

Halfway Home

Dear Mark, How are you I am fine. My job is ok. I count screws and put them in bags but its hard cuz I can only use my good hand you know. Its hard to put the screws in bags and count them bc I can only use one hand. Counting screws is hard because of my hand. Ever green is looking for something else for me in the paper something on the phone calling people I don't know what. Im writing to you on the type writer mom and dad got me for my surprise graduation party. Remember that? I was so surprised. They really got me I was so surprised. When are you coming home? Are you in prison or the half way house today? Call when you can. I miss you Jared misses you mom and dad miss you. OK call me when you can. Love you bunches. Your sister, Carol

Many years before Carol would write that letter, and many years before she would even receive the typewriter as a gift, she propped herself up clumsily on crutches and waddled down the hall to Mark's room with some difficulty. At 10 years old, her interests were certainly different: Rather than being concerned with work or making money – but not too much money to lose her benefits – she was enchanted with toys and puzzles and tabletop games.

In the doorway to Mark's room, she leaned. There he was, her adopted brother four years her junior, sitting on his bed, playing with a few tinker toys.

"Can I play?" asked Carol.

"Sure!" said little Mark. "You can help me build a rocket ship!"

"A rocket ship?" she asked, incredulous. "Sure you don't want to build a house?" She took a step forward, slowly shifting her balance. A few months ago, the doctors and nurses at Scottish Rite Hospital clipped some tendons in her ankles, hoping that her feet wouldn't turn in as much and that she would be able to walk. But it was hard. Especially with all those toys strewn across the floor.

Shifting her weight on her crutches, she took another step forward.

Before Mark had a chance to answer, she said, "I said, 'Sure you don't wanna build a – a house?'"

"I'm sick of houses," Mark said, averting his attention back to the task at hand. It was clear Mark could see the ship being assembled before him, but Carol had a hard time seeing it herself.

She took another shaky step, careful to avoid a block on the carpet. When she lifted her other leg to take another step toward him, just a few paces from her destination, she lost her balance and fell, crashing against a pile of toys on the way down. After a beat of shocked silence, she began to sob.

“Carol!” Mark shouted, jumping off the bed and rushing to her side. “Are you OK?”

Over Carol’s wails, Mark heard booming footsteps coming down the hall. Their mother poked her head inside.

“What happened?” she asked, scrambling to kneel down beside Carol, inspecting her with knowing, maternal eyes. “You’re alright now, Carol. You’re alright.”

“I was on the bed and she came in and she tripped and fell down and I think she’s hurt,” stammered Mark.

“Well, I can see that Mark. And do you know why she fell?” she gestured to the mess in the room.

Mark bowed his head and averted his gaze. “Because I didn’t pick up my toys.”

“Because you didn’t pick up your toys,” she affirmed. “And how many times did I ask you - ?”

“My arm!” Carol sputtered through her sobs. “It hurts!”

Their mother’s attention fell upon her daughter’s forearm, bent jointlessly, unnaturally. She gasped and called for her husband. “Larry! Hurry! Come quick!”

“I’m sorry; I’m so sorry; I didn’t mean to!” Mark shouted as his father came in, a wordless force of protection, and picked Carol up. “I’m so sorry, Carol! I’m sorry!”

Dear Mark, How are you I am fine. I am doing something called telamarkng where I call people and ask them to buy things. People are mean to me. People are always yelling at me and being mean to me. People don’t like it when I call but ever green says I have to and the people I call are mean to me because I call them asking for money. I call people from the center because I need help using the ladys room and I miss out on the fun because Im working. Marilynne saw me crying and I told her I hated it. Where are you today? Are you coming home soon? Call me when you can. Write back soon. Call when you can ok. Jared misses his daddy so come home and call when you can. Love you. Your sister, Carol.

“C’mon, Mark, just *one* game?”

Carol was pleading for Mark to play with her again. She already had *Sorry* sitting on the dining room table. They used to play games all the time when they were little, but now he wanted to play *Battleship* or video games or something else that was too hard.

