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## Little Sinners, and Other Stories

Karen Brown

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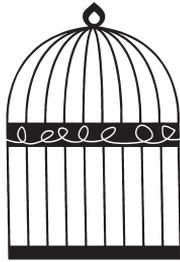
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# Little Sinners

*and other stories*

Karen Brown



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# Little Sinners

*and other stories*

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## Little Sinners

We weren't bad girls. When we were little we played church, flattening soft bread into disks, singing the hymns from stolen paper missals: *Our Fathers chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free; how sweet would be their children's fate, if they like them, could die for Thee.* We set up carnivals and lemonade stands, and collected pennies for UNICEF on Halloween. We bought trees to be planted in our names in forests purged by fire. We drew elaborate peace signs on our notebooks, and watched the Vietnam War on television every night, scanning the faces of the soldiers for our babysitters' boyfriends. We included everyone in our neighborhood games, even our irritating younger siblings, even the girl, Sally Moore, who was clearly a boy, and the boy, Simon Schuster, who was clearly schizophrenic. They were cast as the frog in our production of *The Frog Prince*, or played the dead boy in our Haunted Woods. We would grow up to understand, perfectly, what was expected of us—and still, when it came to you, none of this applied. We were feral, unequivocally vicious, like girls raised by the mountain lions that occasionally slunk out of the wilderness of Massacoe State Forest, between the swing sets and the lawn furniture, into our tended backyards.

It was May when it all started, and the air was still sharp and the forsythia waved its long arms of bright flowers. My friend Valerie Empson and I had been stealing our parents' Pall Malls

and Vantages, hiding them in clever places in our bedrooms. I'd taken off one brass finial and slipped the cigarettes into my curtain rod. At prearranged times we'd retrieve them to smoke in the woods, and one day we put on clothes we found in my basement first: my mother's pleated plaid high school skirt (Drama Club, *The Tattler*, 1958), a cocktail dress (Wampanoag Country Club, 1971). We put on her old winter coats, camel hair and cashmere smelling of mothballs, her satin pumps, and black patent-leather slingbacks. We went out walking about in the woods behind my house, pretending we were someone else. We were too old for dress-up—this was our last fling. We put on the clothes and assumed other personalities with accents.

“Blimey, this is a steep path, I say.”

“Where are we headed? Isn't that the clearing, darling?”

The woods were composed of young growth—birch, maple, and pine saplings, a thicket suitable for cottontails. A brook ran through it parallel to the houses, filled with brownish-looking foam that may have been the result of the DDT misted over us each summer. The planes would drone overhead while our parents sipped whiskey sours, and we lay on our backs in the front-yard grass like unsuspecting sacrifices.

“Oh lovely, I've gotten my shoe wet.”

“Look at that, the hem of your skirt is muddy.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

We walked along the brook's bank, and I slid down the side in the high-heeled shoes and toppled into the water. The brook wasn't very deep, but it was fast-moving, its bottom a variety of stones, and I struggled to stand. Valerie watched from the bank, doubled over laughing with her hand between her legs. Pee streamed down onto the trampled Jack-in-the-pulpit, wetting her chiffon skirt, probably dribbling into her pumps. I felt the icy water soak into my coat. We were too busy laughing and peeing to notice anyone nearby. If it had been a boy we'd have been embarrassed. But it was only you, the weird neighbor girl,

with your doughy cheeks, and your intelligent eyes. You looked at us laughing, and I sensed a sort of yearning in your face. That you were watching only made us laugh harder.

“You’re going to catch something from that water,” you said, matter-of-factly.

We’d met you years ago in elementary school. You were younger, consigned to the kindergarten playground. You carried a blue leather purse and were always alone. Drawn to your oddness, we broke the rules to sneak over to talk to you.

“What’s in your purse?” Valerie said.

Your lips tightened with wariness. “None of your business.” Your hair was cut short, in the pixie style my mother once foisted on my younger sister. You were thinner then, almost tiny, a dollish-looking girl. We laughed at nearly everything you said, most of it mimicked from a grown-up and strange coming from your mouth.

“Why can’t you just be nice and show us?” I said.

