

THREE SISTERS: NORA, CAROL, AND BELLA

Nora came out of her custom built, four-bedroom colonial. She stopped on the front steps, folded her arms, and glared as the junk heap backed quickly out her driveway into the street. Then, the car paused as its motor revved just before the wreck sped forward down the road.

A white and gray cloud remained and lingered over her perfectly manicured lawn and semi-circular driveway. Nora scowled at the smoke before shaking her head and sighing. Then she power walked to her car.

It felt wrong as she climbed into the new Mercedes. In her forty-seven years, Nora rarely acted on impulse and was skeptical of this snap decision. But it was as if someone else controlled her actions.

Starting the car, she could only guess at the intended destination. But the required task was simple, covertly tail her younger sister to ensure she made it home safely.

Carol pushed for the highway in her prized Volkswagen, the engine sputtering and the tailpipe spitting constant white and gray fumes. She loved the car, but it was not as reliable as she bragged. Today, it ran a little better, and for that she was grateful. If the car had not started, it would have been stranded her in an angry sister's driveway.

Carol knew that they were both too old to be arguing about petty things like money. But after Bella, the youngest sister, died in a plane crash, it seemed

everyone in the family quarreled too much. Or worse, they did not talk at all.

Nora feared losing her sister. They had become so distant and confrontational. But right now she could lose her sister in the literal sense. She had never tailed someone. Fortunately, traffic was light, and the highway was close by. So, it was easy to catch up to and follow Carol to the on-ramp.

If Carol paid attention, she would have easily noticed her sister behind her. But Carol was too focused on the recent argument and the strange noises coming from her engine to notice anything else.

They merged onto the highway and blended with the traffic. Nora wondered where they were headed. Carol chose to drive toward the countryside, in a direction away from her home.

Nora was a city girl and did not head this way often. She wondered where Carol could possibly be headed. But she still followed her, for many miles. The flat plain of Denver was soon behind them with the surrounding tree covered hills growing bigger as they moved toward the Rockies. But before reaching the mountains, Carol moved into the right-hand lane, and slowed. It was sudden and Nora sat up straight. She knew this exit and understood Carol's destination.

Nora watched from a distance as Carol pulled into the state park's small parking lot. It was nestled into the foothills, occupying a piece of semi-flat land with a cold stream trickling along one side. Nora smiled as she

remembered the air always smelled of beautiful pine and spruce trees growing nearby.

In the center of the park was a large open field with children playing and picking dandelions out of the well-used lawn. Off to one side, the distinct clank of an aluminum bat rang out from a baseball field as a team took batting practice. Near the stream, isolated off to another side, a fenced dog park contained canines and their owners. And in a corner of the park, a second enclosed area held a well-equipped playground with children's laughter filling the air.

As little girls, their father took them to this park whenever he could. It was their special place where dad took them as a treat. They loved visiting the park and it held many happy memories of the three young sisters.

These days though, Nora rarely gave the place a thought. In fact, she did not remember the last time she recalled anything about the park. She remembered the location and blissful times, but over time it all just faded into the past and out of her consciousness. Now, here she was again with Carol, but Bella's absence settled over her. The mourning she had buried deep, bubbled up.

Nora immediately felt remorse. Was the argument so bad that Carol needed to come to this spot to console herself? Nora wondered how she could be so insensitive to her sister's feelings. And then it became clear to her, she knew nothing about what her sister was thinking or feeling.

After Bella's death, Nora became selfish and only cared about her own feelings. She never asked Carol, or anybody else, the right questions or listened to what they were saying. The burden of Bella's death must have created deep, powerful emotions in her sister. A sense of failure fell over Nora. She knew nothing of Carol's internal conflict in this time of mourning. She only knew Carol needed to borrow money for repairs to her car.

Carol parked her car but paused before exiting and she leaned on the steering wheel. Then she took a deep breath and popped out of the red Beetle carrying a small package. But she again paused and stood watching. It was hard for her to miss the shiny white Mercedes when Nora turned into the parking lot.

The charade was up, and Nora knew it. So, she pulled up right next to Carol's car. Nora examined her sister through the window for a few seconds, then got out and walked over to Carol.

Nora wanted to ask about the package and why Carol came to this park, at this moment. But it just came out. "I'm sorry."

"I am too. It's just too much for all of us to take right now. I know. I shouldn't have asked you for the money to fix my car so soon after the funeral."

Nora sighed and scolded herself mentally for being a such a bad sister. "Don't be silly. I'll give you whatever you need. I worry about you and can't have you driving around in a car that might leave you stranded on the side

of the road." She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, then asked, "Why in the world did you drive out here over such a petty argument?"

Carol did not answer right away. Her face became tight, and her eyes swelled with tears. "Tess got loose and was hit by a car. I didn't want to tell you. It's enough we're dealing with the loss of Bella. It wouldn't be right to burden you, or the rest of the family, with my dog at a time like this. I had her cremated and thought this would be a good place to spread her ashes. I loved coming here with her, you know, since we used to come here a lot as little girls with dad. And Tess loved playing with the other dogs in the park. With all the joy she brought me, it just seemed right to add her this place. Tess and me found happiness here. I know it's stupid"

Nora could not stop the tears, they just welled up in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "You stopped to ask me for money on your way here?"

Carol replied through a sniffle. "Yes. Until I can get it fixed, I try to use my car as few times as possible. You were on the way to the park, so I could make both stops in just one trip."

Nora embraced her sister tight and became aware of how long it was since she hugged anyone. She did not want this one to end. "You poor thing. I'm so sorry. I promise, I will never be so mean or insensitive to you again. Never." She let go of her sister and stroked Carol's long brown hair. "I am so sorry about Tess. She was a good dog and I know you loved her."

Carol simply nodded her head yes. After wiping the tears from her face, she

finally said, "It was sweet of you to chase after me. Especially after I was so awful to argue with you like that."

"Well, it wasn't really chasing after you. I just followed the smoke." Nora paused, afraid Carol would take it wrong. So, she added, "Your car is special to you, I know, and you've been stranded on the side of the road more than once. I couldn't let you leave knowing the car wasn't running right. You were so mad that I didn't think you would even call me for help if your car died." Nora paused again and took a deep breath. "I'm so sorry. I know you don't have the money to get towed and I didn't want you to get stuck. But after the argument, I was too stubborn to let you know I was worried."

Carol let a small smile show through her tears. "I'm sorry too. You know, stubborn is an understatement for both of us. I guess we got that from Dad."

Nora wiped a couple of tears off Carol's cheek. "Yes, and I wouldn't have it any other way." After a deep breath, she wiped her own eyes. "You know it's illegal to spread ashes in public?"

"I know. But this is the perfect place for Tess. It's where she'd pick, if she could."

"Let's find the old seesaw. That's where the three of us always went as soon as we got here with Dad. I don't know why because one of us always got hurt on that stupid thing."

Carol let a little laugh slip out. "The seesaw is gone. Just like you said, we

always got hurt and so did all the other kids. So, they removed it.”

“That’s so sad! I really loved that thing. Well, it’s still one of my favorite memories of us as little girls. Maybe you can spread Tess's ashes near where it was. What do you think of that?” Nora put her arm around Carol, and they walked into the park. Their bond as sisters tested, but renewed and stronger than ever.

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