

# the Fantasy Reader

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# The Fantasy Reader



BOOKSHIP



## Tuesday

This is a diary. Which means it's PERSONAL and PRIVATE. So, unless you're me (in which case hi!), STOP READING.

Good, now I can say it:

Something strange is going on.

And I don't mean slightly strange. I mean *strange* strange.

But this is me, Carol Tanner. Strange is my middle name.

(Actually, Selina is my middle name, but I try to keep quiet about it.)

So let's take a look at Carol Tanner. Four foot ten and fourteen years old. No friends. Spends her evenings shut away in her bedroom reading about people that don't exist and places that don't exist and never *have* existed and never *can* exist.

What's strange about that?

What *isn't*!

But this thing with the stairs is strange on top of that. Like whipped cream on top of an already cream-topped trifle. (Mm, trifle.)

The first question to ask (as I'm sure you're already asking, diary of mine) is this: is Carol Selina-but-keep-quiet-about-it Tanner going a bit loopy?

I wouldn't put it past me.

The trouble is, trying to work out how loopy you are is like trying to look at the back of your head by standing in front of a mirror and turning round quickly in the hope of getting a glimpse. I mean, (a) it doesn't work, and (b) it's loopy to even try.

Hmm.

I think the only thing to do is approach the subject carefully. Creep up on it inch by inch, like Tollers might creep up on a mouse, if only he weren't the laziest cat in the world. (Honestly, I once snuck up on him while he was asleep and made squeaking noises right in his ear. He didn't even look at me, just flicked his ear as if to say, 'Go away you silly human. You're no more a mouse than I'm Gandalf the Wizard.')

So I'll start with the day at school. It didn't happen, this strange thing with the stairs, till the evening, so it might seem a while to go back, but I need to search the whole day for clues. I have to know just how loopy I am.

School, then. Six minutes' walk from 49 Willow Drive, if you take the no-cycling path to Sanders Close, then over the London Road by the pedestrian crossing and into the main building. I've got it down to the exact second so I can be sat in my seat *just* before the bell, which means Miss Michalowski (who, despite her American-sounding name, is actually from Poland) will be there, ready to take the register. That way, things in class won't be too boisterous. (Or girlsterous, which can be just as bad on a school-day morning.)

I arrange things this way for one very important reason.

I'm scared of Candice Cooper.

I'm not proud! I can say it! I'm scared of Candice Cooper.

You see, the thing about Candy (as she likes to be called, though I think of her as Canned Ice) is she's bored by school. So she's always looking for ways to entertain herself. And it just so happens she's the sort of person who's most entertained by inflicting misery on other people.

She inflicted it on me once. She pushed me over in the corridor and laughed, then pushed me over again when I started to get up. And I knew it was going to go on like that, with me trying to stand up and Ms Ice finding it oh so funny pushing me back down again, on and on and on. But then she left because a teacher was coming.

Just a small thing, a tiny incident, but I've thought about it every day.

Why?

Because any day it could happen again, or worse, and then could keep happening-or-worse for the rest of my time at school.

Which, oddly enough, is not what I want. Because once you're a victim you're always a victim, aren't you? You leave school and some other bully, a work bully rather than a school one, picks up where the last left off. Like an unending run of your least favourite TV show. But I want to *enjoy* life. When I grow up. When I leave school. When I'm no longer as strange or loopy as I am now. Somewhere over the rainbow.

Which is why I go to such lengths to avoid being noticed by Candice Cooper: arriving at school the moment before the bell so Miss Michalowski will be there, dawdling to the next lesson so there's no hanging round waiting for the teacher, zipping out at the end of the lesson before the teacher leaves, spending my break times in the sort of place Candice Cooper wouldn't be seen dead (the school library), and always making sure the coast is clear before leaving

through the school gates (sometimes hiding behind a crowd of taller kids, if I can manage it).

That's not too strange, is it?

But here's another fact in the case of Carol could-be-loopy Tanner that is.