You knew that you should be nice, and you did like the attention from us. Finally, one day you undid the snap of the purse and opened it up. We looked into its depths. There was a small change purse, the kind we made summers in craft class at Recreation when we were little—imitation leather, stitched together with plastic. Yours was blue to match your purse. You also had a handkerchief, a tiny pink one, and a bottle of Tinkerbell perfume. Valerie reached her hand in quickly and grabbed the change purse before you could snap the purse shut. Your face hardened like your mother’s probably would when someone did something wrong at your house.

“Give it back,” you said.

“I’m not taking it,” Valerie said, dancing off a ways. “I’m just looking. I’ll give it back in a minute.” She opened it up and looked inside. You had quite a bit of change in the purse—silver, not all pennies. We glanced at each other. This would buy a few packs of gum, or the little round tin of candies we loved, *La Vie Pastillines*, in raspberry or lemon.

*Little Sinners*

If you hadn't seen me fall into the brook, spring would have progressed into summer, and nothing of the business would have transpired. Maybe I'd have seen you riding your purple bike in lazy circles at the end of the street, but that shapeless figure of you wobbling on your Schwinn, those annoying plastic streamers spraying from each handlebar grip, wouldn't have prompted it. That you occasioned to show yourself, that this triggered my thinking of a way to involve you in some deviousness, was purely accidental. I'd climbed out of the brook and stood dripping on the bank.

"Go away," I said. "We're meeting someone and we don't want you around."

I took out the cigarette I'd hidden in my coat pocket and lit it up. Valerie did the same.

Your eyes widened. "Who are you meeting?" You took a careful step closer, pretending our smoking wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

Valerie put her hands on her hips. Her coat opened, revealing the shape of her new breasts beneath the dress's bodice. "A boy," she said. "Charlie."

We held the cigarettes out in the Vs of our fingers.

"Charlie who?" you asked me, suddenly wary. There wasn't a neighborhood boy named Charlie, and this meant that he must be a stranger, someone from beyond our subdivision.

"He lives on the farm there, over the hill."

Your eyes narrowed to where I pointed beyond Foot Hills Road, to the rise of a local dairy farmer's pasture. "How did he tell you to meet him?"

"In his letter," I said.

"What letter?"

"The one he left for us."

"Where did he leave a *letter*?" you asked, well aware that a letter was something mailed from one house to another with the proper postage. It could even be placed secretly in someone's mailbox. A note was passed between popular girls in the dull

hour of American History. And then I told you it was none of your business, that I'd heard your mother calling. You didn't give up, or suspect that we were lying. You wanted to believe what we told you was true.

I don't have to emphasize how often this happens, how typical of human behavior. The UFOs that circled our neighborhood one summer evening, flashes of silver and iridescent violet panning across the night sky, bringing us out of our houses to marvel—parents with drinks and cigarettes, children in cotton pajamas, all of us poised on our own wide sweep of perfect grass. The ghosts we've claimed to have seen in our lifetimes—nuns in barns, men with handlebar mustaches appearing in old medicine chest mirrors, the footsteps on the stairs, the "Light as a Feather" game, where girls levitate each other with only their pinky fingers, the mystery of blood and wine, the Holy Ghost we'd speak of when we crossed ourselves. You bought it all. You crept behind us and we pretended we didn't know. We put out our cigarettes on a rock, and we saw you bend down and retrieve the butts, like evidence, or talismans. You followed us up to the next road, and then to the dead end where a strip of old barbed wire separated our neighborhood from the farmer's field, where beyond the asphalt curb Queen Anne's lace bloomed and twirled its white head, and cows lowed and hoofed through muddy grass, around stones covered with lichen. There at the foot of the cedar post was one of these stones, and I pretended to lift it, to pocket something in my mother's heavy coat that I carried slung over my arm. You took it all in at a distance, your white face round with pleasure, while we pretended we didn't see you.

