



**Before
OnStar**



**Sarah
Carson**

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The Building

Where we live nothing is connected. The brick on one side of the building turns a corner to rows of vinyl siding, and then drops to halved oval thatches like the roofs of cottages by the sea.

Like when the girl who lives beneath me left a note on the gate for the mailman, which I read every word of only to watch him later toting his letters back to his truck without having seen it, and it didn't occur to me to stop him.

The same way that, when I saw her later eating lunch alone in the garden, it didn't occur to me to sit in the empty chair beside her, to ask about the tomatoes she grows in the pots by her door.

Granny Says He'll be Back

CG's not afraid of anybody. Not you, not the lunch lady, not the patrol car that stopped him late last night on the sidewalk, not the bailiff who choked him asleep on the courtroom floor when he tried to throw his folding chair at the judge.

Granny won't pick up the phone when he calls. She says he'll be home in a few weeks just like last time, just like the time before. Six messages today and all I know is, "You have a collect call from the Genesee County Jail."

I think I'm gonna love him forever. I write his name all over my hands inside the blue ink outline of dozens of empty hearts. When the sheriff's suburban turns around in the neighbor's circle drive, I chuck a rock at its big, black rim. I run into the tree-house crying and stay there until long after the sun goes down behind the high school, and when no one comes to find me, I slam the kitchen door so hard the spring flies off into the hall.

Story about a Gang Banger

Katrina says she saw a gangbanger fall off a mini-bike outside the job she quit last week. She's been saying that a lot these days. Everyone's a gangbanger if they've got a bald head or a tattoo of the Virgin Mary. If they wear flannel, smoke menthols, ride the bus to work.

She thinks it started when she got held up at gunpoint in her doorway last winter, but it was before that. She's been looking for gangbangers to fall off mini-bikes all her life.

At one-thirty in the morning we're driving up to Skokie to get her car from the twenty-four hour mechanic when she wants to talk about it again: "I could have been shot, you know, or stabbed." When we arrive, the mechanic is closed, of course, because who's ever heard of a twenty-four hour mechanic?

Us at Fifty

I see two people who look a lot like us crossing the parking lot of the Fairplay. Older versions of us, forty-five, maybe fifty, walking hand-in-hand between parked cars, spooning handfuls of salted peanuts into their mouths from a plastic shopping bag.

When they reach the street they stop for a moment to wait for a passing car, and he bends slightly at the hip— the way you sometimes do— to whisper something in her ear.

She looks up at him and smiles, pulling him closer to her with her forearm, and when they see me watching they are friendly, suggesting something must happen in the future that changes everything.

You have read an excerpt from *Before OnStar* a chapbook by Sarah Carson. *Before OnStar* presents daily life in the de-industrialized Midwest and creates a powerful sense of place and character. The poems in this collection are filled with humanity, humor, honesty, and grace.

Sarah Carson was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, but currently lives in Chicago. She is an editor at the award-winning journal RHINO and is a Communications Specialist at Switchback Books. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from National University, and she is also the author of several books on screenwriting for children.

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