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The Chalk Girl

Written by Carol O'Connell

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The
Chalk Girl

CAROL O'CONNELL

headline

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ONE

On the day I was born, I ran screaming from the womb. That's what my father tells me when I bring home a story about the Driscoll School.

—Ernest Nadler

The first outcry of the morning was lost in a Manhattan mix of distant sirens, barking dogs and loud music from a car rolling by outside the park. The midsummer sky was the deep blue of tourist postcards.

No clouds. No portents of fear.

A parade of small children entered the meadow. They were led by a white-haired woman with a floppy straw hat and a purple dress that revealed blue-veined calves as she crossed the grass, moving slowly with the aid of a cane. Her entourage of small day campers showed great restraint in keeping pace with her. They wanted to run wild, hollering and cartwheeling through Central Park, all but the one who waddled with an awkward gait of legs pressed close together – the early warning sign of a bladder about to explode.

Mrs Lanyard read aloud from a guidebook. 'The flock of grazing sheep was removed from Sheep Meadow in 1934.' This was followed

by a children's chorus of disappointed groans and one shy lament, 'I have to pee.'

'Of course you do.' There was always one. It never failed. The sardonic Mrs Lanyard raised one hand to shade her eyes as she gazed across the open expanse of fifteen acres spotted with people, their bikes and beach towels, baby strollers and flying Frisbees. She was looking for her assistant, who had gone off to scout the territory ahead for a public toilet. 'Soon,' she said to the child in distress, knowing all the while that a toilet would not be found in time. No field trip was complete without the stench of urine on the bus ride home.

After corralling her young charges into a tight cluster, she counted noses for the third time that morning. No children had been lost – but there was one too many. She spied an unfamiliar mop of curly red hair at the back of the ranks. That little girl was definitely not enrolled in the Lanyard Day Camp for Gifted Children – not that Mrs Lanyard regarded any of these brats as anything but ordinary. However, their parents had paid a goodly sum for a prestigious line on a six-year-old's résumé, and the extra child was poaching.

What an odd little face – both beautiful and comical, skin white as cream for the most part and otherwise dirty. The little girl's grin was uncommonly wide, and there was an exaggerated expanse between the upturned nose and full lips. Her chin came to a sharp point to complete the very picture of an elf. Elfin or human, she did not belong here.

'Little girl, what's your name.' This was not phrased as a question, but as a demand.

'Coco,' she said, 'like hot chocolate.'

How absurd. That would hardly fit a red-haired child, blue-eyed and so fair of face. 'Where did you—' Mrs Lanyard paused for a short scream when a rat ran close to the toes of her shoes. Impossible.

Inconceivable. There was no mention of rats in her field guide – only birds and squirrels and banished sheep. She resolved to write the publishers immediately, and her criticism would be severe.

‘Urban rats are nocturnal creatures,’ said Coco, the faux camper, as if reciting from a field guide of her own. ‘They rarely venture out in daylight.’

Well, this was not the typical vocabulary of a child her age. The little poser might be the only gifted one in the lot. ‘So what about *that* rat?’ Mrs Lanyard pointed to the rodent slithering across the meadow. ‘I suppose he’s *retarded*?’

‘He’s a Norway rat,’ said Coco. ‘They’re also called brown rats, and they’re brilliant. They won the rat wars a hundred years ago . . . when they *ate* all the black rats.’ This bit of trivia was punctuated by ‘ooohs’ from the other children. Encouraged, the little girl went on. ‘They used to be boat rats. Now they live mostly on the ground. But some of them live in the sky, and sometimes it *rains* rats.’

In perfect unison, the day campers looked skyward, but no rodents were coming from that quarter. However, another rat was running toward them. Twenty-three pairs of eyes rounded with surprise. And one little boy wet his pants – finally. It never failed.

Oh, and there – another rat – and *another* one. Vile creatures.

In a wide swathe across the far side of the meadow, sun worshippers abandoned their towels to lope away, and screams could be heard at that distance where people and their vocals were only ant size. Dogs barked, and parents on the run madly piloted baby strollers in all directions.

Mrs Lanyard motioned for the children to gather around her. The little redheaded rat maven stepped out from behind the others and came forward, her thin arms outreaching, silently begging for hugs and comfort.

