

Megan Scott

Help Unwanted

She sat with her back towards the window, the sun beating down on her. Despite the heat, she felt comforted in the oversized sweater that swallowed her, the rim of her face hidden by the hood. Her makeshift fortress was the only barrier between her and the rest of the world. She didn't want to be looked at and she didn't want to be spoken to.

“Carla, would you like to share something today?” the woman opposite her asked, peering over schoolmarm glasses.

She said nothing.

“Carla, how about you just give us one word today?”

She positioned her hands inside the pouch in front of her stomach and wiggled her arms out of the sleeves into the body of the sweatshirt and hugged herself tighter. She wouldn't surrender.

“Alright, let's move on then.” Dr. Logan pushed the glasses back up the ridge of her nose as she scribbled something down on the yellow legal notepad resting on her lap. “Gina, how about you? How are we feeling today?”

“I keep having the same nightmare. I'm laying on the bed in a room by myself and I can't move even though I should be able to. And then he comes into the room and I can't move still even though I try. I can't seem to get up and he just comes towards me and I can't...” Gina trailed off. Although Carla's focus was on the worn slate blue carpet by her feet, she could see a large figure shaking two seats over.

“Okay, that was really good, Gina. Who is he in your dream?”

With this question, Gina started sobbing. “I can't, I can't go back.” Her body began to involuntarily rock forward and back.

“You’re not going back. Okay?”

“Go back! You’re going back!” another voice shouted suddenly. The random outburst, although not uncommon, startled Carla so much so that she jumped in her seat. “Go back! You’re going back!”

“Hanna, that’s enough,” the facilitator said.

“Go back! Go back! He’s coming to get you!” she taunted.

“Hanna! Stop!”

Two large men in white uniforms came in and stood by the door. Hanna stopped shouting, but she continued to hop slightly in her seat. With every upward motion, she started to whisper, “One, two, one, two.”

“Okay, that’s okay. For this week, you are all going to receive a journal just like this.” She held up a small sleek black notebook. “Everyday, you’re going to write at least five sentences about how your day went. What was the worst part? What was the best part?” She stood up and handed everyone in the tight circle a notebook. “Everyone should write one thing down right now and then we can go ahead outside for some garden time.”

Carla pressed the notebook against her abdomen as she got up.

“Carla, can you stay a minute?” the woman asked.

That wasn’t a question. That wasn’t even a request. That was a demand disguised as if she had a choice. Carla stopped but didn’t turn to look at her. She slowly moved to a plush green chair and fell backwards into it, watching the light catch small specks of dust thrust into the air.

Carla looked forward, past the meandering stream and beyond the various bridges, and then brought her focus back to the particles floating in front of her, highlighted by the sunlight streaming through the treetops.

“You see these dots in the air? Those are fairies,” her older sister proudly declared.

“Fairies are real, sissy?”

“Of course fairies are real. God. I need to teach you so much, Carla.” The older of the two rolled her eyes and continued onward, wandering on the structured trail.

“Okay, don’t step on the sun because it’s lava. You have to walk on the dark parts only, okay?” Cassie instructed her sister. The two started to diligently hop on each of the tree shadows projected onto the dirt floor. They zigged and zagged along the path, thrusting themselves off the shoddy railing bordering the embankment, their high-pitched laughter permeating the pathway, up into the grassy hills.

Cassie halted the game and taunted, “Hey, Carla, I bet I can jump farther than you can!” She readied herself in a runner’s start position on one side of the pathway and jumped forward.

“Wow, Cassie! That was far!”

“Okay, your turn!” Cassie said.

Carla kept her feet together, squatted down with her arms close to her sides, and hopped forward, nowhere near her sister’s ending point. “Can I try again?”

“After me.” Cassie got into her starting position again jumped, tripping a bit as she tried to plant her feet.

“That was even further! My turn!” Carla tried again.

“Okay, Carla, start like this!” Cassie positioned herself. “And really get your legs going. And then just go!” Cassie got a running start this time, jumped, and surpassed her previous

accomplishments. She caught herself on the railing and brought herself up with her arms. “Okay, you go now. Do it how I showed you.”

