

# Carmen & Grace

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Epigraph by Chase Twichell, excerpt from "Worldliness" from *Perdido* (Faber & Faber, 1991).  
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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO TWO PUERTO RICAN KIDS FROM THE BRONX  
WHO TRIED TO MAKE A WAY FROM NO WAY: MY MOTHER, EDELMIRA ALERS,  
AND MY FATHER, WILLIAM COSS. MAY THEY REST IN PEACE AND POWER.



*I want to love the story of my life,  
the stories. Then I shall seem  
not so much a creature in an index  
of adventures or of dreams,*

*as an interactive force that fed itself  
on love, a force that did not atrophy.  
And if it was reckless,  
what will it matter?*

**—Chase Twichell, "Worldliness"**



# WALKING THE SPIRAL

*Carmon. Summer of 2014*

The small cement room was not built for the woman wearing a long black skirt, with a lot of initials and titles after her name, who passed through the steel threshold of the doorframe radiating light like the full moon hanging low. She was coming through, like so many before her, to do a workshop for those of us getting ready to get out. There would be hoops to jump for sure, so we jumped. Out was something that kept us awake at night. It kept us dreaming. She walked in, set a big stack of books down on the table, and smiled at us. She wrote on the board: *Walking the Spiral*, then drew a big spiral underneath it. On the other side of the board, she wrote: *Instinct Injured*. We were a captive audience for a lot of bullshit. I was ready for her stuff to be more of the same.

Her flow, for a second, reminded me of Grace. How she might have looked in her sixties. You could tell this woman wasn't scared of us by how she went up and down the aisles between us with her handouts instead of standing in front of the room and passing them back. When she bumped my shoulder by accident, she turned her hips to fit through sideways. She placed her hand on my arm and winked as she said, "Sorry, mija. I take up a lot of space." Her body language was singing loud and clear: I am free as fuck and would like to show you the way. I liked

how her gray and black bun was tied back with one of those rubber bands that has a big fake red flower attached. The beads around her neck surely meant something; I respected that, even if I didn't know what they meant to her. She introduced herself in Spanish: "Hola, soy la Dr. Guerrero. When was the last time someone read you a bedtime story? Pues, get comfortable, but don't fall asleep. I'm going to read you one now." People carry energy into a room. She snuck a quiet magic in while no one was looking. I wasn't expecting it. I liked the surprise. I hadn't been enchanted in a long time, even if I still remembered the long slow-motion ride down a dark tunnel that made magic and danger feel the same. She read us her version of the fairy tale "The Red Shoes" and ended by saying, "Sometimes you have to cut off your own feet to stop the crazy dance you've been doing. Don't worry. They grow back."

We were there in our same khaki suits of armor acting like we cared, or like we didn't, depending on how we rolled and how close to getting out we felt. How close we felt, I had learned, had nothing to do with the date that we were given. There were girls leaving tomorrow who felt like they were going home to something worse than what they had in here. The very guy who beat their ass and got them thrown into jail would be picking them up. It was crazy, but true. The feeling of "close to getting out" had a lot to do with already feeling free. It was about cultivating abandoned gardens by planting seeds where nothing had grown in a long time, if ever. It wasn't easy to do or feel in here, but people did it and showed others how to find it for themselves. I felt close and ready. I had been a Goody Two-shoes once. It was a long time ago, but my body still remembered, so I leaned forward, put on my listening face, and folded my hands on the desk. Just like third grade.

The teeth suckers and groaners were sitting in the back row, just like high school. They were about to start their shit when she took a deep breath in and opened her arms out to us. "I am so grateful you invited me here. Thank you." A few laughed because of course none of us had invited her and she knew it. Instead of responding, she turned and underlined "Instinct Injured" with a bunch of wiggly lines on the board behind her. She looked around the room, then said, "You are all here because of



something you did, in addition to a lot of things you had nothing to do with. The question is what will you do with the time you have left when you get out.” She caught us off guard by saying there were things we had nothing to do with. It hit a nerve. We all felt that way but didn’t think anyone else believed it or cared. Walking around the tiny room as if it was the great outdoors, stretching her arms and taking big, deep breaths like the air was the cleanest she had ever taken in, she looked genuinely happy to be there. She had our attention.

“At some point you confused raw survival instincts with self-protective instincts. They are not the same. You stayed overlong in habits that had not served you since you were little girls. The worst one being clinging to the strongest force in your environment instead of focusing on becoming that force for yourselves.”

She gave us silence to take it in, then added, “When the little voice inside told you to run the other way, you ran fast in the direction of the very trouble waiting for you. We all think we are rebelling when we dig ourselves into holes too deep to even let us breathe, but we are just reacting, and usually, with little self-awareness on every front.” Her switch to the *we* did not go unnoticed. She was one of us somehow, and not afraid to say it, except she would leave today. We were not there yet, but she was here to tell us we were close.

