

Table of Contents

<i>The Interview</i>	2
<i>Blue Light Special</i>	3
<i>Gnome Without a Name</i>	4
<i>The Ghost in the Moonlight</i>	5
<i>The Safari Tour</i>	6
<i>The Tall Tree</i>	7
<i>North Collegiate</i>	9

The Interview

Running late, Sara finished grabbing all she'd need for her interview. The interview she'd prepared for, for weeks. Hair, outfit, make-up, and shoes all pristinely fashioned. Prepped with her answers, Sara was certain this would be the job she'd secure.

It was pouring. Early March mixture pooled along the ground. Salt, snow, and sand. A less than desirable day, but nonetheless, she proceeded. The umbrella was large and secure, keeping the hair in place. Her long rubbery boots ensured her feet stayed dry

City transit was never a pleasure on a day like this, but she didn't want to let a bit of rain discourage her goal.

As she waited for the bus, within the half-covered shelter, she kept her mind off the greyness of the day and focussed on her goal. Finally, the bus was within sight. Carefully she stepped out of the shelter and moved closer to where the bus would stop.

Then, it happened. A monster-sized SUV flew by creating a tsunami wave of mud, salt, and winter sludge.

Blue Light Special

She rummaged through the giant bin of the latest dolls, wondering which one to ask Santa for. The red-head with curly hair? The doll with golden curls? The dark-haired Hawaiian doll? So many to choose from. It was almost unbearable.

Eight-year-old Katie continued to enjoy viewing the selection, until the blue-light went up. “What’s that?” she wondered.

Then the clerk announced over the speakers, “Blue light special on the new Cabbage Patch dolls, 30% off!”

A stampede of crazy Christmas shoppers stormed the aisles to the bin of dolls. Nearly trampling poor Katie. Hastily she dodged their charge. Catching her breath, she sighed. “I sure am glad Santa doesn’t care about blue-light specials,” she thought.

Gnome Without a Name

Day after day, she stood in the yard like a silent gnome. She kept to herself, unwilling to acknowledge a friendly hello. She tenderly cared for her small garden, but never moved beyond the yard. Never smiling, dirty and unkempt she stood aloof. Like a gnome, the creatures around her rarely acknowledged her existence. Still and cold she stood.

The sorrow was apparent, but guarded deeply. Then, when the weather changed and had turned cold, she stepped out only long enough to borrow my shovel and clear her walks. Then quietly she'd retreat. Nobody ever seemed to visited. Try as I might, I never got a reply to a gentle hello. I didn't even know her name.

As spring came around again, the gnome I'd seen had disappeared. Had she moved? I did not know. For weeks I did not see the gnome in our conjoining yards. The weeds grew and the silence remained.

Then, spring gave way to summer and the searing heat had set in. Eager to embrace in the July celebrations, we made our way to the downtown events, but the scorching sun made our excursion short.

Upon our return, a horrendous aroma encompassed the air as we approached our front door. I noticed the small black car and a muted colored van sitting in our parking lot. Nobody said a word, but the stench in the air told us the truth. The gnome had died.

In the days and weeks to following, we would learn that this quiet gnome had been alone when she passed. Now her body remained unclaimed. No one there to mourn her. Sorrow was masked by the lingering smell of death that for months. It consumed our neighborhood. We never knew her name.

The quiet gnome, now nearly a year later, had never been claimed. Her belongings scattered to the second-hand stores. Nobody but the sheriff and landlord knew a thing about her. Nobody knew the gnome, not even her name.

The Ghost in the Moonlight

The house shook as the ghost howled outside my bedroom window. The phones were out. Nobody could rescue me. The ghost floated in the moonlight. I hid beneath my bed. I could barely stand the horror. Home alone. Old enough to be on my own, but why tonight? It was dreadful. The family had gone away for the night, leaving me to study in silence. What silence? I was being haunted!

My anxiety only escalated as its presence seemed to stare coldly in upon me. He knew I was under the bed. But cuddling to Mr. Boo, my teddy, I prayed for a miracle.

