

Carey

By Mary McAlister Randlett

When Carey got home from kindergarten, Mama was still in her bathrobe which could mean she had a headache. Carey gave her a little hug, but was careful not to keep touching her. She leaned over her mother's shoulder so she could see the Spiegel catalog open on the kitchen table. Her sister Virginia didn't get home until three o'clock on the school bus.

"Not so close, Carey. Look at these cute jumpsuits. Only \$23.99, but your Daddy wouldn't like me spending more on clothes right now."

The noise of a car engine cut suddenly toward their house from the alley behind. Carey rushed to look out the window of the back door into their yard and Mama jumped up, saying, "What in the world?"

There in the backyard between the swing-set and the garage, an old blue Chevy was parked with two wheels on the concrete walk that ran from the alley to the house, and the other two wheels on the grass. Muddy streaks stretched behind the car across the yard. Carey was glad it didn't hit the swings.

A woman popped out of the driver's door, her graying hair wild, the sun bright on her glasses. She looked like a cartoon lady.

"What is Laverne doing 900 miles from home? Showin up with no notice. Your Daddy better not know about this." Mama pulled her robe together and opened the back door slightly, even though it was cold out.

Carey hoped there might be somebody fun coming.

Standing beside her car, the woman said loudly, "Hello, sistah-in-law, we come for a visit. We needed time away from the old house after losin Grandma!"

Carey remembered this Laverne was Daddy's big sister who Carey didn't know. Maybe that's why Mama wasn't telling her to get her damn car off the grass.

Then Laverne hollered toward her car, "Now, Mardy, get up before you get a stiff neck and help me bring in the bags!"

Maybe she didn't see her car was in the wrong place. Carey wondered if Mama would correct the woman. The woman needed a comb. She was tall and skinny in her striped blue dress, not plump like Daddy. Another almost grown woman got out of the car, but no kids.

Mama called to them, "I'm surprised to see you here Laverne, Ya'll come in." Mama didn't look mad like Carey expected. Mama brushed her dark hair away from her face and moved quickly back inside the kitchen door, like she realized she wasn't dressed.

"I wonder what your Daddy will say when he sees these muddy tracks through his grass." Then Mama smiled.

Aunt Laverne made her way up the back steps and gave Carey's Mama a hug, but not like she meant it. She didn't even look at Carey.

"Mardy, you can bring the bags in one at a time so they aren't too much for you. Here we are after our long ride up from Lafahyette, Charlyn."

"Thank you, Aunt Char for letting us visit."

Mardy's breasts were just above Carey's head as her cousin carried a suitcase past her. It was hard not to stare at them on the way to looking at her

face and curly dark hair. Carey knew she wasn't supposed to stare at anyone's breasts. Mama gave Mardy a sideways hug, "Look how you've grown up, Mardy, you were straight up and down the last time I saw you. Now you're grown and traveling around the country."

Mardy smiled and moved closer to Mama. "I don't know if I could do what you did, Aunt Char, movin here where it's so cold, but I'd like to do something besides run around the country with my mother."

Laverne beamed, "All right now, enough complaints about coming to see our precious relatives."

Laverne took Daddy's seat at the kitchen table, her eyes traveled over the dirty dishes and Mama's robe, and she said, "Were you sleepin in, honey? You must be wore out with takin care of these chilren. You have to let us help. Mardy's a good little housekeeper, she'd be glad to help you."

"Now, I wouldn't want your girls growin up in Chicago without knowin our family ways. We can't leave it up to Dick to show them. Look how much work he's left you with, and you jus all wore out. So hard back home with Grandma sufferin through those strokes."

Laverne put both hands to her face and pressed her fingers on her closed eyelids, "Ooo, I think I bettah lay down for a rest."

Mama showed them the way to the basement rec room. Carey wondered how both of them would sleep on the sofa down there. Would they come upstairs looking for more beds?

When Mama came back, she headed to her bedroom to put on her clothes. "She's probably going to complain we're becoming Yankees just because we live in Chicago now. You'd think no one ever left Lafahyette before."

Carey had asked to see the Christmas windows downtown for weeks, so she was very happy when her Aunt said she wanted to take her sister Virginia and her. She hoped Aunt Laverne could drive them there like she said, although she could tell Mama was worried about it. After he came home from work, Daddy told Aunt Laverne it would be better if she took the El downtown, since none of us knew the way to the Loop. Aunt Laverne would not listen. Mama had a wrinkle between her eyebrows and Daddy kept talking to convince Aunt Laverne, but he finally gave up and told us to have a good time.