Oh, *Lord*, that child was filthy.

The girl’s formerly white T-shirt was a mess of dirt smudges,

grass-colored smears and food stains, some red as blood. And, of course, as was the case with the unwashed, the dreaded head-lice infestation was to be expected. 'Stop!' Mrs Lanyard stepped back and put up both hands to ward off the advance of this urchin.

The child's large blue eyes had a wounded look. Her arms slowly lowered to her sides. Coco turned to the other children, who took their cue from the old woman and also shrank away from her. The little girl's smile collapsed, and her hands folded over her stomach, as if this shunning had come with the pain of a punch.

A boy screamed, 'Look! Look!' He jabbed the air with his pointing finger. 'More rats!'

Oh, dear God, there were dozens of them.

Mrs Lanyard raised her cane, prepared to defend the little ones against this moving brown carpet of quivering, twitchy fur that was headed their way. However, the children – all wonderfully equipped to survive – promptly abandoned the old lady and ran off. The odd child followed after them, her hands fluttering like small white wings in a panic.

It was an inconvenient moment to suffer a massive stroke, but fortunately, mercifully, it would prove fatal for Mrs Lanyard.

The rats were *so* close.

She sank to her knees. The wind took her straw hat to sail it far and wide. Now her pink scalp could be seen through thinning white strands of hair.

The rats were squealing, onrushing, almost here.

Her eyes rolled back, and there was no more fear, though vermin were all around her, dividing into columns to skirt the obstacle of her kneeling body, only wanting to get past her. Stone dead, she pitched forward to lay her head upon the grass, cutting her face on a jagged shard of glass from a broken bottle. There was just a trickle of blood from this wound, for her heart had ceased to beat and pump it.

Twitchy soldiers of the rat army, those closest to her, paused to look – to sniff – to taste.

Mrs Ortega could hear the sound of children's high-pitched squeals as she rolled her wire cart toward the park playground. Her short frame was deceptively thin, for she was strong – a side effect of hard labor. Her heritage was advertised by jet-black hair from the Latin side and her mother's Irish cream complexion. On a normal day during her travels down this path, she was sometimes accosted by women who were attracted by her cart of cleaning supplies. These strangers always approached with a needy, desperate look about them – a good cleaning lady was hard to find. And she would wave them off, saying, 'Don't even ask. I'm booked solid.'

Today, in a sharp departure from this routine, the cleaning lady was body-slammed by a stranger on the run, a young woman looking over her shoulder instead of watching where she was going.

A New Yorker, born and bred, Mrs Ortega had a store of curses for moments like this, choice words that would chill the hearts of a motorcycle gang. She raised one fist in prelude, and then she saw fear in the other woman's eyes when pausing to scream a warning – 'Rats!' – before running on.

Obviously an out-of-towner.

The cleaning lady's indignation subsided, and she lowered her fist. She gave handicap points to lame tourists; anyone frightened by the sight of a rat was surely feeble. New York City was the rat capital of the world. Her own neighborhood had once boasted more vermin than all of Manhattan, but her customer base, the Upper West Side, was becoming a major competitor for bragging rights.

Mrs Ortega entered a noisy playground enclosed in the concentric circles of a long, round bench, a fence and an outer ring of tall trees. She shut the iron gate behind her and took her customary seat near

the drinking fountain. Nodding to nannies and some of the children she knew by name, the cleaning lady settled a delicatessen bag on her lap. She planned to eat a leisurely morning snack before taking the subway to SoHo. Years ago, one of her customers had moved downtown, and that should have been the end of him, but Charles Butler had made it worth her while to spend an extra train fare. She looked down at her wristwatch.

Lots of time.

There was time enough to notice a man standing just outside the fence, and the cleaning lady recognized his kind. She had a cop acquaintance, whose name for men like this was Short Eyes. The man was fixated on the jungle gym, a brightly colored structure with stairs full of climbing children and crossbeams for those who liked to dangle. And some whizzed down a metal slide, shrill, screaming happy kids – witless and fearless. But a few had good instincts, and they would survive to have progeny; native New Yorkers understood the darkest things about Darwinism. Short Eyes caught the attention of a small girl. He smiled – *so* creepy – and the child quickly turned away, her nose scrunched up, as if the sight of him could be a bad smell.

