

Short Story Contest

November 2021



PROMPT: Late at night, at an empty 24-hour laundromat, someone reaches into a dryer to pull the last of their clothes out. Instead, something grabs their arm and pulls them in.

The Peculiar Life of Caroline McFee

by **Ava Tanner**

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Caroline walked down the dimly lit sidewalk as the soles of her shoes dragged across the concrete. Her long dark hair was tied back into a knot, highlighting the sharp features of her solemn face as she walked under the streetlights. She only had two more blocks to go but walking at 1 a.m. made it feel like she still had five ahead of her. The sirens in the distance wrang through her head like nails on a chalkboard as she walked to get her clothes from the laundromat. She couldn't wait to move out of the city; she had moved to Brooklyn after college to become a writer, which-- according to every Gen X'er in existence-- was a "dying field". She could practically feel her eyes roll back in her head as she thought about it. However, they were right to an extent; it was not an easy career path to make money in. So far, her bachelor's degree in English had gotten her a job at the local coffee shop and a shitstain of an apartment that had cracks in the walls, a leaky faucet, and no washer or dryer. She felt numb to the everyday routine of going to work, coming home and sleeping, and waking up late at night to write, only to stare at a blinking cursor on her computer screen for an hour and get discouraged. She knew it would be good for her to move again, maybe get a change of scenery. Caroline never stayed in one place for very long.

She rounded the corner to see the flickering "Laundromat" sign that was missing the "D" and the "O". She always preferred to do her laundry at night, when she had an obligation to no one, and she felt at peace to do what she needed. She opened the door and heard the jingle of the bell at the top of the door frame. The laundromat was empty and quiet, except for the TV set up on the counter on the other side of the room. She walked over to the dryer her clothes were in and started to put them into the bag she brought. Feeling around the walls of the dryer to get the last of her socks, she felt something sharp graze her arm. Caroline drew back for a moment

before feeling around for the last sock she knew she was missing. Before she could yell, she felt a hand grasp her arm and pull her inside, as the door slammed shut behind her, and she was surrounded by darkness as she fell into the abyss.

Before she even opened her eyes, she felt the pine needles beneath her as they scratched the back of her arms through her sleeves. Her head felt heavy, and her body felt stiff as she laid flat on her back. The mist of the air tickled her face as she slowly opened her eyes and groaned. It was dark in the woods as she looked up through the tree line and up at the sky. It was eerily quiet as well, until she heard the crack of a branch nearby. Her heart started racing as she struggled to sit up. After her vision focused, she saw something in the distance.

She tried to get up as fast as she could, but she was sore, and the trees started spinning. She was able to sit up before she saw a figure appear from the trees. “Good, you’re up”, a male voice said to her.

“Who are you?”, she asked nervously.

“Not to worry, we’ve got places to go.”

She realized that he had an English accent and seemed to sound younger. As he got closer, she saw that he was in his early teens, with dark hair and a pale complexion. He held out his hand to help her up, and Caroline sat there wearily. “Oh come on, I won’t bite”.

He squatted down next to her and held out his hand. “The name’s Paxton. Now let’s get up off the ground, shall we?”

Before she could object, he grabbed her hand and pulled her up. The trees spun even more as she tried to stand on her own before having to lean against a nearby tree. Paxton tilted his head as he looked at her.

“Where am I?” Caroline asked.

“Alderedge. We need your help immensely.”

“*My* help? What could you possibly need my help with?”, she exclaimed.

“You’re clairvoyant, Caroline.”

Caroline froze; she hadn't heard that word in fifteen years after her grandmother told her what she was. She had always had strong intuition since she was a child, knew things would happen before they ever did; but it became stronger as she grew up. When she was ten, she had a terrible nightmare that her parents had died in a car accident-- only it wasn't a dream. The next evening, a knock came on her grandmother's door, with a police officer holding his hat in his hands. Caroline came downstairs to see her grandmother sitting in the living room with the officer, sniffing and listening to the details. As soon as Caroline saw them, she knew-- she bolted back up to her room and slammed the door shut, slowly sinking to the ground. After that night, she never had any more visions. It was like her mind shut it off.