In lessons (and this isn't part of my anti-Candice strategy, it's just the way I am) I don't say much. I don't say much to anyone outside of lessons either, but you really only notice it during lessons. (I do speak to the school librarian, Mrs Barker, but that's just to say thank you when she stamps a book out for me. I can't really think of anything else to say to her. Surrounded by so many books — all of which, I'm sure, she's read and memorised — she must know so much. What could I add to her vast store of knowledge?)

Why am I so silent? I don't know.

Or I do, but it's silly.

You see, when I started at this school last year (after Dad's promotion and our house-move), I didn't know anyone and kept to myself. I *still* don't know anyone and *still* keep to myself, so nothing's changed there, but back then I wasn't self-conscious about it. I thought it would get better soon enough, once I found myself a friend or two. (Two! Such ambition!) Then one History lesson early on Mr Isher said, 'You don't speak much, do you Carol?' And of course I blushed like a neon tomato and couldn't think of anything to say.

The whole class jeered, and from that moment my reputation, and with it my schoolside personality, was signed, sealed, and lost in the post. Sure, before it I hadn't talked much, but *until* that moment I wasn't self-conscious about it. Then suddenly I was, and not only me but the entire class. It was like I'd been standing on thin ice all this time, and Mr Isher had come along with a tiny hammer and chisel and given it a little tap, and this huge, ever-widening crack

had opened up. From that moment, I was what he'd said I was and nothing more: someone who didn't speak much. Someone about to fall into a deep, dark hole, away from the reach of anyone. The deep, dark hole of my own strange loopiness.

Pathetic isn't it? I mean, right now, here in my bedroom, I can speak. 'Isn't that right, Wumpus?' I say, and my voice *works*, it actually reaches the other side of the room, to where Wumpus sits on my bed. (I suppose 'sits' is the wrong word for what Wumpus does. He flops or lolls, so maybe I should say 'to where Wumpus *flolls* on the bed'. That's it, Wumpus *flolls*. It's something only he can do. He may have the body of a pink fluffy oddity, but there's a wise and powerful mind somewhere in all that stuffing.)

But in class, if ever I feel I have something to say, I remember that moment with Mr Isher and have to really think hard about whether I want to risk the jeers that'll come if I try to say it in my small, rather feeble squeaky voice, and by the time I've gathered up my courage (which shouldn't take long, there's so little of it), it's too late, the moment's gone and the time to say the thing I wanted to say is gone. Or if I just dive in and put my hand up, the teacher always says something like, 'Why yes, Carol, this is a pleasant surprise,' and I'm instantly reminded of Mr Isher's comment and all the jeers, and I either put my hand down, mumble an apology and blush the rest of the lesson away like a slow-burning fizzed-out squib, or manage something like a tiny squeak, which the teacher has to ask me to repeat until she (or he) works out what I'm trying to say, while all the while there are mutters and comments from the rest of the class and my blush is quickly heading towards melt-down.

So that's school.

On the day in question (yesterday) I had double English, then Science, then Music. I like English (though double

anything is asking too much most days), if only because Miss Michalowski, who takes us for English as well as being our class tutor, knows what I'm like and doesn't make things difficult for me. (She'd *never* have said 'You don't speak much, do you Carol?') Sometimes she starts talking to me as everyone leaves the classroom, and she does it like I'm a normal person, not the incommunicative lump of lead that I am. Sometimes she even manages to get a response out of me. Mostly, it's about school stuff. Like, this time she said, 'I have a question, Carol, about a word you used in your essay.'

It's odd to think she's teaching us English even though she's from Poland, where they probably speak something harsh and beautiful with lots of strange curls, dots, and dings on the letters. (I wish we had curls, dots, and dings in English, *bût wé dôn't*.) She told me once she came to this country to study English Literature when she was eighteen and hasn't been back to her homeland since. (I've no idea how long ago that is, because Miss Michalowski seems quite young to me, even though she can hold her own in a class of rowdies. Perhaps you get used to that sort of thing, coming from a land full of Bolsheviks. (If Poland *is* full of Bolsheviks. It might not be. I've no idea what Bolsheviks are, anyway. Something like orcs or goblins, I think.)) She told me she fell in love with English — with the language, with the literature, and with one particular young man.