Carla turned back to her sister’s starting place, but before she brought her head up to see her sister, she heard a loud crack and Cassie shout. When Carla looked up, her sister wasn’t standing in front of her anymore.

“Cassie? No hide and seek, you know I don’t like it.” She started nearing the edge she last saw her sister, coming to the remnants of the railing. “Don’t scare me, okay?” Carla looked over the embankment to see her sister’s motionless body below her, the trickles of water gently pushing her hair.

Carla opened her eyes, looking up at the ceiling of Dr. Logan’s office.

“Carla, this is court ordered. You need to start trying or you’ll be in here for a lot longer.”

Carla closed her eyes again and focused on the couch underneath her supporting her body.

“I can’t tell the judge you’re improving when you’re not.”

She felt the hard buttons that pushed down into the couch, making the cold leather taut.

“You and I both know if you don’t start talking, the alternative of going upstairs becomes a whole lot more necessary. Don’t let that happen.”

Carla opened her eyes, studying the mismatched wood panels above her.

“I want to help you, really. But I can’t help you if you won’t let me. You need to want to help yourself.”

Carla moved her head to the left and looked into Dr. Logan’s brown eyes behind her glasses. She slowly sat up, maintaining eye contact.

“Write your thoughts down. It doesn’t have to make sense or be grammatically correct. Just write. As much as you want,” she gently handed Carla the familiar notebook.

Carla took it in her hand and stood up as Dr. Logan opened the door.

“You can show me what you write, if you’d like, but you don’t have to. You just need to write.”

Carla paused, looked at her, and then walked out the door down the hall.

She could hear shouting from the Rec Room as she neared it. The shouting was followed by clinking of presumably hard plastic items and a slap on the floor. As Carla passed the room, she saw a checkers board on the floor, surrounded by scattered black and red game pieces. One of the two suspected players held his robe up like wings, standing up over the other, who was holding his knees to his chest and his head on his knees.

Two orderlies rushed passed her and secured the standing man.

Carla moved on to her room. She stepped in to see an explosion of clothes on the bed across hers. She heard rustling in the bathroom and she jumped back a little, startled. She dove into her bed and buried herself under her comforter.

“Oh, my! You weren’t there before!” a southern drawl spoke too loudly in Carla’s direction. “I’m Heidi, who are you?”

Carla didn’t move, so Heidi went on. “I just got here. I heard your last roommate was a real nightmare. Well, I didn’t actually hear that, I just imagine that was the case, seeing as she isn’t here anymore.” She moved to the bed and started folding her clothes. “That big bitch came in here and went through all of my shit, can you believe that? So rude. She took away my toothbrush. How am I supposed to brush my teeth? And she took away my hairdryer! How does

she expect me to get my hair like this without my god damn hairdryer? I don't fucking know." Heidi paused for an "Amen" from Carla. "I can't even shave my legs! They said somebody comes in for that! What does that even mean? I bet you look like Sasquatch under those sweats, don't you?" Heidi laughed at herself. "Do you know where a girl can get a cig around here?"

Finally grasping Carla's unfaltering silence, Heidi walked out of the room in search of nicotine.

1/14/07

Why did you room me with this bitch?

The next morning, Carla took her seat against the window in her oversized sweatshirt. Heidi sat next to her.

"How stupid is this shit? Am I right?" Heidi said.

"Alright, let's go around and introduce ourselves, alright?" Dr. Logan said. "Carla, why don't you start?"

Carla glared at Dr. Logan across the circle, the heat emanating from within her sweatshirt. She hadn't spoken in front of the group since the most recent Family Day, but now she was being forced to. She ignored previous requests from facilitators and orderlies with little penalty, but now that Logan was here, she knew actions would be taken. "Carla," she said from within her jacket.

"Thank you, Carla. And how are you feeling today?"

The heat circulated through her veins, up into her head. The anger manifested into tingling throughout her body. Her heart raced, feeling palpitations in her throat and temples.

“Hot.”

“Okay. Thank you. This is Carla’s new roommate, Heidi. Heidi, would you like to introduce yourself to the rest of the group?”