All the signs were there for even a child to see, but the children's guardians were blind, chatting into cell phones or gossiping with one another. There were no moms in the playground today, only the hired help. Moms were good at spotting predators. Mrs Ortega was better. Her pervert radar was reinforced when Short Eyes used his camera phone to covertly take pictures of the youngsters.

Not wanting to alarm the nannies – brainless teenagers – the cleaning lady casually leaned forward, and one hand drifted toward the baseball bat nestled in her wire cart. This was an inheritance from her father, a Yankees fan till the day he died. She carried it everywhere, but not for sentimental reasons. It made a fine weapon. She watched the man – who watched the children.

And then she was distracted by a dirty little face framed in curly red hair. The child peeked out from behind a tree that was rooted in the playground's cement floor. Her smile was too wide, too generous for any New Yorker's spawn. This little girl was a strange one, all right – and yet familiar.

The cleaning lady sucked in a breath. Though the child had no wings, she was otherwise the living incarnation of a statuette on the mantelpiece at home. Mrs Ortega had a collection of fairy figurines, the legacy of a mother only one generation out of Ireland, a woman who knew the light and the dark side of the little folk: they sang and danced, smiling always, and they were mischief makers all. No good could come of seeing fairies in the flesh.

In the common-sense compartment of her brain, she knew this little girl was all too human and vulnerable, but the resemblance to the magical was uncanny and unsettling. Mrs Ortega turned her head to catch Short Eyes staring at this same child as he prowled along the fence. The little redhead was a likely victim, for she seemed to belong to no one. Easy prey. He was slowly rounding the perimeter, moving closer to the gate, stealthy, grinning; this was the way a cockroach would smile if it only could.

Mrs Ortega's right hand wound around the handle of her baseball bat as the little girl approached one of the nannies, a fool teenager named Nancy, who suddenly took fright. And that was interesting because Nancy was built like a linebacker. The small child closed in on the older girl, arms outstretched, asking for a hug.

From a stranger? Well, *that* was scary.

The teenager left the bench at a dead run, so eager was Nancy to escape the threat of this tiny girl. The nanny collected her charges, twin boys, bundled them through the gate and swiftly walked them toward the park exit to West 68th Street. Thus abandoned, the fairy child's head bowed, and her arms folded to hug herself.

What was that on the kid's T-shirt? Oh, *damn*.

Mrs Ortega had an eye for stains and an expertise. A cop might be fooled by ketchup, but not her. This was blood.

The child suddenly smiled, then danced on tiptoe to the edge of the playground, where the pervert was waiting by the gate – the *open* gate. He was smiling, arms held out to receive her, and she ran to him, so happy, so anxious to give and get love.

Mrs Ortega pulled the baseball bat from her cart.

Three men in uniform stood in the shade of an ancient oak tree and watched the rats swarm over the bloody mound that was the late Mrs Lanyard.

One man broke ranks and walked toward the feeding frenzy in the meadow.

‘No, you don’t.’ Officer Maccaro, a twenty-year veteran of the police force, caught his young partner by the arm and restrained him. ‘Trust me, kid, she’s dead – *really* dead.’ Ah, rookies – they were like toddlers. It wasn’t safe to let them out of your sight for a minute. ‘Animal Control is on the way. We’ll just wait.’ He turned to the other young man, who wore the uniform of the US Forestry Service. ‘Jimmy, I’ve never seen so many rats in broad daylight.’

‘Well, Mac, the rodent population is zooming.’ But for the Midwest accent, the park ranger might be taken for a native city dweller – so blasé about vermin lurching on an old lady. ‘The poison bait wasn’t working anymore. I think the rats acquired a taste for it. So the parks commissioner made a damn contest out of rodent control. And along comes the first contestant, this idiot, Dizzy Hollaren. He runs a small mom-and-pop outfit, mostly termites and roaches. So Dizzy’s got a communal nest pinned down in that building over there.’ The ranger pointed to a brick structure at the edge of the meadow. ‘Before he plugs up the rat hole, he throws in a fumigation bomb. Works for roaches, right?’

Could this man be more sarcastic? Officer Maccaro thought not. ‘I’m guessing the rats had a back door?’