That last detail broke my heart. Because she's *Miss* Michalowski. Which means she didn't marry this 'particular young man'. Maybe he was just *too* particular. He rejected her, or ran away with another girl, or sniggered at her with his friends when she asked him out. Or maybe he was killed in a car crash or electrocuted by a toaster or something tragic like that.

I think of this whenever I think of Miss Michalowski.

Anyway, back to this thing she said.

‘I have a question, Carol, about a word you used in your essay.’

It wasn’t really an essay as such. We’re doing Shakespeare in English at the moment — you know, ‘To be or not to be’, ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day’ and so on. (That man wrote so many quotes it’s a wonder he got any real writing done. Perhaps quotes pay more. You can use them on birthday cards and things.) The play we’re doing is called *A Winter’s Tale*, and to start things off Miss Michalowski got everyone to do their own bit of writing under that title. It could be anything we liked, an essay, a story, a poem, or just the usual string of words some of the boys cobble together in the hope they’ll make up for all the time they haven’t been paying attention in class. Perhaps Miss Michalowski was hoping one of us would come up with the same idea as old Shakeybones himself! Unlikely, but you never know.

Anyway, it didn’t have to be long, and I rather like mine. Here it is:

*A Winter’s Tale*  
by Carol S Tanner

One morning I woke to find the world had been transformed almost magically. Snow and frost sparkled everywhere and my breath came out in little puffs. A man was standing outside my window, so I opened it and said good morning.

‘Good morn to you,’ he said, speaking rather old-fashionedly, but he *was* dressed rather old-fashionedly, with tights and those funny-looking puffball shorts on top of them, as well as a ruff round his neck. He had a beard as pointy as a quill pen, and a bald head.

Not wanting to let the conversation flag after such a good start, I said, ‘Would I be correct in thinking you are Mr William Shakespeare, the famous playwright?’

Mr Shakespeare (for 'twas he) bowed.

I then decided to be rather forward, this being a unique opportunity and one I shouldn't waste. 'Can I ask a question of you, Mr Shakespeare?'

'Pray do,' he said.

'We're about to start studying your play, *A Winter's Tale*, in English, and I wondered if you could tell me what it's about?'

'Why milady,' he said (very politely), 'it is about this very thing, is it not?'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'It is about you, Miss Carol Tanner, and me, Mr William Shakespeare, conversing across the centuries, in a world magically transformed by the glamour of winter.'

At this point I was so confused I couldn't think of anything to say. Mr William Shakespeare bowed once more and walked off across the snow. I believe he was muttering sonnets as he went.

Evening came, the snow sparkled frostily, and a vooor fell across the land.

## THE END

Miss Michalowski produced my story from the wad of papers she had in her bag. (By this time, the classroom had cleared and it was lunch break next so I was in no hurry to go anywhere.)

'This word you used,' she said. 'This word "vooor". I looked it up in my best dictionary but couldn't find it. Did you make it up?'

Now, the thing is, I read a lot, and a lot of what I read is fantasy. Fantasy is full of invented words, and perhaps inventing words is catching, so, yes, I might have. All I could remember, though, was coming to that point in my essay and having the word 'vooor' pop into my head, and thinking, 'Yep, that's the word for me.' Which is pretty

much how I do all my writing. I don't stop each word to ask for passports, baggage checks, and birth certificates, I just let them through. (Which may be why my head is such a mess.)

Unfortunately, as both Miss Michalowski and I were finding out, my mouth had other ideas on border control. Sometimes it doesn't let *any* words through, or only those that have been thoroughly checked, re-checked, and stamped with an official stamp, till they're all tired and useless, and about an hour or so late.

What I come out with was, 'Um, I must have, um, read it somewhere.'

(Even that was an effort.)

Then I blushed, because I really wanted to say more, but couldn't, and I felt ashamed of myself for being such an uncommunicative lump. (Not a major blush on the Carol Tanner scale. I'd say about 2.5, with 0.0 being my normal complexion, 7.5 being cherry-coloured, and 10.0 being the mythical 'purple as a beetroot' blush, which I've yet to achieve.)