That night Valerie and I wrote the first letter. *Dear Francine*, I wrote. *Can I call you "Francie"? I heard your mother calling you in for supper. I saw you on your bike stop and turn to answer her.* Who can say what it is that makes us revel in deceit? I liken it to something pagan and impish. Weren't the fields and woods surrounding us a sort of pastoral landscape? There was the farmer

riding his tractor, the newly planted corn emerging to shake its tassels, all pleasant and bountiful, the smell of manure seeping through window screens into kitchens and bedrooms, awakening in us a sort of misplaced disgust.

And it was easy because I wanted it myself. I wanted there to be some mysterious boy who had been watching me, in love with me from a distance. I'd imagine that out beyond the bay window, on the street that winds higher up the hill than mine, a boy with sweet wispy hair and lips that are always half-smiling was watching. He saw me walk up the driveway to catch the school bus. He saw through the new spring growth of fox glove and pokeweed and fern, through those bright little shoots on the elms. From the Talcott View dairy's fallow fields, white-sprayed with bluets, I could almost hear his sigh and his gentle breathing. I could smell his sweat—coppery, the mineral smell of turned earth.

We left the note under the stone. We didn't actually see it happen, but two days later, after school, a hazy day warming up to be summer, we slipped back and there was a note to the boy from you. *Dear Charles*, it said. *You seem very nice*. It revealed aspects of your family life—your mother sleeping all afternoon on the couch, your father and his woodworking hobby. *He carves puns out of wood*, you wrote. *Shoe tree, water gun, bookworm. He is now making a train track that one day will run through the entire house, upstairs and down*. Valerie and I read the note in the upstairs bathroom at my house. This was the only room with a lock. We both sat on the closed toilet lid. The bathroom smelled of my father's Old Spice. This is where we sat together to read the *Playboys* and *Penthouses* he had hidden in the vanity drawer. Once, as little girls, we mixed up potions in paper Dixie cups on the counter—toothpaste, shaving cream, Bay Rum.

"They're all crazy," Valerie said. Her eyes feigned shock beneath her bangs.

"Tell her he loves her anyway," I said. "He doesn't care about her family. She's different. She's the one his heart is aching for."

*Little Sinners*

My mother was downstairs on the phone, her voice lulling. It was a weekday, and my father was at the office. My sister was outside with her friends, watching the boys construct a go-cart out of a large sheet of plywood they'd stolen from the new subdivision. They were hammering on two sets of old training wheels. They would ride the thing down the hill, the girls watching, envious, waiting for a turn, and up-end it on the curb. This would result in Valerie's brother's broken arm, and a rush to the hospital in her father's Bonneville, her brother shrieking, his face white behind the passenger window. Her mother drove because her father had already started the cocktail hour. She had her lit cigarette, and she backed out of the driveway with a chirp, and took off with a squeal of tires. I remember watching them drive off, and then Valerie came home with me for supper, and she got to spend the night since it was a Friday, and her parents didn't return until long after bedtime.

We wrote the second note and said, *I think I love you*. We laughed until we cried at this, a Partridge Family lyric. Valerie said to write, *But what am I so afraid of?* But I wouldn't. Too much, I told her. We sprinkled my father's Bay Rum on the envelope. We'd used one of his old *Playboys* to write on, July 1969, Nancy McNeil topless on a blanket in the sand. And then we slipped out to the dead end. No one knew where we were headed. No one followed us. We had our cigarettes, and after we left the note we lifted the barbed wire and kept walking through the field's tall grass, its black-eyed Susans, dame's rocket, and chicory, the kinds of flowers we used to bring back in damp fists to our mothers on their birthdays. We sat down in the middle of the field, and no one could see us smoking.

"She'll look today," I said, predicting what would happen next.

Val practiced smoke rings. In a year she would be caught making out with Ritchie Merrill on the Schusters' bed while babysitting. The news would spread, and she would suddenly become popular in school, and we would no longer be friends. Neither

of us could have known that this would happen. In our bliss we believed we were forever bound in our conspiracy against you. We would always press our foreheads together, and stare into each other's eyes, and know exactly what the other was thinking. It was the beginning of summer, and the possibility of days of endless letter writing, and grape-flavored ice cubes, and gum-wrapper chains, and a new attraction to plan—a circus in the backyard, where I would construct a trapeze and practice on it, flipping upside down, dreaming about being watched and applauded. We would have our stack of books from the library to read—*Flambards*, and *Flambards in Summer*. Boys our age would continue to keep clear of us. We would find evidence of them—murdered robins riddled with silver BBs, muddy trails in the woods littered with potato chip bags, and soft drink cans, and trampled violets—but they remained elusive that summer, and we were perfectly happy to invent a boy all our own.