The ranger nodded. ‘They always do – and they swarmed.’ He turned back to the sight of rodents eating Mrs Lanyard. ‘Normally, you’d never see a thing like that. Rats usually scatter when they spot people. I think these critters are jazzed on Dizzy’s chemicals.’ He shrugged. ‘Sorry, guys. There won’t be much left of that corpse.’

‘That’s okay,’ said the younger policeman. ‘We got the victim’s name from some little kids.’

‘Yeah,’ said Officer Maccaro. ‘Only twenty more kids to round up.’ He turned to the far side of Sheep Meadow, where police officers and park workers formed a line to comb the outlying parkland for runaway day campers from the neighboring state of New Jersey.

The ranger pointed skyward. Overhead, a large bird of prey circled the meadow. ‘Keep your eyes on the hawk. That bird’s the reason why you *never* see rats on open ground like this.’

Wings spread, the hawk streaked toward the earth. Only inches from the ground, talons extended, it swooped over the feeding frenzy and carried off a wriggling rat that cried out in a human way. The rest of the vermin continued their meal, unperturbed.

The park ranger nodded sagely. ‘They’re definitely stoned.’ His head tilted back once more, and this time he was looking up into the thick leaves of the stately oak. ‘I hope none of the kids are hiding in the trees.’

Officer Maccaro looked up to see a rat running along the lowest bough. ‘Oh, Christ, when did they learn to do *that*?’

Mrs Ortega took some satisfaction in the sound of a bone breaking. The pervert sank to the ground and lay there screaming. She rested her baseball bat on one shoulder and looked around in all directions.

Where was that strange little girl?

There was no one to ask. The playground was empty now.

Two police officers were running toward her, and she waved to them with her free hand, yelling, 'You gotta find a little girl!'

The youngest cop was the first to enter by the iron gate. He looked down at the man on the ground, who was curled up in a fetal position, not screaming anymore but crying softly. The officer turned on the cleaning lady. 'You did this?'

Stupid question. Was she not holding a bloody baseball bat?

Mrs Ortega nudged the weeping pervert with her foot. 'Never mind this piece of garbage. He'll live. You gotta find the kid real fast. She's a magnet for creeps like him. You'll know her when you see her. She's got red hair, and she looks just like a little fairy.'

'Oh, yeah,' said an older policeman, smiling as he passed through the gate. 'I think I saw her flying over the park.'

'Don't humor me.'

'Okay.' The officer drew his gun and leveled it at her head. 'Lady, drop that bat! *Now!*'

'I'm serious,' said Mrs Ortega.

'Yeah, I can see that.' The man was staring at the bloody end of the bat.

Well, this was new.

The detective stood before a red prefabricated building, temporary housing for the Central Park Precinct. Next door, the older quarters, badly in need of renovation, were partially hidden by tarps, and the rooftops were crawling with workmen.

Damn town was always falling down.

He was far from his own station house down in SoHo, this man in a rumpled suit stained with week-old mustard, but Detective Sergeant Riker never had to show his badge. Uniformed cops stood in a cluster around the entrance, and then they parted in a wave, recognizing his rank by the air of entitlement that came with

carrying a gun and a gold shield. Civilians only saw him as a middle-aged man with bad posture, an amiable, laid-back smile and hooded eyes that said to everyone he met, *I know you're lying, but I just don't care.*

Mrs Ortega had used her telephone privilege to call in a favor. He anticipated spending his lunch hour to plead her case with the man in charge of this cop house, but after a few minutes' conversation, the commander handed him the key to the lockup, allowing Riker the honor of uncaging the Upper West Side's most dangerous cleaning lady.

Though the little woman scowled at him through the bars, the detective grinned as he worked the key in the lock. 'I'm impressed.' He opened the door and made a deep bow from the waist. 'They tell me you broke the guy's right arm and three ribs.'

Riker escorted her downstairs, where she was reunited with her wire cart. Mrs Ortega carefully inspected her property, maybe suspecting the police of stealing her cleaning rags or the stiff brushes she favored for bathroom grout. 'Where's my bat?'

'Don't push your luck,' said Riker. 'I'll get it back for you, okay? But not today.'

'Took you long enough to bail me out.'

