

Later

Carol will recall only small bits of this part of her life. They will linger as single-frame flashes in her memory, the way a visitor will remember only a select few paintings after a full day at a museum. Picture one: Mother pours alcohol down the drain and then throws the glass bottles over the chain link fence in their backyard. The caption reads, “Don’t tell your daddy, okay?”

Then Gary came in drunk and rummaged through the refrigerator. Carol guessed the alcohol on his breath more than smelled it. She knew her father’s drunken look. The lazy red cheeks, the slight curl in his lips, the thudding to his steps. Later, Carol will remember how her mother ignored Gary’s entrance. A passive defiance that Carol will repeat with her own husband. Her own daughter will never see it all transpire as Carol does.

As Gary’s search became more anxious, Carol felt a strange paranoia that he would divine mother’s plan and walk around the fence to find the evidence. Instead, he hit mother. Gary only hit her twice. Enough to give her a black eye and a bruise on the left side of her chin. Mother didn’t cry out. Mother usually screamed back and cried out. Mother should have taken Carol out of bed, still in her pajamas, and driven away. They should have eaten late-night ice cream at the Seven-Eleven and maybe had a campout in the car. That’s what mother had done before. Carol liked sleeping in the car with her mother when it was warm. But when she grew too large to lie down in the back seat, she never slept well. That morning after, she sensed a silent power in her mother that she will later assume when her own life takes similar turns.

Mother, with Carol, drove to a friend’s house and told the story. Picture two: Dolores bursts into tears as mother’s face remains emotionless. The caption reads, “Not the first time.” Carol slept on Dolores’ couch that night, wrapped in blankets that scratched her neck and on cushions that sank and separated under her weight; a deflating float on rolling water. Mother let

Dolores give Carol a sugary cereal for breakfast before school. Picture three: Framed by the two front seats, Carol sees mother and Dolores embrace at the car door. The caption reads, “We’ll get through this.”

Time passed and Gary was nice until he hit mother again. He came home drunk most nights and fell asleep in front of a comedy show with jokes Carol didn’t understand. Picture four: Blue light shines into a black room in which a silhouette reclines on a la-z-boy. He holds a can in one hand, the remote in another, and a bag of chips rests on his gut. The caption reads, “Drunken deep laughter.” Later Carol’s own daughter will watch the same shows on Nick-at-Night, laughing and throwing popcorn in her mouth. Carol will excuse herself to wash the dishes or do the other idle chores she avoids throughout the day. Carol’s daughter will never ask why she doesn’t like the shows and Carol will never tell her.

Mother was silent again when Gary hit her. A slap that time. When he pulled his hand back to strike again, he stopped and held it there, mother unflinching. He dropped his arm, looked at Carol peeking in from the other room, mumbled an apology, grabbed his jacket and left the house. A bruise appeared on mother’s face the next morning.

Mother again took Carol with her when she visited Dolores. Picture five: Mother and Dolores stand at a counter in a nondescript room. A black woman smiles at them in a sad way while handing Mother a clipboard with a pen attached to it by a string. The caption reads, “It can take up to a week to file the petition.”

Gary started being nice again. He came into her room when she was playing with her dolls and he said they were going somewhere. She could even take one doll with her. She chose her Sarah doll, the same doll that will comfort her own daughter as she grows into womanhood. The doll will be put on her granddaughter’s shelf when it becomes discolored and faded and with

sewn rips, but all original parts will still be there; an heirloom with an unknown history. In another generation it will be thrown out, having succumbed to age years after Carol.

Gary threw some of Carol's clothes into a garbage bag and took her hand. He was in a hurry and he buckled her in the front seat and threw the garbage bag in the back.

"What's your dolly's name?" he asked. Carol loved Gary when he was sweet.

"Sarah," Carol said. "From *Sarah Plain and Tall*."

"Is that your favorite movie?" Gary asked.

"It's a book."

"Oh." Gary turned up the radio. He backed out of the driveway and Carol stayed silent. Hours passed, and with the passing of each, Carol hugged Sarah closer. Picture six: Carol's own face is a diaphanous reflection in the window as she looks out to an endless expanse of winter farmland and gray-brown plains. The caption reads, "Where're we going?"

Carol ate a Happy Meal while Gary held the steering wheel in one hand and a Big Mac in the other. He let go of the wheel to take a sip from a straw and the car swerved. He had Carol hold the wheel while he took a bite or a sip. Carol liked the feeling of steering – the slight vibrations through her hands, the slight tugging to keep the truck on course. Later, she will put her own five-year-old daughter on her lap and drive around the neighborhood. They will never exceed fifteen miles per hour nor face anything more formidable than a stop sign, but driving on her mother's lap will be her own daughter's first cherished memory.