We'd orchestrate moments to slip away to the dead end. Old Mrs. Waddams lived in the house at the end of the street, and once she came out and stood at the foot of her driveway with her hands on her hips. "What are you doing over there?" she called.

Val explained that we were working on a science project for school. "We're testing the rate of decay on varying thicknesses of paper," she said.

Mrs. Waddams pulled her cotton cardigan around her shoulders. You could almost smell the mothballs, the lilac powder she fluffed between her breasts. Her hands were gnarled like the branches of her crabapple. She made a noise as if she didn't believe us, and turned away and shuffled into her house. As a teenager, after we'd moved away from the neighborhood, I would bring boys to the dead end to have sex, and sometimes we'd fall asleep in the car. The next morning old Mrs. Waddams, still vigilant, would come to the fogged-over car window and rap her bony fist. "You in there," she'd say. "Are you alive? Wake up!" She would see us scramble to rearrange our clothes, embarrassed by

our bodies, as if what we had done with them had nothing to do with the pale skin showing in the morning light, the sex a ritual, and empty after, like the one thing we had hoped for had died, and we were dead along with it.

The farmer boy didn't need to write much in his letters to convince you. We created his messy cursive. He said he had chores on the farm, and he hunted and fished in the little pond we'd seen when we went on our explorations as children, choosing a swath of a green hillside showing over the trees in the distance, and heading out with Scout canteens and peanut butter crackers. You had plenty to write about, your letters growing longer, written in colored ink on lined notebook paper. You drew designs along the borders—swirling paisley, hearts and moons and stars and clusters of grapes. You filled the pages with clever stories about your family and your pet gerbils, Hansel and Gretel. *Today we had an adventure!* you'd written. *Gretel escaped and is currently unaccounted for. The King and Queen are beside themselves thinking they will put a foot into a shoe where she is hiding and crush her. And Oh, the plight of a lost gerbil is one we will never have to endure. So small! And the world so large!*

It didn't matter what we wrote back. Any sort of acknowledgment seemed enough to keep you writing. When you were punished for some small household infraction: *My bedroom is a tower, and I will forever watch the world from it. And I am thrown into the dungeon and the blackness is deep and desolate. Then I remember you, writing from your sunny field, waiting in the woods to retrieve my letter. You are Lancelot, Tirra lira.* Your letters cast a pall over that summer. We came to know all of your flourishes and games, your mundane details: what color you painted your nails (*skinny dip*), how much money you'd saved watering the vacationing neighbor's philodendron, and what you intended to do with it (*buy a ticket to France to meet my pen pal Chantal*). We learned of your disappointment in never knowing where the balloon you released in science class ended up (*Oh, where oh*

where? Zimbabwe? Tahiti? Scranton?). You described your week-long beach vacation (*seaside manse*), your father in his swimsuit (*hairy thighs, and the conspicuous lump, like something alive stuffed in his skimpy trunks*).

We never knew exactly what to make of your revelations. They became things Val and I thought we should not know, like the questions and answers in the *Penthouse* forum. *The King is on a rampage this morning. The Queen has spent too much money on summer clothes and groceries and other means of existence. Meanwhile the King is busy with his hobbies, and refuses to seek another position in the kingdom. Tonight we dine on canned Beeferoni. The Queen puts it on the Royal Doulton. "Don't be a cunt," the King says, in the foulest of humors.* Charlie, the farmer boy, was boring, his domain limited. We couldn't imagine anything else to fill his life. Faced with your letters, growing longer and more intimate, his became brief, like jotted-down lists. *Work to do today, he'd write. Build the fence down by the road. Caught some nice perch this morning.* His only allure was his mysteriousness.

