

The Circle of Life

by Aline Carriere

My older sister, Carol, is selfish. When we were little she'd always make everyone late, hog the bathroom and take the biggest piece of cake. This time she took the whole selfish cake announcing she's pregnant. She didn't even ask first or discuss it with us, and we had to decide who in our family her baby would replace after the fact.

We were in the kitchen finishing dinner. It was just me, Carol and Ma; what was left of us. Because Carol's a coward as well as selfish she had blurted it out while Ma's back was turned. Ma stood silent at the sink. She has a way of holding a moment, making it linger and squeezing every last planck second out of it so that you almost forget to breathe. "Who's it gonna be then?" she asked Carol in the voice she uses when she's trying to control her anger. "Someone from his family?"

"He doesn't have anyone left."

Ma gripped the edge of the sink. "What were you thinking?" She turned around, her outrage focused like a laser on Carol.

Carol shrugged, she actually shrugged. I told you she doesn't care. Selfish; everything always done for her, expecting the world to curtsy to her whims.

"How could you?" Ma bit her lip. I could see tears welling in her eyes. She turned back and stared out the window. "Well, it's not going to be your sister." Ma declared shaking her head. "It's not going to be Maggie, she's only thirteen."

"I already called The Circle of Life™ office to set up the interviews," Carol said. "They'll decide if we don't." The interviews are mandatory, just in case a family can't or won't choose.

"It's not going to be Maggie," Ma repeated. Of course, Carol had ruled herself out and her newest good-for-nothing boyfriend, so that left Ma to be the Hero.

"I'm sorry, Ma," Carol said. "But Granny and Grandpa were Heroes for me and Maggie. I didn't think it was a big deal. You must

have known this would happen someday.”

“Granny and Grandpa were in their seventies and they came to us, your Pa and me. They told us they were ready for the Exchange. You don't do it like this.” Ma sat down at the table with us. “I thought I raised you better.”

But Ma raised us fine. Carol's just selfish. That's who she is.

“Maybe you could buy a Volunteer,” Carol suggested.

Ma huffed. “You know we don't have the money for that. And besides I never liked the idea of Volunteers — taking advantage of the poor like that.”

I don't like the idea of Volunteers either, but since The Circle of Life™ had instituted them as a way to distribute wealth, there were a lot less poor people. The Volunteers are an effective part of the whole Circle of Life™ plan that's saved us from rampant overpopulation and the brink of class warfare. At least that's what we'd learned in school. But now, it's getting to the point where there's a Volunteer shortage and they're really expensive.

“It's me then,” Ma concluded. “I guess it has to be me.” Ma turned her head and stared into the corner of the kitchen. “You'll take care of Maggie when I'm gone?”

“Of course I will.” Carol reached out her hand to place it over Ma's, but Ma pulled away before she could.

It's traditional to have a celebration in honor of the Hero after the choice is made, so when the dishes were done I baked a cake while Ma and Carol watched TV in the living room. I heard them talking and laughing at the program, trying to reconcile by bonding over the drama of imaginary lives. I put on lots of frosting; the good kind made with real butter. Ma doesn't like frosting and won't eat it, but Carol and I do. I put real vanilla extract in it too. Carol ate lots of cake; after all she's eating for two and I can always count on her being selfish. Now she's throwing up in the bathroom. I can't even get in to pee. But, I expect she'll be dead by morning.