“Hi, ya’ll. I’m Heidi. I’m from Texas, came out here to pursue a modeling career.”

“Okay, thank you. Would you like to tell us why you’re here today?”

“I, uh, I’m just...” it was the first time in 14 hours that Carla heard Heidi’s voice break with hesitation. Carla broke her focus from her hands and looked to the left to Heidi’s hands, clasped together and resting on her crossed legs. She didn’t hear whimpering, but saw a single tear drop onto the back of one hand.

She heard Heidi start up again, explaining how she really should have been sent to a fitness club instead of therapy. As she droned on about being denied gastric bypass surgery and then the significantly less drastic plead for the LapBand, Carla studied the hands that weren’t hers. The back of Heidi’s left hand looked like a shattered window right before it falls to pieces. She wondered how Heidi managed to achieve such an intricate pattern, and if in her attempts to destroy herself, she had in fact insisted on creating art.

Carla sat on the floor of her room she had previously shared with Cassie and played with her dolls.

“Cassie, it’s your turn to play with this one, I know it’s your favorite.” Carla set down a particularly glamorous doll in front of her. She knew Cassie wasn’t there but she knew she’d be back.

She sat for a moment, unmoving, her focus shifting from the small pile of dolls and accessories in front of her to the lace of the black dress she was wearing. Her grandmother made

her put on the dress earlier that morning, before they attended the funeral. Normally her mother wouldn't let Carla stay in a particularly fancy dress much after an event, for she feared it would soon be ripped.

Carla smoothed out the fabric that sat on her leg and grabbed Cassie's preferred doll again. Before she could start another plotline involving the teddy bear teaching the doll something of particular importance, she heard heavy wails emanating from her parents' room. Their sudden start made Carla's body jump involuntarily.

She stood up and started to very slowly make her way down the otherwise silent hallway.

"My baby!" a voice resembling her mother's screamed and then continued sobbing. "My baby!"

The door was open slightly and Carla peered in. Her mother was sitting straight up on the bed, her fists filled with bunched up sheets. She stared at the wall across from her, her face periodically changing from blank and emotionless to tightly compressed, her features squeezing closely together when she yelled.

Carla felt a hand on her shoulder and she looked up to see her grandmother again. Her old eyes were swelled with tears and her dry lips quivered. As the wailing continued, she led Carla back to her room and sat on the floor. She picked up Cassie's doll and started making it walk.

Carla ran up to her grandmother and frantically grabbed the doll from her hands. "That's Cassie's! You're not allowed to play it!"

"I'm sorry, Sweetie." Her grandmother pulled her little body into her own arms.

"That's okay." Carla pulled the doll into her chest. "Where's Daddy, Grandma?"

"Daddy is sad right now too, but he can't cry like your Mom. He went away for a little while," her grandmother gently rocked Carla.

“Is he coming back?” Carla met her grandmother’s eyes.

“I don’t know, Sweetie. He has to deal with some things.”

The wailing stopped and a figure appeared in front of Carla’s doorway. Her mother’s face was expressionless.

“Can I get you something? Some soup?” Carla’s grandmother asked.

Focus came back into her mother’s eyes and she smiled faintly. “No.” She looked at Carla then turned and walked down the stairs. The front door creaked open and the sound of the traffic on the street filled the room.

Carla’s grandmother tried to quickly hoist herself up and ran down the stairs. Carla continued to play with her dolls, until she heard her grandmother shout her mother’s name. There was a loud crash followed by a deafening screech. Then there was silence.

Carla rushed back to the room before Heidi, not knowing how long the orientation meeting with Dr. Logan would take. She wanted to return to her stronghold before being talked at anymore.

Eventually she heard the clacking of heeled boots against the linoleum floors outside the room. Heidi came in, trying to be quiet. She sniffled as she got undressed in front of her bed. Carla opened her eyes in Heidi’s direction. The tall blonde was very slim and obviously fit. Her profile put on display her strong cheekbones and busty chest. Carla wondered if Heidi’s story had ended with her getting the surgery and this was actually her post-op body, or if she had always been this taut and unfairly well-endowed.