The night seemed endless. The clocks blinked. No idea what time it was. After what seemed like hours, the ghost left me and the wind died down. Still afraid, I continued to hide beneath the bed. I must have fallen asleep at some point, because the next thing I knew, the sun was beaming through my window. I awoke, glad to see the day.

Then there was the knock at the door. Had someone come to rescue me? Or was it the ghost? I ran down, teddy in hand, hoping the guest was friendly. As I opened the door, I screamed in horror. All I saw was white!

“Is this your bedsheet?” asked Mrs. Williams.

The Safari Tour

We finally arrived and everything was amazing. The long-necked giraffes were eager to say hello. I could barely contain myself. We watched with amazement as the creatures seemed as fascinated by our presence as we were of theirs. Mom, who failed to read the signs as usual, carefully cracked open her window to feed a young black bear a Kraft caramel square. The bear was delighted. In fact, incredibly so. He not only enjoyed the sweet treat but expected more. The signs on the park that said “don’t feed the animals” were posted for a reason.

The Tall Tree

It'd been a long ride up to the Algonquin Park, but once we'd arrived, I remarked at how beautiful everything was. Nature sang as we began to unload and the air swept away the craziness of the hustle and bustle life.

The three-day weekend with friends was about to begin. The canoes were carefully dropped into the water and with the efforts of all, we quickly had them loaded with our camping gear. The goal was to row out for the day and camp wherever we ended up.

Being that the wind was a little higher, the water rippled roughly. Not enough to tip us, but the opposing ripples made the oars harder to paddle. We had to have rowed two to three hours when we finally arrived at our first portage. With nearly an hour of work, we were soon back in our canoes rowing to our next location.

By early evening the lot of us were starving, so it was time to set up camp. A group of us put up the tents and sorted the supplies, while the others started the fire and made dinner. Before we knew it, we were dining on hot dogs and smores. Yum! We couldn't have chosen a better day. Weather had been fair, the sky was clear, and cozying around a campfire with song and sweets made the ending of a long day, perfect.

Exhausted, I was asleep before my head hit the pillow, I think. The ground was hard, but I didn't care. The cricket lullaby worked perfectly as a backdrop to the rest of the sounds of the Algonquin night.

As dawn approached, my body began to feel the need to make a call to the outdoors. But everyone else was still asleep. It was lighter out now, so I knew I could see. Still I was nervous to go out alone. We were deep into the park and I really didn't know what might be out there this

early in the morning. Try as a might, I couldn't go back to sleep. The need to pee was overtaking my need for logic.

"I won't go far..." I thought to myself.

So, quietly I stepped out from the tent and got an early look at the day. The morning was calm. The air was virtually still. The lake looked like glass, for the lack of wind upon it. The hazy fog that lined the trees around the parameter masked anything that might be behind it. The quiet was almost haunting. Still, the need to go pressed on.

With some hesitation, I made my way into the woods, just past where I could see the tents. I didn't want them to see me, but I wanted to know where they were. Camping had been fun, but this part was not one of the perks of this journey.

As I prepared to do my business, I spotted a very large and tall tree beginning to sway. Back and forth. With the lack of breeze to make it move, it really got my attention. Within a moment, the vigorous rocking of the tree became immense. What, I wondered, would make a tree that large move individually among the forest of quiet? I did not know. I didn't need to know. It was a big tree and anything big enough to move it, was big enough to avoid. Moose? Bear? I didn't know.

The whole row home, I wondered whether it'd been a bear or moose, it might have been neat to see. Yet, despite this, the desire to ever camp without a cabin again had changed for me. Still a lover of nature, but from the safety of walls and a flushable commode it would have to be.

North Collegiate

The cold chill of the brisk November morning nipped at her nose as she scraped the frost from her windshield. Despite the chill, the warmth in her heart didn't even acknowledge the stinging misery upon her face. Instead, she just smiled and sniffed the freshness of the day. Sarah Trotsky, a young teacher at North Brown Collegiate, loved her job and loved her students. She faced the typical challenges of rowdy students, heavy amounts of preparation work and marking to do, and even dealing with the occasional outbursts, but it registered little on her negatively. She rose to the occasion and her students loved her. So did her handsome beau, Reid Parks.

