

Carrie Host

*Between Me and
the River*

Living Beyond Cancer: A Memoir

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BETWEEN ME AND THE RIVER

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To Amory
Chanel, Marco & William—
for loving me back to life

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

“All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.”

—W. B. Yeats, Easter, 1916

Contents



Prologue	11
Part I: The River	19
Part II: The Current	127
Part III: Floating	231
Resources	294
Acknowledgments	296



Prologue



April 13, 2004

I hate having to stand by like a stranger in my own life.

I have to watch as the babysitter does what I want to be doing. I'm jealous of her physical strength and of her health. I can't believe I'm actually feeling this as I lie on the couch in my room. My emotions swing wildly from extreme gratitude, to resentment, to complete apathy. Sinking deeper into these dense thoughts, I tell myself that I'm just not interested anymore in taking care of my family.

My two older children, Marco and Chanel, are at school and my fifteen-month-old baby, William, is napping, but when he wakes up I won't be the one to lift him from his crib. I can't. It would take the house being on fire to get me off this couch.

I'm angry but too weak to show it, so I decide not to care anymore. I try to find things that are safe to think about. For a long time, nothing comes to mind. Then, two distinct moments emerge from my memory. The first is from my childhood.

One frozen February evening in 1972, my family of eight is eating dinner. We're all sitting around the long dining room table. We never eat in the kitchen because we don't fit. My parents are involved in a stiff conversation with my two older brothers, Jack and Steve, at their end of the table. They're on a subject called "war." War is really hard for me to picture.

"What's a war, Dad?" I interrupt them.

“Honey, it’s something I’d rather not tell you about.”

“Were *you* in a war?”

“Yes, in Korea.”

“But where’s *this* war?”

“Vietnam,” he says. I don’t like the sound the word makes coming from my father’s mouth.

“Now don’t worry about that. Just eat your dinner,” my mother directs, her beautiful brown eyes softening her words.

“If they draft me, I’m not going,” my brother Jack says, looking straight at my dad through his John Lennon spectacles.

“Me, either, man,” Steve sides in, tipping his chair back.

“Those turkeys can’t take you. You’re sixteen. You won’t be drafted yet,” Jack consoles him.

“Far out,” he replies, tossing his shoulder-length hair back with a flick of his neck.

“Take him where?” *I’m only eight.* “When can the turkeys take me?” I ask, convinced that each of us six kids will be taken away by turkeys to a drafty place called Vietnam.

“They don’t take girls, Carrie, just boys,” Jack answers while Steve starts to snicker.

“But I don’t want them to take you.” I start to cry, picturing my big brother being taken away.

“Me, either,” Marisa chimes in, not looking up from the Hot Wheels car that she’s pushing in circles around her dinner plate, the racetrack.

My two older sisters, Wendy and June, are quiet in the middle of the table and in the middle of the family. Quiet is not for me.

“Now I told you boys not to talk about this in front of the girls,” my mother admonishes them, too late.

“But *how* do they take you?” I press on for an answer.

“*They* don’t take you, Uncle Spam takes you...*Lu-Lu Bell,*” my

brother Steve chides, using the name he made up for me that he knows will make me mad. Then, using his pointer and middle fingers to pull his lower eyelids down as far as possible while using his thumb to push his nose up, he makes himself look like a red-eyed pig.

“Who’s that?” I wonder, innocently afraid of some uncle I’ve never heard of.

“Uncle *Sam*,” my sister June says to correct him more than to inform me, jumping at any chance to have a fight involving intelligence. This is where she shines.

“The president of the United States,” my father says with finality, trying to end the discussion and appease my mother before her dinner is ruined.

“President Nixon?” I ask.

“That’s right, yes.”

“Well, *I’m* writing him a letter! I’m telling him that he can’t come here and take my brother away.”

“You can’t write to the president, *Lu-Lu Bell*,” Steve taunts.

“Duuuh—George!” June agrees with him, only as an opportunity to use the refrain that she knows will infuriate him. And that’s it; they’re in a fight.

“Yes she can! She’s smarter than *you two!*” Wendy shouts over them, always coming to my defense.

“Yeah!” Marisa snarls with a six-year-old-face, not knowing anything more than that Wendy and I are forever loyal to her, our baby sister. Therefore, she should take *our side* in all family arguments.

I cry. Storming from the table to my room, I rifle through my little desk drawer for paper. Big Chief is too babyish. I want something more grown-up, so I take a circus-animal valentine from the box of twenty-four that I’ll be filling out for my friends next week. I write on the back of it politely, and neatly, so that it all fits into the tight space of the heart shape.

Between Me and the River

Dear President Nixon,

Would you please stop the war in Vietnam.

My brother doesn't want to go there.

I won't let you take him even if you
come to our house to get him.

Happy Valentine's Day
anyway.

Love,

Carrie Farland

I put it in the envelope along with a stick of Juicy Fruit, in case he likes gum, and properly address it, just like the nuns taught me to do in school. I first lightly draw three lines across the center of the envelope with a ruler, in pencil. Then I carefully write the address with my fountain pen, and erase the pencil lines once the ink is dry. Nuns don't like anything crooked.

I find my dad in the den, in the shifting blue light of *Gunsmoke*, the only television program I can ever remember him watching besides golf. I crawl up next to him on the couch.

"Dad, can you mail this to the White House for me?" I ask timidly in a whisper, hoping that my brothers won't hear and start making fun of me again.

"Why, sure, honey."

"Really?" I check, looking up at him.

"Of course. My friend Mr. Allen works in Washington. I'll see that he gets it to the president," he says.

"Thanks, Dad!" I say, thrilled that someone in my family takes me seriously.

Several weeks later, when I come in the door after school, my

mother hands me an envelope. It says, THE WHITE HOUSE in the upper left-hand corner and is addressed to me, Miss Carrie Farland, 735 Williams Street, Denver, Colorado 80218, complete with an eleven-cent stamp on it. I am instantly satisfied. My eight-year-old brain gives no credit to the detail that my father's friend, having hand-delivered my card to President Nixon, had anything to do with the fact that I am now holding the president's reply, a typed letter. His signature is not typed, but signed in thick black ink, which impresses me.

February 16, 1972

Dear Carrie:

During a busy day it is especially delightful to hear from my young friends, and I particularly appreciate your kind greeting on Valentine's Day.

I am grateful for your thoughtfulness in thinking of me, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to return your best wishes,

Sincerely,

Richard Nixon

Now an adult, I have a slightly different take on this response from the president. He's nicely managed to completely avoid addressing any of my concerns. His letter is a politically perfect masterpiece. That fact aside, I recall the way that holding that letter in my hands made me feel. I got a response from the most important person in the world. If writing could do that, then I wanted to be a writer.

Aside from writing letters, essays, short stories and poetry, all of which were promptly deposited into an antique suitcase and snapped shut inside that compartment of my life, there were only a