

THREE

Thursday, May 29, 1980

Carrie stood at Mrs. Gordon's door. Oma's dismay echoed through her. Despite having to endure grumpiness and deflation of her precarious self-esteem, this venture ranked ten times better than the Burger Flipper. And her parents would be furious. All the better. She knocked.

"Come in." Spoken as if Mrs. Gordon had drunk castor oil for breakfast.

Carrie opened the door. The bleak interior chilled her. She stared past a bentwood coatrack and carved millwork to the figure rocking in the adjoining room.

"Close the door. You're blinding me."

"I can hardly see."

"You'll acclimate."

Beyond French doors, furniture shapes emerged: a glass-fronted secretary desk, Victorian sofa, golden oak tables. At the bay window, Carrie grabbed drapery ropes. "May—"

"Trying to put me at a distinct disadvantage? I'll need sunglasses."

“But I *need* light.”

“Eagle of flowers! ... On the sun’s noon-glory gaze ... Light is thy element ...”

“More Blake?”

“It’s too early to entertain such disappointment.” Uttered as if she’d no tolerance for ignorance. “British poet James Montgomery.”

Carrie envisioned Mrs. Gordon as a schoolmarm, slapping palms with rulers, directing dunce-capped students to corners. “Were you a teacher?”

Mrs. Gordon lowered her chin, peering over glasses. “Why?”

At this rate, it would take months to discover the meaning of the lines quoted to Tantje in 1920. “Never mind. But I still need light.”

“Uncover one windowpane.”

Success! Perhaps by summer’s end, light would flood the house. She drew the drapery and tugged the shade, allowing a smidgen of sunshine to chase some gray. The marble-top end table went from drab to shiny. Flecks of sunlit dust spawned from the glass, revealing ferns, bookshelves, an ornate railing. Walls of framed silhouettes and botanical prints spared no breathing space between bookshelves.

Spurning potential poetry critiques, Carrie sat and opened her notebook. “Tell me about your husband.”

“Excuse me. *I’m* directing the research.” Mrs. Gordon tapped a hardcover book. Its gold trim outlined faded scarlet and tattered edges. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Seriously? Nothing about Charlotte Gordon suggested a trek to the Celestial City, like that of the pilgrim of the story. *Dracula* seemed more congruent with her temperament.

“You’re shocked I own such a book,” Mrs. Gordon pronounced.

“Not really.”

“Tell the truth. I only want truth.”

“Are you a Christian, Mrs. Gordon? Most readers find encouragement from Christian’s journey.”

“I’ve been called many things, young lady. *Christian* isn’t one of them.”

“Yet you only want truth.”

“The situational facts.” She made a sweeping gesture. “Don’t misconstrue my meaning with some invisible, ethereal truth floating out there.”

Should Carrie apply to fast-food restaurants? No, this challenge was worth overlooking the sharp tongue. Eventually, this quibbling would benefit her book café.

Carrie opened the book to frail, yellowed pages and read the inscription:

My dear Teddy,

May this story remind you of times we’ve shared, bringing joy and hope of your final destination, no matter how big the Slough of Despond, no matter how tall the Giant of Despair. Someday we’ll meet again, beyond the Delectable Mountains, past the Land of Beulah and the Black River, in the Celestial City itself.

*All my love,
Mother
June 1905, P.E.I.*

A twist of melancholy knotted Carrie’s stomach. “Did you know Teddy?”

“He was my beau. He came to Wolcott from Prince Edward Island.”

A flutter of intrigue waved through Carrie. “How’d you end up with his book?”

“That coincides with my purpose for hiring you.”

Carrie set the book aside. “So, we start with Teddy.”

“You’d best satisfy your curiosity first. You’re eyeing my shelves. Put the lamp on the lowest setting.”

Relieved to avoid another lighting dispute, Carrie switched on the Tiffany lamp and browsed titles. The woman surely owned every novel by Hawthorne, Twain, and Dickens. If Carrie believed in literary reincarnation, perhaps Mrs. Gordon had revived as jilted Miss Havisham.

Dozens of classics and poetry filled the shelves. “Any nonfiction?” Carrie asked.

“What for? Fiction contains all the truth I need.”

Next, a bevy of old picture books, including James Thurber’s 1943 fairy tale. “*Many Moons*. These look original.”

“Collector’s items, amounting to four months’ pay. Minimum.”

“I read these in Children’s Lit.”

“So, they *do* teach something worthwhile these days.”

“Ah, Tasha Tudor.” She pulled out the book and ogled fairy tale pictures. “I could browse all day.”

“And not get paid a cent.”

“My sister and I read it a million times. But my mom threw it away.”

Mrs. Gordon frowned. A speck of sympathy? “You may borrow mine.”

“Thanks!” Could she lure a smile from the woman? Carrie needed such assurance before venturing into tearoom inquiries. “I promise I won’t spill ketchup on it.”

No smile. “If you do, I’ll deduct it from your paycheck.”

If Carrie survived that long. She scanned Newbery winners. “Children’s Lit was my favorite class. Absolutely delightful.”

“So, why’s an old, ornery woman like me reading children’s literature? An oxymoron.”

