just maybe... They walked down to the corner and entered Mr. Ahman’s bodega. He smiled at Georgie—frowned at Carol.

The little girl ran down the aisle and grabbed a twin-pack of Twinkies. She was so excited she slipped-up and shouted, “Mom? Can we stick a birthday candle into the Twinkie so I can blow it out and make a wish?”

Carol, who was a little ways up the aisle from Georgie, spun around. “What did you call me?”

In a panicky little voice, she squeaked, “Carol! Carol! I called you Carol!”

Her mother snatched a can of vegetables off the shelf and let it fly. The missile caught Georgie right in the temple and she went down hard.

When she woke, Georgie stared up into the face of a stranger. She stiffened, quickly took in her surroundings and prepared to bolt.

The woman placed a hand on her shoulder. Georgie shrugged it off which made her head scream.

“It’s okay. I’m a doctor. You’re safe now, honey.”

Two policemen entered the room and stood at her bedside. “Hey, little one. How’re you feeling today? You’ve been asleep for quite a while. Can you tell us what happened to you?”

“Yes, I made my mother mad and she threw something at me.”

“What did you do that made her so mad?”

“I called her mom.”

“Has she ever hurt you before?”

She thought about Conrad’s words. “Abandon the plan and cave in.” *This is it, my chance, maybe my only chance—not the perfect choice but the better choice.* She answered the policeman with a lie. “Yes, all the time. She beats me all the time.”

Glances were exchanged between the doctor and the officers. Georgie crossed her fingers and toes.

“Well, honey, your mommy’s in jail. She’s probably going to be there for a long time based on Mr. Ahman’s account of what happened. Do you have any other family who can take care of you?”

Her grandma went right to work piecing her back together—spackling up her many cracks with hope and promises before slapping on coat after healing coat of unconditional love.

Several weeks after returning to her Neverland, Georgie woke from one of her achingly sad dreams of Conrad. She peeked out from beneath her clean blanket, blinking back tears and the bright sunshine that sliced through her sparkling bedroom window to reflect off the pastel pink walls.

Brewing coffee and the smell of bacon teased her nose, coaxing her out of bed. She entered the kitchen, rubbed her tired grainy eyes, and stopped dead. There, at her grandmother's bright yellow kitchen table and wearing a wide blueberry pancake grin, sat Conrad.