As she slipped into her now warmed car, her cell phone rang.

“Good morning gorgeous,” he said.

“morning Reid.”

“So, you all set for dinner tonight?” he asked.

“I am,” she replied. “I am looking forward to it. But why won’t you tell me where you’re taking me?”

“Aww, my love... I’m still not telling you.”

“You’re killing me, Reid...”

He giggled. “I know, you’re not good at surprises. You’re like a kid at Christmas.”

“Oooo speaking of Christmas. I picked up your gift yesterday,” she taunted.

“Really? What?”

“Ha!” she chimed. “Two can play this game.”

Reid huffed. “Fine, I guess if I have to torture you, you get to torture me.”

“Thing is, you’re revealing your taunt tonight. You have to wait until December 25th, sir...”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you Sarah?”

“Yep...”

“Alright then, I guess I will pick you up at seven?”

“Yes Reid, I will see you then.”

“Love you Sarah.”

“I love you too, Reid.”

**

Sarah pulled into the school’s parking lot with a blissful smile in her heart and upon her face. She was in love and really loved how it made her feel. Her joy quickly challenged, when she noticed three students picking on another.

She quickly parked her car and proceeded towards the impending brawl.

“You’re such a dweeb, Rooster...” said one boy as he pulled on the boy’s hood, yanking it over his face.

“Stop!” he cried, struggling futilely with all his might

While he was being held by the first student, another began to kick him relentlessly in the ass.

“Ou...!” he cried.

“Stop that you kids!” Sarah yelled as she ran towards the pack.

As the three prepared to run for the scene, they gave their victim a final shove, knocking him to the ground with a thump, spilling the contents of his bag all over the ground.

Then, like cowards, one of the boys shouted, “Come on!” And with that the brood of bullies fled.

Sarah looked with compassion to the boy and extended a hand. “You alright Westin?”

Cory looked up with eyes filled with tears and anguish. Sarah extended her hand to help him up, but Westin’s emotions were raw. “Just leave me alone!” he snapped. Then angrily, he leapt to his feet and ran from the scene.

Sarah stood powerless to help. She couldn’t help but feel the lump in her throat. “Fuck’n bullies!”

**

Cory Roster stood in front of the gas station mirror, patting away the blood on his lip. He hadn’t felt the pain initially, but now it was seething; along with his soul. His mind faded back to his early years.

Cory was awkward, even as an eight-year-old. Getting off of the school bus, Roxanne Milford and Patrick O’Donnell, couldn’t help but notice the nerdy child. Supremely thin, dressed in raggedy ol’ hand-me-downs, glasses, and his Scooby Doo lunch box, he stood out. He was incredibly quiet, which had apparently made him even more of a delight for Roxanne and Patrick.

“Westy Messy...Nice clothes...” Patrick said. “Where’d your momma buy those? Some yard sale?”

“No. She got them from my cousin,” Cory explained.

“Was your cousin a geek too?” Patrick asked.

“I’m not a geek...”

“Westy Messy...” Patrick snickered.

“Wait, I got one better...” Roxanne chimed.

“One, what?” Patrick asked.

“Name...”

“Oh?”

“Cory Roster...” she giggled. “...looks like a cock-a-doodle-doo ... Cory Rooooooster...” Then with that, Roxanne added her crowing mock.

“Stop that!” Cory pleaded.

Patrick laughed and joined in the crowing. As the scene built in Westin’s recollection, more and more kids gathered as Patrick and Roxanne continued to crow, circling Cory and walking like cocks in a barn yard. Finding it humorous, the onlookers joined in: seemingly unnoticed by the teachers or monitors in the school yard.

As the school bell rang, one of the onlookers grabbed Cory by the back pack and whirled him into a mucky puddle nearby. “Splish-Splash Rooster!” he laughed.

“Maybe he’ll find a worm in the muck for his lunch!” another student said as they brood of bullies left Cory alone in his misery.