Finally, it seemed you were tapped. It was late July, a heat wave. We hunkered down in my basement and played naked Barbies. *Show yourself to me*, you wrote. Years later I would have a letter-writing affair with a man. It was thrilling at first, to see his slanted script, to learn who he was, or who he wanted me to believe he was. I imagine, with writing, the words on the page unfurling like little banners, their meanings cryptic, that we can never know what anyone intended. I put off meeting him, despite his numerous attempts and arrangements. I could never be sure, in the end, if the feelings he revealed were authentic, or just a guise to lure me into having sex. He tired of just the writing, and getting nothing, and that summer we grew tired of it as well.

We became careless and silly. We asked you to leave a pair of your underwear under the stone. *If you do*, Charlie wrote, *I'll meet you*. It was so ridiculous we didn't believe you would do it.

*Little Sinners*

We thought that would be the end of it, that you would know the truth. I remember the day Val went up to the dead end to check. We'd begun doing it separately, to avoid detection. She'd come to my door and my mother let her in.

"*Vite! Vite!*" she cried, tugging on my arm. Her breath smelled of cigarettes.

My mother was in the middle of something—folding laundry, or making lunch, or swiping the tables with Pledge. She never knew. Parents don't, even when they think they do. I expected Val to pull the underwear out of her pocket, but she said, no, she wouldn't touch it. So the two of us headed up the street. Of course, we were spotted by some of the younger neighborhood kids who'd been suspicious of us from the beginning. It was a small gang of us watching as Val lifted the underwear up in the air with a stick, holding it there like a flag. It was a simple pair, pale and slightly grayed from washing, a small flower attached to the elastic waistband. Soon, for all of us, there would be that splash of bright blood, and we knew it then, and it terrified us. I imagined my own underwear, tucked in the darkness of my top bureau drawer, exposed against the contrast of sunlight and waving grass, the starkness of the stone, the asphalt, the barbed wire tines, the decaying cedar post.

We were done with the letter writing, with the whole game. We didn't care what happened next, or who knew. I can't remember if we told everyone, or if the boy who grabbed the stick and the underwear and raced off on his bike knew who they belonged to. I didn't think it mattered. I see the group of us parading back down our street, the boy at the lead, looking like the benign children depicted in Joan Walsh Anglund prints, with their chunky limbs, large foreheads, heavy bangs, eyes like dark pinpricks.

That night we stayed out late, organizing yard games for the neighborhood kids: Freeze Tag, Red Rover, Mother-May-I, What Time Is It? We played until we could no longer see each other in the darkness, until the fireflies began their heated blinking, bob-

bing and elusive along the edge of the woods, until the mothers, standing in clusters with their cigarettes and drinks, called everyone in. We went to bed with grass-stained feet, our hair smelling like sun and sweat. And the next morning you were gone. The phone rang and the news came from the Schusters. The police parked in front of your house. Val and I stood with everyone at the end of your driveway, waiting for word. Your mother was there, roused from her couch, her eyes red-rimmed, her hands large and veined and clutching something we learned was the baby blanket you still slept with. Your father was there, an older-looking man, hunched over in a sports shirt.

“Geppetto,” Val whispered. We both laughed, nervous laughter you might have forgiven us for.

Your bike was found at the dead end. And it wouldn’t take long for some of the story to come out, but just part of it about a boy writing you notes. No one knew who the boy was, or where he lived, and all of the neighborhood boys were questioned, the police going house to house. Val and I said it was like “Cinderella,” when the prince goes through the village trying to ferret out the young woman whose foot fit the slipper. We stuck together all that day, waiting for the letters we’d written to be discovered, but they were not. We imagined you’d hidden them in some old book, Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *Poems*, the pages carved out beneath the mildewed cover. We thought we knew you then, as well as we knew ourselves. Still, we said nothing, our hearts soft and quick like the robins we’d find near death. Search parties were organized—neighborhood people, volunteer firemen from the town over. Mothers made sandwiches. The men combed the woods along the little brook, climbed over barbed wire and waded into the maze of cornfields. *Francie! Francie!* The sound of your name became a refrain. Long into the evening hours we listened to the way it went, back and forth, from all sides surrounding our neighborhood, echoing back off the rows of houses, the shake shingles and the aluminum siding.