Miss Michalowski, however, carried on for all the world as though I was a normal person. 'What do you like to read, Carol?'

Now, I know the answer to *that* one.

'Fantasy. Great big wedges of fantasy. Books like door-stops. Books in trilogies and quadrilogies and more. My real, absolute, utter favourite is S T Faye. She writes this series called *The Wizard of Eldara*, which you must have heard about, because it's so good. I'm sure it's taught in all sorts of English Literature courses at universities. It's five books long but the fifth hasn't come out yet. I've read all the others countless times. In fact I've read the second book, which is called *A Maid of Dian*, and the third, which is called *Nor Stone, Nor Earth, Nor Boundless Sea*, about six times each, but that's because I bought the second book

first, thinking it was the first, and only realised my mistake once I'd bought it. But by then I was so caught up in the story I couldn't go back to the first book but had to keep reading them in order, because I so needed to find out what happened next, and it was only when I got to the fourth, which is called *Gates of Steel*, that I went back and bought the first, called *Winter's Ragged Hand*, which is where the evil sorcerer makes his first appearance, and then I re-read them all in order. Then I had to re-read them again because the last book hasn't come out yet and I can't bear *not* to be reading them while I'm waiting. But it's coming out soon. It's going to be called *In Sleep A King*, and it's the last book. But even when I've read that I'm going to read all five books again. And then again, probably. Because I like them so much. Mum says I seem to be doing nothing else, but I don't mind, because really it's the only thing I *do* like.'

But of course I didn't say all that. I wanted to. All those words, though... They rushed at my mouth like a bunch of slapstick comedians and got stuck there, all trying to get through at once. I did manage to mumble, 'Um, fantasy, miss,' though it came out more like a question than a statement, which is annoying because this is *the one thing in my life there's no doubt about*: I read fantasy. Why couldn't I say it? Well, I know the answer to that one. I was mouth-locked, word-jammed, throat-stopped and tongue-hobbled. In a word: I was Carol. I was me.

'Well, you certainly have an imagination,' Miss Michalowski said, as she put my essay away. Then, as she was looping her bag over her shoulder (such a lovely loopy bag, though not half as loopy as me), she said, with a little point at my forehead and a conspiratorial smile, 'And you can go places with an imagination.'

Then I grinned and she grinned, and she went off to the staffroom and I stood there thinking how wonderful Miss

Michalowski is. I could still feel that finger pointing at my forehead, like it had been a magic wand casting a spell. Then I thought how useless I am, not being able to say all that about what I like to read. And to Miss Michalowski, too! I'd so like to say all that to her...

Who'd be Carol, eh? She can't speak! Or when she does, what comes out is so poor she might as well not have.

Well, I *have* to be Carol.

Anyway, that's school.

What's after school? Home!

When I first get home, the whole house is mine, mine, all MINE HA HA HA! But seriously, Mum is still out at her 'part-time thing' as she calls it, Dad is of course never back till eight or nine, and usually even Tollers is out, doing that thing cats do all day, though sometimes he's waiting for me on the front step, all folded up like a furry loaf, blinking lazily like the Zen master he most certainly isn't.

There's something exciting about having the house to yourself. Maybe it's because that's what it must feel like to be properly grown up. (I say *properly* grown up because I'm always overhearing the girls in class talking about how they're 'grown up now', and so ought to be treated 'like adults'. What a load of rubbish! If being fourteen is what it feels like to be grown up, I'll skip it, thanks! But if being in a house on your own *is*, then take me there right now.)

The best thing about having the house to yourself is you can do whatever you want and not feel guilty about it. I rush upstairs, fling my schoolbag in the corner, and read.

I read. I read. I read and I read and I read. Why? Because it's what I do. I am a fantasy reader, a reader of fantasies. It's why I was put on this Earth, which is why I've always felt so out of place doing anything else. It's because doing anything else is not what I was made to do. Reading fantasy is.