Westin’s mind continued to recall events.

In seventh grade, Cory had arrived at school on February fourteenth, Valentine’s Day, like all of the other students. Upon his desk was a small wrapped box. It had pretty red, glittery paper. A tiny card was attached, reading ... From your secret admirer... He picked up the box and looked around the room. A pretty blonde haired, blue-eyed girl names Marla smiled at him with a wink from the back of the classroom. Cory was excited. Marla was quite easily one of the prettiest girls in his school.

Cory proceeded to open the box and was happy to see it was a Pot of Gold chocolates. He smiled at Marla and quietly said, thank you.

“Open it Westin? We can share...”

He nodded politely and began to open it. As he removed the lid, however, the odor of its containment was immediately overwhelming. It was no chocolate, but a box of dirty cat litter. Just as he was revealing his containment, the teacher walked in and immediately got a wiff of the contents.

“What is that...” he waved his hand and then gripped his nose. “What ...”

“It’s cat shit, Mr. Turdoff,” said one student.

Just then, many of the students began to snicker as Cory stood in horror.

“Is that coming from you?” Mr. Turdoff asked, pointing at Westin’s gift.

“Someone gave me this...”

“God! Get rid of it!”

Cory was about to toss it in the waste basket, but Mr. Turdoff stopped him. “Not in my classroom Westin...take it out! I don’t want my classroom smelling like a barnyard...”

The students laughed and began to crow.

Cory wanted to cry, but he was thirteen now, and didn’t want them to see him cry.

Humiliated, yet again, Cory took his litter to the outside garbage container. The cold winter air, bit his nose, making him want to cry all the more. Still, he sucked it back. He looked up at his classroom window, and from the window, Roxanne, Patrick, and Marla smiled with proud arrogance.

Westin's mind reeled over and over, reminiscing all of the years of ridicule, bullying, and humiliation. His mother, who was a relentless drunk rarely, noticed his misery, and his dad had split long before. He was alone in a world of bullies and it hurt.

His mind returned to current day and anger rose from his soul. He stared coldly into the mirror and said groaned, "No more! This will be a Christmas they won't soon forget!" He then pounded the mirror with his fists, shattering the glass. He barely felt the cuts upon his hands, his adrenalin and rage were taking over, and he was done.

"What's going on in there!" barked the gas station manager.

Without saying a word, Cory opened the bathroom door and pushed his way past the man, knocking him down. And like a bull, he charged through the store and out into the cold December air.

**

It was just about 1 o'clock in the afternoon now and Sarah stood at the front of her class and was instructing her students on the days lesson in their newest assignment.

"Mankind has faced numerous wars...since the beginning of time. Your assignment is to review one of these wars, research it, create a chronological write up of how your war started, what was the "trigger", so to speak, and what it was that finished the war. Include a "what did we learn" paragraph, and make sure you use reference page. This will be due on January 5th, when you return."

The students groaned, but Sarah just smiled.

"Don't worry; you'll get through this..."

Suddenly there was a gut wrenching scream coming from the hallway, followed by three loud popping noises. Sarah didn't have to think twice, she knew what this was.

“Kids, this is a lockdown!” she shouted. “All of you, over there...” Sarah quickly pulled the blinds to the classroom, locked the door, turned off the light, and pushed her desk in front of it while the students crouched low—taking cover. Screams and popping sounds continued to roar outside of her classroom, her gut told her who it was too. It saddened her.

“Oh god!” cried Roxanne.

“We gotta get out of here!” Marla cried. “I don’t wanna die!”

“We just need to stay...” Sarah was about to comfort the students, when suddenly an enraged Cory began to bang on the door.

“I know they’re in there!” he shouted.

“Oh fuck!” Patrick gasped. “It’s rooster!”

“Oh shit!” Marla gulped.

“Fuck! Oh shit!” Roxanne began to shake. “He hates us!”

Sarah looked at her students and recognized the probable mortality rate, if she couldn’t get them out of her room. But they were on the second floor. As Cory continued to push and bang upon the door, she quickly considered an escape plan.