Cousin Mardy assured Mama they could follow the map Daddy gave them. They would call when they got to the dinner restaurant—after looking at the store windows.

Their breath made little clouds in the cold, as they watched the elves in the department store window, traffic whizzing behind them. Virginia said the dolls were cute and made a funny face at

the elves like she didn't like them. Aunt Laverne didn't want to stay long looking at the elves on account of her thin coat, so they went right to the restaurant. Carey was kind of mad they were already leaving, but she was also hungry. Maybe Daddy would feel sorry for her not getting to stay very long and bring her again soon.

"Hennessey's" it said on the window; Mardy told Carey when she asked. Inside, restaurant people rushed around in white shirts and black pants, and customers sat in dark wood booths. Everyone was talking. Some people were wearing outside coats and others wore blue jeans and heavy sweaters, but there were not many kids. Maybe it was too late, since it was already dark outside.

Carey rocked her head back and forth in time to the restaurant music, feeling the effects of the soda she didn't even have to beg for. Aunt Laverne said Doctah Peppah was better than

Coca-cola, did she want Doctah Peppah? Carey had nodded, not wanting to take a chance her Aunt would say no soda at night. She tried not to act like her Aunt talked funny, but she did talk funny. Carey thought about singing and decided not to when she saw Virginia's face was very still, her eyes wide. Carey couldn't tell what was wrong.

A man about her Daddy's age was sitting next to Aunt Laverne. Carey saw Laverne speak to him when they walked in the restaurant where he was sitting at a table by himself. Now he was next to Aunt Laverne in their booth, so she must know him. The guy was looking right at Carey, so she stopped moving around. Maybe he thought she was acting up.

"You like to dance around, don't you?" the man said, smiling, his teeth white. Carey felt confused. The strange man was sitting next to Aunt Laverne and acting like he knew all of them. Carey didn't know what to do, so she just nodded.

"Answer Bill, Carey, he just wants to get to know you." Aunt Laverne's hand rested on top of his arm on the big table.

"Laverne, you didn't say how cute your nieces were. So, Carey, I bet you go to kindergarten. I have a niece in kindergarten and she likes to dance and play games. Do you like to play games?" he asked real friendly with a voice like on the radio. Carey nodded again.

Before Carey could answer, Virginia faced Bill and looked interested for the first time since they got in the restaurant. "Does your niece have a big sister?"

Carey liked the way he talked to them and thought this guy Bill was pretty cute. Seemed like Virginia liked him, so he must be cute.

"We should make a date to go and see my nieces. You're right, I have another niece who's about your age, Virginia. I bet you're about eight." The open collar of his blue shirt showed a few strands of black and gray hair on his chest, which Carey thought was creepy, even though he was more friendly than most of the dads she knew.

Virginia looked happy and nodded—"Eight, I'm eight."

"I like to play games," Carey said, pushing her voice loud, "I like Sorry and Crazy Eights. I'd like to meet your niece and I'd like to meet your other niece, too."

Carey stood next to Cousin Mardy in the booth, so she could be right across from Bill while she spoke, so he would be sure to hear her. She knew Virginia would think the eight-year-old niece was only for her to play with.

Bill and Aunt Laverne both nodded and said "okay, okay," like she was being a pain. They went on talking, looking at one another and didn't say more to Carey.

Virginia looked at her kind of mad, "We heard you, Carey."

Mardy hovered over Carey's head. "I grew up with girl cousins, Mary Lee and Jenny who lived right down the street in Lafahyette. You would like havin cousins."

Now, Carey felt confused again, since Mardy was called her cousin, but she was mostly grown-up.

"Will Mary Lee and Jenny visit Chicago?"

"It's too far, honey, it takes hours and hours in the car."

"They're too old for us to play with now," Virginia added, "They're like Mardy."

Carey looked at Mardy's face to see if she agreed with Virginia, wondering if there were girl cousins to play with, if she could only meet them. She couldn't tell what Mardy thought.

Cousin Mardy held her fist out toward Virginia and said, "Sizzehrs, papah, stone?"

And Virginia smiled slowly and raised her hand flat in "paper"—so she won. They played again and again, and Virginia started making her fist "stone" every time. Carey didn't know why she did that.

Then, Mardy tickled Virginia every time she lost. And she kept losing. Virginia pulled away into her corner of the booth and wouldn't play anymore, looking down at her lap. Carey knew Virginia didn't like tickling.