“Carol, I don’t *want* to!” Mark snapped from his room. He was shoving something in his pillowcase, glancing over his shoulder all the while. At 15, he wasn’t so interested in playing games anymore anyway, but he especially didn’t want to play baby games like *Sorry*. Why couldn’t he just go and hang out with his friends?

Carol wheeled her way toward his room, perched in the doorway.

“C’mon,” she persisted, whining through her southern drawl, cocking her head even more to the side, resting on the side of her small neck pillow. “Just *one* game? Just one? All I’m saying is maybe we should just play *one* game?”

“I heard you, Carol,” said Mark. He glanced over at her from where he was sitting on the bed, surveying her watery eyes. “Aw, man, Carol, don’t go bawlin’ on me.”

“I’m sorry,” Carol said in a small voice. She cast her eyes downward, and her lip began to quiver.

Mark sighed. He looked at the clock on his nightstand. “*Gilligan’s Island* is about to come on. Wanna just watch that?”

“I want to play *Sorry*,” Carol persisted softly. “I’m just saying I want to play *Sorry*.”

“Carol,” said Mark sternly. “Let’s go watch TV.”

The thought for a moment, her eyes shifting from one side to other, considering her options. “OK,” she said finally.

They moved over to the living room, Mark getting comfy on the couch, Carol angling her wheelchair at just the right line to view the TV. Then their father boomed into the room.

“Boy, I know you haven’t finished your homework yet.”

“Yes, sir, I have,” said Mark, meeting his gaze.

“How can you look your daddy in the eye and lie to him like that? If your mama sees your report card, it’ll be the end of it. March back on up to your room and get to work.”

“But – but – but –” sputtered Carol. “But we was – we was – we was gonna watch –”

“Let’s me and you play *Sorry*, Carol,” said their father, “while Mark works hard to get that A.”

Dear Mark, How are you I am fine. I have a new job!!!! I was crying because I hated calling people and people being mean to me and Marilynne saw me and said what can you do can you answer the phone can you take a message. She said call ever green and tell them you quit now I am her resepsionist!!!!!!!!!!!! I work in the front office at ACT and I have some helpers there is Jessica Franz who helps with copies because I have a hard time with my hand. Making copies is hard with my hand. She helps with the copies bc of my hand. There is Roger who comes by a lot he is always looking at me maybe he likes me I think he is nice. He is in a wheelchair like me. Maybe he will be my boyfriend don’t tell mom and dad!!!!!! Jared skipped school again and a lot so now hes in trouble can you call him? Can you come home? Are you in prison or the half way house? Call me when you can. I love you. Your sister, Carol.

“Mark, what is this??” His mother had produced a small bag from his pillowcase, and she was holding it up to the light where everyone could see it. Mark was standing in the middle of his room, his arms crossed, eyes cast downward.

Carol waited in the hall, peaking around the door frame, her feet and wheelchair clearly in sight from where Mark and their mother stood.

“I don’t know,” said Mark in a huff, throwing his arms in the air. “How should I know? What were you doing going through my stuff anyway?”

“I wasn’t going through *your stuff*, Mark,” hissed their mother. “I was doing your laundry, and this *thing* fell out. Are you on drugs, son? This is not how I raised you to behave!”

“Well, how you raised me to behave is too hard!” Mark said. “You want too much from me! It’s too much! I just wanted something to take the edge off. All my friends are doing it. They’re fine. I’m fine!”

Carol listened from the hallway trying to put the pieces together. What was in the case? What case? What bag? Her brow knit together in concentration; her pail blue eyes shifted, unseeing, from side to side.

Their mother took a deep breath and closed her eyes, steeling herself. She started to sit down on the bed and thought better of it. "Sit down," she told him through her teeth.

"NO!" Mark barked. "I'm an adult. I'm going to look you in the eye like a man."