“Okay kids, I gotta get you out of here.... now listen!” she stood up and grabbed a nearby chair and threw it through one of the windows. It, and the fragments of glass fell to the ground below, lightly blanketed with snow. She grabbed her jacket and placed it over the jagged edges of the window and then directed, “one at a time, jump...drop loosely and roll Don’t be rigid, less chance of a broken bone. Then run!”

Trying to avoid the students from colliding in their escape, she directed them, one at a time... “Dayna, you first...” Dayna jumped, and quickly scampered from the school. By this

time, the school was surrounded by authorities, students, and a parents who'd been receiving texts.

“Jasmine...you’re next...”

“Tammy...”

Just about the time her fifth student had jumped, the banging and shouting at the door had ceased. Had he left?

“Keep going kids...” she instructed.

“Maybe he’s gone...” Patrick said, as he was led towards the classroom door.

“Get away from there!” Sarah ordered.

“Just gonna...” As Patrick pulled back the blinds to look out, a huge blast flew through the window, virtually blowing Patrick’s head from his body.

The students screamed in horror.

Now with a hole in the glass, Cory proceeded to put his hand through the window to unlock the door.

“Go students!” Sarah shouted.

Then, while they were frantically working on getting out, Sarah charged the door and grabbed for Westin’s arm. “Westin! Stop this! Please!”

“Out of my way Miss T!”

“I am not letting you kill any more people Westin!”

“I already shot like 10! What’s a few more? Besides I need to kill those taunting bitches!” he scorned as he struggled with Sarah to get in. She used all of her strength to hold him off.

“Marla! Roxanne! I will kill you!” he cried. “Fucking cunts! I will kill you!”

He pushed and pushed, while Sarah pushed back, keeping him from entering, while her students fled to the ground.

“Westin! Stop! Please!”

Enraged, Cory punched his free hand through and grabbed Sarah by the hair and pulled her back. “I didn’t want to hurt you Miss T, but you leave me no choice!”

He then pulled her head back hard, punched her in the face, and then slammed her head against the door frame. It knocked her out cold, and like a rag doll she fell to the floor. With her out of his way, Cory pushed through and made his way to the classroom, just as Marla was about to leave. Without hesitation, Cory aimed his weapon and fired a round of shots, flinging Marla from the window.

Roxanne, being a tiny individual, had crawled into a cupboard and curled up. Virtually holding her breath as she fought to refrain from crying. Two students remained and Cory shouted. “Where is she!?! Where is Roxanne!” he cocked his weapon again. “She must die! You hear me! She must die!”

“Please don’t kill me...” said Tirana, “I never bullied you...”

“Maybe not, but you laughed...with the rest of them!”

“No, I swear!” she cried.

“Don’t believe you!” Cory aimed his gun at Tirana and looked at the other student too. “You’re next Waylin!”

“God no!”

“Westin...please...stop!” Dazed and bleeding, Sarah looked up at him. “You’ve made your point...please...let them go. I’ll stay if you want...but please...let them go! I beg of you!”

Westin looked at Sarah's face and had remembered her act earlier in the day, but he was hurt and angry. "Miss T! I just wanted them to stop!"

"I know," she said. "This wasn't your fault...they bullied you. I know...but Tirana and Waylin were just onlookers..."

"They could have stopped it!"

"Maybe, but they were frightened too...I am sure..."

"I was never afraid," Cory said.

"Maybe not, but it is possible they were victims too?"

Sarah's head was spinning and the blood from her forehead ran into her eyes, burning them, making visibility difficult, but despite this, she continued to plead. "Please Cory, would you let them go? You can keep me! I will stay... please?"

Cory paused a moment and looked about the classroom. Blood lined the floors, walls, and window ledge. He had done this. He hadn't wanted to, but it was all he could handle.

"Fine...go!" He pointed to the door and watched as Tiranna and Waylin ran from the classroom. Then suddenly, he heard a sneeze.

"What the?" With his foot, Cory opened the cupboard where Roxanne had been hiding. "Ah ha!" he smiled. "Now bitch! It's your turn!"