Is that explanation enough? Then how about this: getting home after school and opening up *A Maid of Dian* or *Winter's Ragged Hand* is like realising you've been holding your breath all day and now you can breathe. It's like realising you've been wearing your left shoe on your right foot and your right shoe on your left foot and then *taking them off* and wiggling your toes. It's like being told you're adopted, because suddenly it all makes sense why you don't get on with your parents, and then your real parents show up and they're wonderful. It's like God appearing in a puff of cloud and saying, 'Sorry, Carol, you've been given the wrong life. This is the one you're supposed to have. Here you go.'

Hmm. Now you see why I think I may be a bit loopy. Little Carol only feels she's really herself when she's reading about other people who don't exist, in other lands that don't exist, doing things nobody has ever done or can do.

But it's great all the same. It's the one thing that *is*.

Mum usually gets home about forty minutes after me.

Clunk (as she drops her shoulder-bag on the floor). Clunk-thunk (as she kicks her shoes off). Really big *sigh*. Then, 'Carol!' And I always have to go to her wherever I am in the house and whatever I'm doing. Even if I'm at a really good bit in a book, I have to go straight down to the front door, else she gets in a huff. Well, she's in a huff anyway (if not a huff and half), because she's been at work 'all day' (which means all afternoon).

She always has a list of things for me to do. I have to take her bag upstairs. I have to make her a cup of tea. If she's in a really bad mood, she'll say something like, 'And would it really hurt you to do a bit of housework every now and then? Don't you think it would be nice for me to come home every so often and find you've vacuumed the stairs or something? Or do you think it should all be left up to me?'

'No, Mum,' I say. 'Sorry, Mum.' Even though I *do* do

housework every now and then. I just didn't do any today because I *so* needed to be reading.

And if she's in a *really* bad mood, she'll go into one of her routines, as I call them. She'll start by saying, 'I mean, what have you been doing all day?' (And this time 'all day' means the forty minutes since I got back from school.)

And I'll say, 'Reading.'

And she'll roll her eyes and give one of those disgusted groans people give when you say absolutely the wrong thing. Then she'll say, '*Reading*, Carol? Don't you get enough of that at school? Honestly, when I was your age I was more concerned with boys than I ever was with books, and I wasn't exactly a dunce, let me tell you. Or if not with boys, then with girlfriends. I could understand it if you said, even once in a while, you'd been on the phone to one of your girlfriends for half an hour. Or even if, God *forbid*, you brought one of them back here.'

And I have to say, 'I don't have any friends, so I can't bring them back here.'

But by this point she's well into her stride and I could announce I'm running away with Mr Morris the hairy games teacher to care for orphaned orang-utans in the Congo and she wouldn't bat an eyelid.

'And what were you reading, Carol? Something for school?'

She knows the answer, but she always asks.

'A fantasy book,' I say grudgingly, because I know what's coming next.

An even BIGGER disgusted sigh. 'Oh, Carol, are you still reading that rubbish? I would have thought you'd have outgrown it years ago blah blah blah.'

She doesn't actually say 'blah blah blah' but at that point I give up listening because I've heard it so many times and all it does is make me feel bad. I mean, even if I don't listen to her, I still have to stand there knowing what she's going

on about, and that makes me feel bad enough. So I'm not going to actually write it down, am I?

This is the thing with my mother, you see. She doesn't like me reading fantasy. She doesn't like me reading. Perhaps she doesn't like *me*. I'm such a disappointment to her. She so wanted me to be a *normal* girl, whatever that means. Something to do with having a mobile phone constantly clamped to my ear and a crush on my favourite boy band, probably. Something to do with having a boyfriend.

A boyfriend. Me? Little miss silent? Little miss nobody? It's too silly to even think about. So please forget I even mentioned it.

Anyway, I make her some tea and listen to her blow off steam (two kettles going at once), and when she's calmed down I slip away, back up to my room, hoping against hope she won't add some parting comment. But she always does. This time it was, 'There she goes again, locking herself up in her bedroom with her books. I might as well be talking to a brick wall.'

Blah blah blah. I wish she *would* talk to a brick wall. Then it might fall on her.

Evil thought. Sorry.