Heidi sat on her bed and pulled her jeans off and pushed them down to the floor. In the dim glow coming from the hallway, Carla could see light but thick scars starting at each of

Heidi's ankles and moving up her legs, to her thighs. There were multiple starts and stops to each line, but they all connected and moved in the same direction. As Heidi pulled off her shirt up and over her head, Carla saw her prominent hip bones and ribs protruding from under her skin. But her gaze shifted to Heidi's middle, where the scars continued from the tops of her legs, along the surface of her abdomen, up towards her chest and down each of her arms.

1/15/07

She tried really hard.

The first time, Carla hadn't fully committed. Perhaps it was out of a need for attention during her late teenage years. Or perhaps she changed her mind as her body began to go limp, the blood draining out of the veins from her right thigh, down her skin, and onto the cold tile floor of the bathroom. She positioned herself with her back to the door, her thought process being that she could prevent it from being opened. The cool floor beneath her sent chills up her spine and neck. As her head became increasingly burdensome to hold up, she rested it against the door. The strobe effect produced by her fluttering eyelids increased her drifting sensation.

Suddenly she heard a familiar voice.

"Carla, what are you doing? Get up."

She fought against the heaviness of her eyelids to see where the voice was coming from.

"Carla, I said, get up."

Carla finally forced her eyes open and looked around the bathroom.

"Carla, don't step on the light. You're going to lose."

"Cassie?" Her mind was playing cruel tricks on her. "Cassie, I'm coming." She laid her head against the bathroom door again and closed her eyes.

“Carla? What are you doing in there?” the voice of her stepmother interrupted her thoughts. Carla didn’t respond. But the bright red blood dripping from her upper leg made its way underneath the bathroom door and out onto the pale tan wooden floors. “Oh my god. Carla! Is that blood? Carla! Open this door! Right now!”

She awoke to beeping. The high-pitched sound melded into the cacophony of the commotion on the other side of the curtain. As she became more aware of her surroundings, she attempted to move her arms, but realized she couldn’t. Looking down, she saw brown restraints on both wrists and both ankles. She struggled to free herself, but to no avail. Just then, the curtain was violently pulled open and a nurse holding a clipboard stepped in.

“Ah, Ms. Wilcern, you’re awake. Honey, I’m Nurse Pat. You see you’re restrained right now. You’re on a 72 hour hold so you don’t hurt yourself again, okay?”

Two years later, it was Carla’s grandmother who found her. She hadn’t wanted her grandmother to find her. In fact, she tried to orchestrate it so no family member would be able to see her ever again. She planned it so her mother’s family would be on their annual cruise, thousands of miles away from her cramped apartment in the city, and her father’s semblance of a family would be gallivanting in Europe. She planned it so her greedy little landlord would come around looking for overdue rent four days later. She planned it so no one would find her in the knick of time and no one she remotely cared about would have to deal with it directly.

Carla placed her tools on the rim of the tub. She washed down half a bottle of Vicoden with a bottle of Jack and stepped into the warm bath. She then started on her wrists and let an overwhelming sensation of tranquility wash over her.

But it just so happened that the cruise had been delayed due to a hurricane in the

Bahamas. Carla hadn't anticipated this. Her grandmother had tried her cell phone for fifteen minutes uninterrupted before acting on her apprehension. By the time she arrived, there was no warmth, only coolness, there was no clear water, only red, and there was no pulse, only quiet.

Carla didn't remember being revived and she didn't remember her stomach being pumped, but she did faintly remember the third floor. And it was not a place she wanted to revisit.

Dr. Logan came in through the door and sat in her seat in the circle across from Cassie. "So, today, our topic will be family. You can talk about a good memory, or a bad memory, or anything else you might want to talk about. Heidi, would you like to start?"

"Um, well, last summer John took me—" Heidi started, before being interrupted by a thunderous collective sigh.

"Come on, girl, I don't want to hear about John no more," a voice to the left of Carla said.

"I really miss him, though. He was so sweet this one time when he—" Heidi was again interrupted.

"No! We know John is no good, you got to get up and move on. He fooled you," the voice continued.

"Fooled you! Fooled you!" Hanna shouted.