Carrie offered a nervous chuckle as if that deduction lay furthest from her mind. “Look—Gretchen Trumbauer! The whole Wendolyn series.” One cover showed a jagged road aiming toward a distant castle. “*Wendolyn and the Gatekeeper of*

Merrimack Castle. I wanted to read all seven, but this one went off the market shortly after release. May I borrow it?"

"What's so appealing?"

"Wendolyn is every girl's heroine. The fairyland of Nickelboggen is so real, I could touch it. I'd read in bed with a flashlight long after Mom turned the lights off."

"Too much reading in bed damages eyes. Put it back."

Like a child caught with stolen candy, Carrie replaced it with another. "*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz!*" She sat near Mrs. Gordon.

"First edition, 1900."

The green and beige cover featured the Cowardly Lion with green glasses. Carrie reveled in W.W. Denslow's vivid illustrations. The inscription's handwriting scrawled in faded ink.

July 1902

*To my dear friend Charlotte Rose,
May you ever dwell in the Oz of your own imagination.*

*Ozily,
L. Frank Baum*

"You met the author!" Not Lodemia Jane? Carrie couldn't ask without hinting Mrs. Gordon had been a supertime highlight, along with beef stew. "The movie—"

"Mr. Baum would've hated the ending, Dorothy's adventure portrayed as merely a dream. Oz is as real as that chair."

"Sure, like children long to believe fairy tales are true."

Mrs. Gordon leaned forward. "Of course you don't understand, with your highfalutin four-year college degree. It knocks the imagination right out of you."

Carrie winced at the word *degree*.

“If thou of fortune be bereft, and in thy store, there be but left two loaves, sell one, and with the dole, buy hyacinths to feed thy soul.”

Another Name-The-Poet game? “Beautiful.”

“John Greenleaf Whittier,” Mrs. Gordon said. “Incidentally, those *without* formal education are better suited to dwell among the hyacinths.”

“And never be hungry.”

Mrs. Gordon lifted her chin as if impressed. “I see your degree doesn’t prevent you from grasping what matters.”

Carrie tapped the Oz book. “I love the movie, but wish they’d included more from the book.” She watched for hints of recognition in the woman’s steel trap memory. “Like that line from the Good Witch of the North. ‘You must walk. It is a long journey.’”

“I concur. Perhaps we’re kindred spirits.”

Hardly! “Have you read all these books?”

“My eyesight’s failing, but I’ll read them all eventually.”

“How?”

“I’ll borrow *your* eyes.”

A crazy image of the woman plucking out Carrie’s eyes struck her with terror, but she doused it with common sense. “You want me to read to you?”

“Daily, for thirty minutes.”

Without commentary, Carrie hoped. “Which book first?”

“The Pilgrim’s Progress. But first, I tell you about Teddy.” Staring at a framed print of William Blake’s sunflower poem, Mrs. Gordon relayed the tale of fourteen-year-old Teddy. Near North Rustico on Prince Edward Island, his farmwife mother saved up coins for months and sent Teddy away to escape his abusive father. In Teddy’s knapsack, she packed a map, a shirt, pumpernickel bread, sardines, sunflower seeds, and money to reach Syracuse, New York.

She also enclosed their well-read copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bread for his soul, she’d said, to keep him aimed

toward the Celestial City, away from the Giant of Despair and Slough of Despond on their farm.

Stomach twisting, Carrie stopped scribbling notes. “I can’t imagine giving up your child to a better life, knowing you’ll never see him again.”

“It’s beyond all reckoning.” Mrs. Gordon’s gaze dropped to folded hands on her lap.

“Did Teddy get to Syracuse?”

“He spent two years there until Dr. Weaver brought him here.”

“How’d they meet? And what does Teddy have to do with the false charge against your husband?”

Mrs. Gordon adjusted her glasses as if giving her vision a clearer path to Carrie’s soul. “Miss Kruisselbrink, the 1918 event needs context. It’s vital you understand what each person brought to that iniquitous deed.”

Carrie deflated, the woman’s condescending tone pricking the balloon of her self-esteem.

“And don’t read newspaper accounts yet.”

“Okay.” She straightened, refusing to cower, embracing her private rebellion. Hadn’t Mrs. Gordon said she had spunk? “What a rough life.”

“His father beat him fourteen years, which explains who he was, what he became.”

Carrie tapped *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. “His life was more than what he inherited from his father.”

“Life isn’t all happy endings, Miss Caroline. Sometimes, evil wins.” Mrs. Gordon’s face was grim. “Teddy endured many beatings. My own father meted out so-called divine justice while raging like the devil himself.”

Carrie’s eyebrows rose at such candor. Older people were usually reticent to speak poorly of family members, as if ancestral ghosts hovered, ready to swoop down and consume.

“But beatings were rare. Father was busy with work.

Mother's weapon was words. Words of my ineptness, horrible sins, impending doom."

Empathy gripped Carrie. Words were her mom's weapons, too. "That's awful. How'd you manage?"

"I had an escape. However, the very thing that saved me also condemned me. It clearly began one summer day in my eighth year." Mrs. Gordon's eyes brightened. "My father owned peach orchards, the cranberry bog, icehouse, and farm. Mother ran the Broderick Resort and Tearoom, drawing people from Holland, Saugatuck, and Douglas, especially tourists. My sisters and I helped in the kitchen, sometimes serving guests."

Carrie reopened her notebook, pen ready.