'No bail,' he said. 'The charges were dropped. I'd like to take credit for that, but the call came from the mayor's office. He sent his limo to pick you up.'

'What about the little girl? She's still out there.'

'There's fifty cops in the park right now. They're hunting down kids from a New Jersey day camp. You told them the girl didn't belong in that playground, right? So she's probably one of the Jersey kids.'

'No, that girl hasn't had a bath in days. She's lost or homeless. And I told them that!'

'If the park cops don't find her, I will. Okay?'

And now that the

cleaning lady seemed somewhat mollified, he asked, 'Don't you wanna know *why* the mayor sent his limo?'

She waved one hand in a shoo-fly way to tell him that she did not care.

Playing the gentleman, he held the door open as she steered her cart outside and into the smell of dust and the sounds of jackhammers and traffic along the busy road bisecting the park. He guided her to a wide strip of pavement where VIPs illegally parked. Beside the waiting limousine stood the mayor's personal chauffeur, a man in a better suit than any cop could afford, and he was staring at his approaching passenger with disbelief. A nod from Riker confirmed that this little woman was indeed the mayor's new best buddy. 'Hey, pal, open the trunk. The cart goes where she goes.'

While the chauffeur loaded her cleaning supplies, Mrs Ortega settled into the backseat, taking everything in stride, as if this luxury ride might be routine in the average day of a cleaning lady. When the driver took his place behind the wheel and started the engine, she leaned forward and called out to him across the expanse of the stretch limousine. 'Drop me off in Brooklyn!'

'City Hall!' yelled Riker, countermanding her order. And now he spoke to the cleaning lady in his let's-make-a-deal tone. 'The mayor just wants to shake your hand. Maybe you pose for a few pictures, talk to some reporters.'

'Yeah, yeah.' She turned her face to the passenger window, clearly bored by this idea.

'Listen,' said Riker, 'this is *big*. That bastard you busted up? He's a bail jumper from Florida. While he's been on the loose, the Miami cops found bodies under the floorboards of his house.' And still the detective felt that he did not have her full attention. 'Hey, you bagged a kid-killer. Good job.'

'Riker, they gotta find that little girl. There's something wrong with her. Or maybe nobody raised her right. She just walks right up

to strangers. And you know that creep wasn't the only pervert in the park. Where's *Mallory*? Why didn't she come?'

'Lieutenant Coffey nailed her little hands to a desk.' For the duration of a probation period, his young partner was not allowed to leave the SoHo precinct during shift hours, not even to forage for food north of Houston, the demarcation line.

The tired child stood in a copse of sheltering trees and watched the frenzy in the meadow. A man in coveralls plugged one end of a thick hose into a hole in the ground and then entered the meadow, the heavy coil unrolling behind him. The nozzle end was pointed at the rats when he waved to another man. And now a strong blast of water from the hose scattered the vermin. Policemen in dark blue uniforms moved toward the bloody mess on the grass, and they knelt down beside it as more people ran toward them, bearing a stretcher.

Traveling in the wide circle of a lost child, Coco had come back to this place by an accident of wandering. She wandered on.

After minutes or hours – the concept of time eluded her – she came upon the lake again, though not by intention, for she had only the sketchiest idea of geography. She stood by a railing and peered through the thick foliage to see a familiar fat orange ribbon of fencing strung around the water's edge. Continuing on her aimless way, she kept close to a low stone wall that led her to another landmark. There were many drinking fountains in the park, and they all looked alike, but Coco recognized this one by the dead bird in the basin. The tiny brown carcass had attracted flies; their buzzing was loud and ugly. Hands pressed against her ears – *stop it stop it stop it* – she left the pavement and ran down a path into the woods, her thin arms spread wide, aeroplaning, feet flying. Farther down the path, another marker for the place of red rain was found by chance born of panic.

Carol O'Connell

Don't cry don't cry don't cry.

Coco slowed her steps to catch her breath. She walked over a trampled section of wire fence and into thick brush. Low branches reached out to make scratchy noises on her blue-jeaned legs. She stood on the thick root of a tree and hugged the rough bark of the trunk. Looking for love and comfort, she stared up into the dense leaves and called the tree by name.

The tree was silent. The child melted down to the ground and curled up in a ball.