There are levels to listening. She pulled us in deeper, one layer at a time.

“Remember, there was a little girl who used all those things to survive when she had nothing else at hand. It is possible she had no other choice. It is possible she is the only reason you are even alive. Forgive her for going too far in trying to save your life. Let all of it go. Accept responsibility for being here, then accept your own freedom as real and possible. More real than all the bars and gates that surround you.”

We all exhaled with her. She was teaching us how to breathe again. It was a skill I once had; she made me realize I had been holding my breath since the day they’d locked the gates behind me.

The worksheet was full of circles, arrows, lines, and a spiral at the center. Her arms opened out wide as she explained, “I want you to know

that there are people out there who won't let you forget where you've been or what you did. I'm here to tell you that they are your new trouble. They will pretend to be very serious and very smart and very important. They will pretend to know you very well. They are not important. They are not smart. They have no idea who you are. They don't know any more about turning a life around than they understand the weight of an eighteen-wheeler making a U-turn. I know both and so do you. Let them talk, but inside your head just keep saying, 'Fuck that.'" We all laughed in a huge wave of relief that led some of us to tears. She would be Dr. Fuck That from there on. She pointed us in the direction of the paper in our hands. She held hers up and said, "You see all those arrows and lines going every which way all around the paper? I call that the land of good advice gone bad, or the best advice is the one I ask for, or the well-meaning are often full of shit. You pick." There was more laughing. She was serious, though. We had to pick what we wanted to call it, then circle all of it and label it. I picked "the well-meaning are often full of shit." I liked that it didn't say always. I'm an optimist like that.

"Okay, mujeres, now I want you to go to that spiral in the center of the page. You have walked it many, many times in your life. You see it has a center and an entrance far away. But the entrance is also the exit. Many of you have never quite made it to the exit yet, but some of you have been close, and turned right back around and used it as the entrance again. Don't feel bad about that. It is what we do. We will all walk it many times before it's over. The trick is to get out at least once, so you know what freedom feels like and you can really decide what it might be worth to you." Standing close to my desk again, she smelled like lavender, a scent that filled me with thoughts of Sugar and all the letters she had sent me over the years. Sugar had made it to the exit in time and taken Destiny with her. That meant I knew at least one person, really two, who had made it out. That had to mean something.

She continued, "I'm sure you have heard this before, we all have, it goes: The only way out is in, etc. It is not a joke or a cliché. It is far more serious than that. I need you to listen carefully: The only way out for you

is through. Through. So put a little arrow in the center and write: *I am here*. Then draw a little stick figure of yourself. Make her cute. Give her earrings or a chain, a hairstyle, and an outfit that suits you. Don't be cheap with yourself. Then, along the first line out of that center write the name of the person you associate with why you are here. There is always someone. Don't argue with me. Write it down."

It was *déjà vu*. I had been clinging to it all these years. My third-grade teacher, Sally Sunshine, used to say that shit all the time. Especially when we were working on those puzzles to learn the multiplication tables. We would complain when we got to the sevens and eights because they were too hard, to which she would say, "Quit the complaining. The only way out of that maze is through. Work your brains, little ones. Work them. Go on through." In third grade we bent our heads, got to work, protected our papers with our hands from cheaters on all sides, and sometimes a few of us burst into tears. We did the exact same things in that room with Dr. Fuck That. Grown women, who mostly liked to play the badass, bent over their papers drawing stick figures and writing secret names with hands covering what would only have meaning to them anyway. A few of us burst into tears. I won't say if it was me, but Grace would say, "Of course it was, crybaby, of course it was." It got heavy fast. I wrote *GRACE* in big, beautiful letters all along that first line, but it was interesting to see myself at the center. I wrote *CARMEN* in script and gave myself a long skirt—though I hadn't worn one since Pete—big hoop earrings, and my old long, curly hair, even though I had cropped it short years ago. Then Dr. Fuck That said, "Now at the exit write the name of the two people you most want to make proud. Only two, and one of them has to be you. If you have children, and you are using them, then write all their names. I don't want to fan the flames of sibling rivalry." I laughed and cried because all I could think of was Grace close to the center and Artemis at the exit.

"So, you will all have to get through what you did with and for, or because of, that first name, and what you felt or feel about how that affected that second name at the exit. I said through, not over. You are

never getting over what has happened to you. None of us do. However, you can, will, and must get through. I believe in you. So should you.”

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Later that night, I fell asleep and into a dream of all of us getting through. Grace was standing under a doorway hugging each of us as we passed. I wrote it down in my little book of dreams in as much detail as I could remember. The very way the dream lady years ago had taught me. Dr. Guerrero had left us with a question: “What will you do with what is left of your one precious life?” She gave us a poem that asked that same question, then left the room clearer than it had been when she walked in. I tried to imagine myself as a force that could change the energy in a room. Grace had been that. I would now have to become that for myself.