*Little Sinners*

There was a fear of abduction. There'd been little Janice Pockett on the news the summer before, who'd gone out on her bike to retrieve a butterfly and never returned. We'd seen the photos of her on flyers—blond hair and freckles and blue eyes, slightly crooked teeth—the newspaper articles documenting the search, and the giving up on searching, until she became just someone missing, a girl whose mother continued to “hold out hope.” I am still plagued by that girl's eyes staring out from some third-grade school portrait, the way life shines in them, alert and potent, waiting to be lived. Val and I stayed together, consigned to our yards. The general fear of the unknown took over, and we gathered in hushed groups to imagine what might have happened to you. No one mentioned the underwear, tossed over the fence into the pasture, trampled into the grass by the farmer's cows. But they were found by the searchers, and cataloged as grim evidence. Val was called home earlier than usual, and we separated, worrying what the other might, in a moment of weakness, confess. At night every deadbolt turned. I lay in bed listening to the crickets, the frogs in the brook, the pinging of beetles against the metal window screen, sounds that I can still imagine, that make me think of the child I was, and the woman I am now, and how little I understood of my life, and how little I still understand.

You weren't taken away by a stranger. A maroon car didn't pull over and scoop you into its dank upholstered depths. Near morning they found you nestled at the base of a pine tree a mile away. You suffered from mosquito bites and dehydration. They brought you back wrapped in a pink blanket, your hair disheveled and stuck with pine needles. We watched from the safety of someone else's front lawn. The police were there, and the fireman who found you, and your parents. Your mother swooned onto the dewy grass and the fireman caught her. Your father stood apart, shaking his head, his hands on his hips, as if to chastise the two of you. I imagined wood shavings were caught in his gray curls. I remembered the word he called your mother. No one could

*Little Sinners*

fathom your resolve to stay hidden, to avoid the comfort of your own bed, the stuffed animals and porcelain figurines that lined your bedroom shelves, staring down at you with their frozen, wise looks. I watched you brought home and I felt, even then, the widening rift between myself and that world of mown grass and tree canopies, the race of years, their rush to overwhelm me.

You never told. But I remember the story you wrote to the boy you may have known all along was pretend. Someone came into your room, you'd written. *His breath smelled of crème de menthe. His hands were furry, like a wild beast's.* You told the searchers that you'd fallen asleep in the woods. You didn't expect them to believe you, but they could come up with no other alternative. We never checked under the stone again, but one night with a boy at the dead end I lifted it one last time and sifted through the dirt. I imagined I saw the decaying pieces of what may have been your last installment. In all stories are the seeds of what we cannot say out loud—that we are corporeal, left to the mercy of the body's urges. You never married. Your mother died of breast cancer, and you fought for years, seeking to lay blame on our corrupted well water, citing the incidences of cancer in our neighbors. My sister sent me the article you wrote, and your picture—a taller version of you than I remembered, standing in the doorway of your mother's split-level. I imagined your father doddering about in the dim interior. You have one arm held across your chest like a shield, stalwart with your secret. Nothing ever came of your fury, your petitions. Today I discovered that you succumbed, too, of the same disease as your mother.

That night you disappeared, I'd lain in bed and imagined you in the arms of a boy I'd invented, his hair a shock of blond over his eyes, from his mouth a hum like the drone of hornets nesting in the garage. I see your face, rounded with joy, the way it looked retrieving the letter from under the stone. This is the way I like to recall it. The neighborhood remains, the farm and the farmer's fields. In summer the corn does its fine green swaying dance.

*Little Sinners*

In thunderstorms the lightning arcs and cleaves and the air fills with ozone. The houses still line the street in their same order. How much stays the same is undeniable, but I am unsure how much this reassures anyone. I no longer go back. What would be the point of revisiting it? We are all alone with the stories we have never told, and even now, given your death, there is no real forgiveness. Just this acknowledgment, whatever it is worth, of all the little deaths that came before it.