

Mr. Carson

Mr. Carson lives with his father in the house across the alley from our house. They keep a garden we can see through the cracks in a tall wooden fence around their property. During the summers, one of the Carsons' trees always hangs a few big plums over their fence, and my brothers and I watch them ripen day by day, and think of ways we might get them down.

Mr. Carson is an old man, and his father is older still. We call the father Old Mr. Carson. Mr. Carson's mother died, but we don't know why she died. Now it's just Mr. Carson and Old Mr. Carson living across the alley. Old Mr. Carson wears a felt hat and walks with a cane. I see him sometimes, through the cracks in the fence, kneeling in his garden next to the okra or the squash. When we play football in our backyard, Mr. Carson peers through the fence cracks and watches us for a while. If he sees that we notice him, he will at first pull back from the fence, but soon he will be watching again.

One day, Mr. Carson walks outside the fence and across the alley to watch us play our game. He stands in the weeds just outside our backyard, near where my parents have tried a time or two to make a garden of their own. He stands with his arms folded across his chest and watches. We wave to him and he gives us a shy little wave in return. On the days that follow, when he sees us playing, Mr. Carson peeks through his fence, then crosses the alley, and then comes into our yard. He comes farther and farther into the yard as the summer drags on. Finally, he comes closer to us than ever before, and one of my brothers tosses him the football. The ball hits his hands, but his hands are stiff and the ball bounces away. He stoops and hops after it, grunting excitedly, then throws the ball back to my brother. He doesn't catch or throw very well.

We know that Mr. Carson is much older than we – he is even older than our parents – but we soon find that he is different in other ways. When he speaks, it takes a little time for his words to come together and come out. He moves his mouth, trying hard to get the words going. And when the words finally come out, they come out pressurized, in a stuttering, stammering flow that is impossible to understand. His hands move about in stiff, jerky movements when he speaks. The top plate of his dentures is always loose, clattering behind his lips with a mind of its own. He wears slacks, dress shoes, and a short-sleeved plaid shirt. This becomes his football uniform. He comes into our yard almost every day for a while, joining my brothers and some neighborhood kids and me in our games of tackle football. We don't say much to him. You can't say, "Mr. Carson, you go long and cut right at that old tire." He wouldn't know what to do. He doesn't understand much of what is going on.

Mr. Carson blends seamlessly into our group – as seamlessly as any 50-year-old man can blend into a group of elementary school children. He drinks from the water hose during breaks in our games, like the rest of us. Like the rest of us, he climbs over Mrs. Keen's fence to retrieve our football when it flies into her yard. He sits in the shade with us, sweating and sipping Kool-Aid our mother has brought outside. She hands him an icy glass and says, "Here, Mr. Carson."

Our mother is worried that one of us will get hurt, playing tackle football with a grown man. One night at supper she tells our father, "I'm worried someone will get hurt."

My brothers and I have fallen from trees and off the backs of horses; we have crashed our bicycles at top speed on the brick street in front of our house; we have been run over by cattle and hogs; we

have pummeled one another with hard little fists and bony knees at every opportunity; and we have hit one another in the head with rocks and clods of dirt.

“I guess you’re right,” our father says to our mother. And then to us, “You boys take it easy on Mr. Carson.”

My brothers and I do not take it easy on Mr. Carson, nor do we take it easy on one another. Many times during the summer a brother will suffer a scraped elbow or a skinned knee, and he might lie on the ground whimpering for a while. But soon he will have had enough of being called a “momma’s baby” and a “little sissy boy” and he will get up, pick the grass out of the shiny patch of blood on his arm, wipe his nose, and rejoin the game. Mr. Carson will have a shirt pocket ripped off on some afternoons, and will go home with grass stains and holes at the knees of his slacks, and with some minor scrapes of his own. No one is ever seriously hurt.

One afternoon in the course of our game, I make a long throw toward Mr. Carson, who has wandered unnoticed to a corner of the yard next to the house. Brothers and neighborhood friends lift their faces to watch as the ball arcs above them toward Mr. Carson. He extends his arms, and the ball falls neatly into them and rests there. There is a moment of collective astonishment. Mr. Carson has caught a pass. He stands there, bewildered and blinking his eyes behind thick glasses. Then, his face a mask of wonder and disbelief, he looks down at the ball in his hands. All of us cheer and whoop. We run over to him and jump up to clap him on the back and shoulders. He stutters and stammers excitedly, dentures clattering, trying to express something. He clutches the ball tightly to his chest for a while.

At dusk, Old Mr. Carson opens the gate in the tall fence and yells for Mr. Carson to come home for supper. Mr. Carson gives us a little wave and runs toward the gate, elbows pumping, head tilted up, glasses bouncing on his nose. He runs flat-footed, leaning forward, like he is falling down. He doesn’t run very well.