"He called you damn shitty things, all the time! Telling you how disgusting you are, naw, get done with him. You know you real pretty, girl," the voice patted Heidi on her narrow thigh.

"I just want to be with him. He's all I've got," Heidi's voice cracked and she started sniffing.

Dr. Logan stepped in. “You know, Heidi, these feelings are natural. But you need to listen to the positive forces in your life. These are your peers and they care about you. Listen to them. Would you like to add anything else right now?”

Heidi took a deep breath. “No, I think I’ll listen today,” she said, defeated.

“Okay, Carla? Would you like to share anything with us today?”

Carla peered out from under her hood and met Dr. Logan’s eyes and briefly shook her head.

“It’s really important that we address these problems. Our families make up a huge stressor, even if that stressor is more positive than it is negative for some of us. We need to get to the root of the problem by thinking back on key moments. Gina? Would you like to add something?”

Gina began to describe her most recent spousal attack while Carla stared at her feet, drifting in and out of the account. She could only concentrate on the rigidity of the plastic chair supporting her. The opening between her pant and her shoe exposed a sliver of skin to the shockingly cold metal leg. The rays coming through the window penetrated her sweatshirt. She was engrossed with the juxtaposition of temperature her body was experiencing. The inch of cold on her leg mixed with the spread of heat on her back and converged at her stomach, leaving her queasy.

1/21/07

It wasn't my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. You shouldn't have punished me for what happened. You took me away from the one thing I had. How did you leave after Cassie? How did

you leave me after mom? How did you take me away from grandma when you came back? This is your fault. You make me feel angry when you act like an asshole.

Dr. Logan arrived in front of the hospital. The streetlamps were still on and it was well before the sun could cast shadows. As she turned into the parking lot, she was momentarily blinded by pulsating bright red lights. She hurried past the humming engines, concerned that they were responding to one of her patients.

“Dr. Logan, I tried to—” the receptionist met her in the hall of the first floor.

“What happened? Why wasn’t I notified?” Dr. Logan interrupted.

“I couldn’t get through on your office line or private number.”

“What happened?” Dr. Logan walked briskly toward the group of three men clad in oversized dark yellow pants and slightly open matching jackets. They were huddled in front of the reception desk, speaking over a large clipboard. “I’m the physician on staff in this facility. What happened?”

“Ma’am, she was D.O.A. We tried to revive her but we weren’t able to. We presume the cause of death was asphyxiation. Her roommate said she left smoke a cigarette and when she returned, she found her with a pair of pajama pants secured around her neck, tied to either side of her bed,” one man said.

“What patient?”

He looked down at his clipboard, and said, “Uh, a Carla Wilcern.”

Dr. Logan entered the room Carla and Heidi had shared. She walked along the side of the bed, unmade from the night before. She shook her head and wiped away the tear that had made

its way down her cheek. As she brought her right hand to her brow, she gently placed the other on top of the pillow. There was something hard inside the case. Momentarily distracted from her sorrow, Dr. Logan took out the black journal she had given to Carla a week before.

1/17/07

This place still feels like jail. But Heidi's making it manageable. Out there, we'd have nothing in common, but in here she's alright. We're all the same in here, and no one bothers you. No one takes account of your past, your violence, your neglect. It doesn't matter who you are or where you came from, we're all the same. We're a real group. My only family.

1/20/07

I went into the garden today for the first time in a long time. The girls were sitting around in a patch of grass doing each other's hair. Heidi waved me over to sit in front of her. She undid my ponytail and started brushing it. She must have been brushing my rat's nest for 45 minutes, but she got it done. All she was doing was getting knots out, but it was really nice. My hair hasn't been played with since Mom. When she was done, she switched with Gina and Gina started braiding my hair. I guess this is the only time I've ever gotten my hair done. It was really nice.

1/22/07

A new woman came in today. She wouldn't stop crying. She cried as she was shown around, she cried while she sat in front the TV, she cried during group. She stopped crying an hour after light's out. But ten minutes ago she shrieked from her room. She's so weak. She reminds me of mom.

1/22/07

It was my fault. I'm so sorry.

1/23/07

Cassie. Mom. Cassie. Mom. Cassie. I'm coming.