"Maybe too much, Vahginia, I was just trying to make our own fun, since my mama is occupied with her company."

Carey sang jingle bells quietly, stood up, and slid over to her sister's place in the booth and patted her on the head. Carey was bigger, since she was walking around on the seat and Virginia was sitting down.

Carey puffed toward Virginia. "Look, Virginia, I'm making clouds again like we did outside Marsha Fields."

Virginia looked up at Carey with a twisted mouth and said firmly, "Marshall Fields, Carey, not Marsha. You can't make clouds inside, only out in the cold."

"Isn't it tahm to go, Mama?"

Aunt Laverne waved Mardy away with her hand, like she was swatting at a bug. Aunt Laverne and Bill were talking fast to one another and Laverne seemed more excited the longer they talked. They had tall glasses in front of them. Carey wondered if they'd start arguing or get real tired all of a sudden and want to leave. They still had to drive home.

"Bill says he'll come with us to Dick and Char's, so we can maybe play some of those games."

"Ma, I'm worn out from all that drivin up here. Besides, how do you know Uncle Dick and Aunt Char want you bringin company back to their house? Haven't we been through this before?"

"The only thing we've been through before is you tellin me what not to do," Aunt Laverne shot back.

Carey looked back and forth from her Aunt and Bill to her cousin, trying to figure out what was going on. She scooted closer to Virginia. Was anyone even paying attention? Was this Bill guy coming with them and where would he sleep? Carey was tired now and she wished Virginia didn't look like she was going to cry. She knew it was late, maybe close to bedtime. What would Mama and Daddy be thinking? She sat down in front of her plate, but she wasn't sure she could eat more fried chicken. Carey hoped leaving food on her plate wouldn't make Aunt Laverne mad.

Bill winked at her, and then, he acted like he was taking a picture of her with an imaginary camera. Carey noticed whiskers growing on his cheek and he didn't look so handsome.

She thought of Mama's college friend, Uncle Brad, who liked to tell her jokes and kid around. But last summer at the lake, he had picked her up in her wet suit and squeezed hard around the middle until she could hardly breathe and grizzled her face with his whiskers. Carey couldn't stand it and wiggled and squirmed. He threw her into the water, even though she couldn't swim. She had screamed for her Mama and Daddy, but later they called her a baby.

Then, Bill took a pretend picture of Virginia and of Mardy.

Carey hiccupped and turned around and faced the high back of the booth. It sounded fun to meet his nieces, but she didn't want them to see her now. It was dark inside her hands, her breath was warm on her fingers. Someone whimpered. Maybe it was her. She didn't want them to call her a baby.

"What's goin on with you, Carey, are you hidin out? I hope you're not cryin." Mardy leaned close and her breath was warm on Carey's neck. Carey scooted down even lower on the seat.

Aunt Laverne dropped her purse on the table and said, "Well children, Bill is ridin with us, since he took the El to get here and we'll bring him back in the mornin."

Then Mardy stood up and said like she really meant it, "That's enough, Mama, how do you get mixed up with a complete stranger you jus met? Didn't you have enough after Cousin Suzie's last month? You're scarin these girls."

"Oh, we weren't that close to Cousin Suzie anyway and these girls aren't scared, just wore out."

Carey didn't want to look at them. Virginia said she wanted to go home.

"Mama, we need to take these girls home now."

Carey looked up in time to see Mardy stare right in her Mama's eyes. Then Laverne shushed her and said they were leaving.

Carey woke the next morning in her bed, not remembering much of being carried in asleep, late at night, except how cold the car was after they left the restaurant. She wondered if that Bill was in the house and held her breath. She crept downstairs, but everything looked normal.

While she ate corn flakes, she talked with Mama about elves making toys in the Marshall Fields' windows and how they had to leave early, on account of Aunt Laverne's coat. And she told about the Dr. Pepper, and that she'd had two glasses.

"Ya'll were out late." Mama looked steadily at Carey.

"We weren't lost or anything. Aunt Laverne and Bill were talking a long time."

Carey looked into her Mama's face.

"Bill said he would take us Saturday to see his niece in kindergarten and his other niece who is eight." Carey looked through the kitchen door to the dining room, checking if anyone else was there, but there was no one.

"Who is Bill?" Mama laid her arms on the table.