"Oh, you think you're a man now? If you want to be treated like a man, you need to start acting like one – you better thank your lucky stars that your father isn't home right now!" She paced around the room, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth in a *whooshing* sound.

Mark stood still, eyes narrowed, trailing her with them as she marched back and forth.

Carol tried to sneak her way into the room quietly, but the *whir* of her wheelchair gave her away. They saw her at the entrance of the room, but both said nothing to her. When things got heated between her family members, it was like this: Like she wasn't even there.

"We ask you for good grades, Mark," said their mother, resigned now, an almost pleading note in her voice. "We ask you for As because we know you're smart. We know you can do it. If you just put in an *ounce* of effort – a *pinch* of the effort you put into playing those damn video games, you'd have a scholarship by now, instead of failing the tenth grade *again*. You've been given so *much* Mark, when others are given so little." Here, her eyes darted for a moment to Carol then flickered away, but Carol didn't understand why. "Is that so horrible? Is that so much to ask?"

"It's not just grades," Mark said, his voice shaky now. He thought he might cry, but he was holding back. He wanted to show that he could be a man. "It's *Play with Carol, Mark. Watch Carol, Mark. Wipe Carol's ass, Mark* –"

"WATCH YOUR MOUTH!" their mother spat.

"It's true! You know it is! You push me too hard, and you know it!"

Without a word, their mother moved to the closet. She swung open the door and started hurling clothes off hangers and onto the floor. "Where's your suitcase?" she asked with her back still turned to him.

"Why?!" Mark yelled. "Are you kicking me out?!"

"You're going to rehab," she told him, producing the suitcase from the very back of the closet. "We'll tell people that you're spending the summer at your aunt's. No son of mine is going lose his life to drugs. Hopefully this will be enough to knock some sense into you."

Dear Mark, How are you I am fine. Today I knew something Marilynne didn't Jessica helped. Jessica has red hair. She helped me know something Marilynne didn't. She was trying to

move a picture of a little girl in a wheelchair like mine with an American flag in her hand in the middle of a picture of a Christmas wreath on the computer. She couldn't figure it out but I just moved it right in there in no time. I just took my hand on the mouse and moved the picture of the girl in the Christmas wreath. I figured it out in no time. Roger doesn't come by the office so much any more. I thought he liked me but maybe not. He doesn't come by so much any more and he doesn't try to talk to me. Oh well. Jared is in ninth grade again like you were in the 10th again hopefully he will finish school and keep going. Jared is big now he is 16 we celebrated his birthday and he's big now. He likes to draw did you know that. He's good at it like you. Maybe you can come home and see his drawings and maybe he will go to school if you like them. Will you call me when you can. Will you write back soon? Call me when you can. Love you to the moon and back to the moon and back. Your sister, Carol.

Dear Carol,

Thank you for all your letters. I miss you too. I miss Jared to death. I'm in a halfway house now in Houston. My case worker doesn't want me to run around with my old crowd anymore 'cause he wants me to avoid my old habits, I guess. I miss you something terrible.

I'm so sorry, Carol... I'm sorry for everything. I know I say this every time, but I'll be better this time. I really will. I've been doing real good this time around. When I come home, I'll be a much better father to Jared. He's just a chip off the old block, ain't he? When I'm back, I'll make sure he doesn't follow in my footsteps. I can't wait to see his drawings. I've been getting back into drawing, myself, and it's really helping keep my mind off things.

I'm not sure when I'll be back, Carol. I've got a lot of things to do down here, a lot of thinking, a lot of stuff to sort out. I'm tallying the days that I've been gone, and I'm gonna give Jared that many kisses when I get back. He'll hate that, I'm sure. He's practically a grown man now. But he'll always be my baby, Carol. You know that better than anybody.

I only get a few minutes on the phone at a time, but I'll call you when I can, OK? I promise.

Thanks for never giving up on me. I love you bunches, to the moon and back, to the moon and back.