

TAKE OFF

A Memoir of



*Sister Carrie Miller
S L W*

YOUR SHOES

By Quinn Rooney

Preface

To be honest, when I enrolled in Aesthetics and Civic Engagement, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. “I have prepared a one hundred page syllabus for this class.” The well-intentioned words of our professor, Dan Vaillancourt, scared the life out of half the class, who consequently dropped the course. I on the other hand, for one strange reason or another, decided to stay, and I am happy to say I’m all the better for it. Our goal for the course was to collect, through a series of interviews, the stories of various religious sisters and to transform them into an artistic memoir, complete with cover art, and as you’re reading now, a preface.

Before we were assigned our interviewees, Dan tried to fire up our imaginations by casually dropping the fact that some of the interviewees were on track for sainthood. When I finally received my interviewee, my mind was a-buzz with ideas as to who “Sister Carrie Miller” could be; I excitedly searched for her online. Unfortunately, Sister Carrie Miller was not on track for sainthood, but, in my personal opinion, she deserves nothing less.

Sister Carrie is a Sister of the Living Word, a small sisterhood devoted to “approaching each person or circumstance of life with an open heart. We will be aware that we are touching God at every moment.” She works in Arlington Heights, Illinois, with the organization Faith Community Homes, which aids those families in Arlington Heights that are on the brink of homelessness. She has previously worked in several fields, such as Samaritan Spiritual Counseling Center, family counseling, and retreats. She holds multiple degrees: a Bachelor of Arts in both Sociology and Psychology from Mount Saint Mary’s College, and two Master’s degrees in Christian Spirituality and Counseling from Creighton University. In her free time she enjoys liturgical dance and pottery.

The life segment which I have chosen to write about has stuck out from the very beginning as a wonderful story. Even as Sister Carrie was telling me the story I thought, “Oh, this has to be in the memoir.” I even remember Kathy, Dan’s wife, being so excited when she had discovered that I had chosen to write about this story. This story occurred about five years ago when she was working with the poor in Arlington Heights, and I think it is a perfect example of who Sister Carrie is. It is about, at its core, being open and listening to God’s call.

The cover art on this memoir is an interesting conversation piece in itself. When I first decided to work on this story for my memoir, an image of shoes seemed to be the most logical thing to do, but as I thought about it and added the more detailed elements to the picture, I realized that there wasn’t anything else that I could do. While all of this is well and good, I will admit to a lack of ability when it comes to drawing, especially shoes, so I decided to keep the most essential part of the shoe idea, just the converse-esque logo. Working with Sister Carrie has taught me many things, but the most important thing that I learned was to always be listening for God. Sister talked about how she admired Moses and the burning bush, and I thought, “Well, Sister Carrie, you’re more like Moses than you think; you both had a burning bush experience!” The burning bush insignia

represents this. The text circling the bush is significant too, since it is what Carrie imagined God might be saying to her at this moment.

Sister Carrie works in a community, and as such she takes a very strong position on leadership: “Leadership is almost like having a most profound respect for people that you work with. The leader, for me, is the one who shows people how to work together and puts themselves to work serving the good of the people.” She believes in hands-on leadership, which is very much like my own style. I believe that leadership requires recognizing that the effect of your decisions goes beyond yourself, and, therefore, as leaders we must do what is right by everyone.

Working with Sister Carrie has been a true pleasure; it has been a wonderful thought provoking experience. I was familiar with the religious, but they had always seemed a bit like superheroes, giving up extraordinary things to become a sister. Sister Carrie really gave a face to a way of life for me. I could see all religious not just as real life superheroes anymore, but as people who sacrificed and were real people. Learning the life story of anyone is sure to have a profound impact on the listener, but I think that working with Sister Carrie has been an infinitely more profound experience in which I have grown both spiritually and as a person.

Attempting to choose just one event from an entire lifetime is quite difficult, and I struggled to decide what story best encapsulated Sister Carrie Miller. I would like to tell you that I found the perfect match, but alas, I didn’t. There is no such thing as a perfect story to sum up a life, but I have tried to include many of the important aspects of Sister Carrie into the story you’re about to read. I hope that it gives you a glimpse of the wonderful woman she is.

I would like to thank Sister Carrie Miller for her patience with me and for sharing her life story with me; without her, none of this would be possible. I would also like to thank my family, especially my parents who have helped me every step of the way. I would like to thank my friends who have given me an enormous amount of support. Without these people, I never could have done this.



Quinn Rooney
December 1, 2010

Take Off Your Shoes

A Memoir of Sister Carrie Miller, SLW
by Quinn Rooney

*So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—
why the bush does not burn up."*

*When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from
within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."*

"Do not come any closer," God said.

