

Extract from The Girl With All The Gifts by M.R. Carey

Melanie is a young girl being raised in a mysterious army base, being taught by Miss Justineau. There have been clear indications throughout the story that there is something unusual about Melanie and the other children on the base. At this point in the story, Melanie has been tied up and separated from the others as a punishment by Sergeant Parks.

1 When there's nothing to do, and you can't even move, time goes a lot more slowly. Melanie's legs
2 and her left arm, still strapped into the chair, have cramped agonisingly, but that happened a long
3 time ago and now the pain of the cramp has faded and it's like her body has stopped bothering to
4 tell her how it feels, so she doesn't even have the pain to distract her.

5 She sits and thinks about Sergeant's anger and what it means. It could mean a lot of things, but the
6 starting point is the same in every case. It was only when she talked about Miss Justineau that
7 Sergeant got angry – when she said that Miss Justineau loved her. Melanie understands jealousy.
8 She's jealous, a little bit, every time Miss Justineau talks to another boy or girl in class. She wants
9 Miss Justineau's time to belong to her, and the reminders that it doesn't sting a little, make her
10 heart do a gentle drop and thud in her chest.

11 But the idea of Sergeant being jealous is dizzying. If Sergeant can be jealous, there are limits to his
12 power – and she herself stands at one of those limits, looking back at him. That thought sustains her,
13 for a while. But nobody comes, and the hours drag on – and though she's good at waiting, at doing
14 nothing, the time is hanging heavy on her. She tries to tell herself stories, but they fall apart in her
15 mind. She sets herself simultaneous equation puzzles and solves them, but it's too easy when you've
16 made the problems up yourself. You're halfway to the answer before you've started to think about it
17 properly. She's tired now, but her enforced position in the chair doesn't allow her to rest.

18 Then, after a long, long time, she hears the key turning in the lock, the bolts drawn back. Heavy steel
19 door clanging. Footsteps running on concrete, raising a whisper farm of echoes. Is it Sergeant? Has
20 he come back to dismantle her? Someone unlocks Melanie's door and pushes it open. Miss Justineau
21 stands in the doorway.

22 "It's okay," she says. "I'm here, Melanie. I'm here for you."

23 Miss Justineau steps forward. She wrestles with the chair, like Hercules wrestling with a lion or a
24 snake. The arm strap is partway undone, and it opens up really easily. Then Miss J goes down on her
25 knees and she's working on the leg straps. Right. Then left. She mutters and curses as she works.

26 "He's insane! Why? Why would anyone do this?"

27 Melanie feels the constriction lessen, and sensation returns to her legs in a tingling rush. She surges
28 to her feet, her heart almost bursting with happiness and relief. Miss Justineau has saved her! She
29 raises her arms in an instinct too strong to resist. She wants Miss Justineau to lift her up and hold
30 her.

31 Then she freezes like a statue. Her jaw muscles stiffen, and a moan comes out of her mouth.

32 Miss Justineau is alarmed. "Melanie?"

33 She stands, and her hand reaches out.

34 "Don't!" Melanie screams. "Don't touch me!"

35 Miss Justineau stops moving, but she's so close! So close! Melanie whimpers. Her whole mind is
36 exploding. She staggers back, but her stiff legs don't work properly and she falls full length on the
37 floor. The smell, the wonderful, terrible smell, fills the room and her mind and her thoughts, and all
38 she wants to do is...

39 "Go away!" she moans. "Go away go away go away!" Miss Justineau doesn't move. "Go away, or I'll
40 dismantle you!"

41 Melanie wails. She's desperate. Her mouth is filled with thick saliva like mud from a mudslide. Her
42 jaws start to churn of their own accord. Her head feels light, and the room sort of goes away and

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43 then comes back again without moving. Melanie is dangling on the end of the thinnest, thinnest
44 piece of string. She's going to fall and there's only one direction to fall in.

45 "Oh God!" Miss Justineau sobs. She gets it at last. She takes a step back. "I'm sorry, Melanie. I didn't
46 even think!"

47 About the showers. Among the sounds that Melanie heard, one big absence: no hiss of chemical
48 spray falling from the ceiling to settle on Miss Justineau and layer on its own smell to hide the Miss
49 Justineau smell underneath.

50 What Melanie feels right then is what Kenny felt when Sergeant wiped the chemicals off his arm and
51 put it right up close to Kenny's face. But she only just caught the edge of it that time, and she didn't
52 really understand it.

53 Something opens inside her, like a mouth opening wider and wider and wider and screaming all the
54 time – not from fear, but from need. Melanie thinks she has a word for it now, although it still isn't
55 anything she's felt before. It's hunger. When the children eat, hunger doesn't factor into it. The
56 grubs are poured into your bowl, and you shovel them into your mouth. But in stories that she's
57 heard, it's different. The people in the stories want and need to eat, and then when they do eat they
58 feel themselves fill up with something. It gives them a satisfaction nothing else can give them.
59 Melanie thinks of a song the children learned and sang one time: You're my bread when I'm hungry.
60 Hunger is bending Melanie's spine like Achilles bending his bow. And Miss Justineau will be her
61 bread.

62 "You have to go," she says. She thinks she says. She can't be sure, because of the heart sounds and
63 breath sounds and blood sounds that are crashing in her ears. She makes a gesture. Go! But Miss
64 Justineau is just standing there, trapped between wanting to run and wanting to help.

65 Melanie scrambles up and lunges, arms stretched out. And it's almost like that other gesture, a
66 moment ago, when she asked to be picked up, but now she presses her hands against Miss
67 Justineau's stomach touching her and pushes her violently away. She's stronger than she ever
68 guessed. Miss Justineau staggers back, almost trips. If she trips, she'll be dead. Be bread.

69 Melanie's muscles are tensing, knotting, coiling inside her. Gathering themselves for some massive
70 effort.

71 She diverts them into a bellowing roar.

72 Miss Justineau scrambles, stumbles, is out through the door and wrenching it closed.