They stayed at a motel that night. While Carol dried off from a bath she heard Gary yelling into the phone. Picture seven: Gary sits on the bed with his back turned to her. His grip on the phone makes his knuckles look enormous. The lamp next to him casts an awkward shadow on the bed. The caption reads, "She's my daughter too, g'dammit."

He hung up and smiled when he saw her. “Want to watch a movie with daddy?” he asked. Carol nodded. They watched a movie together, changing channels to a baseball game during commercials. Carol fell asleep with her head against Gary’s chest and woke up at night because of his snoring. In the morning they ate at a donut shop.

Picture eight: A silver-haired, overweight woman stands at the bottom of a rickety, weather-bent front stoop holding a cane with a tennis ball on its end, and she extends a wrinkled arm. The caption reads, “Give your Grandma a hug.” It was the first time Carol contemplated that her parents had parents. Later, she will be present at her own granddaughter’s birth, and she will be the second person to hold her and the first to see her eyes.

The old woman’s house was stuffy, everything worn and faded. The kitchen table was sturdy and heavy but marked with scratches. The carpet was recently vacuumed but the threads were thinning. The television had cable but the remote was large and heavy and Carol needed to press each button hard to change the channel. That night she went to the bathroom and heard Gary talking to the old woman. She heard Gary crying and realized for the first time that adults cry. Carol did not understand what the old woman said. “Go to the A meeting” and “get sponsored”. Later, Carol will understand the words and attribute significance to them.

Time passed at the old woman’s house. Unlike mother, Gary read three stories to Carol every night before bed, and, unlike mother, the old woman was good at coloring and let her watch television during the daytime. She missed mother anyways. Gary and Carol and the old woman ate meals together and sometimes they went out in the back yard and played in the snow. Once, Gary brought Carol sledding. But she fell off the sled on her third run and got a face full of snow and cried. He scooped her up and warmed her face in his hands and took her home.

Picture nine: Gary and the old woman sit across the table. In the foreground is a ceramic cup with rising steam. The caption reads, “Hot chocolate with marshmallows.” Later, hot chocolate after sledding will become a tradition with her own daughter, so much so that the smell of chocolate will conjure memories of snow even during summer months.

Carol stopped enjoying being spoiled. It was the first time she understood the concept Too Much of a Good Thing. Television bored her and she read all of the old woman’s picture books. For the hours when Gary and the old woman were not in the house, she rummaged through dank-smelling closets and braved the dark corners of an unfinished basement and climbed the tree in the back yard. Later, Carol will never allow her own daughter to stay alone. Each summer there will be camps and road trips and sleep-overs. She will never let her daughter feel extended boredom.

The only day of excitement came when a policeman knocked on the door. The old woman answered it and talked and shut the door when the policeman left. The old woman fluttered about the house, muttering to herself. She made a phone call, saying, “You need to make this right” and some other hushed things. She hurriedly helped Carol put on her coat and mittens and she pulled a knit hat tight across Carol’s ears. The old woman took Carol out the back door and they trudged through neighbors’ snow-covered yards, leaving two sets of footprints, a walking cane print, and a trail where Carol dragged her bag of clothes. Picture ten: Carol high-steps through snow as the old woman leads her by the hand. The caption reads, “It’s kind of like hide and seek.”

They meet Gary around the block. He is already in the car and the car is warm and she feels safe and comfortable. Later, Carol will install an automatic car starter in her own car before

her daughter is born. For the first several years of her life, Carol's daughter will never step into a cold car. Gary smiled at Carol and thanked the old woman in a sad way. They drove off.

"Will we see her again?" Carol asked.

"Did you like spending time with Grandma?" Gary asked. She nodded. "Then I'm sure you'll see her again sometime."

"When?"

"Soon. I promise."

Carol will never see the old woman again. Later, she will never make a promise to her daughter she knows she can't keep. She will break only one promise – her presence at her daughter's cello concert – because a car accident will stop traffic. Carol will apologize profusely, speaking at the edge of tears. Her sixth-grade daughter will shrug it off and tell her, "It's no big deal" and mean it.

Gary didn't say anything when Carol said that she missed mother. Carol waited several long minutes and then asked if they were going home. He waited a few minutes before he said, "We're already on our way." Picture eleven: Carol smiles as she wraps her arms around mother's waist. Mother's eyes are narrow as she looks at Gary. Gary looks ashamed. The caption reads, "Leave before I call the cops again."

Gary said goodbye. Only a wave from where he stood even though she wanted to hug him and to tell him to give a hug to the old woman too. Her mother unloaded the bag with her clothes and handed her Sarah. They went into the house and Carol turned around and smiled and waved one last time. Later, she will miss Gary.