



# passager

WINTER 2023



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## SHE SITS AT THE DESK IN FRONT OF ME

*Ellen Hirning Schmidt*

### I

She sits at the desk in front of me, turns around again, grinning and tells me something funny and we laugh. Still grinning, she tells me that her daddy is in jail. Greasy strands of hair hang around her face. *Carol Ann, how many times do I have to tell you not to turn around?* Mrs. Armstrong asks, but isn't really asking, through her teeth.

### II

Mrs. Armstrong runs a strict third grade. Every morning first thing, top boy and top girl student, Bobby Abbey and I, get to stand up in front of the classroom. Under the pointy stick holding the flag at an angle, Bobby says, *Attention, Salute!* We all put our right hands on our hearts looking up at the flag. (I touch where Mom combs the part in my hair because I know it's on the left so I can figure out which is my right hand.)

One day when we enter the classroom, our mouths make O's when we see Carol Ann.

We stand for the Pledge and the Prayer *Allmighty God we acknowledge our dependence upon thee And beg thy blessing upon our parents our teachers and our countrymen.*

A large piece of duct tape covers Carol Ann's mouth.

### III

At supper, Mom tells us about the call she got from Mrs. Armstrong. *It's kind of you to think of us for the clothing from your niece, but we have*

*enough. What about giving them to someone who needs them, like Carol Ann?* Mom asked. *She wouldn't appreciate them,* Mrs. Armstrong said. But soon we get a box of patent leather shoes, turquoise taffeta skirt, white ruffled ankle socks, red velvet dress with a white lace collar. I wear blue jeans to school and don't like these things anyway. (Mom has already had to go to the principal's office about that, *Her marks are good. Is she a behavior problem in school? No? Then why can't she wear blue jeans?* And it turns out that I can!) So, it isn't hard for me to be generous.

#### IV

We take the box of clothes to Carol Ann's house. Well, it isn't a house, really. It's above Vogler's Garage with the truck that empties our septic tank. She lives with her grandma who is missing some teeth, but she is nice and invites us in. My mom sits at the kitchen table. Her grandma puts out two cups. The room smells like old lady armpits and onions. Carol Ann takes me down the hall to a room with bunk beds, we sit on the edge of one of the lower bunks and play cat's cradle with a string and then make cootie catchers. I'm lousy at cat's cradle.

#### V

The next day Carol Ann brings a green glass bottle of Coke to school. Mrs. Armstrong says this is very bad. So, to let her know how bad it is and to make sure she doesn't turn around in her desk, talk or get up and move around the classroom, Mrs. Armstrong ties her to her chair with a rope.

Under the Palmer Method alphabet hanging up on the wall high above our eyes in the classroom, I learn and never ever forget the meanings of good and bad, of right and wrong.

## IT IS ALWAYS THERE

Playing in the living room on a warm Sunday afternoon my Poppy getting out of the car when a passerby yelled “you kike!” and I only knew it was bad because my Poppy yelled something back and out of the other car came a lanky teen angry and ready to fight and he took off hitting my Poppy – then my father was down the driveway in seconds flat and took over, with fists and tongue till the teen drove away. I wanted the police to be called. My father said no.

Poppy was usually nervous. He always ate food as soon as it was served. Could not wait – not even till my Nonny joined us at the table. He was always afraid – years earlier, worried as a boy about there not being enough so he just had to start eating, had to protect himself, had to fight off whatever came his way. Told us to be proud of who we were, where we came from.

No one wants to hand this down from one generation to the next, but somehow the sighs and wails and screams and worries are just on the other side of the wall.

*Shelley Smithson*

## DEAR FRIEND, I REMEMBER

*in memory of Tom Sullivan*

A typical night at The Stud: tall Buds, poppers  
on the dance floor. You threw up the burrito  
from La Rondalla; then we linked arms and stumbled  
home to apartments that were side-by-side

Later under a full moon  
we sat on the back porch. You said  
*I want someone to take care of me*  
just out of earshot of your lover Paul  
who was busy making soup

I see you now as you were then  
(the most beautiful boy from River Rouge)  
backlit by moonlight, a beer in one hand  
an unfiltered Camel in the other

Already thin, you were soon  
wasting away like the other young men  
up and down Castro Street

They called it the “gay plague” and  
if I’d known what was coming  
I’d have numbed myself even more

Nothing could be done. You were gone.

Alone at home, the back door closed to keep the cat in,  
I sat on a hard chair at the kitchen table  
where we used to sit looking out at the coffin factory

Lights went on in the hills  
Fog covered the houses  
gradually, like an erasure

*Karen Hones*

## WILMINGTON

*for Joe Anthony*

I spent my childhood thirty miles inland,  
watching *The Jim Burns Show* on the NBC  
affiliate and reading the *Morning Star*. We'd cruise  
down Ocean Boulevard to Wrightsville Beach,  
tour the old battleship *USS North Carolina*  
docked forever in the Cape Fear River,  
eat fried shrimp at Calabash. On family visits  
in later years, I'd fly through ILM & drive past  
Laney High, where MJ played JV. It was an easy,  
airy, sea-salted city. Mini-golf in the sun. Azaleas  
in the shade. Driveways paved with crushed  
oyster shells. Never once did I hear a single word  
about what happened on November 10, 1898,  
when Alfred Moore Waddell & a mob of white  
supremacists armed with rifles & a Gatling gun  
burned the black *Daily Record* to the ground  
& then went house to house, slaughtering at least  
sixty black people & up to three hundred, then staged  
a *coup d'état*, replacing the biracial city council  
& installing their own mayor, Waddell, who'd vowed  
never to surrender to a *ragged raffle of Negroes*,  
*even if we have to choke the Cape Fear River with carcasses*.  
I'm sixty when I learn about the Tulsa massacre  
from a superhero miniseries on HBO. I'm sixty-one

when my New Jersey-born landlord tells me what  
happened in Wilmington, his voice rising in anger  
& falling in sorrow, & the black & white movie  
of my youth starts to play again, this time in color.

*Kevin Nance*

## PHANTOM PAIN

– after a line by Samuel Beckett

Every loss recalls another loss  
eroding more of you, a brine-lashed cave.  
The end is in the beginning yet we go on.

Grief springs out of sofas, credenzas, and drawers.  
Masking and distance can't stop the ache.  
Every loss recalls another loss,

like delving inside a wooden nesting doll –  
the hard-to-open smallest reveals hollowed space.  
The end is in the beginning. We go on

despite the empty chairs and beds – the way they'd want  
us to, to hell with booby-trapped DNA.  
Every loss recalls another loss.

Cut out the troubled cells – offer a leg or an arm  
or even two – you'll still feel the phantom pain.  
The end is in the beginning. Going on,

we learn to patiently sift through day-to-day dross  
for the words to divine the endgame.  
Every loss recalls another loss.  
The end is in the beginning. Go on.

*Nancy Naomi Carlson*

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