"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

It was late September 2005. I was working in Arlington Heights, Illinois with Faith Community Homes, a multi-faith organization working on homelessness. I had gotten a bunch of shoes together to help some of the needy families, and I came across a clean but scuffed pair of black tennis shoes. Suddenly, one of the mothers came to mind. Her name was Susan, but she preferred Sue, and she had the most worn out shoes that I had ever seen. They were old, ratty, athletic shoes, covered with dirt and filled with holes. I knew that they were a bit too small for her, because whenever she walked there was always a tinge of pain that showed on her face like a passing cloud on an otherwise sunny day. What I remember most about those shoes was the clip-clop, clip-clop of the soles, bouncing back and forth between the floor and the bottom side of her shoes, as they moved along the linoleum floor of Faith Community Homes Center. I remembered that Sue had mentioned she was going to the city park later that afternoon with her son Jack, and so I packed the pair of black sneakers with a pair of Spiderman shoes for Jack and headed to the park to meet them.

It was a beautiful fall day, and the leaves were just beginning to change color. I walked through the park and admired the leaves that colored the pathway: faded yellows, beet reds, and burnt oranges. I followed the path that led to the playground and the chess tables. I found Sue sitting on one of the weathered chess tables, dressed in her usual clothing, an old North Park University sweatshirt that she had picked up at one of the many thrift shops in the area, and a pair of worn but clean jeans. On her feet were her signature, disintegrating tennis shoes.

She had her back towards me, keeping her eye on Jack, her seven year old. He was playing on the monkey bars in the playground, hanging upside down, his long black hair swinging like a monkey's tail. Sue didn't hear me until the sound of my loafers against the asphalt announced my presence.

"Well, hello, Sister Carrie. How ya doin' today?"

"Doing well, Sue, doing well. Here, look at these shoes I got for you and Jack." I held up the new shoes and gave them to her.

Her face lit up like sunlight at noon. She smiled and called for Jack, who was dangling like a chimpanzee from the monkey bars. She put the Spiderman shoes on his feet, and like lightning he bolted back to the jungle gym.

“Oh, Sister Carrie, thank you, thank you, Sister!”

She held her new shoes and stroked them, but she didn't try them on.

“Don't you like the shoes, Sue?” I asked

“Oh yes, yes, they are wonderful, but...” she looked across the park. “Could you come with me for a minute, Sister Carrie?” Then she turned behind her and called for Jack. “We're going for a walk.”

Jack raced in front of us as we headed to a part of the park that I had never been to before. We walked past a large grassy clearing where some kids were kicking around an orange and red soccer ball. We headed past the clearing to the area near the exit. Next to the exit there was a large bush, its leaves a fiery orange as the sun set on it. The wind, which had picked up a bit since we left the playground, pulled at my skirt playfully, and rippled through the bush, making it look like flames licking the wind.

As we got closer I could make out the image of a teenage girl sitting just behind the bush. She was very tall and thin, almost gaunt. I could see her dust covered, gangly legs sticking out from under the bush. They were badly scraped and her bare feet were covered with dirt and a few blisters.

“You see, Sister Carrie, I like these shoes a lot but ... I already have some shoes, and she doesn't have any shoes at all. Would you mind if I gave this pair to her?”

Inside, I was overflowing with emotion. I thought this woman had so little, but even what little she had she would give away in a heartbeat. She had barely enough for herself and Jack, yet she wanted to give away her new shoes to someone who needed them more. I could see God's compassion in her. I said, trying to conceal my pleasure, “You know, if you want, you can do that.”

“Ally! Ally! Look what I have for you,” Sue shouted.

Ally came out from behind the bush, and she could not be more than 16 years old. She looked at the shoes, but she didn't say anything.

Sue put the shoes in Ally's hand.

“Ally, try them on, Try them on!”

Ally took them, put them on, and jumped up and smiled. Then she turned and seemed to speak to the bush. A gust of wind came racing through the park, and the bush flickered furiously back and forth in the wind.

“Hey, Lisa! Come on out, and see these shoes Sue gave me!” Ally shouted.

A young girl with sandy blonde hair knotted all over her face came out from behind the bush and rushed up to us. It made me shiver thinking about how much time it would take to brush the knots out of that head of hair.

“Wow, Ally, those are really great shoes.”

As the girls happily chatted away about the new shoes, I looked down and noticed that Lisa didn't have any shoes either, and I had no more shoes to give away! Suddenly, I heard a crackling sound as if the bush was on fire, and I knew what God was asking me to do.

On my way home, I passed one of the women from the Center, who looked down at my bare feet and said, “Why, Sister! What happened to your shoes?”

I smiled and said, “Well, God asked for them!”