"Just Aunt Laverne's friend at the restaurant. He was going to come over and spend the night last night, but Mardy said no. Bill said we could visit this Saturday. He said you would think it was all right, because his sister is a teacher in Wilmette. He's going to call us, so we can come over and play games with him and his nieces."

"What do you mean he was going to spend the night?"

"Cousin Mardy said you and Daddy wouldn't like it. Aunt Laverne acts like she really likes Bill. Can we go, Mama?"

Mama got that look on her face like a storm was crossing over, like she was going to get really mad. “Ah don’t think so, Carey, we have othah plans Saturday.”

Then, Mama got up from the table and started cleaning the kitchen, frowning, and it was time for Carey to go to school.

When Carey got home from kindergarten that day, everything was clean and picked up in the dining room, where Aunt Laverne and Mardy had left their stuff earlier. There was no blue Chevy in the back of the garage when she looked. The house was quiet.

“Mama,” Carey called, when she was inside the back door.

Her Mama was sitting at the kitchen table dressed in her bright white shirt and blue skirt.

“They were so sorry they had to go and couldn’t say goodbye, Carey.” Mama smoothed Carey’s hair, like she did when Carey was sick.

Carey wiggled in her chair and twirled her hair between her fingers and told Mama about the funny show-and-tell her friend Sally brought. She smiled big at Mama—she could tell Mama didn’t want her to be upset. When she got up from the table, Carey danced around until Mama said stop and sent her out to play.

Carey scooped dirt into one hand and let it sift through her fingers into a pile, squatting beside the tire tracks in the backyard, where there used to be little hills of leftover snow. Her

quilted winter coat was bunched up above her knees and she was tipping her head back so her nose didn't drip over the pretend driveway in front of her. She moved a blue matchbox car along her driveway.

"Here we are, come this long way and we hope you're happy to see us."

She sifted more dirt onto the pretend driveway, in front of the blue car, and made a pretend house. Carey moved the car up and down the dirt space in front of her.

Carey used her fingers to show the people getting out of the car and walking up to the pretend house, which was now a bigger pile of dirt.

"We hope you liked those Christmas windows we took you to see. We know we were out kinda late."

Then she walked her fingers into the house and back out again.

"Bill, Bill, Bill, that's all you talk about, Mama."

"I didn't want the girls disappointed not to meet Bill's nieces, but we just had to leave."

Virginia came out the back door and clomped down the porch stairs, her winter jacket open. She stood over Carey, her brown hair hanging down.

"I see you playing with that blue car, but the real blue Chevy was over there."

And she pointed to where Aunt Laverne's car had come to a stop in their backyard.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm just playing. Do you think we'll go to Lafayette?"

Virginia scuffed her brown Oxford in the dirt, close to where Carey was playing.

"Don't mess up my driveway, Virginia. Here's how Aunt Laverne woulda said goodbye."

And then Carey took her forefinger and waved it close to the pile of dirt house and said, "We got to go, bah-bah, girls, Bah Bah, little brother Dick and his sweet wife, so wore out and skinny. She's got so much on her. You come see us in Lafahyette, so ya'll can learn our family ways. We know you aren't really Yankees."

Carey liked how she was talking, talking as much like Aunt Laverne as she could.

Virginia turned back toward the house, saying, "Don't be silly, Carey, Mama says come in for dinner. You're getting dirty. Aunt Laverne doesn't know what she's talking about. Mama says it will be a long time before she goes to Lafahyette again."

Virginia scuffed her foot in the dirt again near Carey's driveway, almost covering it, and turned back to go inside.

Carey watched her big sister leave. Then, she moved the little blue car back down the driveway in the dirt, farther and farther away, as if it was leaving the house. She stood up and brushed off her knees. Then she scooped up the car, knocked the loose dirt off the tires, and threw it into the bushes by their garage, where Mama and Daddy found toys when the snow melted in the spring. She kicked dirt over her pretend house and driveway. She knew she better go and wash her hands before Mama called her for dinner herself.

At the dinner table she told Mama and Daddy that Aunt Laverne was a terrible driver and almost got them in a wreck with a red pickup truck. Mardy and Aunt Laverne couldn't stop arguing about which way to turn to get to the restaurant: "Raght, no left, no raght."

When she imitated Aunt Laverne fussing at Mardy, Mama and Daddy laughed. Carey knew without knowing this was how they acted like family.

"Go get that old bologna sandwich before it smells up the Chevy."

Mama and Daddy gave one another a look. Carey laughed and laughed, until they told her to go to bed.

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