"Cory! Wait!" Sarah begged. "She doesn't need to die!"

"She does!"

"No Cory!" Sarah begged. "And here's why..."

Cory paused as she spoke.

"If you let her live, she will spend her entire life remembering the pain she caused you and its result..."

Cory smiled. "That would be sweet..."

"I am sorry Cory...." Roxanne sobbed.

"You better believe it!" Cory said, placing the nozzle of his weapon against her cheek.

"Cory, no!" Sarah begged.

"Roxanne, you have bullied me since second grade, never letting up. I so want to fucking kill you! I just want to.... Ahhhh!" Cory's emotions burst like a floodgate. "Fuck! Fuck!"

"Cory, it's over!" Sarah said, trying to stagger to her feet. "Please!"

Then Cory turned his weapon to his face and said, it's gotta be ...

"No!" Sarah cried. "No!"

Cory pulled the trigger, but it jammed. Then suddenly, with his failed attempt to kill himself, Cory burst into tears. Crumpling like a small child to his knees. "I just wanted to ... be ... a part of something..."

"Go..." Sarah said to Roxanne.

"Miss T?" Roxanne was almost reluctant to go.

"Go...Now!"

As Roxanne walked from the scene, Sarah knelt beside Cory, took the weapons from him and tossed them aside. And while she could have hated him for his act of terror, she felt his wounds and cradled him as he sobbed. She continued to comfort him, until the authorities came to arrest him.

"On the floor!" they shouted.

Cory looked at Sarah. "Do it Cory...please!"

He nodded and complied. "I am sorry Miss T..." he said as they began dragging him away. "I am sorry...."

Her head hurt, but her heart hurt more. “Oh God!” she gasped as she looked around and relished what she’d just witnessed and survived. How had it come to this?

**

In the back of the ambulance, Sarah’s wounds were being tended to, when Reid arrived. “Sarah!” he cried, grabbing her as gently and passionately as he could. “Oh god! Oh god!”

“I’m fine Reid,” she said.

“You’re hurt...”

“These wounds will heal, but that boy...”

“That son of a bitch ... the one who tried to kill you?”

“Honestly, I don’t hate him...”

“But he killed 12 students!”

“I know he did. It was wrong, no arguments...but ...”

“But?”

“This was not a random event, this was coming for a long time and we missed it.” Sarah began to sob as she looked around at all of the chaos and media, “we missed it!”

**

Three days later, Sarah visited the prison where Cory was being held. Her heart ached when she saw him in his chains and jumper. Cory looked surprised to see her.

“Miss T?”

“Hi Cory,” she smiled. “How are you holding up?”

“You don’t hate me?”

“I don’t.”

“Why? The whole world does now!”

“Because they don’t know...”

“Don’t know what?”

“This could have been stopped and we, as a society were a part of this massacre too.”

Cory was confused.

“Will you help me?” she asked.

“Help you? How?”

“It’s time people knew how this could have been prevented, and God help me, and you...maybe we can make it so our victims don’t feel this is the only way to solve their bullying...huh?”

Cory smiled and nodded.

**

That evening, Reid and Sarah sat in their special restaurant.

“You know, Sarah? When I first met you, I knew you were amazing and each day you prove it more. I can’t imagine my world without you in it...”

Reid gets up from his seat and kneels before her... “Will you, dearest Sarah, do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Sarah didn’t hesitate. “Yes Reid! I will marry you...” They embraced passionately as the onlookers cheered, while the television on the background wall recounted her legacy.

Memories Remain

The summer has been scorching hot. How I miss my grandfather and his farm. The heat didn't seem quite so awful. Those were the days when we'd embrace a swim in his man-made ponds. Those were the days when we'd slid along the wooden plank to have a taste of the freshest and coldest spring fed fountain water. Nothing was sweeter.

Driving by his old farm now, the pools had been filled in. The fountain of cold water had been built upon. My childhood now a multi-million-dollar estate.

Summers haven't been the same since he went home. But the memory of that fountain and my grandfather remain.