



THE SPACE YOU LEFT BEHIND

Ona Gritz



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Find us on  

*For Hope, my first and best friend
with a body like mine.*

*And for everyone living with a disability.
May you find your people too.*

Meet C.C.

Paige says to the guys
who've joined us
on our beach blanket.

*Mike and Josh
are on my team,
she tells me.*

The cute one
grins at me.
He's Josh.

Paige and Mike
start talking
volleyball.

Josh asks what
C.C. stands for.

Cara Carrot, I admit.
My cheeks red.
Even more than my hair.

Josh and I chat about
favorite bands.
Boardwalk movie night.

And—*Oh my God,
you love it, too?*—
the *Everyday
Mysteries* podcast.

Scoops?

Mike cuts in to ask.
That's the best
ice cream stand
on the Jersey Shore.

Josh grins.
Paige gets up
and brushes
sand from her legs.

I gaze at
the ocean waves.
Want to say
I'm feeling too lazy.

Though really,
I'm just not ready
to let Josh see

that when I walk,
I limp.

That always
breaks the spell.

The Friend Zone

That's where guys
move me
once they know
I have
cerebral palsy.

Mom says
that's a good thing.
Then I won't
wind up

with someone
too shallow
to like me
for the right reasons.

Whatever that means.

There's Another Zone

An empty one.
It lives inside me.

It's like hunger
only more
lonely.

A space maybe
only
a boyfriend
could fill.

Step on a Shell?

Josh asks
as we head
to the boardwalk.

If I thought
I'd never
see him again,

I might just
say yes.
Instead my face
heats up.

Paige
jumps in with,
*She just walks
that way.*

Which is fine,
I guess.

No matter
how often

I get questions
like that,

I never know
what to say.

While We Eat

our cones
on a bench
facing the ocean,

Josh only
talks to Mike.

Of course.
The secret is out.

C.C. could
just as easily

stand for
Cara the Grip.

That Your Dad?

Mike asks.

Thinking
I'll see Paige's father,
I look
to where he's pointing.

At the shoreline,
a black lab
catches a stick.

And the man
he brings it back to
has curls
the color of carrots.

C.C. Never Met Her Dad

Paige says.

At the same time,
I answer,
*I don't have
a father.*

*My mom
used a donor, I say.*
Then I look away.

These guys
I only just met
must get
that I'm talking
about sperm.

So it could be him,
Josh says.

I shrug.
It could be
anyone.

The Posse

That's what Mom calls
our little family of three.

Grandma with
thin, white hair
died purple, blue,
or cotton candy pink.

Mom with cropped
brown hair
now salted with gray.

And me, the only one
with wild red curls.
A red that's really
very orange.

That's why
Paige named me
Cara Carrot.
Back in
kindergarten.

Why the name
became mine
for good.

Anything New, Cookie?

Grandma asks
like she always does.

She, Mom, and I
wander the boardwalk.
Like we always do

after dinner
in summer.

I want to say,
I met a guy I like.

Only what's the point?

He stopped
liking me back
after seeing me walk.

And that's not
new at all.

Mom Leads Us

into the shop
with the blue leather,
cross-body bag
she's in love with.

It has a leafy pattern
and 200-dollar tag.

You should get it, I say.

I just like to visit it,
she answers, as always.
Which is perfect.

She's turning 50.
And she gets cranky
whenever we bring up
her birthday.

So, I'm saving my money.
Plan to buy her a bag
that makes her glad
to turn 50.

At Home

Mom reads a novel
for her Books and Beer
Book Group.

Grandma moves plants
to new pots she made
in pottery class.

I listen with
earbuds to
Everyday Mysteries.

Mysteries are everywhere,
it begins, as always.

Today's guest
got a letter
in the mail,
written years before
she was even born.

*Did you do your
stretches, C.C.?*
Grandma asks.

My answer,
of course, is *Shhhh*.

My Work Day

at the library is easy.

Tape stickers on books.

Put them away.

Then DVDs

and magazines.

The best part?

First dibs on

the mystery novels

that have just come in.

Also, I like

having somewhere

I need to be

while Paige

plays volleyball.

A sport that,

like all sports,

I'm way too clumsy

to play.

At First I Liked

when Alice would
come into the library.

This pretty woman
in flowing skirts.

She seems confident.
And easy in her body.

Even though she
uses a wheelchair.
And, under those skirts,
she has no legs.

But that was before
I saw how Alice
climbs off her chair.
Then scoots
on her stumps
to reach books
on the lowest shelves.

Whenever I've offered
to help, she's snapped:
*If I need anything,
I'll let you know.*

I Know

Alice is not me.
And I'm not Alice.

But then I see people
see Alice
legless
on the floor.

And I feel like
they're seeing
a secret,
icky,
naked

part of *me*.

So I'm Glad

when Adela,
the librarian, says
I can leave early.

You got everything done. Go!

I choose a new mystery.
Then I head to
the boardwalk to read.

Above me, gulls screech.
Below, on the beach,
the volleyball team practices.

I watch Josh,
and will him to want me
as a girlfriend.

That way I'll know
I'm more normal
than not.

Finally, I Lose Myself

in a world where a girl
is missing.

She's 16 like me.

No one knows
where she's gone.
Or how, or why.

Maybe her creepy
stepdad has something
to do with it.

Or her boyfriend
who seems a little
too perfect.

Unless it's that
popular girl
on her block.

I turn the page,
looking for clues.

But then the book
gets snatched
from my hand.

Would You Rather

*read a mystery
or solve one
in real life?*
Josh (yes, Josh!) asks.

He sits next to me
and my heart revs.
He smells like
oranges and sweat.

What mystery? I ask.

He nods
toward the shoreline.
Toward the red-haired man
playing tug-of-war
with his dog.

*The mystery, C.C.,
of your bio-dad.
And if that guy is him.*

Sure

I want to say
because it's Josh who asked.
Josh with the golden tan.
And the messy hair
that falls in his eyes.

Josh who
leans toward me
to say, *Mysteries*
are everywhere.
Just like on the podcast.

Instead

I say,
I'll think about it.

Because finding
my donor
is not something

I've ever
thought about

before.

I've Blown It with Josh

I'm sure of it
as soon as the words
leave my mouth.

Except
he doesn't leave
our bench.
And he doesn't
seem mad.

You do that,
C.C., he says.
Then he touches
my carrot-colored hair.