Anyway, the next major thing that happens is Dad comes home. This is never exactly a happy event. Usually by this time I've come down from my bedroom to watch TV with Mum, in the hope she'll realise I'm not reading *all* the time (even though I want to) and stop nagging me. (It hasn't worked yet, but I live in hope.) At about eight o'clock or so Mum starts getting restless and keeps looking at her watch. Sometime after eight we hear Dad's car pull up outside. Mum will suddenly sit absolutely still. Dad will ratch on his hand-brake (he always does that, and Mum always used to get on at him for doing it, and the only reason she doesn't now is they haven't been in the car at the same time for ages), then a couple of seconds later we'll hear the car door

slam, then a few seconds after that, the car boot. Then there'll be the sound of keys jangling, sometimes for ages because Dad has so many keys he never seems to be able to find the right one. (Or, more likely, he's putting off the moment when he finally opens the door and comes home.) During all this, Mum keeps letting out these angry little tuts and sighs, all the while muttering to herself. Then the front door opens. Pause. Slam. Dad takes his briefcase into his study (which is a tiny room not much bigger than a cupboard, but he somehow squeezed a table and chair in there, so we call it his study), then comes into the living room. Mum says, 'Your dinner's in the microwave. Two minutes on full.' Then she goes upstairs for the rest of the evening.

Dad goes into the kitchen and starts up the microwave. Sometimes he'll eat in the kitchen and spread out papers on the breakfast table to read while he eats, but sometimes he'll bring it into the living room and eat while watching TV. I just sit there saying nothing. Dad says nothing. I hardly ever speak to Dad and he hardly ever speaks to me. I'm not sure why. When he's finished eating he takes his plate into the kitchen, washes it, then goes into his study and does some work. At that point I turn off the TV and slip up to my room, where I read again. But the reading is never the same as when I've got the house to myself. I can hear Mum in her room, and Dad in his study, one on the ground floor, one on the first, both pretending to exist in entirely different worlds.

At about eleven, Dad switches the lights off downstairs, locks the front door, and goes up to his room (which used to be the spare room). I usually hear Mum turn off her light a few minutes later.

It's like that every night. Mum told me a while back that as soon as I grow up and leave home they're getting a divorce. Until then, they're staying together. For my sake.

I wish they wouldn't bother. Whenever it's like this I can

almost feel them wishing me older, wishing me grown up, wishing me gone so they can be rid of me so they can be rid of each other. Sometimes I find myself thinking about that more than the book I'm reading.

Now, you're probably wondering (*do diaries wonder, I wonder?*) about when I'm finally going to get to this strange thing that happened. (As if me being me isn't strange enough!) Well — ta-da! — it's now.

It happened after I'd gone to bed. I usually go to bed about ten-thirty. This time, though, I lay awake and at about midnight realised I had to go to the loo. (These things happen.) So I got up and padded onto the landing in my PJ's. The bathroom is the room next to mine. I did all that was necessary (you don't need the details), then, just as I was about to pad back to my room and snuggle under the duvet all warm and relieved, I paused.

I don't know why I paused. I just did.

The landing has four rooms coming off it. Going round from where the stairs reach the landing, there's my room, then the bathroom, then (opposite side) Mum's room, then Dad's room. Just outside Dad's room there's a hatch in the ceiling that leads to the attic.

But not last night. Something had changed. It took me a while to realise, and when I did, I stood there staring, not frightened, not even surprised, just wondering why I hadn't noticed it before.

There was another flight of stairs leading up from the landing. Stairs where there hadn't been any before.

I walked over to stand at the bottom and looked up. It was dark, but there was enough light for me to see the banister spiralling up to the next landing (which didn't exist), and another landing after that (which most *certainly* didn't exist), and then another, and another, and another... Forever and ever, upwards and upwards, into the realms of sheer, utter impossibility.

I wasn't dreaming. I was really seeing it.

I put one foot on the first step. It was solid.

And then I knew if I put my other foot next to it, I'd be on my way to leaving this world. That step looked just the same as the real landing, but it was an impossible step, and wherever it was going, somewhere up there, was impossible too. Impossible, and away from here. Away from all the faff and bother that's my life.

I could do it. I could go. Forever.

Do I want to?

I don't know.

I stood there trying to decide.

Then I went back to my bedroom and got into bed.

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