"I don't have that ability anymore", she solemnly responded.

"Of course you do, you just choose not to use it. You were born with it, Caroline."

"I don't want to use it."

"I just ask that you see the problem first before making any judgements", he begged her. She hesitantly nodded her head, and they made their way through the trees.

They emerged from the tree line into a town with cobblestone streets and turned onto a small path with an entrance covered in glowing magenta flowers.

"Here's a bit of background about why we need you. Our Oracle was recently obliterated after a neighboring nation attacked ours. We've been at constant war with Crowhelm after they were taken over by the Draegon, and they led an attack on our city recently that was the grimmest one yet. We fear that the war will be coming to an end soon, but that one nation will fall. We need you to help us by telling us anything you can see about the final attack."

The path took a turn that was cocooned in branches that formed an arch overhead. When it finally opened up on the other side, what she saw was beautiful; it was a garden, but not an ordinary one. The area itself was no bigger than fifteen feet both ways, but was covered in vines and flowers of all different sorts. Not just ordinary flowers, they swayed in the air even though

there wasn't a breath of wind, and the vibrant colors of them all left a hazy aura around the room.

"This is a sacred place where our former Oracle did all of her readings", Paxton explained.

"Now, I know you think you've lost your ability, but you must look within yourself to find it. It's a gift Caroline, and you and four others are the only ones left known to our kind."

Caroline felt her heart fill with fear as it beat a little faster and her blood rushed to her head.

"You must try, Caroline. I beg of you."

Caroline quietly asked to be left alone in the sacred garden, and closed her eyes. Memories of her parents flooded her mind as she felt a single tear fall onto her cheek. They were happy memories: her father swinging her by her arms as she giggled fanatically, her mother telling her stories of fantastical lands filled with creatures and magic. She had repressed all her memories of them after that night, out of fear that she may once again foresee someone's sad demise. But she knew she had to try for Paxton, and so she looked within. She saw a battle ensue in a field amongst the forest with enemies falling on both sides; she saw them battle with magic as the Draegons fought to take over the town. She then saw in the midst of the chaos, there was a child - a girl, no more than four or five years of age, standing in the middle of the violence around her. And then, a flash, an explosion of energy; the enemy had been wiped out, and all that were left standing scrambled back and retreated, just as stunned as the defenders of Alderedge. The girl was still standing in the same place, not an ounce of emotion on her face. She then turned and walked into the treeline, slowly fading into the distance.

Caroline opened her eyes, and turned to see Paxton nervously leaning against the entryway. She told him what she saw and his eyes widened in disbelief after she had mentioned the little girl. "Diana", he breathed. "She's back!"

He became giddy with excitement before explaining who Diana was. Apparently, she was not a little girl at all, but a Goddess who had disappeared for centuries. He exclaimed that she was the key to saving Alderedge, as she had saved their nation once before.

“Thank you, Caroline. I knew that you had it in you.”

He smiled at her and put a hand on her shoulder. “We all have a destiny in life, and this is your purpose. Use it for good, and you will go far in your mortal life and beyond.”

She had a small smile on her face as she thanked him. He told her that she could visit at any time as he folded an object into her hand. “This is the Oracle’s stone; keep it with you for protection, but also channel it when you want to come here again, and I will meet you in the forest as we did before.”

He also folded a rose petal into her hand as well, before closing her palm. He told her to close her eyes, and as she did, she saw a flash of white.

Caroline shot up in her bed and breathed heavily and looked around. *It was all a dream*, she thought. She laid back down and stared at the ceiling for a moment, as she couldn’t believe how vivid the dream had been. But then she felt something in her hand, and looked down at her open palm; a smooth lavender stone and rose petal sat in her hand, and she smiled.

After a while, Caroline got up and laid the stone and rose petal on her vanity. She walked into her small kitchen and made a pot of coffee before leaning against the wall by the breakfast nook, staring out the window at the buildings that stretched into the skyline. The sun was just starting to peak above the horizon, the sky a hazy pink and blue. A small smile slowly appeared on her face as she took a heavy breath. And for the first time in a long time, Caroline sat down in front of her computer and began to write-- about a girl, who found a mystical world, and found peace within herself while in it.